

Philipp Pilhofer

“A very pleasant spot to walk and spend time”

Thecla's Cave at Seleucia

Wolfgang Wischmeyer mox octogenario

At the center of Thecla's cult site near Seleucia on Calycadnus there is a cave that is usually taken as being the spot from which the whole cult site developed. It will be argued here that the cave is not the origin of Thecla's cult site but instead was discovered and integrated into the cult during the fifth century.

Keywords: martyr cult, cult site, holy spaces, Zeno, Ayatekla, Isauria, Cilicia

Thecla, the famous apostle and protomartyr of the early church, was venerated in the whole *oikoumene* from east to west; in medieval times her veneration even stretched to Turfan (Xinjiang, China).¹ Thecla is often

1 Thecla's importance for the early church is illustrated by the fact that her *acta* is extant in more ancient manuscripts (3rd–5th cent.) than some texts that made it into the New Testament canon, cf. T.J. Kraus, “Knowing Letters’: (Il)literacy, Books, and Literary Concept in the Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla (*Mir. Thcl.* 45),” *ASEs* 23 (2006), 283–308, here 306. For the East in general, cf. S.J. Voicu, “Thecla in the Christian East,” in *Thecla: Paul's Disciple in the East and West*, ed. J. Barrier et al., *Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha* 12 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 47–68; especially regarding the Armenian tradition, including an extensive introduction, see V. Calzolari, ed., *Apocrypha armeniaca*, vol. 1: *Acta Pauli et Theclae, Prodigia Theclae, Martyrium Pauli*, CC.SA 20 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017). For the West in general, cf. C.O. Tommasi Moreschini, “Thecla in the Latin Sources,” in Barrier, *Thecla*, 69–105. Regarding old Turkish fragments, cf. P. Zieme, “Paulus und Thekla in der türkischen Überlieferung,” *Apocrypha* 13 (2002), 53–62. For the iconographical tradition, see A. Semoglou, *Η Θέκλα στην αυγή του Χριστιανισμού: Εικονογραφική μελέτη της πρώτης γυναίκας μάρτυρα στην τέχνη της Ύστερης Αρχαϊότητας* (Thessaloniki: Κέντρο Βυζαντινών Ερευνών, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο, 2014), and C. Nauerth, “Theklas Tiere,” in *Contextus: Festschr.ft für Sabine Schrenk*, ed. S. de Blaauw, E. Enss, and P. Linscheid, JAC.E 41 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2020), 346–355 (the most recent findings by Nauerth with references to her older articles). Almost year by year, new objects are discovered; for example, decades ago her depiction at “Paul's cave” in Ephesus (R. Pillingner, “Thekla in the Cave of St. Paul at Ephesus,” in *Religion in Ephesos Reconsidered: Archaeology cf Spaces, Structures, and Objects*, ed. D. Schowalter et al., *NovTSup* 177 [Leiden: Brill, 2020], 62–72), recently an ivory relief (C. Şimşek and



Fig. 1: Cave church, central aisle with apse (© Philipp Pilhofer, 29 May 2014)

apostrophized as “of Iconium.” While there is some evidence for Thecla’s cult in and around Iconium,² a Lycaonian town already visited by Paul on his travels through Asia Minor, the main cult site of her veneration developed farther south, at Ayatekla, near Seleucia on Calycadnus in Cilicia/Isauria.³ At the center of this site there is a cave (see fig. 1). This cave is usually taken as being the spot from which the whole cult site developed.⁴

It will be argued here that the cave is not the origin of Thecla’s cult site. This hypothesis is not wholly new. In the preface of his edition of Thecla’s late antique *Vita et miracula*, in 1978, Gilbert Dagron suggested it, but only

B. Yener, “An Ivory Relief of Saint Thecla,” *Adalya* 13 [2010], 321–334, and even more recently a clay ampulla in Rostock (J. Fischer, “Pilgerandenken in der Archäologischen Sammlung der Universität Rostock,” in *Vom Itern-Maß bis zu Miriam bei Marc Chagall: Festschrift für Claudia Nauerth zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. B.J. Diebner et al., Bibelstudien 20 [Münster: Lit, 2020], 203–220).

2 C. Breytenbach and C. Zimmermann, *Early Christianity in Lycaonia and Adjacent Areas: From Paul to Amphilocheus cf Iconium*, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 101/Early Christianity in Asia Minor 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 117–125.

3 In imperial times the region was called “Rough Cilicia,” in late antiquity it became part of the province “Isauria” (under Diocletian).

4 In the words of F. Hild and H. Hellenkemper, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, vol. 5: *Kilikien und Isaurien*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990), 442: “Nukleus der Entwicklung der Wallfahrtsstätte.”

very briefly.⁵ Although his main arguments have never been contradicted, they have been largely ignored.

The situation of the literary and archaeological evidence is very convoluted. For an interpretation it is thus first required to introduce this situation; this will be done in two steps: a chronological review of the literary sources up to the fifth century, and a geographical approach to the archaeological remains on site. On this basis, the reasons for a later dating of Thecla’s cave are discussed, before a conclusion can be drawn.

1 The Written Sources

Regarding the beginnings of Thecla’s cult at Ayatekla the sources are sparse. What is well known is that the end of the Acts of Thecla relates that Thecla went to Seleucia: “And after bearing witness in that way, she went to Seleucia and illuminated many with the word of God, and she passed away in the midst of a beautiful dream.”⁶ As there are several towns of that name, one has to mention that most likely Seleucia on Calycadnus is meant here. None of the other towns of this name claims that Thecla went there or features a comparably important sanctuary of Thecla.

The general consensus holds that these ancient acts were written at the end of the second century.⁷ Bernhard Kötting deduces from the quoted end of these acts that the sanctuary of Thecla existed by that time, that is, at the end of the second century.⁸ But as has been shown recently, the end of these acts is very fluid in transmission. There are at least eight different variants of the end of this text.⁹ One widespread extended variant narrates how

5 G. Dagron, “Introduction: Avec la collaboration de Marie Duprè la Tour,” in *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle: Texte grec, traduction et commentaire par Gilbert Dagron*, *Subsidia hagiographica* 62 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), 52–53 and 63.

6 *Acta Theclae (ATh)* 43 (R.A. Lipsius, ed., *Acta apostolorum apocrypha*, vol. 1: *Acta Petri, Acta Pauli, Acta Petri et Pauli, Acta Pauli et Theclae, Acta Thaddaei* [Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891], 269.5–7): καὶ ταῦτα διαμαρτυραμένη ἀπῆλθεν εἰς Σελεύκειαν, καὶ πολλοὺς φωτίσασα τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ θεοῦ μετὰ καλοῦ ὕπνου ἐκοιμήθη (my trans.).

7 Several earlier dates are mentioned by J.W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary*, *WUNT 2/270* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 23–24, without further discussion.

8 B. Kötting, *Peregrinatio Religiosa: Wallfahrten in der Antike und das Pilgerwesen in der alten Kirche*, 2nd rev. ed., *Forschungen zur Volkskunde* 33–35 (Münster: Stenderhoff, 1980), 143, 145.

9 J.-D. Kaestli and W. Rordorf, “La fin de la vie de Thècle dans les manuscrits des *Actes de Paul et Thècle*: Édition des textes additionnels,” *Apocrypha* 25 (2014), 9–102.

Thecla vanished into a rock chasm and never actually died.¹⁰ This is the founding legend of Thecla's cult at Ayatekla. Some of these variants also mention a cave. But it is nearly impossible to date any of these variants firmly. To conclude, it has to remain open when her cult started in Seleucia.

What is known for sure is the fact that the cult site existed two hundred years later, at the end of the fourth century. Gregory of Nazianzus himself tells that he went there. His friend Basil made him bishop in a Cappadocian town, but he did not want that honorable post. He writes in one of his autobiographic poems: "When I failed to persuade them (some wanted to get their own way due to their great love for me, others perhaps from a sense of superiority), first I went as a fugitive to Seleucia, to the retreat of the famous virgin Thecla. I told myself, 'Perhaps in time they will get fed up, and be persuaded to hand over the reins to someone else,' and there I spent a considerable time."¹¹ He remained at Ayatekla for five years, probably from 374 to 379. He does not tell what he did there for such a long time. From there, he went to Constantinople.

