

# The Life of Thecla

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# The Life of Thecla

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*Apocryphal Expansion in Late Antiquity*

*Andrew S. Jacobs*



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THE LIFE OF THECLA  
Apocryphal Expansion in Late Antiquity

Early Christian Apocrypha 11  
Westar Tools and Translations

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For my teachers, Susan Ashbrook Harvey  
and Elizabeth A. Clark



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Andrew S. Jacobs  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
Fall 2023

# Abbreviations

## Ancient

<i>Acts John</i>	<i>Acts of John</i>
<i>Acts Paul</i>	<i>Acts of Paul</i>
<i>Acts Pet.</i>	<i>Acts of Peter</i>
<i>Acts Pet. Paul</i>	<i>Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul</i>
<i>Acts Thec.</i>	<i>Acts of Thecla</i>

## Egeria

<i>Itin.</i>	<i>Itinerarium</i>
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## Epiphanius

<i>Pan.</i>	<i>Panarion</i>
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## Eusebius

<i>Mart. Pal.</i>	<i>De martyribus Palaestinae</i>
<i>Praep. ev.</i>	<i>Praeparatio evangelica</i>

## Evagrius

<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
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## Gregory of Nazianzus

<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orations</i>

## Gregory of Nyssa

<i>In cant.</i>	<i>In Canticum canticorum</i>
<i>Vita Mac.</i>	<i>De vita Macrinae</i>

## ABBREVIATIONS

Hippolytus  
*In cant.*     *In Canticum canticorum*

Homer  
*Il.*     *Iliad.*

Jerome  
*Vir. ill.*     *De viris illustribus*

Photius  
*Bibl.*     *Bibliotheca*

Pseudo-Clement  
*Hom.*     *Homilies*

Severus of Antioch  
*Hom.*     *Homilia cathedralis*

Tertullian  
*Bapt.*     *De baptismo*

Themistus  
*Or.*     *Orations*

Theodoret  
*Hist. rel.*     *Religious History*

### **Modern**

*AnBoll*     *Analecta Bollandiana*

*Aug*     *Augustinianum*

*FC*     *Fathers of the Church*

*JBL*     *Journal of Biblical Literature*

*J ECS*     *Journal of Early Christian Studies*

*JFSR*     *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*

*LNTS*     *Library of New Testament Studies*

*MAMA*     *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua, 1928–1993*

## ABBREVIATIONS

NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies
NPNF <sup>2</sup>	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies, Series 2
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> . Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886
<i>PGL</i>	<i>Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> . Edited by Geoffrey W. H. Lampe. Oxford: Clarendon, 2004
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
<i>TLL</i>	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Latinae</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSup	Vigiliae Christianae Supplements
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

# Introduction

## Thecla in Late Antiquity

In the fifth century CE, in a corner of the Roman Empire subject to so much disruption from local outlaws that troops were stationed on the roadways, pilgrims streamed into a shrine outside of the city of Seleucia (modern Silifke, on the southern coast of Turkey), seeking the healing power of the saint who resided there: Thecla. They came from across the Roman Empire, and even from outside its borders: men, women, children, free, enslaved, Christian, pagan, elite, and uneducated alike. They all sought the undeniable power of the saint: a heroic virgin from apostolic times.

Thecla was one of the most popular Christian saints in late antiquity.<sup>1</sup> Venerated as an apostle and martyr, Thecla was remembered as a wealthy young woman who, upon being converted to a life of celibacy by the apostle Paul, survived multiple condemnations to death and went on to preach on her own. We know about Thecla from several written and non-written sources, most importantly the second-century *Acts of Thecla* (often included as part of the longer *Acts of Paul*) and her later saint's shrine, Hagia Thekla, established in the fourth century near the city of Seleucia.<sup>2</sup> She also appears in late ancient sermons, wall art, pilgrimage flasks, lesser shrines (notably in Rome and Egypt), and numerous literary references and adaptations.<sup>3</sup> Thecla's origins are mysterious: some scholars have claimed her story was based

1. The literature on Thecla is enormous. For a recent overview, see Kraemer, "Thecla."

2. On the textual history of the *Acts of Thecla*, including its relationship to the longer *Acts of Paul*, see Barrier, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*; and Barrier, "Paul and Thecla, Acts of." On Hagia Thekla, see Dagron, *Vie et miracles*, 55–79; Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 36–80; and Kristensen, "Landscape, Space, and Presence."

