

JACOB A. LOLLAR

Thekla in Syriac

*Studien und Texte zu
Antike und Christentum
144*

Mohr Siebeck

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144



Jacob A. Lollar

Thekla in Syriac

The Acts of Thekla and its Reception
in Syriac Traditions

Mohr Siebeck

Jacob A. Lollar, born 1987; 2018 PhD (Florida State University); 2022–24 Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, Universität Regensburg; British Academy International Fellow Durham University.
orcid.org/0009-0009-5146-3121

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For Kora and Maryn

Acknowledgements

As we walked silently through the Catedral de Tarragona on the Catalan coast, I was surprised to find my two daughters standing in the Capilla de Santa Tecla, which they had found before me. They gazed at the eighteenth century marble sculptures depicting three-dimensional scenes from the Acts of Thekla and to my great delight they asked me to do something that they have asked countless times: can you tell us the story? My love of storytelling has only grown with my children and without their sense of wonder – always sprinkled with a due portion of silliness – I would hardly have embarked on such a trialing adventure as studying the story of Thekla in Syriac. But like any good story, this one needed to be told again, and this time to the fullest extent possible to do justice to the rich literary, theological, and cultural heritage of the Syriac Churches.

As with any project of this magnitude, I could not have done it alone. My journey with Thekla in Syriac began with an email exchange with Catherine Burris, who up to now has remained one of the only scholars to have done any extensive study of this version of the Acts of Thekla. She kindly encouraged me to pursue the textual work that eventually culminated in this volume. In addition, she facilitated my contact with Professor Lucas Van Rompay, who also has been a constant source of encouragement, wisdom, and instruction over the last few years. To say that I owe both of these people would be an understatement and I hope that my constant references to their work will demonstrate a fraction of the impact that they actually had on the final product. Moreover, I must thank Professor Van Rompay for providing me with access to the two Deir al-Surian manuscripts, whose texts of Acts of Thekla are published here for the first time.

This volume would not have been possible, naturally, without a place where I could do the work and I count myself among the most fortunate that that place came to be Regensburg, Germany at the Centre for Advanced Studies “Beyond Canon”, under the direction of Prof. Dr. Tobias Nicklas. I first approached Tobias with the idea of editing the Syriac Acts of Thekla in 2019 and he kindly agreed to sponsor my application to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which I began in the Spring of 2022. To say that working in Regensburg was a joy would be an understatement, and I am humbled to have been part of such a rare and wonderful working environment for two years. The faculty – including Prof. Dr. Harald Buchinger and Prof. Dr. Andreas Merkt – were thoughtful and caring mentors and I am grateful for their collaborative spirit during my stay. My thanks as well to the coordinators at the Centre “Beyond

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Finally, thank you to my family. Sarah, Kora, and Maryn: thank you for leaving our lives in the USA and moving across the world with me to pursue these dreams and ideas. Of all the stories out there, ours is the one I love telling – and living – the most.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	VII
Chapter 1: The Acts of Thekla	1
A. Introduction	1
B. Thekla in Syriac: A Brief History	6
1. Early Christian Women and the <i>Acts of Thekla</i>	9
2. Gender Dynamics and the Syriac <i>Acts of Thekla</i>	11
3. Violence, Abuse, and Power in the <i>Acts of Thekla</i>	12
4. Canon and the <i>Acts of Thekla</i>	13
5. Conclusion	14
C. Methods: Material Philology and the <i>Acts of Thekla</i> in Syriac	15
Chapter 2: The Manuscripts	23
A. Introduction	23
B. The West Syriac Miaphysite Manuscripts	27
1. The Codicology of ms E (= ms DS06)	30
2. The Codicology of ms A (= BL Add. 14652)	37
3. The Codicology of ms F (= DS09)	44
4. The Codicology of ms B (= BL Add. 14447)	47
5. The Codicology of ms C (= BL Add. 14641)	55
6. The Codicology of ms D (= BL Add. 12174)	60
7. Conclusions	71
C. Thekla in a Melkite Manuscript?	73
1. Introduction	73
2. The Codicology of ms S (= Sinai syr. ms 30)	76
3. The <i>ATH</i> in ms S	81
4. Conclusion	86
D. The East Syriac Manuscripts	86
1. The Codicology of ms H (= Vat. sir. ms 597)	89

2. The Codicology of ms I (= Berlin syr. 75/Sachau 222)	93
3. The Codicology of ms J (= OAOC ms 621)	101
4. The Codicology of ms K (= OAOC ms 628)	104
5. The Codicology of ms L (= OAOC ms 637)	106
6. The Codicology of ms M (= Mingana syr. ms. 598)	108
7. Relationships of the East Syriac Manuscripts	110
E. Fragments of <i>Acts of Thekla</i> in Syriac Manuscripts	111
1. Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate Library mss 12/17 and 12/18	111
2. Mardin Church of the 40 Martyrs ms 253	113
F. Conclusion	114
 Chapter 3: Acts of Thekla in Syriac: Translation and Internalization ..	117
A. Introduction	117
B. Translation	118
1. <i>3 Corinthians</i> in Ephrem and Aphrahat	120
2. Acts of Thekla in the Liber Graduum	120
Excursus: The Syriac and Armenian Translations of <i>ATh</i>	123
3. Translator and Provenance	126
4. Translation Technique	127
4.1 Acculturated Translation	129
4.2 Intertextual Translation	140
4.3 Gendered Translation	144
5. Conclusion	150
 Chapter 4: The West Syriac (Miaphysite) Tradition of <i>Acts of Thekla</i> .	153
A. Introduction	153
B. Text and Translation	155
Abbreviations	156
C. Manuscript E	157
 Chapter 5: The West Syriac (Melkite) Tradition of <i>Acts of Thekla</i>	209
A. Introduction	209
Abbreviations	211
B. Manuscript S	212

Chapter 6: The East Syriac (Catholic) Tradition of <i>Acts of Thekla</i>	247
A. Introduction	247
Abbreviations	248
Chapter 7: The Reception of <i>Acts of Thekla</i> in the Syriac-Speaking Milieu	289
A. Introduction	289
B. Scholarship on Thekla's Reception in Syriac	291
C. Thekla as a Sainly Exemplar: Febronia, John of Tella, Bassus and Susanna, and Thekla and her Companions	293
1. The <i>Life of Febronia</i>	293
2. The <i>Life of John of Tella</i>	297
3. The <i>Martyrdom of Bassus and Susanna</i>	299
4. The <i>Martyrdom of Thekla and Her Companions</i>	302
5. Conclusions	303
D. Thekla in the Sermons of Severus of Antioch	305
1. Thekla in <i>Cathedral Homily 71</i>	306
2. Thekla in <i>Cathedral Homily 75</i>	308
2. Thekla in <i>Cathedral Homily 97</i>	310
E. Thekla in Syriac Art, Iconography, and Architecture	313
1. Definitive Examples of Syriac Material Culture Related to Thekla	314
1.1 Icon of Girgis al-Musawwir and an Inscription (Aleppo, Syria)	314
1.2 Thekla Devotion in Maaloula, Syria	315
<i>Excursus: Thekla at Dura?</i>	319
2. Tentative Examples of Syriac Material Culture Related to Thekla	320
2.1 Thekla and the (Upper?) Window	320
2.2 Thekla at Sinai	324
<i>Excursus: Thekla in Manichaean Devotion</i>	325
F. Conclusion	328
Appendices	329
Appendix A: The West Syriac Manuscripts (ABCDF)	331
Appendix B: East Syriac Manuscripts (IJKLM)	361
Appendix C: Names in Syriac <i>Acts of Thekla</i>	391

Bibliography	409
Primary Sources	409
Reference Sources	412
Secondary Sources	414
 Indices	 429
Index of Subjects	429
Index of Ancient Texts	433
Index of Manuscripts	437

Chapter 1

The Acts of Thekla

What can I say to you about Thekla? ... She is so well known,
everywhere and by everyone.