Five years later, we are informed by a female visitor of the site. Pilgrim Egeria (or Aetheria) visited Jerusalem, coming from Gaul or Spain. On her way back, she arrived at Seleucia in 384. After visiting a church and meeting the bishop in that town, she went up the hill to Ayatekla. In her account of her travels she tells us: "Round the holy church there is nothing else than (*nihil aliud est*) cells for men and women. [...] There are a great many cells on that hill, and in the middle a great wall, which includes a church with a *martyrium*, which is very beautiful. Thus the wall was built to protect the church against the Isaurians, who are hostile, and always committing robberies, to prevent them trying to damage anything around the monastic settlement, which has been established there."¹² These lines speak for

¹⁰ A close parallel is that of Ariadne of Prymnessus (*BHG* 165). Thonemann summarizes *Martyrium Areadnes* 15 (TU 172.378.16–21 Seeliger/Wischmeyer): "The girl then fled into the nearby mountains, where she successfully prayed for the earth to swallow her up, leaving only a scrap of her clothing" (P. Thonemann, "The Martyrdom of Ariadne of Prymnessos and an Inscription from Perge," *Chiron* 45 [2015], 151–170, here 152).

¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *carm.* 2.1.11 (*De vita sua*) (ed. C. Jungck, *Gregor von Nazianz, De vita sua*, Wissenschaftliche Kommentare zu griechischen und lateinischen Schriftstellern [Heidelberg: Winter, 1974], 80.545–551): Ως δ' οὐκ ἔπειθον τοὺς μὲν ἐκ πολλοῦ πόθου / κρατεῖν θέλοντας, τοὺς δ' ἴσως ὑπέρφρονας, / πρῶτον μὲν ἦλθον εἰς Σελεύκειαν φυγὰς, / τὸν παρθενῶνα τῆς αἰοιδίμου κόρης / Θεέκλας. "τάχ' ἂν πεισθεῖεν ἄλλ' οὕτω," λέγων, / "χρόνῳ καμόντες ἡνίας δοῦναι τι." / καὶ μοι διήλθεν οὐ βραχὺς τῆδε χρόνος (trans. C. White, *Gregory cf Nazianzus, Autobiographical Poems*, Cambridge Medieval Classics 6 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 51).

¹² *Itinerarium Egeriae* (*It. Eg.*) 23.2 and 4 (ed. K. Brodersen, *Aetheria/Egeria, Reise ins Heilige Land: Lateinisch-deutsch*, Tusculum [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016], 164–166): *Ibi*

themselves, but a caveat is necessary: Egeria uses the phrase *nihil aliud est* several times in her *Itinerarium*, so this might not be an exact description. Egeria then relates that she read the relevant holy text directly on site (*It. Eg.* 23.5); in this case most likely the Acts of Thecla. She reports such readings in many places, it could be part of her self-fashioning.¹³ At the same time the numerous readings raise the question whether she was carrying all those texts with her or if the texts were available on site.

About fifty years later, Thecla’s shrine is mentioned in a letter by Isidorus of Pelusium. He addresses a certain Isaurian Tarasis, maybe the well-known founder of Alahan, and calls him “a lover of the customs and the precinct of the protomartyr Thecla.”¹⁴ Kötting supposes he was a pilgrim,¹⁵ but he may have been a priest at the site, too. Ayatekla is mentioned in many further sources, for instance, Theodoret of Cyrrihus relates that the ascetics Marana and Cyra came from Syria, as they “desired to see the precinct of the gloriously triumphant Thecla.”¹⁶

At the end of the fifth century Emperor Zeno is said to have donated a fortune to Thecla’s shrine. In 475, the year after he accessed the throne in Constantinople, an usurpation made him flee to Isauria. According to Euagrius, Thecla herself appeared in a vision and encouraged him. Euagrius notes: “But Zeno, having seen in a vision the holy and much tried

autem ad sanctam ecclesiam nihil aliud est nisi monasteria sine numero uirorum ac mulierum. [...] monasteria ergo plurima sunt ibi per ipsum collem et in medio murus ingens, qui includet ecclesiam, in qua est martyrium, quod martyrium satis pulchrum est. Propterea autem murus missus est ad custodiendam ecclesiam propter Hisauros, quia satis mali sunt et frequenter latrunculantur, ne forte conentur aliquid facere circa monasterium, quod ibi est deputatum (trans. based on J. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels to the Holy Land: Newly Translated with Supporting Documents and Notes*, rev. ed. [Jerusalem: Ariel, 1981], 121–122).

13 Cf. *It. Eg.* 3.6; 4.3; 10.7; 11.3; 14.1; 15.4; 19.2 and 16; 20.3; 21.1. She mostly reads biblical texts, but sometimes apocrypha (e.g., Thomas: 19.2, or Abgar: 19.16); she even reflects on her reading habit (e.g., 10.7) and on the transmission of those texts (e.g., 19.19).

14 Isidorus of Pelusium, *ep.* 160 (PG 78.289C): [...] τὸν Θεκλῆς τῆς πρωτομάρτυρος καὶ τρόπον καὶ σηκὸν ἀγαπήσαντα. Cf., inter alia, Voicu, “Thecla in the Christian East” (see n. 1), 60. Voicu (who wrongly quotes PG 85 instead of 78) translates σηκός as “grave.” The identification of the recipient with Tarasis from Alahan has not yet been discussed, it would be feasible: Tarasis of Alahan died in 462 (M. Harrison, “The Inscriptions and Chronology of Alahan,” in *Alahan: An Early Christian Monastery in Southern Turkey; Based on the Work of Michael Gough*, ed. M. Gough, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts 73 [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1985], 21–34, here 22–23 no. 1), probably not as a young man.

15 Kötting, *Peregrinatio Religiosa* (see n. 8), 159.

16 Theodoret of Cyrrihus, *Historia religiosa* 29.7 (SC 257.238.12–15 Canivet/Leroy-Molinghen): Καὶ τῆς καλλνίκου δὲ Θεκλῆς ἐπιθυμήσασαι θεάσασθαι τὸν ἐν Ἰσαυρίᾳ σηκὸν [...] ὡς ἀπήλθον, οὕτως ἐπανήλθον ἄστοι (my trans.).

protomartyr Thecla encouraging him and promising him restoration to power [...].”¹⁷ In August 476, Zeno returned to Constantinople and was welcomed as emperor in the hippodrome. He was aware who had helped him there, and he knew how to pay his respect. Euagrius relates: “Zeno, in consequence, dedicated to the protomartyr Thecla a very extensive sanctuary, of singular stateliness and beauty, at Seleucia, which is situated near the borders of Isauria, and embellished it with very many and royal offerings, which have been preserved to our times.”¹⁸

That quote of Euagrius proves that Emperor Zeno made a remarkable donation to Thecla’s shrine, but it remains elusive what he donated exactly: Did he renovate or rebuild the existing church, did he build a new one, or did he invest in other buildings at the site (or more than one of these options)? We will return to this point.

To sum up this short overview of the sources: We do not know when the cult activities at Ayatekla started. In the last quarter of the fourth century there existed a well-developed cult site including a church. It attracted pilgrims from far away, especially as Thecla was said to work miracles there. By that time, Ayatekla no longer was a small martyr shrine near Seleucia but instead the city now was “Thecla’s.”¹⁹

2 Thecla’s Sanctuary

Where the canyon-like valley of the Calycadnus river opens up to an alluvial plain lies Seleucia, modern-day Silifke, with its acropolis on the hill Kokysion. Ayatekla, which is also known as Meriamlik or Meryemlik,²⁰ is

17 Euagrius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.8 (ed. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius with the Scholia* [London: Methuen, 1898], 107.30–32): Ζήνων δὲ παροτρύνουσαν ὡς φασὶ θεασάμενος τὴν ἁγίαν καὶ πολυάθλον πρωτομάρτυρα Θεέκλαν καὶ τὴν τῆς βασιλείας ἀποκατάστασιν ὑπισχνουμένην [...] (my trans.).