3. On Thecla's shrines and pilgrimage flasks, see Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*. Some prominent material remains are cataloged by Naureth and Warns, *Thekla*. On literary influence, see Dabiri and Ruani, *Thecla and Medieval Sainthood*.

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on oral traditions later incorporated into the *Acts of Paul*, but the source of those purported oral traditions is unclear. Thecla's appeal is widespread and undeniable: Christians for centuries turned to her as a powerful saint and intercessor, one step removed from the apostle Paul.<sup>4</sup>

The *Life and Miracles of Thecla* is a fifth-century text that draws on and illuminates Thecla's place in the late ancient Christian world. The *Life*, which I translate in this volume, explicitly follows the narrative structure of the earlier *Acts*. The *Miracles*, which have been translated into English by both Linda Ann Honey and Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, are by the same author and recount 46 miracles performed (mostly posthumously) by Thecla from Hagia Thekla.<sup>5</sup> The two parts were composed as a literary diptych (like the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, to which the author refers in the *Life's* preface), but the *Life* also circulated independently.<sup>6</sup> While the *Acts* was enormously popular in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and is well known to modern readers, the *Life and Miracles of Thecla* are less well known. Yet this lesser-known fifth-century expansion of a famous apocryphal text deserves our attention for several reasons.

First, the *Life of Thecla* provides precious information about how the story of Thecla was received and imagined at the site of her ongoing veneration. How did her devotees understand, interpret, and perhaps even transform the well-known story of a rich, beautiful girl who gave it all up to become Christ's apostle? Second, the *Life* opens up a window into the ways apostolic stories continued to be written and rewritten throughout late antiquity, blurring the line between neat scholarly genres like *apocrypha* and *hagiography*. Finally, the *Life* participates in a movement of late ancient authors creatively rewriting "classical" and "biblical" texts in new literary styles.<sup>7</sup>

4. Most scholars agree that Thecla is not a historical figure, or at least cannot be affirmed as historical beyond her literary life in the *Acts of Paul* and later texts. As Ross Shepard Kraemer notes, "Modern scholars give no historical credence to its portrait of a female disciple of Paul in the mid-first century" ("Thecla," 488). See also Barrier, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 10–12. For a counterargument on Thecla's historicity, see Honey, "Thekla," 96–105.

5. Honey, "Thekla," 362–439; Johnson, "Miracles of Saint Thekla" (which also includes facing Greek text from Dagron's critical edition).

6. See Dagron, *Vie et miracles*, 141–47 (of the 12 extant manuscripts Dagron examined, four contain the *Life* and *Miracles* while eight contain just the *Life*).

7. Johnson (*Life and Miracles*, 67–112) analyzes the text in the broader context of "ancient paraphrase," such as the Empress Eudoxia's biblical poems created out of patchwork lines of Homer or the recondite poetic "paraphrase" of the Gospel of John by Nonnus of Panopolis, both also from the fifth century.

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### *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

The *Acts of Thecla* was the central section of a longer *Acts of Paul*, although there is evidence that the *Acts* was read on its own in late antiquity and may even have been composed earlier and incorporated later into the *Acts of Paul*.<sup>8</sup> Written in Greek, it probably originated in the second half of the second century.<sup>9</sup> Like other contemporary “apocryphal acts of the apostles,” the *Acts* centers on the disruptive effects of an apostle preaching the merits of celibacy and the appeal of the apostle’s anti-marriage message to women.<sup>10</sup> In several such stories, married women abandon their prominent husbands to embrace celibacy and follow the apostle; the ensuing conflict between abandoned husband and homewrecking apostle frequently ends in the apostle’s execution and martyrdom. The *Acts* is a variation on this narrative: Thecla is not yet married (although she is engaged) and the apostle Paul is not condemned to death but Thecla, the girl who embraces virginity, is subject twice to unsuccessful public execution (earning her the later sobriquet “protomartyr”).<sup>11</sup>

