Methodius of Constantinople is undoubtedly one of the most colourful figures in Byzantine history. During the Second Iconoclasm, he was one of the leaders of the Iconophile party and as a consequence suffered exile, imprisonment and torture. However, after the death of Emperor Theophilus he was fully rehabilitated, became patriarch and eventually presided over the Synod that ended the controversies about the worship of images of Christ and the saints.1 Like other members of the Constantinopolitan elite Methodius was also a prolific author. Apart from several hymns he wrote three lives devoted to his contemporaries Theophanes of Agros, Euthymius of Sardes and Theodore of Stoudios,2 and three encomia about the Late Antique saints Nicholas of Myra, Denys of Paris and Agatha of Catania.3 At first sight these texts do not seem to differ substantially from other hagiographical writings of the time: Methodius’ biographies of contemporary saints mostly conform to the then popular template of a vita followed by a


passio, and his *metaphraseis* are surprisingly faithful to the texts of their models. However, a closer look reveals that Methodius is not a simple story-teller because he inserts into his texts lengthy excursus about contemporary debates: in the *Life* of Theophanes he attempts to prove that dead saints can intercede with God,⁴ in the *Life* of Euthymius he defends the posthumous activity of saints in general and sets out his ideas about the divine image in the human being,⁵ and in his *Encomium* of Agatha he addresses the old question whether there is a hierarchy of the saved in heaven and furthermore develops a sophisticated argument for the real presence of saints in dreams and visions.⁶

In a recent article about Methodius’ *Encomium* of Agatha I have made the case that even the biographical sections of his texts are not as straightforward as they might first appear because he encodes into them his views about God, the world and the human being.⁷ This becomes possible because he isolates from the narratives data that he considers relevant and then integrates them through skilful manipulation into an overarching interpretative framework. This framework is not based on causal relations but rather on degrees of similarity, and coherence is achieved through the layering of similar phenomena, which opens up to the reader a wide field of associations. Once one has learnt to read the texts in the manner intended by Methodius, one can discern two main themes: firstly, the divine acts on human beings not only at the level of the soul but necessarily also at the level of the body; and secondly, human beings cannot simply suppress their sexual urges and other emotions but must redirect them towards the divine.⁸ These themes are closely related: the relations with the divine, which are first established at the level of the soul, are invariably eventually made manifest at the level of the body and its organs, which have until then remained untouched by interactions with other human beings. For example, Agatha does not breastfeed an ordinary child, but she imagines herself breastfeeding the infant Christ, and this inner interaction becomes manifest in the particular configuration of her martyrdom: Methodius explains the leaping of the amputated breasts away from

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⁷ For the following see D. Krausmüller, Exegeting the *Passio* of St Agatha: Patriarch Methodios († 847) on Sexual Differentiation and the Perfect ‘Man’. *BMGS* 33 (2009) 1-16.
the saint’s body as a movement towards the mouth of Christ, thus finally giving a positive role to this body part and its function. However, each interpretation of a phenomenon is only one of several possibilities, a point that can again be illustrated with Agatha’s martyrdom, which Methodius presents not only as an act of breastfeeding but also as an impregnation with Christ. In order to understand how the mutilation of a breast can be interpreted as an impregnation we need to consider one further detail in the narrative, namely that Agatha’s breasts are later miraculously restored. Methodius regards the swelling of the breasts as a displaced pregnancy because this process is similar to the swelling of a womb. When one seeks to discover Methodius’ agenda it is often necessary to take together information found in different parts of the text. In such cases repeated use of clusters of significant words and phrases help the reader to identify the connections. For example, the same imagery is used to describe the growth of Christ within Agatha in the account of her martyrdom and the regrowing of her breasts in the later narrative of the miracle.

In this article I will turn my attention to another of Methodius’ writings, the Life of Theophanes, abbot of the Bithynian monastery of Agros. This text is an important source for students of Byzantine history, society and religion, since it sheds light on the norms and values of aristocratic circles in eighth-century Constantinople, the rise of coenobitic monasticism after the end of the First Iconoclasm, and imperial policy during the Second Iconoclasm. However, as I hope to show in the following discussion, it also served Methodius as another vehicle for his speculation. In order to make my case I will analyse one section of the text, which gives an account of the saint’s wedding, his decision not to consummate the marriage, and the miraculous appearance of a sweet smell in his bedchamber. In the course of my argument I will make the following points. The sweet smell that the couple perceive is presented as a manifestation of Christ as ‘essential’ ointment, which is interpreted as a re-enactment of the incarnation. This configuration is then related back to the previous behaviour of Theophanes and his wife Megalou: Methodius claims that Theophanes did not make an impression on Megalou’s nose by applying sweet-smelling ointment to his cheeks, thus leaving her free to seek Christ as sweet-smelling ointment in her imagina-

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tion, and that Christ rewarded her by manifesting himself as a sweet smell to her nose. However, this smell does not appear out of nowhere but issues forth from Theophanes’ body and is in fact his sweat, which serves as the material substrate for the manifestation of the divine as ‘essential’ ointment. In a second step I will propose an alternative interpretation of this conceptual framework: Theophanes refuses to have sexual intercourse with Megalou, which leaves her free to seek such intercourse with Christ in her imagination, and this inner relationship is made manifest at the level of the body when Christ manifests himself in Theophanes’ ejaculate. Not all of these elements are made explicit in the episode. In the following discussion I will argue that they nevertheless need to be added because Methodius has developed a coherent conceptual framework, which he applies consistently in his writings. In order to make my case I will not only compare the account of the ointment miracle with other sections of the text, which are linked to the miracle story through use of the same words and phrases, but also have recourse to parallels in the *Encomium* of Agatha where Methodius tends to be more explicit. Having presented my analysis of the text I will conclude with an examination of the reasons that may have prompted Methodius to deviate so radically from the traditional views on chastity.

The episode in the *Life* of Theophanes, which I have selected for in-depth analysis, is part of the narrative of the saint’s adolescent years. According to Methodius the young Theophanes engaged in activities such as hunting and wrestling, which were typical pursuits of members of the Byzantine elite, but was then persuaded by one of his servants that the life-style of a monk was vastly superior. However, any plans of taking up such a life-style were thwarted by his mother who had already engaged him to a noble girl named Megalou. Once Theophanes had reached adulthood his mother started preparing for the wedding and when she died unexpectedly he was given only a brief breathing space because Megalou’s father continued to insist that the engagement should be honoured. As a consequence he was forced to go through with the wedding and eventually found himself in the bedchamber together with his young wife. However, instead of consummating the marriage he spent the whole night in an attempt to win over his bride to the life-style that he had already chosen for himself. His arguments proved persuasive and the couple pledged to God that they would henceforth lead

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12 *Life of Theophanes*, 6, ed. Latyšev, 4
13 *Life of Theophanes*, 8-11, ed. Latyšev, 6-7.
14 *Life of Theophanes*, 11-13, ed. Latyšev, 7-10.
a chaste life devoted to prayer and other pious activities. The following section of the text describes how Theophanes and Megalou put their plan into practice and how God responded to their efforts:

From that hour then and subsequently they performed all daily and nightly services through divine grace without interruption, devoting themselves to fasts and vigils and sleeping on the ground at all times through which they acquired the divine in the midst, which preserved and saved and so-to-speak blessed them according to his word: ‘Where there are two or three gathered together in my name I am in the midst of them.’ This, then, confirming the all-merciful showed his presence through sweet smell, by filling to overflowing the room while they were chanting and singing to him at night, as really being and being called ointment that has been emptied out without dissipation from the paternal bosom to our farthest margins in the world.