18 Euagrius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.8 (108.2–6 Bidez/Parmentier): Οὗτος ὁ Ζήνων μέγιστον τέμενος ἔξοχῇ τε καὶ κάλλει προὔχον ἀνατέθεικε τῇ πρωτομάρτυρι Θεέκλῃ ἀνὰ τὴν Σελευκέων τὴν πρὸς τῇ Ἰσαύρων χώρα κεκμένην, πλείστοις καὶ βασιλικαῖς ἀναθήμασι διακοσμήσας, τοῖς καὶ μέχρις ἡμῶν σωζομένοις (my trans.).

19 Gregory of Nazianzus, *or.* 21.22 (*In laudem Athanasii*) (SC 270.154.2 Mossay/Lafontaine): [...] τὴν τῆς ἁγίας καὶ καλλιπαρθένου Θεέκλας Σελεύκειαν.

20 While Ayatekla certainly stems from ἁγία Θεέκλα, “holy Thecla,” Meriamlik/Meryemlik means “place of Mary” and obviously shows that the connection to Thecla was forgotten at some point (according to S. Eyice, “Thekla at Antioch,” in *Actes du I^{er} Congrès International sur Antioche de Pisidie*, ed. T. Drew-Bear, M. Taşhalan, and C.M. Thomas [Paris: de Boccard, 2002], 111–122, here 117, even the Greek Orthodox of Silifke called the place that way).

located south of it. Ayatekla was one of the most significant centers of pilgrimage in Asia Minor and at the same time the most prominent shrine of Thekla in the Mediterranean. To show the significance of that complex and to clarify the context of the written sources, the most important features of Thekla’s precinct are described here.

Ayatekla is situated on the wide hilltop of Kalamon hill, gently sloping to the sea (see fig. 2). This means that not all the site was visible from the city of Seleucia, while the larger buildings were visible from the sea. East and west to it, there were two wadis running parallel to the hill. The site of Thekla’s sanctuary covers about thirty hectares and was even considered a city on its own in late antiquity.²¹ Stephen Mitchell calls the site the “best-studied centre of the fourth to sixth centuries,”²² but this is only true as other centers of this age are even less studied. At Ayatekla there has been only one short excavation more than hundred years ago, and since then there have been only a handful of small surveys.²³

Ayatekla was designed to accommodate and cater for huge masses of pilgrims. A late antique source, which will be introduced more thoroughly below, describes the crowds of pilgrims as follows: “As the festival of the virgin got underway, at the time when all people – especially the Cili-

21 See *Vita et miracula Theclae* (VMTh) 1.28.16–17 (ed. Dagron, *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle* [see n. 5], 280.16–17): καὶ γὰρ εἰς πόλεως λοιπὸν περιελήγεται καὶ σχῆμα καὶ χρεῖαν καὶ κάλλος. Thirty hectares is about the size of an average city in Asia Minor (H. Hellenkemper, “Frühe christliche Wallfahrtsstätten in Kleinasien,” in *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie*, ed. E. Dassmann and J. Engemann, JAC.E 20/1 [Münster: Aschendorff, 1995], 259–271, here 264).

22 S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, vol. 2: *The Rise of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 116.

23 For the excavation and its results, cf. E. Herzfeld and S. Guyer, *MAMA* 2, pp. 1–89. Several surveys in the 1990s never were fully published: M. Ahunbay, “Binbirkilise ve Ayatekla 1996 yüzey araştırmaları,” *Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı* (AST) 15.1/1997 (1998), 59–68; id., “Binbirkilise (Karaman) ve Ayatekla (Silifke) araştırmaları,” *AST* 16.1/1998 (1999), 95–104; M. Ahunbay and T. Saner, “Binbirkilise ve Ayatekla’da (Meryemlik) 1998 araştırmaları,” *AST* 17.1/1999 (2000), 39–48; id., “Karaman (Binbirkilise) – Silifke (Ayatekla-Mylai) araştırmaları,” *AST* 18.2/2000 (2001), 273–278. In the last decade, new research started: U. Almaç, “Mersin, Silifke, Ayatekla (Meryemlik) ören yeri yüzey araştırma ve belgeleme çalışması, 2014,” *AST* 33.2/2015 (2016), 289–300; id., “Ayatekla (Meryemlik) yüzey araştırması, 2018,” *AST* 37.3/2019 (2020), 137–149; Ö. Bahar Balcı, “Ayatekla kutsal alanı’nda (Meryemlik’te) bulunan ‘Kubbeli kilise’ nin güncel bulgular doğrultusunda yeniden değerlendirilmesi ve mekansal özellikleri” (master’s thesis, İstanbul Teknik Üniversitesi, 2020); U. Almaç and A. Özügül, “Hagia Thekla (Meryemlik) Archaeological Site Survey, 2017,” *ANMED* 16 (2018), 150–155; U. Almaç, A. Özügül, and N. Semiz, “Hagia Thekla (Meryemlik) Archaeological Site Survey, 2018,” *ANMED* 17 (2019), 10–15; id., “St. Thekla (Meryemlik) Archaeological Site Survey 2019,” *ANMED* 18 (2020), 3–6. Some of the following observations have been made by the author himself exploring the site (30 Sept. 2013 and 29 May 2014).



Fig. 2: Ayatekla, site plan (© Hansgerd Hellenkemper, 1995)

cians²⁴ – were hastening (as they still hasten today to our city and will continue <to do so> as long as mankind exists) to honor the martyr, each for the benefit of his own soul. As a result both land and sea were over-

²⁴ By that time, Ayatekla was part of Isauria, so the Cilicians are the eastern neighbors from the province around Tarsus.

crowded from the confluence of all the people at this spot, community by community, house by house, nation by nation.”²⁵ The first and foremost requirement was adequate water supply. Even today at least ten enormous cisterns are visible, some of which were obviously roofed.²⁶ These cisterns were not only filled by rainwater but also by a formidable aqueduct, which can be traced a bit west of Ayatekla.²⁷ This aqueduct was built for the sole purpose of supplying Thecla’s shrine with water. But obviously the pilgrims did not only come to drink water. The water was also used for healing cures; there also was a bathing complex.²⁸

The sanctuary was connected with Seleucia via a road deeply carved into the bedrock, wide enough for modern busses.²⁹ The road ran through the site roughly from north to south and was met by a 5 m wide road running over a bridge spanning the western wadi.³⁰ There was a road to the sea harbor, too.³¹

The remains of at least five churches have been recorded. Parts of the site were guarded by a defensive wall with a gate and towers. To the south,

25 *VMTh* 2.29.17–21 (368.17–21 Dagron): Καὶ γὰρ ἐνστάσης τῆς παρθενικῆς ἑορτῆς, καθ’ ἣν πᾶς τις, μάλιστα Κιλικίων, ἔθει καὶ θεῖ δ’ ἔτι πρὸς ἡμᾶς, καὶ μέχρις ἂν ὦσιν ἄνθρωποι, ἐπὶ τιμῇ μὲν τῆς μάρτυρος, ὠφελεία δὲ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς ἕκαστος, ὡς στενοχωρεῖσθαι μὲν τὴν γῆν, στενοχωρεῖσθαι δὲ τὴν θάλασσαν, κατὰ δῆμους, κατὰ οἴκους, κατὰ γένη πάντων ἐνταυθοῖ συρρεόντων. All translations of the miracles (not including the rewritten *Vita*) used here are taken from S.F. Johnson, “Miracles of Saint Thecla,” in *Miracle Tales from Byzantium*, by A.-M. Talbot and S.F. Johnson, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–201. For the festival, cf. Dagron, “Introduction” (see n. 5), 135–136.

26 U. Peschlow, “Die Zisternen von Meriamlik: Fragen zu Bau- und Mauertechnik im Bezirk von Ayatekla,” in *Syrien und seine Nachbarn von der Spätantike bis in islamische Zeit*, ed. I. Eichner and V. Tsamakda, Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz B 25 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2009), 57–80.

27 For an image, cf. *MAMA* 3, pl. 11.30. Today, the remains are less impressive but still standing. Hild and Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien* (see n. 4), 442, date it to the late fourth or fifth century.