Gregory of Nazianzus, Carm. I.2.10.916

A. Introduction

Stories about Thekla of Iconium are arguably the most famous and influential accounts of an early Christian woman and have inspired – and troubled – people for generations. Average Christian believers have been captivated by her stories for millennia, from women in North Africa in the late second century, to believers in Antioch in Syria in the sixth century, and even until today in places like Maaloula, Syria, Tarragona, Spain, and Sarajevo, Bosnia – all three of which preserve active cults around her various relics.¹ Bishops, clergy, and those others with ability (and privilege) to speak and write about Thekla at various times and places were equally captivated by her, if not also troubled and challenged by her popularity, authority, and ambiguity.² Even Roman emperors found Thekla compelling and claimed to have

¹ On these modern cultic receptions of Thekla see A. Poujeau, “Monasteries, Politics, and Social Memory: Revival of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch in Syria during the Twentieth Century,” in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective* (eds. C. Hahn and H. Goltz; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 177–92; R. Goshgarian, “The Arm of St. Thecla between Armenia and Aragon: Bodilessness, Placelessness, Diplomacy, and the Reliquary Trade,” in *Sacred Spaces and Urban Networks* (eds. S. Yalman and A. Hilâl Uğurlu; Istanbul: Koç University Research Center, 2019), 129–46. The contemporary cult of Thekla at Tarragona and its relationship to the Armenian reception of *Acts of Thekla* has been studied by V. Calzolari, “Une traduction latine médiévale de la légende arménienne de Thècle et la translation du bras de la sainte de l’Arméno-Cilicie à Tarragone en 1321,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 123 (2005): 349–67 and in several subsequent studies. See also J. Amengual i Batle, “The Cult of the Female Proto-Martyr and Apostle Saint Thecla in Hispania,” in *TPDS*, 240–82; M. Pérez Martínez, “*Sancta Virgo Thecla*. The Origins of the Cult of Thecla in Tarragona,” in *TPDS*, 304–26. To my knowledge, the devotion to Thekla at the Church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel in Sarajevo, where a relic of her hand was purportedly brought by the Serbian St. Sava, has never been studied.

² The earliest of these is Tertullian of Carthage, who wrote about Thekla’s (negative, in his view) influence on female religious authority in North Africa. See A. Hilhorst, “Tertullian on the Acts of Paul,” in *AAPT*, 150–63; M. B. McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 15–45; J. W. Barrier, “A Cainite Invocation of Thecla? The Reception of the Acts of Paul in North Africa as Exemplified in Tertullian’s *de Baptismo*,” in *TMS*, 35–60. Thekla was revered in Cappadocia by people like Basil and Gregory of Nyssa – whose sister Macrina had the

been visited by her in dreams.³ It is difficult to find a part of the Mediterranean, North African, or Middle Eastern worlds that was not impacted in some way by stories of Thekla.

Scholars have, in their own ways, been equally obsessed with Thekla, though perhaps for different reasons than ancient readers and devotees. Of particular interest for post modernity has been Thekla's prominence as a woman and what she can (or cannot) reveal about the actual lives and experiences of women in antiquity.⁴ In the last several decades, scholars have painstakingly assessed this issue among others and postured themselves in various ways, and all the while Thekla and her stories have remained central in the discourse. I have no intention here to recapitulate or critique studies of Thekla's gender, as this has been done adequately (and recently) by others,⁵ though I will return to some important ideas related to Thekla and gender in late antiquity later. It is sufficient simply to summarize that the popularity of, intrigue by, and fascination with Thekla has remained constant from the second century to today. Indeed, the present volume is in part reflective of my own fascination with Thekla and her stories and all the wonderous complexities that accompany them.

secret name "Thecla" (cf. M. Girardi, *Basilio di Caesarea e il culto dei martiri nel IV secolo: Scrittura e Tradizione* [Bari: Università di Bari, 1990]) –, and Gregory of Nazianzus. See, e. g., L. Hayne, "Thecla and the Church Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48.3 (1994): 209–18; M. Pesthy, "Thecla in the Fathers of the Church," in *AAPT*, 164–78; M. Moreschini, "The Cult of Thecla in Cappadocia," in *TPDS*, 1–16; Á. Narro, *Tecla de Iconio: La santa ideal, un ideal de santa* (Rhema Monografías 6; Tarragona: Rhemata, 2021), 99–155.

³ C. dell'Oso, "Thecla in Visions: the Case of Zeno," in *TPDS*, 17–31.

⁴ A more positive view was adopted in major studies by S. L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); D. R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); V. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987). As a corrective to this positivistic view, see K. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and S. Matthews, "Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17.2 (2001): 39–55. Some scholars still maintain that there is much to be gained of an authentic female perspective in the *Acts of Thekla*. See, e. g., A. B. Merz, "New? Woman? Bruce W. Winters These und ihre Rezeption in der exegetischen Diskussion kritisch beleuchtet," in *Frauen im antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum* (eds. J. Frey and N. Rupschus; WUNT 2.489; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 209–34; eadem, "Gendered Power and the Power of Genre in the Debate about Women's Roles in the Pastoral Letters and the Acts of Paul," in *Power in the New Testament* (eds. P. G. R. de Villiers and A. B. Merz; Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 173–94. Merz and others maintain there is much to be learned from the debates over Paul and his views expressed about women in his letters, especially about what such debates reveal regarding perspectives of and even from women in antiquity. See also the essays in R. S. Kraemer and M. R. D'Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵ See, e. g., J. W. Barrier, *APT*, 45–47; G. E. Snyder, *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus* (WUNT 2/352; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), esp. 105–37, who provides an excellent discussion of scholarship regarding the classification of *Acts of Thekla*; J. W. Barrier, "The Acts of Paul and Thecla: the Historiographical Context," in *TPDS*, 327–50; Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, 33–97. Especially helpful for this particular discussion is the brief essay by K. Cooper, "Afterword," in *TMS*, 318–28.

Despite all the many things that could (and should) be discussed and studied regarding Thekla and the *Acts of Thekla* (*ATH*),⁶ the present study has as its focus the wider reception of Thekla and stories about her in the Syriac-speaking/reading traditions. A linguistic and geographic focus on Syriac traditions is easily defensible, at the very least because, at a philological level, the Syriac version of the *ATH* is one of the earliest extant versions, and is undoubtedly the earliest extant *complete* version of the story, having survived in two manuscripts from the sixth century.⁷ Despite a Syriac text and translation having been published by William Wright in 1871, the Syriac version of *ATH* has played almost no role in the modern studies of Thekla, her cult, or the text of the *ATH*. To illustrate this point, we can consider the scant, pithy mentions of the Syriac evidence in the two most prominent editions of the Christian apocrypha in English, both of which relied entirely on the reconstructed Greek text of Lipsius:

Schneemelcher⁸: “The Acta Pauli et Theclae were edited by Lipsius [...] on the basis of 11 Greek manuscripts as well as Latin, Syriac, Slavic and Arabic versions [...] Important are the Latin translations, of which according to O. von Gebhardt [...] there were at least four, independent of one another [...] The relation of the witnesses to one another and the value of the individual versions probably requires a fresh investigation. Lipsius’ text is frequently in need of correction. In this respect a special significance attaches to the Coptic version [...] even if it is not of itself decisive.”

Elliott⁹: “Lipsius-Bonnet based their edition on eleven Greek manuscripts, but over forty are now known to be extant. There are manuscripts of separate Latin translations that, according to von Gebhardt, represent an independent tradition. Syriac, Armenian, Slavonic, and perhaps Arabic versions also survive. Since the publication of Lipsius-Bonnet’s edition, parts of the text of the Acts of Paul and Thecla are to be found in P. Heid. [...] the Antinoopolis fragment, P. Oxy. 6, and the Fackelmann papyrus.”

Aside from the fact that Elliott’s description of the textual state of the *ATH* is very similar to Schneemelcher, it is noteworthy that both specifically draw attention to the Latin traditions and the fragmentary Coptic version preserved in the Heidelberg manuscript. To be sure, both the Latin and Coptic versions of *ATH* are extremely important and deserve more study. However, it is lamentable that both of these popular editions of Christian apocrypha say almost nothing about the Syriac version,

⁶ Throughout this volume I use the generic title “Acts of Thekla” even though this title actually never appears in any Syriac manuscript (see Chapter 2). This is the most commonly known title for the story, and I use it here out of convenience.

⁷ Perhaps an earlier extant version is the Coptic version found in the Heidelberg papyrus (= Coptic¹), which may date to the sixth century (cf. C. Schmidt, *Acta Pauli aus der Heidelberger koptischen Papyrushandschrift Nr. 1* [Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1965], 3–20). This manuscript, however, is highly fragmentary and contains several large lacunae in the text. There is also a fourth century Coptic fragment (= Coptic²) which was edited by R. Kasser and P. Luisier, “Le Bodmer XLI en Édition Princes l’épisode d’Éphèse des *Acta Pauli* en Copte et en Traduction,” *Le Muséon* 117 (2004): 281–384, but this only contains the Ephesus episode and may or may not have also included the *Acts of Thekla*.

⁸ W. Schneemelcher, “Acts of Paul” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2 (ed. W. Schneemelcher; trans. R. McL. Wilson; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 217.

⁹ J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in English Translation Based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 353.

nor do they provide any textual variants in their translations, despite having access to Wright's text and translation since 1871. Indeed, one could argue that the real culprit in this overt disregard of the Syriac version is Lipsius, who, although he occasionally cited Syriac variants, seems never to afford them any kind of significance other than as mere variant readings.¹⁰

The distinct neglect of the Syriac version unfortunately has been carried over into the research on *ATH*. In his 2009 commentary on *ATH*, Jeremy Barrier relegates the Syriac version only to a list of versions; much like Schneemelcher, Barrier occasionally acknowledges the priority of the Coptic Heidelberg version over the Greek manuscripts but does not afford the same consideration to the Syriac.¹¹ Richard Pervo's 2014 commentary is slightly better in this regard. Pervo highlights the importance of the Syriac evidence regarding other parts of the *Acts of Paul*, especially *3 Corinthians*, but he says comparatively little about the Syriac *ATH*, once again prioritizing the Coptic evidence in comparison with the Greek.¹² In study after study of *ATH*, scholars rely almost entirely on the Greek text reconstructed by Lipsius and rarely, if ever, mention the Syriac version.