In this passage Methodius claims that the couple engaged in various devotional and ascetic activities and that God rewarded them with the appearance of a sweet smell in their bedchamber. Such stories are not uncommon in Late Antique and Byzantine hagiography: a particularly close parallel is found in the tenth-century Life of Constantine the former Jew whose author informs us that ‘whenever … he conversed with God during the hourly prayers on each day, the house in which he laboured was filled with an abundance of sweet smell’ (ὅπόταν … περὶ τὰς ὡριαῖς εὐχὰς καθ’ ἑκάστην προσωμίλει θεῷ, εὐῳδίας πλειστῆς ἐπληρώθη ὁ οἶκος καθ’ ὧν εἰργάζετο), and that those who perceived this smell concluded that it was a visitation ‘of the … divine grace of the spirit’ (τῆς … θείας τοῦ πνεύματος χάριτος). There can thus be no doubt that Methodius’ account follows an established pattern. This does not, however, mean that it contains no original features. Whereas the hagiographer of Constantine the former Jew simply states what he believes to have happened, Methodius sets out to show to his readers that through

15 Life of Theophanes, 14, ed. Latyšev, 10.11-12.
their behaviour the couple elicited the appearance of Christ as sweet smell and
furthermore that this sweet smell was a manifestation of the divine substance.

In order to show that the miracle can be considered a ‘confirmation’ (πίστω-
σις) of the claim that the couple had the divine ‘in the middle’ (ἐμμέσῳ)
Methodius has recourse to two Biblical statements: Christ’s promise ‘Where two or
three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst’ (οὗ γάρ εἰσιν
δύο ἢ τρεῖς συνηγμένοι εἰς τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα, ἐκεῖ εἰμί ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν) in Matthew
18:19; and the exclamation ‘ointment that has been emptied out is your name’
(μύρον ἐκκενωθὲν ὄνομά σου) in Song of Songs 1:3, which he paraphrases as ‘be-
ing called ointment that has been emptied out’ (καλούμενος ἐκκενωθὲν μύρον).
By presenting these two verses in sequence he can insinuate that the ‘ointment’
(μύρον) as the source of the sweet smell equals the ‘name’ (ὄνομα) of Christ in
which the couple are gathered and that the sweet smell appearing in their midst
can therefore serve as proof of the divine presence that is being promised in
Matthew 18:19.

Methodius does not only affirm that Christ ‘is called’ (καλούμενος) oint-
ment but makes the further claim that Christ ‘really is’ (ὄντως ὄν) ointment. The
combination of these two elements is a common feature in Byzantine literature:
Maximus the Confessor, for example, explains the name Senacherim as ‘tempta-
tion ... of dryness’ (πειρασμός ... ξηρασίας) and then adds that the Assyrian king
who bore this name ‘really ... was and was called’ (/vndως ... ὄν καὶ καλούμενος)
thus because his being corresponded to the meaning of the name.17 Therefore
we can conclude that by adding ‘really being’ (/vndως ὄν) Methodius assures the
readers that ‘ointment’ (μύρον) is not just an empty metaphor but is intrinsically
linked to the being of God.

The Biblical justification for this claim is most likely found in statements such
as John 8:12: ‘I am the light of the world’ (ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου) and John
1:9: ‘He was the true light’ (ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν), which Methodius modified
by replacing ‘light’ (φῶς) with ‘ointment’ (μύρον), a substitution that can also be
found in the writings of other authors of the time: Ignatius the Deacon, for exam-
ple, once refers to Christ as the ‘true ointment’ (τὸ ἀληθινὸν μύρον).18 However,
there can be little doubt that the underlying conceptual framework is the theologi-
ical system of Pseudo-Denys where Biblical appellations of God are interpreted
as aspects of his substance: for example, the ‘name good’ (ἀγαθωνυμία), which is

17 Maximus, Quaestiones ad Thalassium, 49, ed. C. Laga – C. Steel, Maximi Confessoris
Quaestiones ad Thalassium, I: Quaestiones I-LV (CCSG, 7). Turnhout–Leuven 1980,
359.166-167.
18 Ignatius the Deacon, Life of George of Amastris, 31, ed. V. G. Vasil’jevskij, Russko-
vizantijskija issledovanija, II. St Petersburg 1893, 50.4-5
derived from Mark 10:18 where God is called ‘good’ (ἀγαθός), is complemented with the formula ‘substantial good’ (οὐσιώδες ἀγαθόν). Since Pseudo-Denys subjects the ‘name light’ (φωτωνυμία) to the same treatment it was only a small step to apply this model to the divine name ‘ointment’ (μύρον) as well.

Yet this does not mean that Methodius followed his Late Antique predecessors slavishly. Earlier theologians were aware that Biblical characterisations of God as ointment, sweet smell or light take as their starting point sensible phenomena. However, they then claimed that when applied to God these terms cannot be taken literally but must be interpreted in keeping with common notions about the divine, which was believed to be immaterial. Accordingly, some authors concluded that they signified abstract concepts such as ‘knowledge’ (γνώσις), as is indeed already suggested by Paul’s formula ‘smell of knowledge’ (ὀσμὴ γνώσεως), and that it is these abstract concepts that are imparted to human beings. Others took a less radical approach, in particular when speaking about ‘light’ (φῶς), which was often equated with the ‘glory’ (δόξα) of the divinity. However, even they insisted that such phenomena can only be perceived by the mind and not by the senses. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, states that ‘the smell of the divine ointments is a smell not of the nostrils but of some intelligible and immaterial power’ (ἡ τῶν θείων μύρων ὀσμὴ οὐ μυκτήρων ἐστίν ὀσμή, ἀλλά τινος νοητῆς καὶ ἀύλου δυνάμεως). By contrast, Methodius claims that the intelligible divine smell can manifest itself to the senses and that it is then not categorically different from ordinary sweet smell.

