

The Holy Fool and Folly in the Late Antique World: A Historiographical Examination

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A foolish monk left his ascetic practice in the desert and came to live an urban life during the seventh century. In the urban setting of Emesa, he acted like a madman: dragging a dead dog through the streets,¹ becoming a “literal lunatic” by thrashing about in the presence of a new moon,² and savagely devouring raw meat.³ He is recorded as acting as if he “had no body...he paid no attention to what might be judged disgraceful conduct either by human convention or by nature.”⁴ So goes the *Life* of Symeon the Fool as recorded in the first full-length vita of a fool’s life by Leontius of Neapolis. The outlandish acts of Symeon are quantified as holy foolery due to the fact that he had “so thoroughly stripped off the garment of vainglory as to appear insane to those who did not know him, although he was filled with all divine wisdom and grace;” he did this so he could escape the confines of monasticism and reach his ascetic perfection in a new and unique fashion.⁵ Symeon is one of the most popular holy fools, with plenty of scholarship concerning his vita as it is the most extensive of its kind. He is, however, not the only one.

There are plenty other fools who are recorded wandering through cities with dead dogs tied around their necks as Symeon did, giving away both the calf and the cow so as not to separate the bovine family as is recorded in St. Philaretos’ vita, and laughing madly into the faces of other monks like the fool Abba Silvanus. They were so insane that their folly could only be interpreted as divine inspiration. As Sergey Ivanov states, holy fools emerged as a “saint ‘in spite of,’” the inherent sanctity of all

people “rather than a saint ‘because of’” it.⁶ Holy fools represent this rebellion against the success of Christianity and monasticism: “[the holy man] was thought of as a man who owed nothing to society. He fled women and bishops, not because he would have found the society of either particularly agreeable, but because both threatened to rivet him to a distinct place in society.”⁷ Even though they fled these prescribed roles, the hagiographers, or the authors, defended them, saying that “the veneer of their madness or marginality demonstrated perfect self-mastery in a context that prevented devotion or adulation of others.”⁸ They are rebels deflecting praise from others for their outstanding ascetic habits by feigning “madness and [becoming] objects of derision.”⁹ Hagiographers saw their deeds as a way to be more divine by committing to a different, abject form of asceticism.

As objects of contempt, these fools are recorded by hagiographers through the use of the specific term of *salos*. While originating from the secular Syriac term for ‘imbecile’ or ‘half-wit,’¹⁰ it was quickly adapted into a Christian religious context after its first use in Palladius’ *Lausiac History* to distinguish sinners from holy fools.¹¹ Through the use of the term *salos*, holy foolery is taken “beyond the limits of apostolic ‘foolishness’ (*moria*) and into a different sphere.”¹² A *salos* meant specifically “un

¹ Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius’ Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 151.

² *Ibid.*, 155.

³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵ Krueger, “Tales of Holy Fools,” in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, edited by Richard Valantasis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 184.

⁶ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, Simon Franklin, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48.

⁷ Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 92.

⁸ G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 495.

⁹ Krueger, “Tales of Holy Fools,” 177.

¹⁰ Guy G. Stroumsa, “Madness and Divinization in Early Christian Monasticism,” *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 75

¹¹ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

ascète choisissant de se faire passer durablement pour fou ou simple d'esprit auprès des gens qu'il côtoie."¹³ The use of this term allowed for holy fools to be differentiated ever so slightly from sinners.¹⁴

A holy fool can only be studied through the works of those observing, since the fools wrote nothing of their experiences or motivations. The majority of what is known of these "Fools for Christ's sake" is garnered through the hagiographies from other religious figures who observed their madness.¹⁵ This presents a problem for late antique scholars, as they are unable to discern the holy fool's perspective from this outside observer who has his own motives and bias for crafting the *vita* itself.

There has been a lack of discussion on the holy fools, arguably due to the lack of written records by this liminal group. A new trend, however, is the use of late antique sources, such as Palladius' *Lausiac History*,¹⁶ the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,¹⁷ and the *Liber Graduum*,¹⁸ which have been interpreted and analyzed endlessly through scholarship in accordance with new perspectives and approaches to analyze and understand the fools in a new light. Also, these sources can be reanalyzed with the newly distinguishable term *salos* for fool and not sinner. Sources interpreted in a new light and through new perspectives have allowed for the study of holy fools to come to fruition.

The study of holy fools, therefore, is a relatively small area of research due to the lack of primary sources as well as a strange mix of inherent authorial responses therein that leave modern scholars without a clear direction or focus on the 'fools for Christ's sake.' The subject of analysis in late antique studies is scattered not only in history, but also psychology, sociology, and literary analysis. The objectives of these studies vary significantly. It is in part their liminal status that makes the holy fools of great interest to a variety of scholars. The tales of holy fools can be used to examine late antique

¹³ Or, "an ascetic who pretends to be permanently insane or simple by the people he surrounds himself with." Vincent Déroche, *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis* (Uppsala, Sweden: Acta University Uppsala, 1995), 155.

¹⁴ Svitlana Kobets, "Foolishness in Christ: East vs. West," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 34 (2000): 337-363.

¹⁵ Paul (1 Cor. 4:10) quoted in Krueger, "Tales of Holy Fools," 177-186.

¹⁶ Robert T. Meyer, trans. *Palladius: The Lausiac History* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1965).

¹⁷ Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1984).

¹⁸ Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F.G. Parmentier, trans. *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 2004).

to medieval literary themes, urban life, the role of sickness, the experience of alienation, and even the cultural role fools filled in a societal context.