The 2001 monograph of Stephen Davis in some ways broke the pattern of scholarship on *ATH* and Thekla by prioritizing the reception history of Thekla devotion. Davis went beyond the "original text" of *ATH* in its second century context and explored how stories of Thekla developed and influenced Christian cultures in late antiquity. To demonstrate this, however, Davis focused on two geographical regions, Asia Minor and Egypt, passing over the Syrian regions entirely. In some ways, this decision made sense: the cultic epicenter of Thekla devotion resides in Seleukeia (in southern Asia Minor) and a great deal of iconographic, literary, and artistic traces of Thekla devotion in Egypt have survived. Davis thus sensibly chose to narrow his focus to Asia and Egypt and produced one of the most helpful and lasting studies of Thekla and her stories to date. Nevertheless, the lacuna of Syria and Syriac evidence in the monograph is glaring.¹³

¹⁰ See, e.g., the mention in *ATH* 33 of the prayer of Thekla in the arena, which does not occur in any Greek manuscript. See Lipsius and Bonnet, *AAA*, 259. This is the only major variant from the Syriac mentioned by Lipsius, who often misses places where the Latin and Syriac align against the Greek. This is striking, given that Lipsius mentions the primacy of the Syriac version in his introduction (p. CV). To my knowledge, Lipsius could not read Syriac and was dependent on Wright's translation and notes.

¹¹ For example, Barrier supplies Coptic readings at *ATH* 23 (cf. Barrier, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 128 notes 8 and 10).

¹² To his credit, Pervo references the Syriac in comparison to the Greek in a few places. See, e.g., R. I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014), 127–30.

¹³ Davis, *Cult of St. Thecla*, vi claims that *only* in Asia Minor and Egypt "does archaeological, artistic, and literary evidence provide enough context for a 'thick' description of communities and practices connected with Thecla devotion." Davis is probably correct about this, but as my analysis in this book shows, the Syriac manuscripts of *ATH* provide important glimpses into Thekla devotion in the Syrian context, a data set that Davis does not consider in his study.

In some ways, this treatment of Syriac evidence is a byproduct of the domains in which the study of early Christian literature tends to take place. For the most part, the apocryphal acts of apostles have been studied by those trained in Classics and Classical Philology, disciplines that prioritize Greek and Latin as “Mediterranean languages.”¹⁴ Syriac language and literature have often been neglected or marginalized as “late” or “derivative” of “earlier” Greek/Latin “originals.” The present volume aims to correct this marginalization: the Syriac manuscripts contain the earliest extant complete copies of Thekla’s story. There exists no Greek manuscript containing the entirety of *ATH* that dates prior to the tenth century. The earliest Coptic fragments of *Acts of Paul* date to the fourth century, but do not contain any part of Thekla’s story. By contrast, there are two Syriac manuscripts from the sixth century – one of which is entirely complete, the other mostly complete –, one from the late seventh century, one from the eighth century, and one from the tenth century. In other words, the Syriac manuscripts boast the earliest complete textual evidence for the *ATH*. It is past time for a careful study of this version.

Not too long after Davis published his monograph, Catherine Burris and Lucas Van Rompay began to fill this lacuna with two articles on Thekla in Syriac.¹⁵ These are the two most cited articles on *ATH* in Syriac in subsequent literature, though each article is only a few pages long. In their first essay, they state that their aim is to “present some preliminary data that may contribute to a future comprehensive study of the cult of Thekla in Syriac Christianity.”¹⁶ The present volume is my attempt to answer this call for such a comprehensive study. In what follows, I will first give a brief history of the study of *ATH* and Thekla in Syriac, followed by a discussion of the significance for studying the Syriac version within the history of scholarship on Thekla more generally. I will then present the scope and intentions of the present

¹⁴ It is characteristic within scholarship on the apocryphal acts of apostles to compare them to the ancient Greek and Latin novels and such comparison must entail philological analysis and comparison, which typically narrows the interests of researchers to texts written in the same languages. In the case of the *Acts of Paul* and/or *Acts of Thekla*, this is the approach in several foundational works. E. g., R. Söder, *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932); T. Haag, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 154–62; R. F. Hock, J. B. Chance, and J. Perkins, eds., *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); Cooper, *Virgin and Bride*, 20–44; Barrier, *APT*, 1–21. The study by S. E. Hulen, *A Modest Apostle: Thekla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), compares Thekla to women within the Greco-Roman context, situating her study in the second century setting. This comparison is also characteristic of the later *Life and Miracles of Thekla*, e. g., Á. Narro, “The Influence of the Greek Novel on the *Life and Miracles of Saint Thekla*,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 109.1 (2016): 71–94. In a more generic application to the apocryphal acts, see, e. g., D. Konstan, “Reunion and Regeneration: Narrative Patterns in Ancient Greek Novels and Christian Acts,” in *Fiction on the Fringe: Novelistic Writing in the Post-Classical Age* (ed. G. A. Karla; Mnemosyne 310; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 105–20.

¹⁵ C. Burris and L. Van Rompay, “Thekla in Syriac Christianity: Preliminary Observations,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 5.2 (2002): 225–36; C. Burris and L. Van Rompay, “Some Further Notes on Thekla in Syriac Christianity,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 6.2 (2009): 337–42.

¹⁶ Burris and Van Rompay, “Thekla in Syriac Christianity,” 226.

study by providing an overview of the methods employed and how I envision this book to be used by readers.

B. Thekla in Syriac: A Brief History

In 1871, the British Orientalist William Wright published a selection of Apocryphal Acts of Apostles in Syriac. His collection contained a Syriac recalibration of the Greek *Acts of John* entitled *The History of John the Son of Zebedee*,¹⁷ followed by a Syriac translation of the *Metastasis of John*,¹⁸ an original Syriac text the *History of Philip*,¹⁹ a Syriac translation of the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*,²⁰ a Syriac translation of the *Acts of Thekla*, and what Wright referred to as the “gem” of his collection, the Syriac version of the *Acts of Thomas*.²¹ With the exception of the *Acts of Thomas*, it has only been in recent years that these Syriac texts have been studied in their own right – only the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, from Wright’s collection, has yet to be edited from the Syriac and Garshuni versions.²²

Wright says nothing about the reception or importance of *ATh* in the Syriac traditions but was primarily interested in the text for philological purposes. In fact, this seems to have been his interest for all of the texts in the volume. His thoughts on the “derivative” nature of the *History of John* were likely applicable to all the texts in his collection: “These Acts, which are obviously translated from the Greek, being of comparatively late date, and to all appearance destitute of any historical basis, are chiefly valuable from the linguistic point of view.”²³ Wright thus thought the texts were of little value beyond comparing them to their Greek *Vorlagen*. He admitted elsewhere

¹⁷ See J.A. Lollar, *The History of John the Son of Zebedee: Introduction, Texts and Translations* (Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 56; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2020).

¹⁸ On the Greek tradition see E. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis* (CCSA 1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), 317–43. Junod and Kaestli discuss multiple versions of the *Metastasis of John* in Greek and even provide a Coptic version, but appear not to address the Syriac version edited by Wright.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur, mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn: Marcus and Webers, 1922), 68; M. van Esbroeck, “Les Actes syriaques de Philippe à Charthagène en version arabe,” *Oriens Chrétienne* 79 (1995): 120–45; F. Ruani and É. Villey, “Recherches sur la transmission manuscrite syriaque de l’*Histoire de Philippe*,” in *Manuscripta Syriaca: Des sources de première main* (eds. F. Briquel Chatonnet and M. Debié; Cahiers d’études syriaques 4; Paris: Geuthner, 2015), 385–420; R.A. Kitchen, “The History of Philip,” in *MNTA* 2.293–315.

²⁰ See the essays in J. N. Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew* (Studies in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 5; Leuven: Peeters, 2000).

²¹ For Wright’s comment see Wright, AAAS, ixiii. Wright’s text of the *Acts of Thomas* remains the standard Syriac text, though a fifth/sixth century fragment of the text was discovered in some folios of the undertext of the so-called Sinai Palimpsest (Sinai syr. 30). See especially the recent essay by the late P.-H. Poirier, “Vers une édition des *Actes syriaque de Thomas*,” *Apocrypha* 33 (2022): 185–218.