In order to understand how Methodius conceived of such manifestations we need to broaden the textual basis for the discussion and consider the whole passage into which the quotation from Song of Songs 1:3 is integrated: ‘ointment which is emptied out without dissipation from the paternal bosom into our farthest margins in the world’ (ἐκκενωθὲν μύρον ἀδιαρρόως ἀπὸ πατρικῶν κόλπων εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐσχατιάν). It is immediately evident that this passage is a pastiche of several Biblical passages: Methodius has conflated the phrase ‘ointment that has been emptied out’ (ἐκκενωθέν μῦρον) with Philippians

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21 The so-called Messalians were condemned for holding such a view. On this monastic movement see M. Plested, The Macarian Legacy: The Place of Macarius-Symeon in the Eastern Christian Tradition. Oxford 2004.
2:6-7: ‘He did not consider being like God as spoils but emptied himself taking
the form of a servant’ (οὐχ ἁρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφήν δούλου λαβών), and has then added two further elements that
are derived from John 1:18: ‘The only-begotten god who is in the bosom of the
father has made known’ (μονογενῆς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκείνος ἐξηγήσατο), and from John 16:27: ‘I came out of the Father and have come into
the world’ (ἐξῆλθον παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ ἐλήλυθα εἰς τὸν κόσμον). In itself, the
resulting statement is unexceptional: taking their lead from John 1:9: ‘he was the
true light … that comes into the world’ (ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν … ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον), Late Antique theologians had often had recourse to Song of Songs
1:3 in descriptions of the incarnation. However, in their writings the phrase
‘emptied-out ointment’ was always used in a strictly metaphorical sense: oint
ment was one of the images that could be employed when speaking about Christ’s
incarnation in order to express certain aspects of this event, and there was never
any question that it might acquire an independent existence. Methodius takes a
radically different stance: he introduces the formula of the emptied-out ointment
in order to prove that Christ can manifest himself to the senses as sweet smell and
thus defines this manifestation as an incarnation in its own right. Such reasoning
implies that Methodius did not see a fundamental difference between the two
events and that he considered the incarnation to be merely another manifestation
of a divine name, in this case ‘human being’. This is not as far-fetched a notion as
it may seem. One could argue that it is a result of Methodius’ engagement with
the theology of Pseudo-Denys. Indeed, a precedent is found in Pseudo-Denys’
fourth letter where we are told that Christ might be called human being ‘as the
cause of human beings’ (ὡς αἴτιος ἀνθρώπων).

The discussion so far has revealed that Methodius departs radically from the
Late Antique consensus. The sensible is the culmination of the intelligible rather
than a level that is ontologically lower. However, in his own time his speculation
may well have been less outré than it now seems to be. His contemporary Theo
dore of Stoudios, for example, claims in his third Antiirrheticus that Christ must
be depicted on icons ‘because not going forth to an imprint of matter eliminates
his being in human shape’ (τὸ γὰρ μὴ προβῆναι εἰς ὅλης ἀποσφράγισμα καὶ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἀνθρωπόμορφον ἀναιρεῖ) and ‘because that which is seen intellec
tually in absence, if it is not also seen sensibly through circumscription, would

23 See e.g. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, In Canticum Canticorum I, PG 81, 60B; and Nilus of
Ancyra in the Canticum-catena of Procopius of Gaza, PG 87/2, 1549CD
lose also its being seen intelligibly’ (τὸ γὰρ νοερῶς δι’ ἀπουσίας βλεπόμενον, καὶ αἰσθητῶς εἰ μὴ βλέποιτο, ἀπολέσειν ἂν καὶ τὸ νοερῶς ὀπτάνεσθαι). These statements suggest that the Iconophile discourse of the early ninth century was edging towards a position where intelligible reality was considered to be dependent on the realm of sense perception.

So far the discussion has focused on Methodius’ speculation about the divinity and its relation to the world of matter. His reasoning shows a degree of complexity that would not be out of place in a theological treatise. However, it must not be forgotten that he takes as his starting point a particular event, the appearance of a ‘sweet smell’ (εὐωδία) in the bedchamber of Theophanes and Megalou, and that this event is part of a continuous narrative. In the previous discussion I have already pointed out that the miracle follows an account of the couple’s devotional practices and ascetic endeavours and that it is presented as God’s response to these activities.

A closer look at the context reveals that this is not the only part of the text to which the miracle is related. As I have already mentioned the description of the couple’s lifestyle is preceded by an account of the conversation on the night of their wedding through which the saint persuades his young wife not to consummate the marriage. When Megalou finally declares her willingness to follow his advice Theophanes reacts in the following manner:

Δάκρυσι τοίνυν ἀντὶ μύρου τὰς παρειὰς ἀλειψάμενος καὶ τῇ τούτων ἀντ’ ὀσφρήσεως θέα τὴν τῆς μνήστιδος ψυχὴν τὸ ὁρᾶν εὐωδιάσας πέπεικε λοιπὸν κοινῆς συνθεμένους εἰς ὀσμὴν δραμεῖν τοῦ κυρίου τῶν διὰ παρθενίας εὐωδούντων αὐτῷ, ὡς ἂν ἑλκύσειν αὐτὸν τὸν μόνον φιλόψυχον. Having then anointed the cheeks with tears instead of ointment and having through the sight of them rather than through smelling made sweet-smelling the soul of the bride through seeing, he persuaded her that from then on they should make common cause and run towards the smell of the Lord of those who are sweet-smelling for him through virginity in order that they might draw him, the only lover of souls.

In this rather convoluted passage we are told that Megalou’s positive response moved Theophanes to tears and that these tears made such an impression on Megalou that she acquiesced in his plan to strive for spiritual perfection. As long as we focus exclusively on the content, this passage seems only indirectly

25 Theodore of Stoudios, Antirrheticus III, PG 99, 432D, 436A
26 Life of Theophanes, 13, ed. Latyšev, 9.32-10.3. Latyšev has εὐωδιάσας and εὐωδούντων.
related to the subsequent account of the miracle: it leads to the couple’s decision to take up various devotional and ascetic activities, which then in turn elicit the divine response. However, this impression changes radically when we consider the building blocks from which Methodius constructs his narrative. On the lexicographical level we find no fewer than four words, the nouns ‘ointment’ (μύρον) and ‘smell’ (ὀσμή) and the verbs ‘to make sweet-smelling’ (εὐωδιάζειν) and ‘to be sweet-smelling’ (εὐωδεῖν), that have counterparts in the account of the miracle. This suggests that Methodius has created a direct link between the two parts of the story, and this impression is confirmed when we consider the Biblical reference texts. The phrase ‘to run towards the smell of the Lord … in order that they might draw him’ (εἰς ὀσμὴν δραμεῖν τοῦ κυρίου … ὡς ἄν ἔλκυσειν αὐτὸν) is adapted from Song of Songs 1:3-4: ‘Therefore girls have loved you, have drawn you, we will run behind you towards the smell of your ointments’ (διὰ τοῦτο νεάνιδες ἠγάπησάν σε, εἵλκυσάν σε, ὀπίσω σου ἑλκύσειν μύρων σου δραμοῦμεν), which is there immediately preceded by the statement ‘emptied out ointment is your name’ (μύρον ἐκκενωθὲν ὄνομά σου) that provides the Biblical basis for Methodius’ formula ‘being called emptied out ointment’ (καλούμενος ἐκκενωθὲν μύρον); and the phrase ‘smell of ointment’ (ὀσμὴ μύρων) is the obvious Biblical starting point for the noun ‘smell of ointment’ (μυρωδία) in the account of the miracle. This leaves no doubt that the manifestation of the divine as ‘sweet smell’ and as ‘smell of ointment’ is a response to the couple’s previous decision to seek the divine as ‘smell’. Yet Methodius has also taken great care to relate the couple’s search of God to the preceding narrative. He starts from the situation in which an ordinary couple would find itself during the night of their wedding: the bridegroom would use ‘ointment’ (μύρον) to make himself fragrant and would thus attract his bride to himself through her ‘sense of smell’ (ὀσφρησις), which would then condition her for the following sexual intercourse. This reference to custom then allows Methodius to claim that Theophanes refused to anoint his face with ointment and that his bride Megalou’s nose did not receive any olfactory impression from him. It is evident that this is the negative counterpart to the subsequent miracle where Megalou’s nose does receive an olfactory impression, but this time from God as ‘ointment’ (μύρον). The result is a three-stage process, which goes from the outer to the inner dimension and then back to the outer dimension: Megalou does not smell her earthly bridegroom with her ‘outer’ nose but instead seeks to smell her heavenly bridegroom with her ‘inner’ nose, and this internal olfactory experience is then made manifest to her ‘outer’ nose, which gives the body a role in the interaction between her and Christ.