WHO WERE THE FOOLS?

The most prominent fools are those who have an entire *vita* dedicated to them, such as Symeon of Emesa,¹⁹ St Andrew,²⁰ and St Philaretos,²¹ although the list of holy fools is not limited to these few. Other fools can be found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,²² the sixteenth *mēmra* of *The Book of Steps*,²³ as well as case thirty-four of Palladius' *Lausiac History*.²⁴ These six fools are the most frequently addressed in scholarship. While these fools' *vitas* can be regarded as insight into the fools themselves, they have also been applied to a variety of other things, such as discerning information on the perception of mental illness, authorial intent, and the cultural context in which they exist.

As determined by the term *salos*, many holy fools have come out of the cracks over the recent years as translations have changed and the sources have been reconsidered. This is the case with the *Lausiac History* by Palladius and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Palladius' *Lausiac History* is considered one of the most important primary source documents for late antique Egyptian monasticism.²⁵ *The Lausiac History* uses fools as the ideal form of monastic life and ascetic existence since it was written to inspire "the emulation and imitation of those who wish to succeed in the heavenly way of life and to take the journey which leads to the kingdom of heaven."²⁶ In this way, the fool is used as an example as an ideal form of monasticism.

The specific section that pertains exclusively to the study undertaken here is number thirty-four of Palladius' work, entitled "The Nun Who Feigned Madness." This nun did so by refusing to eat with others and undertaking menial tasks in the kitchen away from the other women of the monastery. When she is revealed to be a "spiritual mother" the

¹⁹ For a translation of his *vita*, please reference Derek Krueger, *Symeon*.

²⁰ Please reference Lennart Rydén, *The Life of St Andrew the Fool II* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 1995).

²¹ Please reference Lennart Rydén, *The Life of St Philaretos the Merciful Written by his Grandson Niketas: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, Notes, and Indices* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 2002).

²² Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 6, 27, 140.

²³ Kitchen and Parmentier, trans. *The Book of Steps*, 164-165.

²⁴ Meyer, *Palladius*, 96-98.

²⁵ Meyer, *Palladius*, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

author emphasizes her sanctity by imploring the reader to pray so that he “may be deemed worthy as she on the Day of Judgment.”²⁷ After the reveal of her hidden sanctity, the holy fool can no longer “bear the praise and honor of the sisters,” and leaves the monastery forever.²⁸ This is one of the many examples of the necessity of keeping sanctity hidden under the guise of madness. This anonymous nun is only mentioned in a short section of a larger work.

Similarly, in *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the author only mentions holy folly in two short instances in his larger work: Ammonas from Scetis and Moses the Robber. In the letters attributed to Ammonas, one letter expresses the idealness of holy foolery: “How much labor have I given myself in the desert to acquire this folly,” he exclaims after being accused of madness, “through you I have lost it today!”²⁹ Ammonas had to keep his sanity a secret under his folly for it to be successful, much like Palladius’ anonymous mad nun.

Moses the Robber, also included in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, leaves the reader with a similar story. To avoid meeting with a magistrate, Moses flees his monastic community and hides in a marsh. When the magistrate appears in the marsh, he asks the Abba to help him find Moses, even though he is unaware that he is talking to the man he seeks. The disguised Abba informs him that Moses is a fool, which ultimately stops the magistrate’s search. He quickly retires and is enlightened when he learns that he had confronted the Abba by the marsh.³⁰ This encounter stresses the edifying role of holy fools in society, even when the people who interact with them do not know that they are sane under their madness.

Still feigning madness like the anonymous nun and the Abba, St. Andrew, also called Andreas Salos, presents a more complete and dense view of madness. The *Life* of St. Andrew was written in the tenth century, although the author pretends to be a sixth century monk named Nikephorus writing on Andrew who was proposed to have lived in fifth century Constantinople. This dating issue has been the subject of much scholarship and will be discussed in the next section.³¹ Due to this large gap, Pseudo-Nikephorus tries to gain credibility with the reader by claiming to be an “intimate friend of

Andrew’s, pretending that he wrote [The *Life* of St Andrew] partly on the basis of his own friendship with the holy man.”³² A five-century gap obviously discredits Pseudo-Nikephorus’ reliability, but the vita was still considered to be an influential work.

Andrew is found doing many similar foolish things: he wanders into a brothel, and when the prostitutes sell his clothes, he “fetched a mat, cut a hole in the middle and put it around his neck, and in this outfit he was thrown out of the brothel,”³³ and, having ridiculed a rich man, “he kicks and runs like an ass.”³⁴ The so-called Nikephorus frequently calls him a fool, but only to remind the reader of the divine call that was the start of his madness. The *Life* is lengthy and filled with examples of Andrew battling to keep his sanctity a secret beneath his folly, much like the previous fools.

Another example of secret sanctity hidden under a guise of sheer madness is that of Symeon of Emesa. The *Life* of Symeon the Fool is “characterized by eccentric acts which violate moral precepts and etiquette and are often accompanied by comic efforts.”³⁵ Krueger states: “pretending to be insane, Symeon the monk walks about naked, eats enormous quantities of beans, and defecates in the streets.”³⁶ The acts recorded by Leontius of Neapolis provide a much more in-depth examination of Symeon the Fool and his ridiculous acts that defy any societal precept or societal norm, and that was the goal.