²² For a list of the manuscripts (with need of some updating) see N. J. Hardy, “Acts of Andrew and Matthias,” *e-Clavis: Christian Apocrypha*. Accessed 3 April 2024. <https://www.nasscal.com/e-clavis-christian-apocrypha/acts-of-andrew-and-matthias/>.

²³ Wright, AAAS, lix.

that he was a philologist and made no claims to being an expert in Syriac history and culture.²⁴ Still, his comments on the value of these texts has been influential on their later reception.

Notwithstanding Wright's admitted interests, it is fascinating that he inadvertently stumbled upon an ancient trend. These apocryphal texts were composed/translated at a very early period in Syriac literarization.²⁵ In particular, the *History of John*, the *Acts of Thekla*, and the *Acts of Thomas* all appear in manuscripts of the fifth and sixth centuries and all three were known in Syriac no later than the fifth century.²⁶ These texts thus form part of the foundations of Syriac literary culture and offer glimpses of the developments of distinct Syriac perspectives.²⁷ Wright admitted that his work constituted only the beginning of the analysis and textual criticism of these narratives and saw his own work in relation to his erudite predecessor William Cureton. For his part, Cureton saw the importance of such "apocryphal" stories in Syriac. They were related (as Cureton's subtitle for his own collection states) to *the earliest establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the neighboring countries*.²⁸

Although Wright did not know it at the time – or at least left no indication that he knew – his collection of apocrypha actually mirrors collections that have survived in several (mostly modern) East Syriac manuscripts.²⁹ These manuscripts contain many of the same texts as each other, but also some of the same texts Wright included in his collection, such as the *History of John*, the *Acts of Thomas*, and the *Acts of Thekla*.³⁰ Syriac scribes across time and ecclesiastical boundaries tended to group apostolic acts in the manuscripts – much as Cureton and Wright grouped them together into modern, scholarly editions. In a somewhat ironic twist, William Wright (and before him William Cureton) was himself participating in a well-established Syriac scribal habit of grouping apostolic apocrypha together in a bound volume.³¹

²⁴ See his comments in the preface to W. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents Relative to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighboring Countries* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864).

²⁵ Cf. A. Rigolio, "Syriac," in *How Literature Begins: A Global History* (eds. J. B. Lande and D. Feeney; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 167–90.

²⁶ The *History of John* appears in the fifth century St. Petersburg syr. ms. 04; the *Acts of Thomas* in the fifth/sixth century undertext of Sinai syr. 30; the *Acts of Thekla* in the sixth century mss Deir al-Surian syr. 06 and BL Add. 14652.

²⁷ E. g., Rigolio, "Syriac," 177 writes of the *Acts of Thomas*: "the *Acts of Thomas* ... is an instance of Acts of the Apostles composed in Syriac and narrating the missionary travels of the apostle Thomas to India, at the same time offering important glimpses into the Edessenes' perceptions of Roman and Parthian imperial powers."

²⁸ See Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents*.

²⁹ These are, among others, ms Trichur, Chaldean Syrian Church, Syr. 9 (1615) and Vat. sir. 597 (17th cent.).

³⁰ On these manuscripts and their shared features, see J. Edward Walters, "Digitized Manuscripts and the Preservation of Material Culture: Syriac Manuscript ACK213 as a Case Study," in *Material Apocrypha: Ten Studies* (eds. J. E. Spittler and R. M. Calhoun; Sheffield: Equinox, forthcoming).

³¹ I recently presented on this very phenomenon for the SBL Christian Apocrypha and Syriac Studies joint session (San Antonio, TX 2023): "Ancient Syriac Documents: Apocrypha and History

Wright's text of *ATH* is based on four manuscripts he consulted from the British Library (see the next chapter). The main text was copied from BL Add. 14652 and filled in by the other manuscripts where lacunae occurred. Aside from referring to the Greek edition of *ATH* by Tischendorf – the only version available to Wright in 1871 –, he offers no clear insights into the text, its history, or reception. In 1900, Agnes Smith Lewis found another copy of *ATH* in the upper text of the famous Sinai Palimpsest. She did not record the entire text, but simply listed variants in comparison to Wright's edition.³² Aside from the meager references to Wright's edition noted above (no mention is made of Lewis by Schneemelcher or Elliott), the Syriac version of *ATH* remained unstudied and ignored until the early years of the twenty-first century.

The two essays by Burris and Van Rompay brought the Syriac of *ATH* back into view. Since the study by Davis had ignited a renewed interest into the *reception* of Thekla and stories about her, and since Davis paid no attention to the Syriac evidence, Burris and Van Rompay's brief studies became virtually the only source of information about the reception of *ATH* in Syriac. In 2005, an exceptional volume on *Les apocryphes syriaques* appeared in the Paris-based "Études syriaques" series, edited by Muriel Debié, Alain Desreumaux, and Christelle and Florence Jullien. In his contribution on the apocryphal acts of apostles, Desreumaux remarks about *ATH* in Syriac:

On possède en syriaque une traduction des textes grecs des *Actes de Paul et Thècle* dont les relations avec la version arménienne constituent un bon exemple de la circulation, de la diffusion et de l'usage des rédactions et versions d'une oeuvre apocryphe dans le Proche-Orient chrétien[.]³³

The importance of the Syriac *ATH* and its connection with the Armenian version to which Desreumaux alludes has been a major topic in the works of Valentina Calzolari, who published a critical edition of the Armenian *ATH* (among other Thekla stories) with an Italian translation in 2017.³⁴ Calzolari provides a comprehensive treatment of the Syriac evidence, though it is in the context of comparison with the Armenian version, which itself is a translation of the Syriac.³⁵ With her focus on the Armenian, Calzolari does not discuss any of the reception of Thekla and her stories in Syriac,

in Antiquity and Modern Scholarship." This basic observation is important for my project "Syriac Manuscripts and the Construction of Culture" as part of my British Academy International Fellowship (Durham University, 2024–2027).

³² A. Smith Lewis, *Select Narratives of Holy Women from the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest* (Studia Sinaitica IX; London: C. J. Clay, 1900). Lewis does not mention Thekla in her brief introduction, but also does not speak very approvingly of the stories of women overall. See p. vi: "Although these 'Select Narratives' cannot pretend to much value when compared with the ancient Gospel-text which underlies them, and which has been preserved for their sakes alone during eleven centuries, and though it would be a difficult task to sift through the few grains of historical truth which they contain from their bushels of imaginative chaff, they are not without some literary beauty."

³³ A. Desreumaux, "Les apocryphes apostoliques," in *Les apocryphes syriaques* (eds. M. Debié, A. Desreumaux, C. Jullien, and F. Jullien; Études syriaques 2; Paris: Geuthner, 2005), 71–95, here 83.

³⁴ V. Calzolari, *Apocrypha Armeniaca I: Acta Pauli et Theclae. Prodigia Theclae. Martyrium Pauli* (CCSA 20; Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).

³⁵ See Calzolari, *Apocrypha Armeniaca*, 171–87. See also the excursus discussion in Chapter 3 below.

though both Desreumaux and Calzolari afford great significance to the Syriac *ATH* especially in terms of its relationship to the Armenian version.

The only existing study of the reception of *ATH* and *Thekla* in Syriac is the doctoral thesis of Catherine Burris, completed in 2010, but unpublished.³⁶ This study's central focus is not on the text of *ATH* so much, but it contains crucial insights into how Syriac speaking/reading Christians read *ATH* and interacted with it. Moreover, although Burris made no attempt at producing a critical edition of the text, her observations of the translation profile from Greek to Syriac have been influential on my own analysis. Much of the present volume is indebted to Burris's work.

Ultimately, Desreumaux is correct in his observation that the Syriac *ATH* offers a glimpse into the diffusion and use of apocryphal works in Syria, Mesopotamia, and the wider Near East. Moreover, the Syriac version has much to contribute to the discussion of *Thekla* devotion and the reception of *Thekla* and stories about her in late antiquity writ large. It is worth dwelling on a few issues that have occupied scholarship on *Thekla* in the last few decades with the purpose of showing how the Syriac version impacts the scholarship on these issues. In what follows, I will assess briefly what I believe to be the more salient aspects of discussions of *Thekla* as they relate to the Syriac version of the *Acts of Thekla*, including: 1) the lives and experiences of early Christian women; 2) gender, gender fluidity, and transvestitism; 3) violence, abuse, and power; and 4) the scriptural canon.

1. Early Christian Women and the *Acts of Thekla*

Scholars of the 1980s and 1990s drew attention to *Thekla*'s status as an early Christian heroine. In many ways, these studies were driven by the famous section from Tertullian of Carthage's *De baptismo*, where he speaks against the authorship of the *Acts of Paul* in order to discredit the story of *Thekla*, which had evidently inspired women to preach and baptize.³⁷ Tertullian's complaints about women have been taken as evidence for organized groups of women evangelizers, who themselves may have authored, read, and disseminated *Thekla*'s story.³⁸ The *Acts of Thekla* thus were considered a glimpse – however bleak – into the lives of early Christian women.³⁹

³⁶ C. Burris, "The Reception of the Acts of Thekla in Syriac Christianity: Translation, Collection, and Reception" (PhD Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010). In private correspondence in 2019, Dr. Burris informed me that she intended to publish her dissertation in a modified form, but this has yet to be published to my knowledge.