Integration of seemingly unconnected features of a narrative into such an overarching framework is a recurrent feature in Methodius’ writings. A typical
example is found in his *Encomium of Agatha*. I have already mentioned it at the beginning: Agatha does not make use of her ‘outer’ breasts in order to interact with an ordinary human infant; she uses her ‘inner’ breasts to interact with the divine infant Christ; and this ‘inner’ interaction becomes manifest in the particular configuration of her martyrdom where she feeds Christ with her ‘outer’ breasts as well. It is evident that this is the same three-stage process that we find in the *Life* of Theophanes. Accordingly we can conclude that Methodius has developed a general template that he then applies to different sets of data.

So far the discussion has focused on Megalou. However, in order to come to an adequate understanding of the passage under discussion we also need to consider the role played by her husband Theophanes. The closest counterpart is found in another section of the proem of the *Encomium* of Agatha where Methodius develops the theme of dyeing. He introduces the saint as somebody who ‘does not redden … her dress … through murex shell …, that is, through purple dye’ (οὐ κόχλῳ … εἴτουν ἁλιβαφίᾳ … τὴν ἐσθῆτα … φοινίττουσα) but instead ‘carries around inside her the slaughter of her lover through continuous mental activity’ (τῷ διηνεκεὶ τοῦ νοῦ ἐνθυμήματι, νεοβαφὴ τὴν σφαγήν τοῦ ἑαυτῆς ἐραστοῦ ἐνδόθεφεν περιφέρουσα) and eventually lets this blood flow over her ‘confessor’s dress’ (ἐξομολογικὴ στολή). The starting points for these statements are two aspects in the narrative proper, namely that despite her high social status Agatha wore the same undyed clothes as her servants, and that she covered her dress with her blood when she was martyred. These two originally discrete elements are again integrated into an overarching framework: the saint refuses to dye her ‘outer’ dress with artificial purple dye but instead fills her mind with the blood of Christ, and this ‘inner’ colouring is then made manifest to the senses in her martyrdom when blood dyes her dress purple and thus reveals to the onlookers that she is indeed of noble status as the bride of the heavenly emperor Christ.

It is immediately evident that Agatha’s refusal to apply artificial dye to her clothes is analogous to Theophanes’ refusal to apply manufactured ointment to his cheeks, and a counterpart for Agatha’s colouring her inner being with the blood of Christ can be found in the phrase ‘smell … of the Lord of those who emit sweet smell for him through virginity’ (ὀσμήν … τοῦ κυρίου τῶν διὰ παρθενίας εὐωδούντων αὐτῷ), which creates a hierarchical relationship between Christ and human beings who follow his example. This leads one to expect that in the ensuing miracle this divine fragrance would also appear on the surface of his

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27 See Krausmüller, Exegeting the *Passio* (cited n. 7), 7-9.
28 *Encomium* of Agatha, 3, ed. Mioni, 78.3-11.
29 *Encomium* of Agatha, 10, ed. Mioni, 82.30-32.
body and thus have an impact on Megalou’s ‘outer’ nose.

Such a scenario is indeed described in another Byzantine text, a speech in honour of the martyr Demetrius of Thessalonike by John Staurakios, which dates to the thirteenth century. In this text we find the following explanation of the fact that the martyr’s relics emitted fragrant ointment:

Καὶ τοίνυν ἐπείπερ μύρον ἐκκενωθέν ὁ θεάνθρωπος Κύριος, οἶκος δὲ τούτου καὶ
dοχεῖον, ὡς ἄν τις εἴποι, οἱ μάρτυς καθαρὸν καὶ τηλίκης εὐωδίας ἐπάξιον, ἐκεῖθεν
δήτα κατὰ τὰ μυροδόχα ἁγγεία μεμύρισται καὶ τὸν μυρισμόν ἐντευθὲν ἐπλούτει,
πρὸ τῆς ἀθλήσεως μὲν ἀὐλόν καὶ ἀσώματον καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἀθλήσιν δὲ ἀριδηλό-
tερον καὶ φαιδρότερον. Ἐνεζωγράφει μὲν γὰρ ὁ μάρτυς καθ’ ἑαυτὸν ἐκάστην ἐν ἑαυτῷ
tὸν Χριστόν καὶ τῆς ἐντεῦθεν εὐωδίας ἐπίμπλατο. Ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ διὰ μαρτυρίου καὶ
tῆς τοῦ πάθους ὁμοιότητος εἶδεν ἐγγίσαντά οἱ σωματικῶς, ἐξέθορεν ἢ τέως
sκηνοβατοῦσα καὶ ἡσυχάζουσα μυριστικὴ εὐωδία τὸν μάρτυρι, ὡς εὐφροσύνως
προϋπαντήσῃ μύρον Χριστὸν τὸν οὐράνιον· κἀκεῖθεν πλείονος πλησθεῖσα τῆς
χάριτος ὑπερεξέβλυσε καὶ ὑπερεκβλύζειν οὐ πέπαυται.

And since the divine and human Lord is ointment that has been emptied out,
and the martyr is so-to-speak his house and pure receptacle worthy of such
sweet smell, like the vessels that contain ointment he was from there anointed
and received the anointing from there, before the martyrdom in an immaterial
and incorporeal fashion and after the martyrdom more clearly and more splen-
didly; for the martyr painted Christ in himself every day and was filled full of the
sweet smell from there, but where it saw that he had come near him corporeally
through martyrdom and through the similarity of the passion, the anointing
sweet smell that had so far merely acted as if on stage and been dormant broke
forth for the martyr, in order that it approach gladly the heavenly Christ as oint-
ment; and having been filled from there with greater grace he flowed over and
does not cease from flowing over.