28 The remains of the bath are next to the “cupola” church. The bath has recently been studied; for a preliminary report, cf. Almaç, “Ayatekla 2014” (see n. 23). For the healing cures there, see, e.g., *VMTh* 2.25.16–25 (354.16–25 Dagron): ἀνοίγει μὲν ἐν τῷ αὐτῆς τεμένει τὸ ἱατρεῖον, προσκαλεῖται δὲ κοινῇ πάντας ὡς αὐτῆν, ἐνὶ μὲν τῶν πασχόντων τοῦτο νόκτωρ διακελευσαμένη, πᾶσι δὲ δι’ ἐκείνου κηρῶσσα, ὥστε τῷ αὐτῆς χρῆσασθαι λουτρῷ πάντας τοὺς τῷ πάθει τούτῳ περιπεπωκότας. Τοῦτο γὰρ ἦν τὸ ἱατρεῖον, ὃ τῷ μὲν νοσηματι τῆς ὀφθαλμίας πολέμιον ἦν ὡς ἂν καὶ ἄρτι ἀρξαμένης, ἀνακραθὲν δὲ ὅμως τῆ ἐνεργεία τῆς μάρτυρος, ἄκος μέγιστον ὁμοῦ πάση τῇ πόλει γεγενηται· ὡς τὴν ἐπέκεινα λεωφόρον μηδὲ ἀρκεῖν τοῖς ἀνιούσι μὲν μετ’ οἰμωγῆς καὶ δακρῶν, κατιοῦσι δὲ μεθ’ ἡδονῆς καὶ δοξολογίας.

29 According to Hild and Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien* (see n. 4), 441, the stepped road up the hill from Seleucia was up to 3 m wide.

30 For the bridge, cf. Hild and Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien* (see n. 4), 441.

31 Cf. *VMTh* 2.15.7–8.

remains of a residential area have been found. Scattered around the site survived traces of several necropoleis including many rock cut tombs and *chamosoria*.³² There even is a funeral inscription that mentions nuns of Thecla.³³

For the discussion of the cave and its history the two largest churches are relevant, both of them being visible from far away, especially to those who came by ship.

The first one is the so-called cupola church. It lies in the east of the site, where the ground noticeably slopes down to a wadi. There are not many remains visible today because a lot of stones have been removed in recent decades. As the church is situated on sloping ground, the eastern parts needed massive substructions. Including its fore-courts, it measured 78 by 35 m. The floor consisted of *opus sectile*, and much Proconnesian marble was used. The architectural layout provoked debate: “The main section of the church retained the basilical principle of having nave and aisles, but the nave was divided into two sections. Immediately in front of the apse was a central bay. The inner sides of this formed an almost perfect square (10.6 by 10.65 meters). The corners were defined on the west side by piers which were 2.2 meters square, and on the east side by the walls at the mouth of the apse which were 2 meters thick.”³⁴ This massive construction led to the hypothesis that this church had a cupola, but today most scholars think it was a pyramidal wooden roof.³⁵ This church is generally dated to the second half of the fifth century.

Beside the “cupola” church, there is another large church on site. This huge edifice is usually called the “basilica of Thecla.” It is the largest known church in all of Isauria and Cilicia.³⁶ It measured about 81 by 43 m. One of

32 For a preliminary report on recent research at the necropoleis (including images), see Almaç, “Ayatekla 2018” (see n. 23), 10–13. They recorded about fifty graves in the southern necropolis and sixty-eight tomb lids (!) in the northern one (Almaç and Özügül, “Ayatekla 2017” [see n. 23], 153–154, and Almaç, Özügül, and Semiz, “Ayatekla 2019” [see n. 23], 4).

33 MAMA 3.45 (P. Nowakowski, *Inscribing the Saints in Late Antique Anatolia*, JPPSup 34 [Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018], no. ISA/10/02): μνημα Παυλείνας καὶ Θεέκλας μοναστριῶν Θεέκλας. †, “Grave of Paulina and Thecla, nuns of Thecla.”

34 S. Hill, *The Early Byzantine Churches of Cilicia and Isauria*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs 1 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 228.

35 Herzfeld and Guyer, *MAMA* 2, pp. 61–62 (cupola) vs. G.H. Forsyth, “Architectural Notes on a Trip through Cilicia,” *DOP* 11 (1957), 223–236, here 224–225. For a discussion with extensive references, cf. A. Arbeiter, “El santuario de Tecla (Ayatekla) en Seleucia,” in Barrier, *Thecla* (see n. 1), 152–204, here 169–172.

36 Arbeiter even calls it “die stattlichste christliche Architektur aller in und um Kilikien gelegenen Gebiete” (Arbeiter, “El santuario de Tecla” [see n. 35], 154).

Fig. 3: The standing remains of Thecla's basilica, phase 3 (© Susanne Froehlich, 30 Sept. 2013)

the excavators, Samuel Guyer, writes that the basilica of San Apollinare in Classe near Ravenna would have fitted into Thecla's basilica easily. A part of the apse is still standing, it "conveys effectively the grandiose scale"³⁷ (see fig. 3).

Beside the remarkable size, this church is a usual three-aisled basilica, like most other churches in Cilicia. In 1907 some excavations (less than a month!) have been carried out. Stephen Hill well-foundedly concludes that these "consisted of a series of test-holes."³⁸ It was about a hundred years later that a stratigraphy was published by Gabriele Mietke, based on the original field books.³⁹ It is assumed that five different phases can be recognized, four of them being highlighted in the figure below (fig. 4). Not all of them relate to a new building, often it is just a new layer on the floor. Phase 2 (green) is usually said to be dated by a mosaic to the late fourth century.⁴⁰ By that time, the building probably already was as large as in the later phases. The apse, which is visible today, is part of phase 3 (red). Its floors were paved with *opus sectile*. Mietke dates this apse to the second half of the fifth century, based on two marble fragments of capitals that most likely were used in the windows of the apse. The dating is based on a meticulous study of their sculptural style.⁴¹

Euagrius's wording regarding Zeno's donation is quite clear: The emperor dedicated, that is, erected or set up (ἀνατίθημι) a precinct for Thecla. But as it is certain that there was an earlier sanctuary, both churches presented here are candidates for the donation of Zeno. Samuel Guyer, Gunnar Brands, and others chose the "cupola" church,⁴² while George

37 Forsyth, "Architectural Notes" (see n. 35), 223.

38 Hill, *Byzantine Churches* (see n. 34), 217.

39 Gabriele Mietke, "Bauphasen und Datierung der Basilika von Meriamlik (Ayatekla)," in Eichner and Tsamakda, *Syrien und seine Nachbarn* (see n. 26), 37–56.

40 This tentative and much-quoted dating was suggested by Gisela Hellenkemper-Salies in a small article (G. Hellenkemper-Salies, "Kilikische Pavimente: Ein Aspekt künstlerischer Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kilikien und der Levante," *AnAnt* 1 [1991], 316–330), and not by Gabriele Mietke, as A. Cortese, *Cilicia as Sacred Landscape in Late Antiquity: A Journey on the Trail of Apostles, Martyrs and Local Saints*, Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz B 53 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2022), 81, claims.

41 Mietke, "Bauphasen" (see n. 39), 50–54; Arbeiter, "El santuario de Tecla" (see n. 35), 177–178, agrees on that.

42 Cf. Herzfeld and Guyer, *MAMA* 2, pp. 32 and 73–74 (in a statement from 1909, Guyer had chosen the basilica); G. Brands, "Pilgerfahrt und Wallfahrtsstätten im spätantiken Orient," in *Oriens Christianus: Geschichte und Gegenwart des nahöstlichen Christentums*, ed. S. Gralla, Villigst Profile 1 (Münster: Lit, 2003), 15–41, here 25. Hellenkemper picked this option, too: H. Hellenkemper, "Die Kirchenstiftung des Kaisers Zenon im Wallfahrtsheiligtum der heiligen Thekla bei Seleukia," *Wallrauf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 47 (1986),



Meramlik, Große Basilika, Phasenplan auf der Grundlage des Nivellements von Ernst Herzfeld 1907
 Beiläge zur: Gabriele Mietke, Bauphasen und Datierung der Basilika von Meramlik (Ayatekla), in: Syrien und seine Nachbarn von der Spätantike bis in die islamische Zeit, Wiesbaden 2009, 37-56.