³⁷ See most recently McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, 15–45; Barrier, "Cainite Invocation of Thekla?" 35–60.

³⁸ See, e.g., Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*, 129: "The [apocryphal] Acts, if they are what remain of a burst of creativity among Christian women of very early times, are valuable for our time. They appear to have been a striving by Christian women for both a mode of self-expression and a way to preach rebellion for the sake of continence."

³⁹ See, e.g., MacDonald, *Legend and the Apostle*; Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*.

These ideas were challenged by some groundbreaking studies that reoriented the question of what can be known about early Christian women from such texts as *ATH*. These stories tell not about women and women's experiences, but rather about the men who wrote *about* women and their preoccupations with women's behavior and, especially, their bodies.⁴⁰ Often, it was male scribes who copied these texts and altered them in distinct ways. The *Acts of Thekla* thus is less likely to provide a glimpse into ancient female lives than it is a glimpse of ancient male ideologies of femaleness.

The Syriac *ATH* is no exception to the rule that scribes, translators, copyists, and authors often introduced variants into stories, intervening in their tellings to (de)emphasize any elements according to personal preference. The reception history of a text like *ATH* permits a broader view of the kinds of interventions that took place over time and, in the case of translations into languages that operated in distinct geographical regions, it allows us to *contextualize* these interventions. Recently, Kate Cooper clarified that her earlier work on Thekla was not arguing that no "real" women could be found in these texts, but rather that "the voice of early storytellers, if it can indeed be traced, is distorted by the layering of other, later voices in the text,"⁴¹ such as the Syriac. Elisabeth Esch-Wermeling has argued that within the *ATH* itself Thekla's character is unstable and the two major episodes (in Iconium and Antioch) appear to have "unterschiedliche soziale und religiöse Kontexte."⁴² She further points to the fact that, in the reception of Thekla between text and iconography, her depiction is even further destabilized so that her image is constantly reframed and it is difficult (if not impossible) to get back to an "original," or "real" Thekla, only the product of the authors, scribes, translators, and copyists – most of whom were male.⁴³

As will become clear throughout the present study, analysis of the Syriac manuscripts of *ATH* allow us to glimpse the processes and dynamics of translating, transmitting, and transforming Thekla and her story for a distinct, Syriac-reading/speaking audience. Whether or not we can learn anything about a "historical Thekla" or the "real" life of a second-century Christian woman aside, the Syriac manuscripts (and the wider Syriac reception of Thekla) have a great deal to say about how real, historical women were devoted to Thekla. Copies of her story were owned and read by real women who wrote their names in the manuscripts. Female devotees of Thekla have existed in Syria at least from the time of Severus of Antioch (sixth century) until even today in at the Convent of Thekla at Maaloula. While there are still massive gaps

⁴⁰ Cf. the substantive critique of their approaches in J.-D. Kaestli, "Fiction littéraire et réalité sociale: que peut-on savoir de la place des femmes dans le milieu de production des Actes apocryphes des apôtres?" *Apocrypha* 1 (1990): 279–302, who argues that there are insufficient grounds for feminist readings of the apocryphal acts of apostles. See alternative critiques by Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride*; Matthews, "Thinking of Thecla."

⁴¹ K. Cooper, "Afterword," in *TMS*, 318–28, here 320.

⁴² E. Esch-Wermeling, *Thekla – Paulusschülerin wider willen? Strategien der Leserlenkung in den Theklaakten* (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 53; Münster: Aschendorff, 2008), 299.

⁴³ Esch-Wermeling, *Thekla – Paulusschülerin wider willen?* 308–10.

Index of Subjects

- Abgar, King of Edessa 27, 130, 289, 325
Adam 135n74, 306–7, 312
Adiabene 302
Aleppo 46, 63, 77, 99, 301, 314–15, 317, 319, 324, 328
Alexandria 14n59, 36n63, 42, 58–59, 61, 63, 71, 112, 138n87
Alexandros of Antioch 12, 130–31, 145, 148, 183–87, 195–98, 209, 229–35, 238, 269–80, 296, 303, 312
Alqušh 25, 87–88, 91, 94, 96–97, 99–107, 110
Amida 66, 68
Antioch 10, 59, 132, 136–39, 143, 145, 157n8, 183, 229, 269, 295, 300
– arena 185n288, 187n301, 307
– of Pisidia 136–38
– of Syria 1, 26, 65–66, 77, 80–82, 85, 136–38, 203n436, 209, 213n10, 245–46, 289, 291–92, 308, 312–13, 319
– *see also* Alexandros of Antioch; Severus of Antioch
apostle(s) 13, 27n19, 35, 43, 76, 96, 105, 140n91, 307, 310
– Apocryphal Acts of, 5–8, 10n40, 83, 118, 325
– Thekla as 317, 327–38
Arabic 19n77, 27, 33n45, 56, 87n289, 101, 315
– *Acts of Thekla* in, 3, 136n75, 147, 150, 165n90, 182n262, 184n278, 194n369, 206n469, 210, 220n82, 225n136, 241n314, 248
– manuscripts 23, 132n68
archetype 100, 106, 110, 247–48, 251n20, 261n128, 264n154, 271n233, 273n249, 280nn326–27, 282n345, 284n374, 306
arena 4n10, 12, 130, 136, 142n106, 185n288, 187n301, 295n35, 296, 300–1, 307, 312, 314, *see also* theatre
Armenian 72, 81, 138, 155, 210, 322
– *Acts of Thekla* in 1n1, 3, 8–9, 12n49, 15, 122–26, 139, 145, 147, 149, 154, 163n65, 175n182, 189n323, 323
– manuscripts 23, 124
– texts, 290, 322
– translation 118, 120, 122–26, 133, 139, 145, 150, 154, 191n345, 218n56, 248
asceticism 13, 43, 126–29, 133n70, 151, 304, 309n100
Baghdad 27, 87, 101, 106
body 11–12, 15, 84, 118, 121, 144, 149, 162n57, 213, 253, 277, 294–95, 302, 308–13, 316–17, 319, 326
Book of Women 14, 25, 29, 37–38, 40–46, 49, 51, 53, 55, 70n241, 72, 114, 127n50, 151
canon 9, 13–14, 24, 30, 33n48, 43, 55, 59, 86n286, 122, 139, 317–18
Cappadocia 1n2, 13–14, 29n30, 42, 290
Cilicia 85–86, 138, 246n368, 289–90, 308, 322
Constantinople 26n15, 38, 43, 58n135, 59, 62n168, 71
Church of the East 86–88
Coptic 36n63, 37, 60, 114n406, 148
– *Acts of Thekla* in 3–5, 6n18, 23–24, 55n119, 83n282, 117, 119, 133n72, 145n115, 146–50, 184n278, 213n10
– church 27, 33n48, 292, 326
– literature 59–60, 301n65, 303n74, 325–174