It is evident that this text has several features in common with the Life of Theo-
phanes and that it integrates these features into the conceptual framework that
is found in the Encomium of Agatha: Demetrius imagines Christ as ‘emptied out
ointment’ (μύρον ἐκκενωθέν); his inner being is filled with this ointment and
its ‘sweet smell’ (εὐωδία); and this inner dimension is then exteriorised in the
phenomenon of ‘flow of ointment’ (μυροβλυσία).

Indeed, Methodius himself employs the same imagery in his Encomium of
Nicholas. In the proem of this text the saint is referred to as ‘the ointment-
containing vessel of the all-holy and life-giving spirit’ (τὸ σκεῦος τὸ μυριδόχον
τοῦ παναγίου καὶ ζωοποιοῦ πνεύματος) and as ‘harvested ointment’ (μύρισμα),

30 Encomium of Demetrius, 17, ed. IOACHIM IBERITES, Ἰωάννου Σταυρακίου Λόγος εἰς τὰ
θαύματα τοῦ ἁγίου Δημητρίου. Makedonika 1 (1940) 324-376, esp. 352.17-27
which alludes to the fact that the corpse of this saint also produced a miraculous substance.\footnote{Life-Encomium of Nicholas, 2, ed. Anrich, 141.2-3.} And in the account of Nicholas’ ordination we find the specifically Methodian juxtaposition of manufactured and ‘divine’ substances that come from the inside in the statement ‘there welled up above his head not oil that was applied from the outside … but his very own’ (βρύει δὲ τούτου ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς οὐκ ἔξωθεν ἐπιτεθέν ἑλαίον … ἀλλ’ ἰδιον αὐτοῦ ἐκείνου).

Yet when we return to the Life of Theophanes we do not find such a straightforward scenario. As we have seen Methodius does not offer a direct account of the events taking place in the couple’s bedchamber but presents the appearance of the sweet smell as a re-enactment of the incarnation when Christ went out of the Father and entered into Mary. Accordingly it is left to the reader to adapt the configuration of the archetype to the new situation. Such adaptation poses no problems in the case of Megalou because her nose evidently takes the place of Mary’s womb. By contrast, it is much less clear whether there is any involvement of Theophanes because the phrase ‘from the paternal bosom’ (ἀπὸ πατρικῶν κόλπων) refers to the divine Father. In order to make the case that there is nevertheless a link we first need to consider that Byzantine authors modified John 1:18 when they conflated with Song of Songs 1:3. This can be seen from a speech by Gregory Antiochus where Christ is characterised as ‘ointment that has been emptied out from the celestial ointment container for those on earth’ (μῦρον τῆς οὐρανίου μυροδόχης ἐκκενωθὲν τοῖς ἐν γῇ)\footnote{Gregory Antiochus, Encomium of Patriarch Basil Kamateros, ed. M. Loukaki, Grégoire Antiochos, Éloge du patriarche Basile Kamatèros. Text, traduction, commentaire suivis d’une analyse des œuvres de Grégoire Antiochos (Byzantina Sorbonensia, 13). Paris 1996, 65.317-318.}. Here the μυροδόχη has taken the place of the κόλπος. Significantly, the same image is applied to saints who exude sweet smell. We have already seen that they can be called σκεύη μυριδόχα and μυριδόχα ἀγγεῖα.\footnote{See also Pseudo-Athanasius, In nativitatem Praecursoris, PG 28, 908A (about Elisabeth): μυροδόχον σκεύος.}

Yet in the Life of Theophanes there may even be a more straightforward link. This is suggested by a later episode, which takes place at a time when the saint is already abbot of the Agros monastery. There Methodius mentions that Theophanes visited the neighbouring monastic establishments and then adds:

... τὰ μὲν παρ’ ἑαυτοῦ τῷ μόνον παρουσιάζειν καὶ μὴ ἐθέλων δεικνὺς ὥσπερ ἔοικεν, ἀρωματούσι γὰρ ἀρεταί καὶ εὐωδιάζουσι, κἂν ταπεινοφροσύνης κόλπος
δοκεῖ ταύτας περιστέλλειν καὶ περικρύπτεσθαι.\(^{35}\)

... showing what came from himself through his mere presence even against his wish as it is proper because virtues emit aromatics and sweet smell even if the bosom of humility seems to contain and to hide them.

This short passage contains no fewer than three words that have counterparts in the ointment miracle, the verbs ‘to be present’ (παρουσιάζειν) and ‘to confer a sweet smell’ (εὐωδιάζειν), and the noun ‘bosom’ (κόλπος). However, there is also one important discrepancy: here the last term does not characterise God but Theophanes himself. The previous discussion has shown that Methodius employs identical vocabulary in order to establish links between different parts of his narrative. Thus one can argue that the correspondences serve to remind his readers that in the earlier episode the prepositional phrase ‘from the paternal bosom’ (ἀπὸ πατρικῶν κόλπων) may not be as unequivocal as it first seems and that it could not only refer to God but also to Theophanes who in the re-enactment of the incarnation would then take the place of the divine Father and become the source for the ‘ointment’ (μύρον) that emits the ‘sweet smell’ (εὐωδία).\(^{36}\)

The discussion so far has suggested that in the \textit{Life of Theophanes} Methodius uses the same basic conceptual framework as in the \textit{Encomium} of Agatha. If this is the case, we need to consider one remaining feature in the \textit{Encomium} of Agatha and examine what its counterpart in the \textit{Life of Theophanes} might be. When the blood of the lamb appears on Agatha’s body it is not some additional substance that comes out of nowhere but rather her own blood, which pours out from her body. Indeed this is how the topos is employed by most authors who stress that the martyrs dye their clothes with their own blood and who do not create a link with Christ’s blood at all.\(^{37}\) If we accept that Methodius’ conceptual framework is consistent it follows that the sweet smelling substance, which is emitted from the body of Theophanes, is also a real body fluid, which is then transformed into a divine manifestation. However, in this case we are confronted with a difficulty because unlike blood ointment is not an ordinary body fluid. In order to solve this problem we need to turn one more time to the \textit{Encomium} of Demetrius by John Staurakios, which has already provided us with a parallel for the exteriorisation of imagined divine ointment. There we read that ‘the sweat of his

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\(^{36}\) Methodius calls Theophanes τῆς ἀρετῆς τεκνοποιός, which turns him into a father. This aspect will be discussed in greater detail further down. See \textit{Life of Theophanes}, 13 ed. Latyšev, 9. 22-23.