Since the *Life* explicitly follows the narrative structure of the *Acts*, it is worth rehearsing its outline here briefly.<sup>12</sup> *Acts* begins with Paul and two duplicitous companions, Demas and Hermogenes, arriving in Iconium where they are welcomed by an Iconian named Onesiphorus (1–4).<sup>13</sup> While Paul preaches on the holiness of chastity and virginity, Thecla, listening from a window next door, overhears him and is converted to a life of chastity (5–7). She rejects her fiancé, Thamyris, and the pleading of her

8. See Barrier, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 21–24.

9. Barrier (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 23–24) suggests “the last 30–40 years of the second century.”

10. Key works on this issue include Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*; Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*; and Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride*, 45–67.

11. The longer *Acts of Paul*, in which the *Acts of Thecla* are usually embedded, does end with the apostle’s martyrdom in Rome: on legends of Paul’s death, see Eastman, *Ancient Martyrdom Accounts*.

12. Paragraph numbers are taken from the English translation of J.K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 364–72. In more recent translations of the *Acts of Paul*, the verse numbers are presented as: 1–25=*Acts Paul* 3:1–25; 26–43=*Acts Paul* 4:1–18.

13. All three of these names appear in Pauline and pseudo-Pauline letters (Col 4:14; Phlmn 1:24; 2 Tim 1:6, 1:15, 4:19), leading to a rich scholarly discussion about the relationship between the *Acts* and other Pauline traditions. See, as a start, MacDonald, *Legend*; and Hylan, *Modest Apostle*.

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mother, Theocleia, to turn away from Paul and back to Thamyris.<sup>14</sup> Enraged, Thamyris has Paul arrested; Thecla sneaks out of her house and visits Paul in jail (8–19). While Paul is punished with flogging and expulsion from Iconium, Thecla is condemned to execution by burning (19–21). A miraculous hailstorm douses the fire, and she leaves Iconium to search for Paul, finding him outside of Iconium praying for her. She pleads for baptism and offers to cut her hair and follow him. Paul defers her baptism but allows her to accompany him on his journey (22–25).

They arrive at Antioch where almost immediately Thecla is sexually assaulted by a prominent local leader, Alexander. She publicly humiliates him and is arrested and sentenced to death (26–27). Paul, who claims not to know Thecla, disappears. Entrusted to a relative of the emperor, Tryphaena, Thecla prays for the salvation of Tryphaena's dead daughter (28). Thecla is condemned to the beasts; in the arena, a lioness fights to protect Thecla but is killed (29–33). Alexander devises more punishments for Thecla, but she escapes harm. Thecla baptizes herself in a pool of man-eating seals and is protected by a divine flash of lightning. When Tryphaena faints and is thought to be dead, the proconsul halts the execution (34–36). Thecla is freed and given money and enslaved servants by Tryphaena (39). Thecla finds Paul once more and, after announcing her baptism and conveying some of Tryphaena's wealth to Paul, she goes off to evangelize (40–41). She goes first to Iconium where she speaks briefly with her mother and then heads off to Seleucia. The oldest version of the *Acts* ends with a short notice of Thecla's death (42–43).

The simple two-act structure is repetitive but effective. Thecla's character is vivid and her adventures gripping. As scholars have pointed out, the basic structure of the *Acts*, like many of the so-called apocryphal acts, echoes contemporaneous ancient Greek novels which recount the adventures of a beautiful young couple who fall in love and must navigate extraordinary hazards (shipwrecks, bandits, executions, enslavements) before coming together at the end to marry.<sup>15</sup> While the *Acts* subverts

14. As Dagron (*Vie et miracles*, 175 n. 9) points out, "Thecla" is usually understood as a "diminutive" of "Theocleia," although he floats the provocative idea that "on pourrait imaginer qu'au contraire Théokleia soit une forme développée, imaginée à partir d'un nom indigène, Thékla" (one could imagine that, on the contrary, Theocleia is a developed form, imagined from an indigenous name, Thecla).