- Damascus 24, 27, 111, 250, 315–16
- Daniel (prophet) 14n59, 25, 33, 36, 51, 72, 114, 140–44, 151, 163n67, 199nn403–5, 204n453, 298, 307–9, 321
- Deir al-Surian 24–33, 35–37, 41, 44–45, 47, 49, 53, 55, 60, 69, 71–72, 87, 106, 124n35, 153, 292, 325
- Dura 319–20
- Edessa 7, 26, 34–35, 42–43, 118–20, 289, 291, 325n173 *see also* Jacob of Edessa; Rabbula of Edessa
- Egeria 246n368, 289–90
- Egypt 4, 14, 26–29, 36n63, 37, 59–60, 63, 69, 71, 81, 103, 108, 112, 117n3, 182n262, 290, 292, 302, 305, 313, 315, 317n135, 318, 320, 324–26
- Eliya 297–99, 304
- Ephesus 3n7, 59, 98, 117n3, 141, 290, 320–21, 324n171
- family 33, 46, 68, 88, 97, 105–6, 294n31, 318
- manuscript 213n10
- of Thekla 12, 46n101, 121, 132, 175, 223, 262, 311
- Febronia 112, 293–300, 304, 328
- gender 2, 9, 11–12, 40n76, 143–46, 148–51, 300–1, 311n107, 312
- Gospel(s) 8n32, 49n109, 111, 114, 145n115, 326
- Old Syriac 73–74
- Peshitta 87n288
- Greek 6, 38, 42, 55, 69, 127, 291, 297–98, 305, 314–16, 325n174, 326n177
- *Acts of Thekla* in, 3–5, 8, 18, 23, 36, 55, 85–86, 123–24, 140, 147, 210, 295n36, 314, 321, 323–24, 327
- manuscripts, 4–5, 23, 37, 55, 83, 125, 138–39, 145n114, 146, 153–54, 301, 320
- translation 9, 11–12, 36, 86, 126–38, 141–43, 148–51, 155, 292–93
- calendar year 33, 44
- Grotto of St Paul (Ephesus) 141, 316–17, 319–21, 324n171
- homily/sermon 36, 38, 82, 107, 113, 121, 137, 140, 144, 148, 151, 291–92, 305–13, 316, 318, 328
- Homs (Emesa) 112, 316
- Ḥormizd (Rabban) 98–100, 302
- Antonine Order of 25, 87n289, 88, 100–101, 103, 106, 110, 247
- scribe 102–3, 109
- *see also* monastery, Rabban Ḥormizd, Alqush
- icon/iconography 4, 10, 12–13, 18n77, 55n119, 69, 72, 80, 141, 150, 291, 301, 313–15, 317, 319, 323–24, 328
- inscription 16, 18n76, 141, 144, 314–15, 319, 328
- Jacob of Edessa 77n262, 306
- Jews/Judaism 18, 42, 45, 49, 63, 69, 172n156, 194n369, 235n255
- John (apostle) 6–7, 14n59, 58–59, 63, 90, 325–27
- John Chrysostom 43, 308, 318n143
- John of Ephesus 112, 297, 305
- John of Tella 61, 141, 293–94, 297–99, 304, 321, 328
- John the Solitary 111, 114
- John the Stylite 76–77, 81–83, 85–86, 137–38, 209–10, 212, 213n10, 218n56, 219n64, 221, 225n139, 227n158, 228–29, 232n225, 233, 235, 237n280, 240n305, 242–46, 319
- Josephus 45, 65, 69, 128n57
- Latin 5, 72, 293
- *Acts of Thekla* in, 3, 4n10, 55n119, 72, 124, 141, 141n101, 147–48, 150, 183n267, 314, 323
- manuscripts 23, 83, 133n72, 301, 323
- translation 293, 322
- Lebanon 315, 328
- Leo XIII, pope 96–97, 105
- library 69–70
- Antonine Order of Hormizd, Erbil, *see* monastery, Rabban Ḥormizd, Alqush
- Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan 19n78, 29n31

- Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City 89, 93
- British Library (Museum), London 8, 24, 41, 47, 55, 60n146
- Deir al-Surian *see* Deir al-Surian
- Orthodox Patriarchal, Damascus 24, 27, 111
- Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham 108
- St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai 80
- Staatsbibliothek, Berlin 87n289, 91, 93
- liturgy 54, 66n227, 68, 70–72, 92, 100, 104, 106, 111, 236n275, 291, 314n123, 326–28

- Maaloula, Syria 1, 10, 301, 315–19, 324
- Mabbug 289, 291, *see also* Philoxenus of Mabbug
- Maccabees 45
 - books of 37, 45, 65, 69
 - martyrdoms of 70
- Manichaeism 83n281, 325–27
- martyr/martyrdom 12–13, 24, 37, 49, 51, 54, 58–59, 62, 64–65, 69–72, 76, 80, 85–86, 96–100, 102–3, 111, 113–15, 124n33, 136, 143–44, 178n210, 245, 296, 299–304, 307–12, 316–17, 328
- martyrium 246n368, 289
- Mary, Virgin 65, 69–70, 74, 76, 113, 324
- Maryam (abbess) 40–41
- Material Philology 15–21, 23, 26, 30, 44n93, 107, 111, 114, 313–15, 320, 325, 328
- Melkites 20, 25–26, 73–86, 149, 153–54, 209–10, 292, 314–15, 324
- Mesopotamia 9, 26–28, 55, 86, 93, 108, 291–92, 302n67
- Michael the Syrian 29, 65–66, 68–70, 112
- model 11n46, 13, 15–17, 25n13, 72n248, 109–10, 118, 125, 189n323, 293, 296–99, 301, 307, 309, 313, 327
- monastery, 26–28, 38n74, 46n98, 59–60, 71, 87, 108, 110, 112
 - Abū Ghālib, Amida 66
 - of the Syrians, Scete, *see* Deir al-Surian
 - Lady Mary of the Seeds, Alqūsh 101–6, 109
 - Mār Barṣaumā, Melitene 66, 69
 - Mār Qanūn, Ma'r'rath Meṣrīn 77, 245n367
 - Mār Zakkay, Kallinikos 297
- Rabban Ḥormizd, Alqūsh 91, 94, 96–97, 99–101, 105, 280n326, 284n370
- St Catherine's, Sinai 24–25, 33n49, 73, 80–81, 86, 209, 292, 324
- St Mark's, Jerusalem 121
- St Sergius, Maaloula 316–17
- St Thekla, Maaloula 316–17
- Zafran, Mardin 113
- Mosul 31n38, 87, 88n296, 93–94, 101, 107–8
- Mūše of Nisibis 26–29, 49n108, 71, 86–87

- New Testament 13, 15, 126, 300n60, 318

- Old Testament 14n57, 29, 36, 42n81, 45n96, 72n248

- palaeography 47, 88, 91
- Palestine 65, 69, 315
- palimpsest 6n21, 8, 24, 73–74, 76, 86
- Paul (apostle) 11–12, 24, 51, 70, 80, 82–84, 91, 99, 113, 117, 123n28, 125–42, 144–51, 154, 157–64, 166–84, 202–6, 210, 212–30, 242–44, 249–57, 260–69, 283–85, 294–95, 298–99, 302–3, 307–8, 311–12, 314, 316–17, 320–28
- Peter (apostle) 89, 113, 324, 326–27
- Philoxenus of Mabbug 68n233, 305
- pilgrim/pilgrimage 12, 246n368, 289–90, 319
- prison 62, 133–35, 174–76, 206–7, 222–24, 244, 261–63, 285, 314, 327
- prologues 91–93, 247

- Rabbula of Edessa 37–38, 42–43, 123

- Scete/Scetis (Egypt) 31–32, 35, 49, 60–62, 71
- scribe(s) 7, 10–12, 17–20, 30, 34, 40–47, 51, 53–60, 65–66, 69–72, 76–77, 82, 86, 88n294, 92, 95–97, 100, 102–4, 106–10, 113–15, 128, 132n67, 137–38, 140, 145n114, 151, 153–54, 157–67, 171–74, 176–85, 188, 191, 197, 202, 205, 208, 212–13, 218, 249–58, 261–86
- Seleukeia 4, 14, 40, 59, 139, 146, 208, 245, 287, 296, 309, 317, 319
 - of Cilicia 86, 138, 289, 312–13
 - of Syria 85–86, 138, 145n114, 246
- Severus of Antioch 10, 36, 85, 118, 140, 144, 151, 291, 294, 305–13, 328

- Smyrna 59, 203n436
 Syriac Renaissance 55, 68, 70n243
- Takrit 27–28
 – brothers of 28, 31–33, 35, 71
 – Christians from 28, 31
- Tarragona, Spain 1, 141, 320, 322–23, 328
- Tella-Zekīpha 109
- Tertullian of Carthage 1n2, 9, 13, 117, 313
- Thamyris/Thamarys 70, 126, 130, 139, 163–72, 175–76, 185, 207, 216–21, 223–25, 230, 244, 254–60, 263, 269, 286, 295, 300
- theatre 129, 131, 136, 142, 145n114, 177–78, 186–89, 191–92, 195–98, 201, 225–26, 231–41, 264–65, 271–73, 275, 278–82, 294–95, 321, *see also* arena
- Thomas (apostle) 97, 99, 289, 326–27
- Tryphaena 12, 107, 131, 133, 135, 139, 186–91, 197–98, 201–5, 231–34, 239–43, 247, 271–75, 279–85, 294–96, 300n60
- Tur Abdin 44, 108
- virgin/virginity 12–14, 23, 40n76, 46, 69, 72n248, 133, 162–63, 165–68, 171, 178, 215–17, 219, 221, 226, 254, 256–60, 265, 300, 307–8, 311–13, 317, 319–20, 326–27
- window 140–41, 150, 163–65, 180n238, 216–17, 254–56, 298, 319–23
- women 1–2, 5n14, 8n32, 9–11, 14, 25, 30, 54, 69–70, 72n248, 74, 77, 81–83, 113–14, 133, 137, 142n106, 144–46, 148, 164–65, 177, 184, 191–96, 201–3, 209, 212, 216–17, 225, 230, 234–37, 241, 255–56, 264, 269, 271, 276–78, 282, 289, 293, 295–96, 300, 302–4, 306, 310–13, 317, 319–20, 326–27
 – as readers 24, 40, 151
 – as scribes 40n76, 151
 – *see also* Book of Women
- Zeno, emperor 14, 58–59, 63n182