\(^{37}\) \textit{Canon of Zenobius and Zenobia (30 October)}, stichera, Μηναία τοῦ ὅλου ἐνιαυτοῦ, Τόμοι Α’ περιέχον τὴν ἀκολουθίαν τῶν Σεπτεμβρίου καὶ Ὀκτωβρίου μηνῶν. Rome 1888, 562: Μαρτυρίου ἐν αἵματι τὴν στολὴν σου ... ἐπιχρώσας.
struggle has been turned into ointment through the grace of the divine spirit’ (ὁ ἐκ τοῦ ἀγῶνος ἱδρὼς εἰς μύρον μεταπεποιημένος τῇ τοῦ θείου πνεύματος χάρτι). This explanation is very common in Byzantine literature. The author of the tenth-century Life of Euthymius the Younger, for example, relates that when the saint’s old companion Joseph died God ‘caused sweet smelling ointment … to be emptied … from the temples of the saint’ (μύρον ... ἐκ τῶν κροτάφων τοῦ ἁγίου εὐώδες … κενωθῆναι παρεσκεύασεν), which is an evident allusion to Song of Songs 1:3, and then declares that ‘it is customary for God to transform the sweat of those who have struggled on his behalf into ointment’ (ἐξ ἔθους γὰρ θεῷ τῶν δι’ αὐτὸν ἀγωνιζόμενων τοὺς ἱδρώτας εἰς μύρον μετασκευάζειν). Significantly, Methodius himself has recourse to this explanation: in his Life of Euthymius of Sardes he claims that after the saint’s death ‘a residue of sweat appeared on his forehead as is the case with those who are engaged in toils’ (ἱδρὼς ἐπὶ μετώπου ὡς τῶν ἐν κόπῳ τελούντων ὑφέστηκεν), and then adds the comment ‘perhaps this was ointment and not sweat’ (τάχα δὲ μύρον, οὐκ ἱδρὼς, τοῦτο εἶεν). This suggests that in the Life of Theophanes, too, the divine ointment is a sublimation of the sweat that the couple exuded during their strenuous devotional and ascetic exercises. Indeed it can be argued that Theophanes and Agatha correspond to each other. After all, Byzantine authors often juxtapose the sweat of ascetics with the blood of martyrs.

So far we have used evidence from the Encomium of Agatha as a tool to facilitate the interpretation of the miracle account in the Life of Theophanes, which is less explicit and thus poses greater difficulties to the reader. As Agatha does not dye her clothes purple but instead imagines incessantly the blood of the divine lamb, which in her martyrdom issues forth from her body and thus dyes her clothes purple, so does Theophanes not cover his cheeks with ointment but instead makes his soul fragrant, and this fragrance issues forth from him through the sublima-
tion of his sweat. And as Agatha does not use her ‘outer’ breasts to feed ordinary infants but instead offers up her ‘inner’ breasts to Christ until this interaction is made visible in her martyrdom, which is interpreted as an ‘outer’ breastfeeding, so does Megalou keep her ‘outer’ nose free of the smell of earthly perfume and instead directs her ‘inner’ nose towards the divine perfume, which eventually is also perceived by her ‘outer’ nose.

At first sight it seems that in his Life of Theophanes Methodius has simply combined the two scenarios that he sets out in the Encomium of Agatha. However, a closer look reveals that the configuration in the Life of Theophanes is considerably more complex. Unlike Agatha who reveals her true inner state to other human beings only in her martyrdom, Theophanes has an impact on Megalou’s senses already at the first stage of the process. As we have seen Methodius states that the saint persuaded his bride to lead a life of asceticism and prayer by ‘anointing the cheeks with tears instead of ointment and through the sight of them instead of smell making fragrant the soul of the bride as regards seeing’ (δάκρυσι … ἀντὶ μύρου τὰς παρειὰς ἀλειψάμενος καὶ τῇ τούτων ἀντ’ ὀσφρήσεως θέα τῆν τῆς μνήστιος ψυχὴν τὸ ὁρᾶν εὐωδιάσας). From this statement we learn that Theophanes whose soul is already ‘fragrant’ (εὐώδης) makes this inner state visible on the outside and thus acts on Megalou’s soul through the mediation of sense perception. However, this interaction happens in a roundabout way: what appear on Theophanes’ cheeks are tears, which are scentless and can therefore only be seen with the eyes and not smelled with the nose.

\[\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{Theophanes} & \text{Megalou} \\
\hline
\text{Soul:} & \text{fragrant (εὐώδης)} & \text{fragrant (εὐώδης)} \\
\downarrow & & \\
\text{Body:} & \text{tears (δάκρυα)} & \text{sight (θεα)} & \text{eyes}
\end{array}\]

It is not difficult to see why Methodius created this odd configuration. Unlike Agatha who decides for herself that she does not want to breastfeed Megalou needs to be won over to the proposed life of chastity. Accordingly, refusal to communicate at all would only lead to an impasse but not to a redirection of Megalou’s desire from Theophanes to the divine bridegroom. On the other hand, Megalou’s ‘outer’ nose had to be kept free at all costs at the first stage of the process because otherwise the narrative would no longer conform to the general template.

At the second stage of the interaction the departure from the straightfor-
ward scenarios of the *Encomium of Agatha* is even more evident. So far we have assumed that throughout the narrative bridegroom and bride have fixed roles: Theophanes is the emitter and Megalou is the recipient of the sweet smell. However, this neat distinction is thrown into question in the second part of the sentence that we have just discussed. Having influenced Megalou through his tears Theophanes persuades her ‘to make common cause and run towards the smell of the lord of those who smell sweetly’ (κοινῇ συνθεμένους εἰς ὀσμὴν δραμεῖν τοῦ κυρίου τῶν διὰ παρθενίας εὐωδοῦντων αὐτῷ). From this statement we can see that not only Megalou but also Theophanes directs the ‘inner’ nose towards the ‘smell’ of Christ. If we apply this configuration to the third and final step of the process we are forced to conclude that both Theophanes and Megalou smell the divine as ‘ointment’ with their ‘outer’ noses. At first sight such a scenario seems to rule out the interpretation of the divine manifestation that has been proposed so far. If Theophanes is the recipient of the sweet smell, how can he then be its source?

However, a closer look at the passage under discussion suggests that this interpretation needs to be modified rather than discarded. In the sentence under discussion Christ is characterised as ‘the lord of those who smell sweet for him’ (τοῦ κυρίου τῶν … εὐωδοῦντων αὐτῷ). I have already discussed this phrase before when I used evidence from the *Encomium of Agatha* as a template for reconstructing Theophanes’ role in the narrative. There I argued that it provides evidence for the second stage of the process: Theophanes is ‘inwardly fragrant’ before he becomes the locus for the manifestation of the divine as ointment in the miracle. Now we see that this phrase does not just apply to Theophanes but also to Megalou, whose soul Theophanes has just ‘made fragrant’ (εὐωδιάσας) through his tears. Accordingly one can argue that in her case, too, this inner fragrance can become manifest on her body. At the third stage of the process the original scenario where Theophanes takes the place of the ‘paternal bosom’ in the re-enactment of the incarnation and Megalou represents Mary would then need to be complemented with its opposite where Megalou becomes the emitter of the sweet-smelling ointment and Theophanes its recipient. In other words, both seek God as sweet smell and each of them finds him in the other because both have become loci for the manifestation of the divine as ointment. As a consequence Megalou is no longer just a passive recipient of an impression made on her by her husband but plays an active role. This scenario would be in keeping with Methodius’ conceptual framework where reciprocity plays an important role. When he speaks about Theophanes’s travels to other monasteries he not only explains that the saint had an impact on others but also states that he was influenced by them.
... τὰ δὲ παρ’ ἐκείνων αὐτὸς ἀπλήστως ἐμπορευόμενος μυριοφόρου πλέον ὀλκά-
δος τὰ κέρδη τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἀποκομίζων ἀνέλυεν.43

... acquiring himself insatiably what he could get from them he departed bring-
ing profits to the brothers, more than a multi-tonnage freighter does.