Niveauangaben in Zentimetern beziehen sich auf einen unbekanntem Nullpunkt an der Apsis. Angegeben sind nur Fundamentoberkanten und sichere Laufniveaus.

Phasen:
 Phase 1 (-224 cm - -206 cm)
 Phase 2 (-188 cm - -164,5 cm)
 Phase 3 (-145 cm bis -130 cm), mit erhöhten Türschwellen (-116 cm) und Portico im Westan (-199 cm bis -129 cm)
 Phase 4 (-144 cm bis -142 cm)

Nummern der Meßpunkte von 1907:
 ○ im Grundriß sichtbar
 ● im Grundriß verborgen

Fig. 4: Plan of Thecla's basilica (© Gabriele Mietke, 2009)

63-90, here 81-88 (also in F. Hild, H. Hellenkemper, and G. Hellenkemper-Salies, "Kommagene - Kilikien - Isaurien," *RBK* 4 [1990], 182-356, here 238-239).

Fig. 5: Plan of the cave church (© *MAMA* 2, p. 39, fig. 39)

Forsyth, Gilbert Dagron, and others opted for the large basilica.⁴³ Stephen Hill says both might be part of the donation, Hugh Elton thinks at least one of them, Hansgerd Hellenkemper and Friedrich Hild even suggest a third building.⁴⁴

Below Thecla's basilica lies her cave.⁴⁵ It is usually taken as granted that this cave is the origin of Thecla's cult at this site, maybe even in direct continuity with an older pagan cult.⁴⁶ A small three-aisled basilica was built here, measuring about 18 by 12 m (cf. fig. 5). A test hole dug in the northern aisle decades ago shows that the cave is even today filled with nearly a meter of debris: The ancient cave was much larger than it seems today. The height of the cave church from the mosaic floor to the top of the arches was

⁴³ Forsyth, "Architectural Notes" (see n. 35), 224; Dagron, "Introduction" (see n. 5), 61.

⁴⁴ Hill, *Byzantine Churches* (see n. 34), 234 (on p. 212 he opts for the "cupola" church as Zeno's dedication, though); H. Elton, "Alahan and Zeno," *AnSt* 52 (2002), 153–157, here 153; Hild and Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien* (see n. 4), 443 (they recorded a "bedeutende[n] Sakralbau" to the west of the road, a "Zentralbau" covering about 1,200 m², see fig. 2).

⁴⁵ For a very detailed discussion, cf. Arbeiter, "El santuario de Tecla" (see n. 35), 173–175.

⁴⁶ Hild and Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien* (see n. 4), 442, do "not want to exclude" a former Athena Parthenos cult site.



Fig. 6: Cave church, northern aisle: the *fenestellae* (© Philipp Pilhofer, 29 May 2014)

measured at 3.25 m.⁴⁷ When the large basilica was erected overground, the small cave church had to be transformed to bear that weight. The northern aisle was separated by a wall that ran where the colonnades of the overground church stood. The remains of mosaics, marble wall coverings, and possibly also frescoes have been documented; these probably indicate formerly lavish decoration.⁴⁸

The middle aisle ended with an apse, with doors to small side rooms. The northern aisle ended with two windows, *fenestellae*, which enabled the visitors to have a look into the grotto next to the apse, probably the *sanctum* (see fig. 6). A close parallel is the much-neglected church of the Forty Saints at Sarandë, which was built in the fifth or sixth century. While the whole crypt is much more elaborate than the one in Ayatekla, the two *fenestellae* are of striking similarity: “Two roughly square flat-headed openings pierce the eastern end-wall of this sanctuary some 1.25 m above the floor level, giving access to narrow vaulted tunnels.” These tunnels again are a bit more complex than the grotto in Ayatekla, but the concept of these *fenestellae* is the same: “It would appear that this sequence of chambers was designed to hold major relics, just visible to the faithful, through a *fenestella*-window,

⁴⁷ Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* (see n. 12), 288.

⁴⁸ A photo of a mosaic depicting a human head is printed at Arbeiter, “El santuario de Tecla” (see n. 35), 209.

but kept at a safe and reverential distance by the intervening vaulted passages, and preceded by a partially and dramatically lit viewing chamber, the ‘sanctuary.’⁴⁹ As there were most likely no relics existing in Ayatekla by that time,⁵⁰ we do not know exactly what was on display there (if anything). But it is very likely that this grotto was the spiritual center of the whole city-like complex Ayatekla in late antiquity.⁵¹

It is striking, and this has to be stressed here, that the overground basilica’s layout is in no way axially geared to that underground *sanctum*, and there is no structural or liturgical connection between the basilica and the cave, as has been observed by Achim Arbeiter.⁵²

3 A Newly Found Cave in Quiet and Solitude

With approximate knowledge of the written sources and the archaeological remains let us now turn to the discussion of the cave’s date. A late antique source sheds doubt on the old hypothesis that the cave is where the cult of Thecla originated, a hypothesis taken for granted by the large majority of researchers.

This source has been mentioned here already, it is called *Vita et miracula Theclae*. It was written and revised during the mid-fifth century. In the ecclesial tradition, the *Vita et miracula* is attributed to Bishop Basil of Seleucia. As the text attacks Basil personally several times, it is highly

49 J. Mitchell, “The Archaeology of Pilgrimage in Late Antique Albania. The Basilica of the Forty Martyrs,” in *Recent Research on the Late Antique Countryside*, ed. W. Bowden, L. Lavan, and C. Machado, *Late Antique Archaeology 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 145–186, here 169 and 171. For the church of the Forty Saints (Manastiri i 40 Shenjtorëve) in Albania as “the most important pilgrimage destination in the Ionian Sea region,” see also R. Hodges and J. Mitchell, “The Forty Saints Reconsidered,” *Expedition* 56.3 (2014), 38–44. Personal inspection on 17 May 2013.

50 Thecla did not die, according to her legend, so there were no corporal relics (maybe a “scrap of her clothing” as in the case of Ariadne, cf. n. 10 above). In the fourteenth century relics are mentioned (Hellenkemper, “Kirchenstiftung” [see n. 42], 88 n. 7) and were subsequently translated to Tarragona in Spain.

51 Generally regarding the architecture of holiness, cf. A. Arbeiter, “Holy Spaces: Bauliche Inszenierungen von Heiligkeit in der christlichen Spätantike,” in *Heilige, Heiliges und Heiligkeit in spätantiken Religionskulturen*, ed. P. Gemeinhardt and K. Heyden, RVV 61 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 49–84.

52 Arbeiter, “El santuario de Tecla” (see n. 35), 155 (more detailed and in Spanish on pp. 181–182): “Im Thekla-Heiligtum dagegen mit seiner nicht axial auf die unterirdischen Gegebenheiten Bezug nehmenden Oberkirchen-Baufolge sind zwar – fast aleatorisch wirkende, abseitige – Perforationen vorhanden, doch wurde augenscheinlich nie direkter baulicher und/oder liturgischer Kontakt zwischen ‘Reliquie’ (der Grotte) und Oberkirche(n) hergestellt.”

improbable that he wrote it himself.⁵³ Instead, Gilbert Dagron showed about fifty years ago that the author was an anonymous Christian from Seleucia, most likely a priest at Thecla’s sanctuary, who seemingly was excommunicated by Basil.⁵⁴ The author’s main aim is to show the importance of Thecla to Seleucia and the region. In his epilogue, moreover, he invokes Thecla in a tone of bitter frustration for personal reasons. He hopes to be reinstated and to have the opportunity to preach from her pulpit again.⁵⁵

The *Vita et miracula Theclae* consists of two parts. The first part is the *vita*, which is basically a rewritten version of the older Acts of Thecla mentioned above. The second part is a collection of miracles worked by Thecla. In that collection, Thecla’s links to Iconium are almost completely ignored. Instead she is closely connected to her precinct in Ayatekla, which is, according to that text, situated where she disappeared into the rock. This shrine, the city of Seleucia, and its surroundings are constructed as Thecla’s space.⁵⁶ The author of these new acts points out that, just as Peter was sent to Judea or Paul to the gentiles, Christ appointed Thecla to preach in the vicinity of Seleucia.⁵⁷

In his edition fifty years ago, Dagron proposed a later date for the incorporation of the cave into Thecla’s cult, based on the evidence of the *Vita et miracula*. While he is quoted often, his main argument has not yet been disputed.⁵⁸

53 To give the most explicit statements here: τοῦτο Βασιλείος, τὸ μὲν ὅπως ἐπίσκοπός τε ἐγένετο καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἐκράτησε, τὸ μὴδὲ σκηνῆς ἀξίον (*VMTh* 2.12.45–46); ταῖς περὶ αὐτοῦ κακαῖς καὶ ὀλεθρίαις ψήφοις (2.12.48–49); τοῦ δυστήνου τοῦτου παιδαρίου (2.12.55); τὴν Βασιλείου λέγω κακουργίαν (2.12.110–111).