The two sources on Symeon, one by Leontius of Neapolis and the other by Evagrius Scholasticus, mention similar deeds but use them in very different ways to reflect their own desires. For example, writing at the end of the sixth century in Antioch, Evagrius was concerned with early church politics. He wrote a much tamer version of Symeon’s deeds, focusing on his breaking of gender norms and his “folly as a virtue.”³⁷ Leontius of Neapolis, who was writing in the mid-seventh century, focuses on the religious uniformity he wishes to see in his own bishopric of Cyprus. Leontius does this by allowing for the narrative-based Symeon to convert the ‘unconvertible’ people of Emesa, since Leontius himself has had trouble converting the Jewish and

²⁷ Palladius, 98.

²⁸ Ibid., 98.

²⁹ Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 27.

³⁰ Ibid., 140.

³¹ Lennart Rydén, “The Date of The ‘Life of Andreas Salos,’” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 32 (1978): 129-155.

³² Rydén, *Life of St Andrew I*, 28.

³³ Rydén, *Life of St Andrew II*, 35.

³⁴ Rydén, *Life of St Andrew I*, 25.

³⁵ Alexander Y. Syrkin, “On the Behavior of the ‘Fool for Christ’s Sake,’” *History of Religions* 22.2 (1982): 150.

³⁶ Krueger, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, 1.

³⁷ Krueger, “Tales of Holy Fools,” 184.

Monophysite populations of his own diocese.³⁸ Allowing the literary Symeon to convert people would be reflecting Leontius' own unattainable desire. These two different approaches to the telling of Symeon's tale demonstrate the varying cultural contexts and purposes concerning the author rather than the truth behind Symeon's acts.

St Philaretos is a very different of fool when compared to Symeon and Andrew. The *Life* of St Philaretos the Merciful, a Byzantine hagiography, is focused on his kind and charitable acts rather than bizarre and unnerving ones. He is recorded as a fool mainly due to his unconventional views on property and the poor. He does not defecate in the street or carry around any dead dogs. Instead, he shares a royal feast with the poor while in Constantinople,³⁹ and gives away both his calf and his cow so as not to separate the two.⁴⁰ Unlike Symeon's and Andrew's *vitas*, Philaretos' tale is specifically a rural hagiography, popular in the tenth century.⁴¹ He is also set apart due to the fact that he is happy but still manages to prove his moral superiority.⁴² The *vita* also shies away from the political turbulence of the iconoclast controversy of the ninth century and focus on the cultural and social shifts and he still parallels Philaretos to the folklore hero popular in his time period.⁴³ While Philaretos was a very different kind of fool, he still functioned the same way as Symeon and Andrew—acting against societal norms and causing a stir.

Finally, the *Liber Graduum* is a Syriac manual for reaching Perfection and leading the Perfect life. The sixteenth *mēmra*, or lesson, presents the “idea of the Perfect life, the model of the holy fool is given.”⁴⁴ The anonymous author starts by describing “a crazy person” who “treats himself with contempt and does not own a house or a wife and any property, not even extra garments besides clothes, nor food apart from a day to day supply.”⁴⁵ This fool has been inspired by the “madness of the apostles.”⁴⁶ The author continues to advise the reader to

³⁸ Krueger, *Life of Symeon*, 122.

³⁹ Rydén, *Life of St Philaretos*, 93, 95, 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 75, 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁴² Alexander Kazhdan and Lee F. Sherry, “The Tale of a Happy Fool: the *Vita* of St. Philaretos the Merciful,” *Byzantium; revue internationale des études Byzantines* 66 (1996): 359.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁴⁴ Kitchen and Parmentier, trans. *The Book of Steps*, xxxiv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

“become a fool” since they are the only ones who have “overthrown Satan.”⁴⁷ In this lesson, the fools alone have achieved the ideal level of Perfection, as they are the ones who have overthrown temptations and the devil to become holier than the rest. Much like in the *Lausiac History* and *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the holy fool is an example meant to be emulated by the rest of society.

The sources on holy folly tend to follow three themes: the need to keep sanctity a secret; the reflection of the author in the texts; and acting against the norms of society as a way to practice asceticism. For the most part, the scholarship tends to focus on three themes as well, though it is not limited to such. There is also an inquiry into the psychological reasons why they were considered mad, why they took up folly in the first place, and how they fit into the culture around them. The next section will examine the progression of the scholarship as fools are explored more thoroughly. Since there is no unified study of holy fools in the academic community, the research is scattered over multiple fields and various methodologies, making an intriguingly interesting and multi-faceted portrait of the late antique ‘fool for Christ's sake.’

PART I: THE FOCUS ON THE FOOL

Edward Gibbon's 1788 volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was one of the first works that sparked a discussion of Christianity in relation to the Roman Empire during the time that would later be coined ‘late antiquity.’⁴⁸ The reason this foundational narrative sparked this discussion, however, was because Gibbon blamed Christian monasticism and asceticism for the fall of the Roman Empire.⁴⁹ This is a point of contention, however, and Gibbon serves as an antagonist for late antique scholars who strive to find something of merit in Gibbon's bleak perception of the late antique past. In his eyes, “the splendid days of Augustus and Trajan were eclipsed by a cloud of ignorance” that was Christianity.⁵⁰ Gibbon established the idea that all ascetics were insane; he did not distinguish between holy fools, desert fathers, or cloistered monks—they were all mad. This idea was countered by the later studies of the *saloi*, but this study was still centuries off.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁸ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

⁴⁹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

The 'fall' of the empire was revised by Peter Brown in 1971, and he thus noted that the empire transformed and changed with the addition of Christianity.⁵¹ It did not fall it just adapted and evolved into a period known as late antiquity. While Brown's seminal 1971 article, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" did not address the holy fools specifically, he addresses the marginality of the holy man in general: "he belonged to a world that was not so much antithetical to village life as marginal."⁵² Brown's analysis opened up the study of these liminal figures for scholars to utilize the framework of the late antique holy man to distinguish and discover the holy fool in the same context as well.