Index of Ancient Texts

- 3 *Corinthians* 4, 118–20, 169n128
Acts of Andrew and Matthias 6, 83n281, 97, 99, 325n172
Acts of John 6, 58n131, 83n281, 325
Acts of Mar Mari 89, 91, 97, 99–100
Acts of Paul 2–5, 9, 13, 23, 55n118, 117–20, 122, 140n95, 150, 157n8, 169n128, 325n172
Acts of the Apostles 13, 250n10
Acts of Thomas 6–7, 27n19, 73–74, 89, 91, 97, 99–100, 111, 118, 167n106, 289, 325n172
Anecdotes of Apollo and Amun 62
Anecdote of Awgin 62–63
Anecdotes of Daniel of Scetis 62
Anecdotes of Macarius of Alexandria 61
Anecdotes of Martinianus 62
Anecdotes of Nicolaus of Myra 61
Anecdotes of Paphnutius 62
 Aphrahat
 – *Demonstrations* 120, 127, 167n106
Apocalypse of Paul 89, 103, 109, 111
Apocalypse of Ezra 89
 Athanasius of Alexandria
 – *De virginitate* 71n246

Baruch 37
 Basil of Caesarea
 – *De spiritu sancto* 127n54
 – *Life of* 61, 112
 Bel and the Dragon 25, 34, 51

Chronicle of Seert 203n436
Chronicle of Zuqnin 305
 1 *Corinthians* 311

 Daniel 25, 33, 36, 51, 72, 114, 140–44, 151, 163n67, 199, 203n453, 298, 307–9
Death of Theodosius of Jerusalem 61

Dialogue between Moses and God 90
Doctrine of Addai 27n19, 99n376, 130n63, 325n174

 Egeria
 – *Itinerarium* 246n368, 289
 Ephrem the Syrian
 – *Commentary on Third Corinthians* 119–20
 – *Memra on Resurrection* 103, 109
 Esther 14, 25, 29, 37–38, 42–43, 45–46, 49, 51, 53–54

 Gregory of Nazianzus
 – *Carmina* 1

 Hippolytus of Rome
 – *Commentary on Daniel* 140
History and Panegyric of Constantine and his three sons 56
History of Andronicus and Athanasia 62
History of Archileides 58
History of Arsenes of Egypt 103, 109
History of Constantine 62
History of Cosmas and Damian 65
History of the Death of the Mother of God 65
History of mār Giwargīs 107
History of the Image of Christ 89, 91, 97, 99–100
History of Jacob Intercisus 98, 100, 103, 109
History of John 6–7, 58, 83n281, 90, 325n174
History of Judas Kyriakos 98, 100
History of the Martyrs of Beth Slōk 98, 100
History of the Martyrs of Mt Ber'ain 64
History of Maurice 103, 109
History of Mikā 90–91, 98
History of Paphnutis 103, 109
History of Paul 90

- History of Paul the Bishop* 90
History of Peter 89
History of Peter of Alexandria 58
History of Philip 6
Story of Rabban Ḥormizd 98
History of the Rechabites 63, 103, 109
History of Sultan Mahdok 98
History of Tenina 103, 109
History of the Virgin 89

Job 31–33, 51, 114
John and the Robber 58–59
John of Ephesus
 – *Life of Susanna* 112
John the Solitary
 – *Letter to Hesychius* 111, 114
Josephus
 – *Jewish War* 45, 128n57
Judith 14, 25, 29, 36–38, 42–43, 46, 49, 51, 53
Julian Romance 56

Legend of Helena Augusta 63, 98
Legend of Hilaria 58–60, 112
Legend of the Himyarite Martyrs 54, 58, 99
Legend of Protonike 63, 97
Letter of Simeon of the Persians to Simeon of Gabula 58
Liber Graduum (Book of Steps) 13, 107, 118–23, 127, 135, 150
Life and Miracles of Thekla 5n14, 14, 59, 85–86, 139, 146, 184n278, 192n347, 209–10, 233, 245n367, 237n280, 242n334, 243n344, 244n348, 245n367, 265n161, 309, 314n123, 319
Life of Aaron 61
Life of Abā 90
Life of Abhai 61
Life of Abraham of Tur 63
Life of Agna 112
Life of Asius 61
Life of Barbara and Juliana 112
Life of Barsaumā the Syrian 60
Life of Clement of Rome 63
Life of Eugenia 112, 151
Life of Eulogius 63
Life of Euphrosyne 112
Life of Eupraxia 112
Life of Eusebius of Samosata 62

Life of Febronia 293–300, 328
Life of Gregory of Nazianzus 61
Life of Hanania 61
Life of Isaiah of Aleppo 63, 99
Life of Isaiah of Scetis 61
Life of Jacob Baradaeus 63
Life of Jacob of Nisibis 63
Life of Jacob the Recluse 65, 90–91
Life of Jacob of Serugh 63
Life of John bar Aphtunaya 61
Life of John the Nazarite 63
Life of John of Tella 141n102, 297n42, 298, 304, 328
Life of Malchus the Solitary 62
Life of Marina 112
Life of Mary 112
Life of Mary of Egypt 112
Life of Onesima 112
Life of Paul the Simple 61
Life of Pelagia 112
Life of Peter the Iberian 60
Life of Pistis and Agape 112
Life of Simeon Salus and John 61
Life of Stratonike 64, 112
Life of Symeon Stylites 60
Life of Yareth of Alexandria 63

Maccabees
 – 3 Maccabees 45, 69, 237
 – 4 Maccabees 65, 69
Manichaean Psalm Book 326–27
 – *Homilies* 326
 – *Kephalaia* 326
 – *Psalm of Heracleides* 326–27
 – *Psalms of the Wanderers* 327
Mani
 – *Living Gospel* 326
Mark 218n58
Martyrdom of the 120 Martyrs 64
Martyrdom of Babylas 64
Martyrdom of Bassus and Susanna 293, 299–301, 304
Martyrdom of Behnam 65, 98, 100, 103, 107, 109
Martyrdom of Christopher 64, 98
Martyrdom of Cyprian and Justa 62, 99
Martyrdom of George 98
Martyrdom of Ḥabib 136

- Martyrdom of Leontius* 65
Martyrdom of Ma'in 65
Martyrdom of Mamas 64
Martyrdom of Martha 64
Martyrdom of Onesimus 64
Martyrdom of Pethion 65
Martyrdom of Placidus 64, 90
Martyrdom of Polycarp 58–59
Martyrdom of Posi 64
Martyrdom of Probus 65
Martyrdom of Romanus 61n151, 64
Martyrdom of Romulus 65
Martyrdom of Sergius and Bacchus 64, 98, 100n378, 102–3, 109
Martyrdom of Shahdoust 64, 98
Martyrdom of Shmona and Guria 136
Martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabba'e 64, 90–91, 98
Martyrdom/History of the Slave of Christ 64, 299
Martyrdom of Stephen 97, 103, 109
Martyrdom of Stratonike 64, 112
Martyrdom of Tarbu 64, 98
Martyrdom of Talya 65
Martyrdom of Thecla and Her Companions 99, 293, 300, 302–4
Martyrdom of Theodore 64
Metastasis of John (Apostle) 6, 58n131, 63

Odes of Solomon 167n106

Passion of Goubarlaha and Qazo 90
Passion of Julian 90, 99
Passion of Julian of Cilicia 308–9
Philippians 265n161, 306
Physiologus 14n57, 29n30, 42
Psalms 44–310

Rabbula of Edessa
– *Letter to Gemellina* 124n28
– *Life of Rabbula* 38, 43
– *Orders to Priests and Monks* 38, 43
– *Orders to Monks* 38, 43
– *Sermon at Constantinople* 38
Ruth 14, 29, 37–38, 42–43, 45–46, 51, 53–54

Seven Sleepers of Ephesus 58–59
Severus of Antioch
– *Cathedral Homilies*
– 71 306
– 75 306, 308
– 97 306, 310
Six Books Dormition 73–74
Song of Songs 310
Story of a Man in Prison 62
Story of Aba Jonah 98, 103
Story of the Actors 99
Story of Apollonius the Younger 62
Story of Copres and Patermutius 62
Story of Eulogius 62
Story of the Forty Martyrs 98
Story of Gerasimus 63
Story of Ignatius of Antioch 97, 103, 109
Story of the Image of Christ set up by the Jews 63
Story of John bar Malke 98
Story of Mar Saba 90–91, 98
Story of Mar Qardagh 90–91, 98, 100
Story of Mark the Merchant 63
Story of the Merchant of Paddana 62
Story of Penteleon 98
Story of the Virgin of Alexandria 112
Story of the Virgin of Caesarea Palestine 65, 69
Susanna 14, 25, 29, 36n63, 37–38, 42, 45, 49, 51, 53–54, 72n248, 82, 103n109, 151

Tertullian of Carthage
– *De baptismo* 1n2, 9, 13, 23n1, 117, 290n10, 313
Tobit 46, 51