Such mutual exchanges are one of Methodius’ favourite themes: for example, he
offers an elaborate description of the exchange of gifts between the families of
the couple on the occasion of their engagement where the two parties strive to
outdo each other ‘in all importations and exportations’ (ἐν ταῖς εἰσαγωγαῖς τε
και ἐκφοραῖς ἁπάσαις).44

So far I have attempted to make the case that the account of the ointment miracle
in the *Life* of Theophanes conforms to a general template that Methodius had
developed in order to make sense of the relation between the divine and human
beings. This template integrates biographical information about saints into three
stage-processes, which culminate in ‘miracles’ through which the divine manifests
itself as substances on the surface of the saints’ bodies that had so far remained
‘unoccupied’ and then have the effect on other human beings. Moreover, the
divine manifestations are not alien to the persons on whom they appear: they
are sublimations of ‘natural’ body fluids such as blood or sweat, which serve as
material substrates that make the ‘incarnations’ possible. However, in our dis-
cussion we have also seen that in the *Life* of Theophanes only the manifestation
of the divine substance to the senses is made explicit in the account of the oint-
ment miracle. By contrast, the readers are forced to rely on their familiarity with
Methodius’ ‘system’, which requires that this substance appears on the bodies of
the saints and that body fluids serve as material substrates. This raises the ques-
tion: why did Methodius limit himself to giving tantalising hints rather than
simply stating that the divine ointment was a sublimation of the couple’s sweat?
I would argue that he could not afford to make explicit statements because they
would have ruled out alternative readings that he wished to encode into the text.

So far we have focused exclusively on Theophanes’ refusal to attract his bride
through ointment. The prominence that this theme has in the text makes it easy
to forget that it is only a minor detail in the story. The main theme of the episode
is the couple’s decision not to consummate the marriage but rather to remain
chaste. A closer look at the text shows that this theme is also present in the pas-
sages that we have been discussing so far. There Methodius does not merely say

44 *Life of Theophanes*, 6, ed. Latyšev, 4.16.
that Christ is the lord ‘of those who … smell sweet for him’ (τῶν εὐωδούντων αὐτῷ) but adds the qualification ‘through virginity’ (διὰ παρθενίας). This additional feature, which conjures up the traditional opposition between the ‘sweet smell of virginity’ (παρθενικὴ εὐωδία) and the ‘foul smell of fornication’ (πορνικὴ δυσωδία),\(^{45}\) establishes a clear link between the couple’s sexual abstinence on the one hand and the good smell that emanates from them on the other. Therefore we can assume that Methodius also wishes his readers to explore possible connections between the miraculous manifestation of Christ as ‘sweet smell’ (εὐωδία) and the couple’s refusal to have sexual intercourse, just as he expects them to examine the link between this same manifestation and Theophanes’ refusal to anoint his cheeks. If we accept that Methodius applies his conceptual framework in a consistent fashion we would expect him to interpret the ointment miracle as the consummation of the marriage.

In what follows I will attempt to show that Methodius inserts into his text a variety of clues that alert the reader to the possibility of such a reading. I will start my exploration of these clues with the description of the couple’s devotional and ascetic activities and the subsequent ointment miracle, which I will now quote again:

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Ἀπὸ γοὺς τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης καὶ ἐφεξῆς ἐτέλουν πάσας ήμερινὰς τε καὶ νυκτερινὰς λειτουργίας θείαις χάρισι ἀπαράλειπτα, νηστείαις καὶ ἀγρυπνίαις καὶ χαμευνίαις σχολάζοντες πάντοτε, δι’ ὧν καὶ τὸ θεῖον ἐν μέσῳ ἐκτήσαντο συντηροῦν αὐτοὺς καὶ σῶζον καὶ ὡς ἐπευλογοῦν δι’ ὧν ὀιόν ἄποικόν ἔθετον ὑπεκπλήσας μυρωδίας τὸ οἴκημα. 46
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From that hour then and subsequently they performed all daily and nightly services through divine grace without interruption, devoting themselves to fasts and vigils and sleeping on the ground at all times through which they acquired the divine in the midst, which preserved and saved and so-to-speak blessed them according to his word: ‘Where there are two are three gathered together in my name I am in the midst of them.’ This, then, confirming the all-merciful showed his presence through sweet smell, by filling to overflowing the room while they were chanting and singing to him at night.

In the previous discussion I have mentioned that Methodius draws attention to structural similarities between this passage and the later episode of Theophanes’

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45 See e.g. Pseudo-John Chrysostom, In evangelii dictum et de virginitate, PG 64, 40, 31-32: τὴν πορνικὴν δυσωδίαν τῆς παρθενικῆς εὐωδίας προέκρινας.

46 Life of Theophanes 14, ed. Latyšev 10, 11-17.
visits to other monasteries through the use in both contexts of the three pregnant terms παρουσία/παρουσιάζειν, εὐωδία/εὐωδιάζειν and κόλπος. Further study of the text reveals that he has created a similar link with the previous description of Theophanes’ and Megalou’s wedding, which reads as follows:

After it (sc. the wedding) had received its diurnal execution through blessings and meals, the nocturnal secret escort with musical organs and flutes and clapping succeeded it; and the crowd of the present relatives and joiners shut in him who had the attitude of an angel and who loved chastity in order that he perform in it the acts that create human beings, and then remained there.

It is immediately evident that the two passages contain a number of common features: the assertions that God was ‘blessing’ (ἐπευλογοῦν) the couple and that he made his ‘presence’ (παρουσίαν) manifest ‘through sweet smell’ (εὐωδία) in the couple’s bedchamber have counterparts in the statements that the wedding was performed ‘through blessings and meals’ (ἐπ’ εὐλογίαις καὶ εὐωχίαις) and that the relatives ‘were present’ (παρόντων) outside the couple’s bedchamber; and the detail that the couple ‘performed all daily and nightly services’ (ἐτέλουν πάσας ἡμερινάς τε καὶ νυκτερινάς λειτουργίας) corresponds not only to the juxtaposition of ‘daily’ (ἡμερινή) and ‘nightly’ (νυκτερινή) wedding ceremonies but also to the phrase ‘to perform the acts that create human beings’ (τὰ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης πλάσεως ἔργα τελεῖν) in the couple’s bedchamber. And consideration of other related passages reinforces this link even further: in the subsequent conversation in the bedchamber Theophanes suggests to his bride that they should become abstinent ‘after they had performed what is appropriate for nature’ (λειτουργήσαντες τῇ φύσει ἁρμόδια), thus using λειτουργία/λειτουργεῖν not in reference to church services but in reference to sexual intercourse.