Few works on the holy fool appear before Brown's "Rise and Function of the Holy Man" in 1971. Lennart Rydén was the first to address this new type of holy man. He, along with André-Jean Festugière, wrote a book entitled *Léontios Néapolis: Vie de Syméon le Fou; (et) Vie de Jean de Chypre*, in which the focus is not entirely on Symeon the Fool or John the Almsgiver; Rydén and Festugière focus mainly on the author, Leontius of Neapolis and how he ties into the story of the vita.⁵³ His next article, "The Date of *Life of Andreas Salos*," he aims to determine just what the title suggests: the date that St Andrew the Fool's vita was composed.⁵⁴ This narrow and introductory piece is cited in Krueger's work on Symeon in 1996, but other than that, Rydén's early and pointed response to Brown did not spark much of a reaction until much later.

John Saward, however, was one of the first to write an extensive work on holy folly after Brown's initial article nine years prior. Since it was one of the first works to gain attention, he covered a vast array of fools to act as an introduction to this blossoming topic. The breadth of fools included:

The wild men of Byzantium, Russia, and Ireland, whose apparently outrageous and provocative behaviour masks a deeper sanctity; the 'merry men' of the Middle Ages, God's jongleurs, who

proclaim the 'Gospel of Good Humour'; and, finally those who have gone the deeper and more perilous way of being written off by the world as mad and contemptible.⁵⁵

He focuses on the Greeks, and the Orthodox East, but spends a disproportionate amount of time discussing the folly of seventeenth-century France, which is obviously beyond the scope of the late antique paper.

Saward seeks to write an introductory text, not an argumentative piece. His objective was to demonstrate that all saints do not have to fit in the category of mad or sane, but it was still indeed a phenomenon that persisted from the Greeks through the Orthodox East and to modern day Ireland.⁵⁶ He writes a narrative of the different forms of folly and how it existed within the various locations. For him, however, the tradition of holy foolery is rooted in late antiquity; he frequently refers back to the late antique examples as he explains the folly of eleventh and fifteenth century hermits.⁵⁷ He does not, however, go so far as to compare these different forms of folly. For this reason, his text is introductory and meant to incorporate the scattered interest of the fools into one text. He is not in conversation with many other scholars only because he is one of the first to write exclusively on the fools.

He does cite briefly Peter Brown's "Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" since this appears to be his spark for completing this study. Unfortunately, he only uses Brown's article to add to his discussion on of the Syrian desert as the "birthplace of the wild wanderers, 'grazers,' and pilgrim-fools of later hagiography."⁵⁸ For the sections on the Greeks and the East, he focuses mainly on biblical sources, such as Paul and Corinthians, from which the term 'Fools for Christ's sake' originated, and un-translated hagiographies on St Antony, St Andrew, and Symeon Stylite, a few of which were compiled by Lennart Rydén. Saward's work may not be the most prevalent to the study of holy fools in late antiquity, but it is mentioned or briefly cited in many other sources. For example, Saward's work was influential in Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar's definition of holy fools, as well as Krueger's *Symeon* and "Tales of Holy Fools," and Ivanov's *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*.

⁵⁵ Saward, *Perfect Fools*, ix.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁵¹ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.

⁵² Brown, "The Rise and Function," 83-84.

⁵³ André-Jean Festugière and Lennart Rydén, eds. and trans., *Léontios Néapolis: Vie de Syméon le Fou, et Vie de Jean de Chypre* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1974).

⁵⁴ Lennart Rydén, "The Date of the 'Life of Andreas Salos,'" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 32 (1978): 129-155.

Quick to answer the call established by Saward was Alexander Syrkin and Cyril Mango. Syrkin's article, "On the Behavior of the 'Fool for Christ's Sake,'" uses the familiar Symeon of Emesa as an introduction to the unexpected behavior of the fools.⁵⁹ While Syrkin's work functions mainly as an introductory text, it is still part of the progression and is cited by almost every other study cited within this paper. Cyril Mango's article, "The Life of St. Andrew the Fool Reconsidered," is also cited in most of the studies presented here.⁶⁰ Mango focuses solely on the vita of St Andrew and the problems with the text, such as missing motivations of the author.⁶¹ Both of these articles, however brief, add to the study of holy fools to make it a more pointed and progressive study.

The next prominent work on the holy fools was done by Sergey Ivanov. He wrote two very important pieces that helped to establish a foundation to the study of holy fools in both the Byzantine Empire and the medieval Russian Orthodox tradition. His first article, "From 'Secret Servants of God' to 'Fools for Christ's Sake' in Byzantine Hagiography," was published in 1993 in a Swedish edited collection of articles presented at a conference.⁶² This article served as an introduction to his 1994 work *Vizantiiskoe iuridstvo*, which was edited for the English-speaking world as *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* in 2006.⁶³ While the initial article was deemed "limited in scope," it proved to be a "provocative contribution to an overworked and under-comprehended theme."⁶⁴ Therefore, this introductory article was still useful in understanding the holy fool in other works and studies, and served as a springboard for Ivanov's later work.