15. Discussion in Perkins, *Suffering Self*; Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride*; Barrier, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 1–10; and Burrus, "Mimicking Virgins." Thomas, *Acts of Peter*, places Apocryphal Acts in the wider contexts of ancient novelistic literature (including biblical



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this narrative—the “happy ending” is not marriage and reproduction but celibacy and religious devotion—it uses similar narrative techniques, including the hint of erotic attachment between Paul and Thecla, who becomes enraptured at the sound of his voice. This tangled engagement with “secular” literary tropes and themes will continue in later adaptations and expansions of Thecla’s story, including the *Life of Thecla*.

### Later Texts and Art Featuring Thecla

The *Acts of Thecla* was enormously popular.<sup>16</sup> Dozens of manuscripts survive in the original Greek along with translations into every language of the late ancient world.<sup>17</sup> Tertullian, writing in North Africa in the late second or early third century, is our first external witness to the popularity of the text. Tertullian decried Christians who looked to Thecla as precedent for women baptizers: he reports that the *Acta Pauli* on which they rely was only recently composed by a presbyter in Asia Minor and therefore lacks apostolic authority (*Bapt.* 17).<sup>18</sup> In the late fourth century, Jerome was aware of the *Journeys of Paul and Thecla* (*περίοδοι Pauli et Theclae*); he mentions the text in his catalog of Christian authors and deems it “apocrypha,” citing Tertullian’s earlier condemnation (*Vir. ill.* 7, his chapter on Luke). Around the same time, a western pilgrim named Egeria traveled to Seleucia and Thecla’s shrine and heard “all the *Acts of Thecla* read” there (*Itin.* 23.5). Epiphanius of Cyprus, a noted heresiologist, even cites one of Paul’s ascetic “beatitudes” from the *Acts* as simply a saying of the apostle.<sup>19</sup> Today, asking whether or not the *Acts* was considered “canonical” or “authoritative” misses the point: it was *read* and was a persistent and popular part of Christian culture throughout this period. A recent volume on *Thecla and Medieval Sainthood* shows how influential the text was as a blueprint for saints’ stories from Ireland to Armenia.<sup>20</sup>

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texts like Esther and Daniel).

16. For an overview of “culture-making” through literary and material memorializations of Thecla in late antiquity see Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 134–71.

17. Many of them are described in Kaestli and Rordorf, “La fin de la vie de Thècle.”

18. Barrier (“Cainite Invocation”) places this brief notice in the context of Tertullian’s larger, possibly anti-gnostic arguments.

19. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 77.27.7: “Blessed are they that keep pure the flesh” (*Acts Thec.* 5).

20. Dabiri and Ruani, *Thecla and Medieval Sainthood*.

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Thecla became an influential figure apart from the specific narrative of the *Acts*. In the late third century, ascetically-minded bishop Methodius of Olympus composed his *Symposium*, a riff on Plato's famous dialogue that swaps out pederastic Athenian men at a drinking party for Christian virgins in a serene garden; their host, Aretē (Virtue), calls upon the ten virgins to extol "chastity" (ἀγνεία, *hagneia*). Thecla delivers the eighth of ten speeches (adding to her praise of virginity an anti-astrological defense of human free will) and, at the conclusion, is given the crown of victory by Aretē and pronounced "chief" (πρώτη, *prōtē*) among the symposiasts.<sup>21</sup> By the late fourth century Thecla's popularity as a virgin worthy of emulation was widespread. She appears in the texts of prominent bishops: Gregory of Nazianzus (*Or.* 21, in praise of Athanasius), Gregory of Nyssa (*In cant.* 14), and Epiphanius of Cyprus (*Pan.* 78.16.7, 79.5.2), to name a few.<sup>22</sup> We also encounter evidence of women named for Thecla (a name otherwise unattested before the *Acts*), including a martyr remembered by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Mart. Pal.* 10–11, 20), a correspondent of Gregory of Nazianzus (*Ep.* 56, 57, 222, 223), and the saintly ascetic Macrina, who was given the name of Thecla in secret by her mother while she was still in the womb (Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Mac.* 3.2).<sup>23</sup> A fifth- or sixth-century homily mistakenly ascribed to John Chrysostom attests to the establishment of Thecla's feast day, which was eventually commemorated in late September.<sup>24</sup> The Ps.-Chrysostom homily begins with an invocation of Thecla's "image," probably a literal reference to a saintly portrait placed before the congregation.<sup>25</sup> Indeed it is precisely during this same period that Thecla materializes into the physical landscape of a newly Christian empire. In addition to multiple sites of veneration (see below), she also appears in art and mobile objects: wall paintings in Italy, Asia Minor, and Egypt; pilgrimage flasks