Wisdom 37

Index of Manuscripts

Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan

- B. 21 Inf. 28–29
- C 123 sup (213) [Grk. 48] 162, 172
- D 92 sup. (259) [Grk. 27] 229
- F 144 sup (377) [Grk. 49] 162, 172

Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City

- Gr. 797 [Grk. 7] 161, 165, 180, 183, 189, 191, 194, 199, 202–3, 217, 225, 240–41, 253
- Gr. 866 [Grk. 25] 153–54, 161, 166, 169, 171, 173, 182–83, 185, 188–90, 194, 198–99, 201–3, 206, 218, 225, 229–30, 241, 251, 254, 271
- Gr. 1190 [Grk. 47] 154, 158, 162, 204–5, 249–51, 253
- Gr. 1238 [Grk. 41] 162
- Gr. 1631 [Grk. 50] 162, 168, 173
- Lat. 8565 [Lat. C] 157, 160–63, 169, 173, 177, 180, 182–83, 194, 200, 202, 204–07, 213, 222, 225, 228, 236, 240–41, 277
- Sir. 597/H 24–25, 89–93, 110, 247–87

Bibliothèque des Bollandistes, Brussels

- Ms. 137 /506/146 [Lat. Bab] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

Biblioteca Capitolare, Ivrea

- Ms. 105 (olim 35) [Lat. C] 157, 160–63, 169, 173, 177, 180, 182–83, 194, 200, 202, 204–07, 213, 222, 225, 228, 236, 240–41, 277

Biblioteca Capitolare, Padua

- Ms. E.25 [Lat. Ba] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris

- Ms. 1711 [Lat. Ba] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

Bibliothèque municipale, Clermont-Ferrand

- Ms. 148 [Lat. Ba] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

Bibliothèque municipale, Rouen

- Ms. 1399 (U.2) [Lat. Ba] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

Bibliothèque municipale, Toulouse

- Ms. 479 (I.44) [Lat. A] 174, 180, 182–83, 194, 200, 202, 204, 206, 213, 216, 222–23, 225, 236, 240

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

- Arm. 117 [Arm. O] 223
- Gr. 520 [Grk. 35] 154, 161, 168, 170, 173, 178, 180, 183, 189, 202–4, 206, 227, 229, 232, 240–41, 250, 271
- Gr. 1454 [Grk. 36] 154, 161, 168, 173, 178, 183, 189, 202–4, 206, 213, 218, 223, 227, 229, 240–41, 249–50
- Gr. 1468 [Grk. 39] 153–54, 157, 163, 169, 182–83, 185, 188–89, 194, 201, 203, 207, 213, 222, 225, 228, 240–41, 250–51
- Gr. 1506 [Grk. 1] 162, 254
- Lat. 5306 [Lat. A] 174, 180, 182–83, 194, 200, 202, 204, 206, 213, 216, 222–23, 225, 236, 240
- Lat. 11759/Lat. 12612/Nouv. acq. lat. 2179 [Lat. Bb] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

Bibliothèque publique et universitaire, Fribourg

- Ms. L 743 [Lat. Bb] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Brussels

- Ms. II.973 (3286)/197/9810–14 (3229)/21885 (3275) [Lat. Ba] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41
- Ms. 98–100 (3132) [Lat. C] 157, 160–63, 169, 173, 177, 180, 182–83, 194, 200, 202, 204–07, 213, 222, 225, 228, 236, 240–41, 277
- Bodleian Library, Oxford
 - Auct. E.5.12 [Grk. 26] 161, 185, 188–90, 194, 198, 206, 251, 271
 - Barocc. 180 [Grk. 45] 153–54, 162, 168–69, 171, 173, 182–83, 185, 199, 201–03, 206, 218, 225, 229–30, 241, 250–51, 254
 - Digby 39 [Lat. C] 157, 160–63, 169, 173, 177, 180, 182–83, 194, 200, 202, 204–07, 213, 222, 225, 228, 236, 240–41, 277
- Bodmer Library, Geneva
 - Papyrus XLI 23, 117
- British Library, London
 - Add. 12142 28
 - Add. 12174/D 24–25, 29, 60–72, 153–208, 332–60
 - Add. 14437 28
 - Add. 14447/B 24–25, 47–55, 153–208, 332–60
 - Add. 14485 28
 - Add. 14486 28
 - Add. 14487 28
 - Add. 14641/C 24–25, 55–60, 72, 153–208, 332–60
 - Add. 14644 27
 - Add. 14652/A 24–25, 37–44, 153–208, 332–60
 - Harl. 2801/4699 [Lat. Bab] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41
- Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham
 - Mingana Syr. 598/M 24–25, 108–110, 247–87, 362–89
- Chester Beatty Library, Dublin
 - Pma 3.5–6 325–27
- Church of the Forty Martyrs, Mardin
 - Ms 253 113–14
- Deir al-Surian, Wadi al-Natrun
 - Ms. Syr. 06/E 24–25, 30–37, 153–208
 - Ms. Syr. 09/F 24–25, 44–47, 153–208, 332–60
- Heidelberg University Library, Heidelberg
 - Inv. Kopt. 300 + 301 [Copt.¹] 3–4, 23, 55, 117, 133, 145, 157, 158, 162, 165–66, 168, 169–72, 176, 180, 182–89, 194, 196, 200, 202, 204, 207, 208, 213, 215, 225, 228–29, 241–42, 277
- Historische Archiv der Stadt Köln, Cologne
 - Ms. W 164a [Lat. C] 157, 160–63, 169, 173, 177, 180, 182–83, 194, 200, 202, 204–07, 213, 222, 225, 228, 236, 240–41, 277
- John Rylands Library, Manchester
 - Coptic Papyrus 44 23, 117
- Koninklijke Bibliotheek, La Haye
 - Ms. J 3 (78 A 31)/L 29 (70 E 21) [Lat. Bb] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41
- Lambeth Palace, London
 - Ms. 94 [Lat. Ba] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41
- Landeshauptarchiv, Coblenz
 - Ms. Best. 701 Nr. 113a (Gymnasium 5) [Lat. Bb] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30, 234, 236, 240–41
- Library of the Mechitarist Fathers, Venice
 - Ms. 202 [Arm. V] 223
- Matenadaran, Yerevan
 - Ms. 1522 [Arm. E] 213, 223
 - Ms. 1524 [Arm. A] 202
 - Ms. 3111 [Arm. S] 203, 233
 - Ms. 3777 [Arm. C] 213, 223
 - Ms. 3787 [Arm. D] 213, 223
 - Ms. 3797 [Arm. R] 203, 233
 - Ms. 4802 [Arm. B] 202
 - Ms. 7441 [Arm. Q] 203, 233
- Mar Saba Monastery, Jerusalem

- Ms. 30 [Grk. 40] 162
- Monastery Library, Isfahan
- Ms. 21 [Arm. K] 202
- Ms. 229 [Arm. L] 202
- Ms. 436 [Arm. N] 223
- National Museum, Ohrid
- Ms. 4(76) [Grk. 37] 168
- Ordini Antoniani Sancti Hormisdæ
Chaldeorum (OAOC), Erbil
- Syr. 621/J 24–25, 247–87, 101–04, 110,
362–89
- Syr. 628/K 24–25, 104–06, 110, 247–87,
362–89
- Syr. 637/L 24–25, 106–07, 110, 247–87,
362–89
- Pantokratoros Monastery, Mt. Athos
- Ms. 40 [Grk. 38] 168
- Public Library, St. Petersburg
- Ms. 94 (olim Sinai, gr. 518) [Grk. 51] 168
- Ms. Gr. 213 [Grk. 46] 162
- Ms. NS Syr. 04 27
- Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai
- Gr. 526 [Grk. 30] 162
- Ms. NE Meg. Perg. 17 [Grk. 52] 168
- Syr. 30/S 24–25, 73–86, 209–46
- Saint James's Monastery, Jerusalem
- Ms. 154-d [Arm. J] 223
- Staatsbibliothek, Berlin
- Syr. 57 (*olim* Sachau 222)/I 24–25,
93–101, 110, 247–87, 362–89
- Stadtbibliothek, Trèves
- Ms. 1160 (1410)/1372 (*olim* 1316) [Lat.
Bab] 157, 161–62, 182, 189, 194, 198,
200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225, 229–30,
234, 236, 240–41
- Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate Library,
Damascus
- Mss. 12/17 and 12/18 111–13
- Trinity College, Dublin
- Ms. 174 (B 4 3) [Lat. A] 174, 180, 182–83,
194, 200, 202, 204, 206, 213, 216, 222–23,
225, 236, 240
- Universitätsbibliothek, Leipzig
- Ms. 525 [Lat. Bb] 157, 161–62, 182, 189,
194, 198, 200–02, 206, 213, 216, 222, 225,
229–30, 234, 236, 240–41