Much like the previous scholarship, Ivanov's *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* focuses not only

⁵⁹ Alexander Syrkin, "On the Behavior of the 'Fool for Christ's Sake,'" *History of Religions* 22.2 (1982): 150-171.

⁶⁰ Cyril Mango, "The Life of St. Andrew the Fool Reconsidered," *Rivista di studi bizantini e slavi* 2 (1982): 297-313.

⁶¹ "And herein lies the singularity of VAS—not in its being a fiction...nor its reliance on an invented eyewitness...but in the absence of any apparent motive for composition of so lengthy and elaborate a biography." Mango, "Andrew the Fool Reconsidered," 297.

⁶² Sergey Ivanov, "From 'Secret Servants of God' to 'Fools for Christ's Sake' in Byzantine Hagiography," in *The Holy Fool in Byzantium and Russia*, edited by Inge Lunde (Bergen, Norway: University of Bergen, 1993).

⁶³ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, Simon Franklin, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶⁴ Simon Franklin, review of *The Holy Fool in Byzantium and Russia*, edited by Inge Lunde, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 75.3 (July 1997): 534.

on the late antique Byzantine fools, such as Andrew, Symeon, and the nun who feigned madness in the *Lausiac History*, but also on the development of foolery into the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Ivanov's purpose in composing this study, however, is not to explore the roots or connections between Eastern and Western folly; he wishes to explore "the immediate origins, the emergence, and the life-span, of a specific cultural phenomenon which could only arise in particular historical circumstances."⁶⁵ Ivanov confesses later in his introduction that his cultural approach to the fools prompts the question of why society would allow insanity to be divine.⁶⁶ By working from a cultural standpoint, Ivanov can track holy foolery from its roots in fifth century Egypt, through its development in Byzantium to the fourteenth century, and can even discuss the medieval and modern development of folly in the Russian Eastern Orthodox tradition to find the "artifices of the worldly structures which serve as guarantors of the divine order" that, in a specific cultural context, represent different opposing structures.⁶⁷ In this way, Ivanov uses the primary sources to explain the culture so in need of a fool.

Since he was working in 1994, he is lacking many recent studies, such as those by Krueger, and several critical editions created by Rydén. He is also quite explicit about the approaches he *does not* use, such as modern psychiatry and typological comparisons.⁶⁸ Ivanov's main purpose in writing *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* was to discern the fool's place within the cultural landscape of late antiquity to medieval Russia. He writes in a narrative manner, not completely eschewing theoretical approaches, but favoring the descriptive approach over the overly analytical.

Ivanov cites the work of many prominent scholars, such as Peter Brown's "Rise and Function of the Holy Man," Vincent Déroche's study of Leontius of Neapolis, Kazhdan and Sherry's article "Tale of the Happy Fool" as well as Mango's "The Life of St Andrew Reconsidered" and Syrkin's "Fools for Christ's Sake," as well as the many articles, though not Rydén's translations. The cultural approach Ivanov takes obviously adds to the various cultural understandings and roles already established by these other scholars. His work is cited in almost all those after him. Because of this large amount of

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

conversation between Ivanov and other scholars, he is truly an integral part of the growing study of holy foolery.

The next scholar to focus on one fool is Lennart Rydén, a Swedish historian whose contribution to the field is of holy fools is truly incalculable. Having written numerous articles, creating critical editions of the previously ignored foolish hagiographies, and contributing much more, Rydén cannot be overlooked in a discussion on holy fools.

After the publication of *Syméon le Fou* and “The Date of ‘The Life of Andreas Salos’” a few years later, Rydén moved on to more substantial work. In the mid-1990s, he published the critical edition of the vita of St Andrew the Fool. It was followed by a critical edition of St Philaretos in 2002. Rydén’s extensive work on both the *Life* of St Andrew the Fool and St Philaretos the Merciful is impressive scholarship.⁶⁹ He uses sources from a multitude of languages and disciplines, and even incorporates the Greek text with the English translation for those readers who would prefer a Greek vita to the English. Included in these thick volumes are summaries of the work itself, as well as discussions of the grammar and translation of the text. It is written for a very scholarly audience and the fact that it was translated to English helps broaden the receptors of this work.

He is not interested in finding cultural clues or identifying specific authorial intent. Rydén is focused on the texts and providing introductions and information on the text itself, as seen through his numerous critical editions. Rydén’s work is extensive. He is cited by almost every other scholar mentioned in this paper. His work has been truly influential. With critical editions, Rydén has expanded the study of holy fools by making the primary texts available to the English-speaking and reading world. His work has been instrumental in bringing the study of the holy fool to a wider audience for graduates and undergraduates alike. Most of his translations are the most extensive work done on the subjects, and are considered the critical editions of these *vitae*, including the original text, a translation, and commentary on the subject.

Derek Krueger, a religious studies scholar from University of North Carolina, is one of the last scholars to focus on a particular fool without shifting drastically. With his dissertation-turned first work,

Symeon the Holy Fool; Leontius’ Life and the Late Antique City, Krueger unknowingly acted as a transition between the focused works on fools and the diverting works focused on a variety of topics, but using fools in explanatory circumstances.⁷⁰ Because Krueger examined Leontius’ work in such a new way, he opened the door for other hagiographies to be examined in other ways as well.