54 G. Dagron, “L’auteur des Actes et des Miracles de Sainte Thècle,” *AnBoll* 92 (1974), 5–11, and id., “Introduction” (see n. 4), 13–16. Even literature specializing in the region often still ignores his observations regarding Basil (e.g., Hill, *Byzantine Churches* [see n. 34]).

55 *VMTh* 2 epilogue, 23–32 (410.23–32 Dagron): καὶ ταύτην δὲ τὴν γε νῦν ἐπαναστάσάν μοι λῦπην σὺ λῦσον, ὦ τρισμακαρία, τὸν κῦνα, τὸν ἀρκόχοιρον, τὸν δυσγενῆ καὶ δύστροπον Πορφύριον παύσασα τῆς κατ’ ἐμοῦ μανίας καὶ λύττης ἐπεὶ τοι καὶ τόνδε τὸν ἐκ ταπεινῶν καὶ ἀνωνύμων καὶ ἀθεμίτου πορνείας τεχθέντα, καὶ λιμοῦ καὶ πείνας ἔκγονον ὄντα, εἶναι τι δοκεῖν καὶ δύνασθαι πεποιήκεν ὁ παγγάλεπος σῦτος καιρός, ὁ πάντα μὲν ἐλευθερον καὶ εὐπατρίδην ταπεινώσας, πάντα δὲ ληστήν καὶ δραπετήν καὶ τυμβωρυχὸν ὑψώσας. Μετὰ δὴ τούτων, ὦ παρθένε, δὸς τὸ καὶ αὐτὴς ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τῆς ἱεράς ἀναβάθρας τοῦ ἱεροῦ βήματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας ταύτης ὀφθῆναι [...].

56 S.F. Johnson, *Literary Territories: Cartographical Thinking in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 61–80.

57 *VMTh* 2.4.21–24 (294,21–24 Dagron): Ὡσπερ δὲ ἄλλοις ἄλλας τῶν ἁγίων πόλεις καὶ χώρας ὁ Χριστὸς διένειμεν ὥστε ἀνακαθᾶραι σὺν ἀκριβείᾳ τὴν γῆν, οὕτω καὶ αὐτὴ ταύτην ἀπένειμεν, ὡς Πέτρῳ τὴν Ἰουδαίαν, ὡς Παύλῳ τὰ ἔθνη.

58 B. Kollmann, “Einleitung,” in *Pseudo-Basiliius von Seleukia, Vita et miracula sanctae Theclae*, ed. B. Kollmann and B. Schröder, *Fontes Christiani* 93 (Freiburg im Breisgau:

Dagron's arguments will be fostered and reinforced here and some new aspects will be added. This will be done in three steps. First, what can be gathered about the old *martyrium* building does not seem to fit evidence of the cave. Secondly, none of the sources that can be dated firmly before the middle of the fifth century mentions a cave. And thirdly, the fifth-century miracles, written by an eyewitness, claim that the cave was found during his lifetime and that it is clearly separated from the old church building.

First, regarding the old *martyrium* it is established that the altar stood at the position where Thecla vanished into the rock. In the words of the rewritten *Vita Theclae*: "[...] but she sank [into the ground] alive and went underground. For so it had pleased God: The ground parted for her and opened, in the place where [now] the divine, holy, and liturgical table stands firmly, set up in a circular, silver-shining peristyle."⁵⁹ Yet there are no traces of a circular ciborium in the cave, and the grotto that is architecturally presented as the *sanctum* by the *fenestellae* does not fit an altar with ciborium at all.

Secondly, regarding the non-mentioning of the cave: As we have seen, some of the variant endings of the old Acts of Thecla mention a cave. It is, however, not possible to date these variants.⁶⁰ Egeria does not mention a cave, and she is quite elaborate in such aspects usually; Gregory does not either.⁶¹ Even though the *Vita et miracula* is very interested in the constructional details of Ayatekla and specifically the main church,⁶² a cave is

Herder, 2021), 7–74, here 39, at least mentions the hypothesis. Hild, Hellenkemper, and Hellenkemper-Salies, "Kilikien" (see n. 42), are referring to Dagron several times, but when it comes to the cave, his hypothesis is ignored (234–235). Often his arguments are understood only partially, cf. Hill, *Byzantine Churches* (see n. 34), 209–212, and Cortese, *Cilicia* (see n. 40), 84 (n. 206). Arbeiter, "El santuario de Tecla" (see n. 35), 172–173 n. 34, brings forward several valid arguments against Dagron's hypothesis. S.J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37, is one of the few (or the only one?) who followed Dagron.

59 *VMTh* 1.28.7–11 (280,7–11 Dagron): ἔδω δὲ ζῶσα καὶ ὑπεισήλθε τὴν γῆν, οὕτω τῷ Θεῷ δοξάν, διαστῆναί τε αὐτῆ καὶ ὑποβραγῆναι τὴν γῆν ἐκείνην, ἐν ᾧ περὶ τόπων ἡ θεία καὶ ἱερὰ καὶ λειτουργικὴ πέπηγε τράπεζα, ἐν περιστύλῳ καὶ ἀργυροφειγῆ καθιδρυμένη κύκλῳ [...] (my trans.).

60 Cf. Kaestli and Rordorf, "La fin de la vie de Thècle" (see n. 9), 53–54.

61 This has been shown above, so Cortese is obviously wrong when she claims: "The words reported by Egeria and Gregory of Nazianzos attest that, already in the fourth century, a cave church existed" (Cortese, *Cilicia* [see n. 40], 84).

62 Several features of the building are described in detail, for example, a concentric geometric mosaic on the floor (*VMTh* 2.17.3–6), an oil lamp in her church's choir (2.7.24–26), a golden mosaic with inscription (2.10.3–8), the chancel screen (2.18.41–42), and even the choir with its pulpit is mentioned (2 epilogue, 31–32). For further evidence, cf. Dagron, "Introduction" (see n. 5), 67–73.

never mentioned when it refers to the original cult site. The text narrates twice how Thecla arrived south of Seleucia on a mountain peak. At the first mention we are told she makes the mountain peak her dwelling place; at the other place, the peak is just mentioned: “When the virgin <Thecla> came to this country, passed its borders, and arrived at the mountain peak.”⁶³ In both cases, no cave is mentioned (but each time a peak, κορυφή!). To sum up: According to the written sources, the cave might be a later “invention.”