21. For more on this text and its philosophical context see Burns, "Astrological Determinism" and Lavalle Norman, *Aesthetics of Hope*.

22. For more citations see Hayne, "Thecla and the Church Fathers"; and Hylen, "'Domestication' of Saint Thecla," 6.

23. On "namesakes" of Thecla in the Egyptian papyrological record, see Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 201–208. The *Miracles* also mentions a woman named Thecla, whose mother was "still pagan" but whose son, Aurelios, is cured of scrofula by the saint (*Miracle* 11). Either we are to assume the woman's father was Christian or that "Thecla" was a popular regional name regardless of religious affiliation.

24. English translation in MacDonald and Scrimgeour, "Pseudo-Chrysostom's Panegyric to Thecla," 154–57.

25. MacDonald and Scrimgeour, "Pseudo-Chrysostom's Panegyric to Thecla," 157–59.

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traveling across the empire from various shrines; even small objects like combs, boxes, and medallions feature Thecla in recognizable scenes from the *Acts*.<sup>26</sup> As the “cult of the saints” ramped up in the Christian Roman Empire, Thecla, the virgin-martyr-apostle, led the way.

### Veneration of Thecla

Multiple sites for the veneration of Saint Thecla emerged in the fourth through sixth centuries across the late ancient world. A basilica in Milan was dedicated to Saint Thecla in the fourth or fifth century.<sup>27</sup> A church in Rome claimed to have relics of Thecla by the seventh century, substantiated by a later, long ending of the *Acts* in which the virgin, in her old age, longs once more to see Paul and seeks him out in Rome (see my summary and discussion below).<sup>28</sup> No clever hagiographical expansion explains the prominence of Thecla’s veneration in Egypt, in conjunction with the popular Saint Menas, although Stephen Davis has outlined the extensive material and literary evidence for her veneration there.<sup>29</sup>

The most famous of these sites of veneration was Hagia Thekla (“Saint Thecla”), on the southeastern coast of Asia Minor just outside the city of Seleucia, where the *Acts* places the end of Thecla’s life. Whether Thecla was already connected with Seleucia when the *Acts* was composed or its composition inspired veneration there is unknown. By the late fourth century it was the preeminent site for veneration of the saint.<sup>30</sup> In the 370s, Gregory of Nazianzus secluded himself at the “convent (*παρθενῶνα*, *parthenōna*) of the holy virgin Thecla” to avoid episcopal ordination (*De vita sua* 549). When Egeria visited a decade later there was a “church of the martyrrium” alongside “many monasteries” housing “as many men as women” (*Itin.*

26. See Naeurth and Warns, *Thekla*, 93–99 for a catalog of Thecla images (some of which are reproduced in plates at the end of the volume) and the plates, with discussions, in Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*. Pillinger (“Thekla in the Cave of St. Paul”) compares an ancient fresco of Thecla, Paul, and Theocleia uncovered in a cave in Ephesus in the 1990s with other contemporary (fifth-century) material representations of the saint.

27. Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals*, 74–77.

28. Translated by Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 372; see also Kaestli and Rordorf, “La fin de la vie de Thècle,” 90–93; and Rordorf, “Saint Thècle,” 79–81.

29. Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 83–194.

30. See Hill, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 208–17 for an attempt to reconstruct the earliest, fourth-century buildings at the site, including their appearance during the period the *Life and Miracles* were written.