Krueger’s work functions as a transition because of the new approach he took to his source. By using literary theory, Krueger sought to differentiate between the themes and *topoi* of hagiography regarding folly; specifically, he wanted to show that Symeon did not act as an archetype for the Eastern Orthodox fool.⁷¹ While this is Krueger’s main purpose in writing *Symeon*, he ultimately adds much more the study of holy fools through literary analysis, connecting the work with its contemporaries, and, like Rydén, through translating the work itself.

Literary analysis plays an important role in Krueger’s analysis of Leontius’ *Life* of Symeon. He seeks to explain Leontius’ intentions and bias, as well as the audience and how they would have received the work as a whole. In this way, the text is reflective of the culture in which it was written. Krueger states, “Leontius’s work not only reflects the Christian environment in which it was composed, it remains a witness to the survival of Greco-Roman literary and intellectual culture into the seventh century.”⁷² Unlike Ivanov, who took the information within the pages of hagiographies as facts to infer the late antique culture, Krueger looks at authorial intent along with how and in what ways the culture around the work would react. He still provides a critical reading of the text, but through the lens of literary theory and authorial intent. As part of the literary turn in historiography, Krueger focuses on the literary and intellectual culture specifically, not just on Ivanov’s comparative claims to the varying cultures.

Krueger also does an excellent job comparing Leontius’ *Life* to other works of the time. He does not compare merely on the content that exists within the different hagiographies, but the literary themes and *topoi* that are links between the works. He does so as to place *Symeon* in a larger context of holy folly themed hagiography and as part of the conversation on hagiographical themes that are

⁶⁹ Please refer to Rydén, *The Life of St Andrew the Fool*, and Rydén, *The Life of St Philaretos*.

⁷⁰ Krueger, *Life of Symeon the Fool*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

prevalent in the late antique world. For example, chapter four, “Holy Fools and Secret Saints,” is dedicated to these literary elements that create intersections between Symeon’s vita and such works as the *Lausiac History* of Palladius, the *Life of Daniel of Skete*, and Theodoret’s *Religious History*, all of which contain at least one mention of a holy fool.⁷³ Krueger also identifies the key word of *salos* that is used particularly to differentiate holy fools from sinners; by doing so, he is able to draw attention to other works which had previously ignored sections on holy foolery, such as the aforementioned *Lausiac History* and *Life of Daniel of Skete* again, as well as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.⁷⁴ He also spends a significant part of the chapter describing “generic literary type” themes, and how these themes in Symeon’s vita relate to the overall literary view of the work.⁷⁵

Krueger, as part of the relatively new movement of the literary turn in late antique studies, takes a large amount of time and space to explain this literary approach, I believe in part to legitimize the progressive thesis of the book itself. As a religious studies scholar, Krueger adds to the conversation not as a historian, but as an expert in religious studies with a subsequent religious mindset and context. Although he looks at the vita in a literary sense, Krueger adds a new way to analyze primary sources to the historians’, and other types of scholars’, tool belts. Since Krueger’s methodology and approach is somewhat new and relatively untrusted, the amount of supplementary explanation is of great help to the reader.

Along with this unique approach, Krueger also included the first English translation of Leontius’ *Life of Symeon of Emesa*.⁷⁶ This was quite helpful, as it both provided evidence to support his literary themed thesis as well as brought this *Life* to the English study of holy fools. His thesis was risky, however, due to the fact that it disagreed with most of the previous scholarship on the vita. Even though Krueger’s work provided a new lens through which to regard the holy fool himself, something is to be said for providing a translation. Translations, especially to English in a critical edition (which I

⁷³ Krueger, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, 57-62. For the *Lausiac History*, please see Meyer, *Palladius*. For sections of *The Life of Daniel of Skete*, please refer to Krueger, “Tales of Holy Fools,” 182-184.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* For the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, please refer to Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

⁷⁵ Krueger, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, 70-71.

⁷⁶ For Leontius of Neapolis’s *Life of Symeon the Fool*, please see the appendix of Krueger, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, 131-171.

am tempted to label Krueger’s *Symeon the Holy Fool*), bring the perhaps previously ignored source into Western scholarship and greatly broadens the field. In the case of the holy fool, a widening of the field would not be a bad thing.

Through the use of literary theory and literary turn methodology, Krueger opened the door for new approaches and disciplines to utilize the fools in distinct and different ways. Although the study of holy fools started with Saward and Ivanov trying to legitimize it through comparisons and over arching scopes, the focused study on fools is concluded by Krueger, who uses them in a very different way and allows for future scholars, such as Guy Stroumsa, Andrew Crislip, and Antigone Samellas, to examine fools in studies that diverge from history.

PART II: DIVERGENCE FROM THE FOOLS

Although Krueger was the first to act upon this new methodology, it did not happen over night. The idea of diverting to use the fools for examples of other occurrences in late antiquity had to be prompted by a call to do so. Introductory articles by Krueger and Rydén do just that.

Krueger has been quite prolific in recent years, although he has deviated from his initial focus on the holy fool. One introductory work, a short journal article featured in Richard Valantasis’ edited collection *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, was featured along such reputable scholarship such as James Goehring, Teresa M. Shaw, David Frankfurter, and Virginia Burrus.⁷⁷ In his article, “Tales of Holy Fools,” Krueger provides several specific examples of holy fools, all previously mentioned here: the *Lausiac History*, *Life of Daniel of Skete*, and Evagrius Scholasticus’ *Ecclesiastical History*. The article functions as an introduction, much like Rydén’s “Holy Fool,” with hopes of pulling in curious scholars to expand this small topic of study. The literary approach Krueger takes, as well as the translations he provides, invites scholars to approach folly in a different way. Rydén does something similar. Much like Krueger’s “Tales of Holy Fools,” Rydén’s article, “The Holy Fool” is also featured in a larger anthology and serves as an introduction.⁷⁸ He provides a few examples of fools and then diverts to call for more work to be done. And, in this

⁷⁷ Krueger, “Tales of Holy Fools,” 179-186.