Thirdly and most importantly, the miracles explicitly state that the cave was not the origin of the cult. A cave is mentioned in miracle 36 for the first time, and the text is quite clear about it:

It was summertime: the cicadas were chirping and a blazing sun was burning high overhead. [...] She arranged for the sudden gushing forth of a spring, which had not formerly existed, and had not been noticed either by any of us or by the inhabitants of old. And she did not arrange this far off, in a strange land, but in the very location of her own sanctuary. This is a cave to the west of her church, lying just opposite it, which is quite delightful and charming and offers a very pleasant spot to walk and spend time, where one can pray in absolute tranquillity and obtain from the martyr through prayer whatever one desires. Anyone who comes to pray at the church straightaway also heads to this cave, as if to a bedroom and chamber where the virgin martyr resides. For some say that she spends most of her time in this cave, because she loves the quiet and solitude.⁶⁴

The miracle is clearly told as if it happened during the lifetime of the author. He includes himself into the group of people who did not know the well before. Without any doubt, the author explains that the cave is not situated under the main church but west of it: In his account, visitors go to the church first, and then, separately, to the cave. Why would someone who is

63 *VMTh* 2.1.14–16 (290,14–16 Dagron): ἅμα τε προσήλασεν ἡ παρθένος τῇ χώρᾳ ταύτῃ καὶ ἤψατο καὶ ἤψατο τῶν ὀρίων αὐτῆς καὶ τὴν κορυφὴν ταύτην κατέλαβε, συνέστελλέ τε αὐτῆς καὶ κατεσίγασε. *VMTh* 1.27.49–54 (278,49–54): Ἐν ταύτῃ τοίνυν τῇ πόλει καταχθεῖσαι καὶ ἀρεσθεῖσαι, καὶ τὴν γείτονα καὶ πρὸς μεσημβρίαν ἀνεστηκυῖαν καταλαβοῦσα κορυφὴν, ποιεῖται μὲν ἑαυτῆς ἐνδιαίτημα, ὡς Ἡλίας τὸν Κάρμηλον, ὡς Ἰωάννης τὴν ἔρημον (“When she came to this town and enjoyed it, she reached the nearby peak rising to the south and made it her dwelling place, just as Elia on the Carmel and John in the desert,” my trans.).

64 *VMTh* 2.36.1–2 and 13–25 (386,1–2 and 388,13–15 Dagron): Θέρος ἦν καὶ τεττίγων ᾧδῃ καὶ πολὺς ὁ ἥλιος ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς φλέγων [...]. Τὴν γὰρ μὴ οὐσάν ποτε πηγὴν, μήτε παρὰ τινος ἡμῶν ἢ καὶ τῶν παλαιωτέρων ὀφθεῖσαν, ἀθρόον ἀναβλύσαι παρασκευάζει· παρασκευάζει δὲ οὔτε πόρρω, οὔτε ἐν ἀλλοτρίῳ χώρῳ, ἀλλ’ ἐν ᾧπερ τόπῳ πάλιν αὐτῆς ἐστὶ τὸ τέμενος. Τοῦτο δὲ ἐστὶν ἄντρον πρὸς ἐσπέραν αὐτοῦ τοῦ νεῶ καὶ καταντικρῶ κείμενον, χαριέστατον δὲ καὶ ἐπιτερπέστατον, καὶ πολλὴν ἔχον τὴν ἡδονὴν βαδίσαι τε ἐπ’ αὐτῷ καὶ ἐμφιλοχῶρησαι, καὶ καθ’ ἡσυχίαν πολλὴν εὐξασθαί τε καὶ οὐ βούλεται τις τυχεῖν δι’ εὐχῆς παρὰ τῆς μάρτυρος. Πᾶς γοῦν ὁ εἰς τὸν νεῶν βαδίζων τε καὶ εὐχόμενος, εὐθὺς καὶ ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνον τρέχει τὸ ἄντρον, ὡς ἂν καὶ ἐπὶ τινα κοιτωνίσκον λοιπὸν καὶ θάλαμον ἔνδον ἔχοντα τὴν παρθένον. Φασὶ γάρ τινες τὰ πλείιστα καὶ ἐν τούτῳ διατρίβειν αὐτὴν, ὡς ἂν ἡσυχίας τε ἐρώσαν καὶ φιλέρημον οὐσαν.

writing for his local community invent something like that? For a historian's mind there is no doubt that by this time, that is, the middle of the fifth century, the cave was not located under the church, but a short distance west to it.

Thecla's favorite spot is mentioned in another miracle: "[Pausicacus] did not go to the church but to the small outer precinct which is a little ways from the church, which is called Myrsineon, the 'Myrtle Grove,' where it is claimed and believed that the virgin martyr spends most of her time."⁶⁵ In the *Vita et miracula* (as it is reconstructed in Dagron's edition)⁶⁶ it is not stated explicitly, but according to another text of Thecla's tradition, "she took residence in a cave in the Myrsineon, where there is now a spring."⁶⁷ This description of the grove perfectly corresponds to what miracle 36 told about Thecla's favorite place, but it is obvious that it was written at the same time or later (as the recency of the spring is emphasized).

These texts clearly indicate that the cave became more and more important during the lifetime of the anonymous author.⁶⁸ It became the place where the pilgrims expected Thecla to be (invisibly of course). This fits the findings in the actual cave. The northern aisle points to the *sanctum*: In that *sanctum*, there is no room for an altar with ciborium. So this spot is probably not the place where Thecla was said to have vanished.

This essentially historical hypothesis invites several objections from an archaeological perspective.⁶⁹ First and foremost, the dating of the early phases of the overground basilica to the fourth century is widely accepted. Then, the layout of the *temenos* walls has the basilica in its center. Additionally, cult sites are usually considered as unmovable, and often considerable costs are accepted so that an old cult site can be integrated into a

65 *VMTh* 2.23.8–11 (348,8–11 Dagron): Καταλαβών γάρ οὗτος οὐ τὸν νεών, τὸ δὲ μικρὸν ἀπωτέρω τοῦ νεῶ προτεμένισμα, ᾧ ὄνομα Μυρσινεῶν, ᾧ καὶ τὰ πλείστα ἐνδιδαιτᾶσθαι λέγεται καὶ πιστεύεται ἢ παρθένος, ἐνταῦθα τρόπον τινὰ καθείρξας ἑαυτὸν.

66 The transmission of the *Acta Theclae* and the *Vita et miracula* is intermingling in the manuscripts. This shows that to an ancient or Byzantine reader, the entities *VMTh* and *ATh* were not as distinctly separated as it appears today.

67 Kaestli and Rordorf, "La fin de la vie de Thècle" (see n. 9), 53–54, ll. 9–10 (the text is also edited by Joseph Paramelle and Dagron in an appendix to Dagron's edition of *VMTh*): Ὅθεν ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ ᾤκει ἐν τῷ Μυρσεῶνι, ἔνθα νῦν ἡ πηγὴ (trans. from Johnson, "Miracles" [see n. 25], 187).

68 Cortese, *Cilicia* (see n. 40), 84, tries to reconcile the sources. She suggests that there were two caves: The one under the church, assuming "an increasing role," and one in the west, "probably linked to an early cult." This idea does not take into account that the western cave is explicitly presented as a new spot in our fifth-century text.

69 Cf. Hill, *Byzantine Churches* (see n. 34), 209–212, and Arbeiter, "El santuario de Tecla" (see n. 35), 172–173.

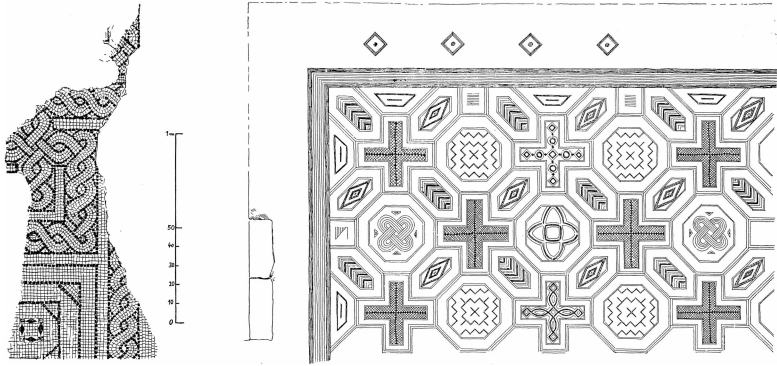


Fig. 7a and b: Remaining mosaics in Thecla’s basilica, phase 1 (a) and 2 (b) (© MAMA 2, p. 20, fig. 19 [a]; p. 35, fig. 37 [b])

new building. And last but certainly not least: Where was Egeria’s church located, and why is there almost nothing left of it? To settle these questions, more field work is required, of course. The following discussion is merely intended to show that the evidence leaves more possibilities for interpretation than expected.