⁷⁸ Lennart Rydén, “The Holy Fool,” *The Byzantine Saint*, Sergei Hackel, ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 106-113.

progressive time of historical study, he is taken up in unexpected ways.

Guy Stroumsa approaches holy foolery as a way of self-transformation in the late antique era in his article “Madness and Divinization in Early Christian Monasticism.”⁷⁹ This is an interesting jump to take as it is more metaphorical and philosophical than any of the inquiries on language or culture that had been encountered before. Stroumsa still takes a very scholarly approach to this study, which was published in 2002. He is in conversation with Krueger, Brown, Déroche, Rydén, and Syrkin, as well as citing the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the *Bible*, and the *Lausiac History*. The purpose of his focus on the holy fool is to examine how the “beastly” *salos* is transformed into an angel of the divine world through their folly.⁸⁰ Stroumsa finds an example of this in the Life of Symeon by both Evagrius and Leontius: Symeon is described by both as being so far mad that he had no body.⁸¹ To Stroumsa, this exemplifies the transformative nature of the divine. It is this transformation that classifies the *salos* as liminal: they are “crossing the boundary between human and divine nature.”⁸² In this way, he adds to the argument by using the liminal qualities of the fools as a way to explore the self in late antiquity.

The study of the self is a relatively new direction in history. There is not very much done on the subject, and therefore this article was published as part of a larger edited collection, which was edited by Stroumsa. It covers a vast array of history, not just late antiquity. Due to this, and the fact that “Madness and Divinization” is cited in only a few other places, it is not the most influential article that exists. Stroumsa’s article, however, is one of the select few that do exist on the subject of holy fools in late antiquity. For that reason, it is included in this overview.

Andrew Crislip engages in the conversation of holy fools in his work *From Monastery to Hospital: Christian Monasticism and the Transformation of Health Care in Late Antiquity* by creating a context for those perceived as sick to procure medical care.⁸³

⁷⁹ Guy G. Stroumsa, “Madness and Divinization in Early Christian Monasticism,” *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73-88.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸³ Andrew Crislip, *From Monastery to Hospital: Christian Monasticism and the Transformation of Health Care in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

Although he is looking at the growth of medical facilities and care as part of the growing monastic movement, Crislip still engages with many other scholars: Brown, Cameron, Patlagean, Foucault and Rouselle. He also utilizes an impressive amount of primary sources, including the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, and the work of Eusebius, and John Chrysostom. Crislip’s work is relevant to the study of holy fools since it creates a context for the sick in the late antique world. Sickness could be perceived as a part of ascetic practice in many cases.⁸⁴ In the fools’ case, their perceived illness could be interpreted as mental illness. For example, in Palladius’ *Lausiac History*, the nun who feigned madness was referred to as the “afflicted one” by her sisters.⁸⁵ Crislip’s work helps to put holy fools in the cultural category of the ‘afflicted’ and details their place in society and monastic communities.

In a later article, “I Have Chosen Sickness: The Controversial Function of Sickness in Early Christian Ascetic Practice,” Crislip explores how sickness functions in an exclusively monastic context, which is a bit closer to the scope of this paper.⁸⁶ Specifically, he examines the controversial understanding of sickness as a form of asceticism, as well as how much responsibility a monastic had, therefore, to care for his or her body if sickness and self mortification could be considered a form of asceticism. Crislip quotes Evagrius of Pontus to explain this contradiction: “The monk should always live as if he were to die on the morrow, but at the same time...he should treat his body as if he were to live on with it for many years to come.”⁸⁷ With that in mind, where exactly did holy foolery fall? Was it an ascetic practice or an illness? While Crislip still does not address the holy fool in his work, the implications and comparisons can be made to the work of other scholars on the subject. Crislip addresses the work of other scholars, such as Brown, Brakke, Foucault, and uses Soranus, Galen, and the *Apophthegmata Patrum* as primary sources. Although this is just an article without much connection to holy fools, the context created is ideal for future scholars’ expansion on the subject.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁵ Meyer, *Palladius*, 98.

⁸⁶ Andrew Crislip, “I Have Chosen Sickness: The Controversial Function of Sickness in Early Christian Ascetic Practice,” *Asceticism and Its Critic: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, Oliver Freiberger, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179-209.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

Antigone Samellas expands on the marginality of the fools in her work *Alienation: The Experience of the Eastern Mediterranean*, which focuses on the topic of alienation in the late antique world.⁸⁸ Stemming from her definition of alienation being “the aftermath of creative and destructive aspects of social change,”⁸⁹ she establishes the Christians as the first aliens in a Roman world. She takes an unexpected turn stating that her goal is to uncover Christian intolerance and alienation through heresy and the destruction of cults.⁹⁰ Much like Gibbon, though she does not cite him in her work, Samellas is using Christianity to explain the fall of the established norm. While she examines this turn in late antiquity, she neglects to cite the expected late antique scholars, such as Brown, Crislip, and Krueger.

Although Samellas is supposedly concentrating her study of alienation to the Eastern Mediterranean between the years 50-600 AD, she still pulls modern examples to further exemplify her point. For example, Samellas references Chateaubriand and the French Revolution, Karl Marx, a 1940s poet, Edmund Burke, and even Huxley’s *A Brave New World*. While this is helpful for creating a contemporary understanding of alienation, it adds nothing to her actual argument and distracts from the true focus of her work. She also incorporates a variety of disciplines into her work, such as psychology, philosophy, Marxism, and sociology, making it difficult to follow. While this is exemplary of the cultural turn and modern approaches to the study of history, it does not function in a way appropriate for what she seeks to examine.

It would make ideological sense to incorporate fools directly into her study: part of alienation was going against authority and disrupting the societal norm, which is the same objective as the fool.⁹¹ But her examination on holy folly is quite miniscule; Samellas discusses Andrew the Fool for a page in relation to the marginalization he encountered.⁹² There is no discussion of *saloi*, or a differentiation between a fool and a sinner. It could be argued that she missed a great opportunity to expand on the topic of fools since their hagiographies would have fit perfectly into her argument.

⁸⁸ Antigone Samellas, *Alienation: The Experience of the Eastern Mediterranean (50-600 AD)* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lange AG, International Academic Publishers, 2010).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 158.

Stroumsa, Crislip, and Samellas all took the topic of fools, and the themes surrounding them, and found a new way to look at their role in late antique history. Be it self-transformation, hospitals, or alienation, these scholars built off of the established frameworks of the previous works, some more poignantly than others, and created a new path for holy fools in scholarship. This divergence added new perspectives, methodologies, and approaches to the study of holy fools, which has helped expand the topic in general.

PART III: THE ONGOING DISCUSSION

The study of holy fools, therefore, is a relatively small area of research due to the lack of primary sources as well as a strange mix of inherent authorial responses therein that leave modern scholars without a clear direction or focus on the ‘fools for Christ’s sake.’ The subject of analysis in late antique studies is scattered not only in history, but also psychology, sociology, and literary analysis. The objectives of these studies are quite varied. It is in part their liminal status that makes the holy fools of great interest to a variety of scholars. The tales of holy fools can be used to examine late antique to medieval literary themes, urban life, the role of sickness, the experience of alienation, and even the cultural role fools filled in a societal context.

The study of holy fools is not very unified. Scholars approach them in a variety of different ways with many different methodologies, as exemplified with the above discussion. This variety does not mean that the fools are all separate entities floating around the academic world. These *saloi* are unified with themes of liminality, similar exploits, and the objective of rebelling against the established societal norm. As far as the hagiographies and authors go, their own experiences and views are reflected in the explanation of the fools’ experience. The scholars writing on both the fools and the authors try to explain the world around them, be it the reason they feigned madness or what type of culture they inhabited that would prompt such a reaction.

The study of holy fools acts as a chain reaction: the scholars are revising and revisiting previous works, and building off the ideas established by other scholars such as Gibbon, Brown, and Saward. In that sense, the study is rather succinct. The call for more academic scholarship is what keeps expanding the topic of fools, as seen by the responses of Kazhdan, Sherry, and even

Samellas. With new approaches and methodologies being used, the study of fools keeps expanding to incorporate the aspect of self-transformation and alienation, as well as cultural and literary turn methodologies and different approaches such as psychology and Marxism.

It is this continuous change that creates fluidity and progress within the study of holy folly. The use of this liminal group can be used to support the claims of many unexplored topics in late antiquity; when this occurs, the history of holy fools evolves and changes as well. The focus is still on holy fools, but the focus is shifting from what the holy fools reveal about their own experiences to what their experiences and vitae can tell about a variety of other things as well.

CONCLUSION

The study of the holy fool is not a succinct one. Approaches and methodologies differ significantly depending on which scholar is conducting the research. No matter what approach or lens the primary sources were viewed through, one overall theme stays the same: “madness... is a common charge against those who tell the disturbing truth...the guardian of truth is invariably dismissed as a raving lunatic.”⁹³ The holy fool functioned in a marginal place in society; they were on the sidelines—insane, but so much so that they must be more divine and ascetic than those who had not yet reached their level of asceticism.

⁹³ Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 1.

Although the fools keep their sanctity a secret to mock the confines of developing monasticism in the late antique period, they function as an example for future readers of their hagiographies.⁹⁴

The scholarship on holy fools is so broad and variant due to the fact that the holy fools themselves had no unified experience. They all acted foolish in ways that suited their asceticism and repelled their specific cultural and societal norms, or those of the hagiographers. The various approaches and methodologies applied allow for this subject to be a fascinating and ever changing one, which will hopefully continue to intrigue future scholars.

Even with the intriguing versatility of these figures, the same few continue to reappear. Although not all of these ‘fools for Christ’s sake’ gave feasts for the poor or consorted with prostitutes, they still mocked the world in a way that gives the modern reader something to think about. As Krueger explains, “the fool’s eventual exposure gives the other characters in the story an opportunity do instruction. The text’s audience, also, is invited to learn...holiness may be among us, perhaps where we least expect it.”⁹⁵ Holy fools are used in a variety of ways, due to variety in objective, methodology, perspective, and lack of unity of source material, which creates an understandable and unfortunate lack in scholarship. This field of study is continuously reexamined and expanding, creating a fluid environment with the fool at the center to hold it together.

⁹⁴ Kitchen and Parmentier, trans. *The Book of Steps*.

⁹⁵ Krueger, “Tales of Holy Fools,” 178.

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