Regarding the dating of the earlier phases: Phase 2 has been – up to now – dated to about 375, based on a small strip of mosaic (see fig. 7b); there has been no date suggested for the mosaic of phase 1 (see fig. 7a).⁷⁰ This dating of the mosaic of phase 2 is by no means certain. Mosaics of very similar geometric style were made in the fifth and sixth centuries, too.⁷¹ Phase 3 (red) is dated rather firmly to the second half of the fifth century so that a date in the last quarter fits with it. Following Mietke’s phases, this still leaves two phases – the first phase of the building and the “Umbauphase”⁷² (phase 2) – squeezed in before that. According to Arbeiter, there is only one earlier overground phase.⁷³ All in all, the earlier phases do at least not exclude the hypothesis.

The remains of the *temenos* wall that encloses the basilica are usually identified with the wall reported by Egeria. But this dating is in conflict with

70 See above, n. 40. The dating for the mosaic of phase 2 was proposed by Hellenkemper-Salies, “Kilikische Pavimente” (see n. 40), and accepted widely.

71 Philipp Niewöhner referred me to the sixth-century churches of Miletus (via email, 2 Sept. 2021); for reference, cf. P. Niewöhner, *Die byzantinischen Basiliken von Milet, Milet 1,11* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), fig. 152.

72 Mietke, “Bauphasen” (see n. 39), 48–49.

73 Arbeiter, “El santuario de Tecla” (see n. 35), 172, distinguishes phase 1 (cave only), 2 (overground church, 4th cent.), 3 (basilica, 5th cent.) and 4 (Armenian/medieval).

Richard Bayliss's observation that the mortar used for building the *temenos* wall, the cistern next to the basilica, and the apse of the basilica "is consistent" and thus all three were built roughly at the same time in the fifth century.⁷⁴ Egeria seems to imply anyway that the wall enclosed more than just the church. Her testimony perhaps refers to the more extensive enclosing wall of large limestone ashlar, which can still be clearly seen at the edge of the eastern wadi today.⁷⁵ The center of this wider enclosure cannot yet be determined.

What is very puzzling is the idea of "moving" a cult site, though this is what the text indicates: According to it, there was an older cult site, but "everyone" (or at least the insiders), after visiting the old site, dashed to the newly found cave. Additionally, as has been pointed out above, even the "new" church (i. e., the overground basilica) is neither aligned with the "new" underground cult site nor does it have a strong liturgical connection to it (both are very unusual, but still valid even if one assumes that the basilica is the "old" church). If the cave church was the origin of the cult site, the main altar would have been standing behind the *fenestellae*, which is an odd arrangement. The archaeological evidence in any case remains exceptional.

But where did the old church seen by Egeria and Gregory lie? It is unclear, and more archaeological work is required. If the anonymous author is correct about it, the original building should be slightly east of the cave. Dagrón's suggestion of some substructions has been rejected by Hill and Arbeiter. But as long as parts of the whole site are still ploughed and there even is a large church completely uncharted,⁷⁶ there are many options remaining. Still, many problems are solved if one supposes that the author meant his *πρὸς ἑσπέραν αὐτοῦ* in miracle 36 *cum grano salis*, that is, not exactly west, but southwest. Then, the "cupola" church could be at the place of the old church (Egeria's), while Thecla's basilica was erected southwest (!) of it some years after the cave was discovered. This also solves the problem regarding the "unmovability" of a cult site in a simpler way. Not

74 R. Bayliss, *Provincial Cilicia and the Archaeology of Temple Conversion*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1282 (Oxford: Hadrian Books, 2004), 89–90.

75 This wall is also mentioned in Hild and Hellenkemper, *Kilikien und Isaurien* (see n. 4), 443: "Teile einer größeren Umfassungsmauer, die ehemals vielleicht den gesamten Wallfahrtsbezirk einfaßte." Hild and Hellenkemper recorded remains of crenellations, which reveals defensive purposes. Cf. fig. 1 in Hellenkemper, "Kirchenstiftung" (see n. 42), 64, and, more impressively, the relevant figures in id., "Wallfahrtsstätten" (see n. 21). Archaeological research on those walls only just started: Almaç, Özügül, and Semiz, "Ayatekla 2019" (see n. 23), 5–6 (they call it "embankment walls").

76 See above n. 44 with fig. 2.

least, a glance on the site plan⁷⁷ shows that the “cupola” church stands on a κορυφή, which fits this historical account better than the location of the main basilica.⁷⁸

4 Results

To conclude, it seems quite clear that Thecla’s cave cannot be seen as the origin of her cult at Ayatekla. This hypothesis appears to be a valid interpretation of the archaeological evidence. It has to be discussed whether the restructuring of the site really coincides with Zeno’s involvement.⁷⁹ Maybe it even was Zeno’s donation that made it possible to reflect the new realities at the site, that is, that firmly included the cave into the cult center. The variant endings of the older *Acta Theclae* promoting the cave then might have been written during that time.

It should be already obvious by the text of miracle 36, that the tranquillity of the Myrsineon and her cave ended way before the erection of the huge church on the cave: If every pilgrim came to the cave after praying in the church looking for a walk at this very pleasant spot, it soon would have become crowded.

Although not many scholars and spades have disturbed Ayatekla recently, it has lost its tranquillity and comfort anyway. This is not because of the masses of pilgrims – although the place still is frequented by Greek Orthodox visitors. The Turkish archaeologist Semavi Eyice writes: “[I]n the years that followed [after the excavation], a parking lot was senselessly built there for tourist buses, and asphalt was poured on this spot which had housed buildings of historical significance.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Esp. on the plan at *MAMA* 2, p. 2.

⁷⁸ I am aware that this hypothesis stands on shaking ground due to the stray location of the “cupola” church. But that location needs to be explained in any case, and maybe the explanation is the earliest sacred space at Ayatekla ...

⁷⁹ If Bayliss is right (in claiming that the apse of the main basilica, the *temenos* wall, and the cistern there have been built at the same time), this points to a phase of elaborate building activities. Peschlow showed on the basis of the bricks and their stamps that the cistern next to the bath at Ayatekla as well as the huge cistern in Seleucia were built with similar bricks made by a Constantinopolitan team using local material in the second half of the fifth century (Peschlow, “Zisternen” [see n. 26]; he tries to substantiate a dating for both large churches, the bath, and some cisterns between 476 and 479: *ibid.*, 68–72). This again points to complex building activities, this time probably with imperial backing. If this was one large combined building process, in turn it certainly would have to be connected with Zeno’s donation.

⁸⁰ Eyice, “Thekla” (see n. 20), 118.

So even if the title of this contribution is proven wrong, Ayatekla remains to be investigated. A publication on Ayatekla cannot be finished without referring to the art historian Josef Strzygowski from Biala and his 1903 statement: “Meriamlik muss ausgegraben werden.”⁸¹ More than a hundred years later, one might be less optimistic about excavations and the resulting risk of a newly reconstructed Disneyland, but certainly: More research is necessary.⁸²

Philipp Pilhofer

University of Rostock, Germany

orcid.org/0000-0003-4818-8017

81 J. Strzygowski, *Kleinasien: Ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte; Kirchenaufnahmen von J.W. Crowfoot und J.I. Smirnov; Unter Benutzung einiger Ergebnisse der Expedition nach der asiatischen Türkei des kais. Legationsrates Dr. Max Freiherrn von Oppenheim, der isaurischen Expedition der Gesellschaft zur Förderung deutscher Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur in Böhmen, Beiträgen von Bruno Keil, Otto Puchstein, Adolf Wilhelm u. a.; Mit 162 Abbildungen* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1903), 51.

82 I do thank the organizers and participants of Ewa Wipszycka’s Late Antique seminar in Warsaw (2021) as well as of the Archäologische Ringvorlesung at Göttingen (2022) for their patience with and comments on my ideas; special thanks to Jon Cubas Díaz, Stephen Mitchell, Gabriele Mietke, Philipp Niewöhner, and Paweł Nowakowski.