These similarities are so striking that they can only have been created deliberately. This raises the question: what could be the purpose of a link between the two episodes? At first one might be tempted to conclude that the couple’s performance of religious chants and ascetic feats and the subsequent ointment miracle is a straightforward antitype of the wedding ceremony where bawdy

47 Life of Theophanes, 11, ed. Latyshev 8, 1-5.
48 For a possible link between the similar-sounding nouns εὐωχία and εὐωδία see the Acathistus hymn: χαίρε, ὀσμή τῆς Χριστοῦ εὐωδίας· χαίρε, ζωὴ μυστικῆς εὐωχίας.
singing and lavish meals prepares a couple for sexual intercourse. However, it must be emphasised that such an opposition is never made explicit in the text, and indeed it would militate against the conceptual framework that we have reconstructed in our discussion of the ointment theme. Therefore I would suggest that the lexicographical links have a different purpose, namely to alert the readers to structural similarities between ‘the acts that create human beings’ (τὰ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης πλάσεως ἔργα) and the manifestation of Christ as ‘sweet smell’ (εὐωδία), and to insinuate that this manifestation brings about the sexual intercourse that the couple had refused to perform during the night of their wedding.

Indeed, Methodius may give us another clue. As we have seen the miracle is introduced by the quotation of Matthew 18, 20. This quotation is in turn preceded by the phrase ‘devoting themselves to ... fasting’ (νηστείαις ... σχολάζοντες). In itself this phrase is innocuous enough. However, in the context it is odd because it refers the reader to I Corinthians 7, 5: ‘Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to fasting and prayer; but then come together again’ (μὴ ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους εἰ μήτι ἂν ἐκ συμφώνου πρὸς καυμόν ἵνα σχολάζητε τῇ νηστείᾳ καὶ τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ συνήρχεσθε) where Paul suggests that couples should have sexual intercourse so as to avoid fornication. The similarity is even more striking when we consider that the second part of this recommendation resembles Matthew 18:19-20 very closely.

In order to explore this dimension we need to have a closer look at the manner in which Methodius speaks about the divine manifestation. As I have already repeatedly pointed out, he does not just state that Christ performed the miracle but adds the comment that he did so ‘as truly being and being called ointment which has been emptied out without dissipation from the paternal bosom to our farthest margin in the world’ (ὡς ὄντως ὢν καὶ καλούμενος ἐκκενωθὲν μύρον ἀδιαρρόως ἀπὸ πατρικῶν κόλπων εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν ἐν κόσμῳ ἐσχατιάν). The previous discussion has revealed that this passage is a complex pastiche of Scriptural references in which the formula ‘emptied out ointment’ (μύρον ἐκκενωθέν) from Song of Songs 1:3 is combined with three passages from the New Testament, which all refer to the incarnation of Christ, namely John 1:18, Philippians 2:6-7, and John 16:27, and that as a consequence the manifestation of Christ as ‘sweet smell’ (εὐωδία) becomes a re-enactment of the incarnation. This raises the possibility that Methodius may have wished to establish a link between God’s ‘impregnation’ of Mary and the consummation of the marriage by Theophanes and Megalou, which their relatives hoped would result in pregnancy. And this hypothesis can indeed be substantiated when we turn to a passage in Theophanes’ previous speech to his bride Megalou in which he tries to convince her of the
futility of earthly existence and thus to win her over to his ideal of chastity. This speech concludes with the following statement:

Ὡς εὐτελὴς ἡ εἰς τὸν βίον εἴσοδός τε καὶ ἐξοδός ὡς ἐοικυῖα αὐτὴ ἑαυτῇ καὶ ἄδοξος κατ᾽ ἀμφότερα, φθορᾶς γὰρ γεννηθέντες, διαφθορᾶς ἀναλύομεν καὶ οἵαν εἰσαγωγὴν ὁ κόσμος διαρροῆς ἐπιδέχεται, τοιαύτην ἐξαγωγὴν πάλιν διεκροῆς ἐπιδέχεται.49

How humble is both the entrance into life and the exit, how similar is it to itself and inglorious in both cases, for begotten of corruption we dissolve through corruption and what manner of importation the world receives through flow, the same manner of exportation does it again receive through outflow.

This passage highlights the similarity between the beginning and the end of human existence. Having quoted Wisdom 7:6: ‘None of the kings had another beginning of existence and there is one entrance for all into life and the same exit’ (οὐδεὶς γὰρ βασιλέων ἑτέραν ἔσχεν γενέσεως ἀρχήν, μία δὲ πάντων εἴσοδος εἰς τὸν βίον ἐξοδός τε ἴση), Methodius then explains the meaning of this verse by identifying the two processes as ‘dissolution’ (ἀνάλυσις) and as ‘begetting’ (γέννησις), a reference to Wisdom 7:5 where it is stated that the human embryo is ‘out of the seed of a man’ (ἐκ σπέρματος ἀνδρός), and by further specifying that these two processes take place through ‘corruption’ (φθορά, διαφθορά). By contrast, the third statement does not add further information: here Methodius merely replaces the Biblical term ‘life’ with ‘world’ (κόσμος) and rephrases the term ‘corruption’ as ‘flow’ (ῥοή, ἐκροή). However, this does not mean that this statement is redundant for it has an important function within the overall context: it establishes a link with the subsequent account of the miraculous appearance of sweet smell. The phrase ‘what manner of importation the world … receives’ (οἵαν εἰσαγωγὴν ὁ κόσμος … ἐπιδέχεται) bears a close resemblance to ‘into our farthest margins in the world’ (εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν ἐν κόσμῳ ἐσχατιάν), and the prepositional phrase ‘through flow’ (διὰ ῥοῆς) has a counterpart in the adverb ‘without flowing away’ (ἀδιαρρόως). The former of these parallels establishes the overall similarity between the conception of an ordinary human being and the incarnation of Christ that makes the comparison possible whereas the latter highlights the differences between the two phenomena. The Son leaves the divine Father and enters the womb of the God-bearer Mary and is thus a counterpart for the semen that is ejaculated from the penis of an ordinary man into the vagina of an ordinary woman. However, whereas in the case of ordinary men the semen leaves their bodies and thus leads to a loss of physical integrity, the divine Father keeps the Son in himself even when he sends him forth into Mary’s womb and

49 Life of Theophanes, 11, ed. Latyšev, 8.30-9.2.
therefore can be said to suffer neither ‘flow’ (ῥοή) nor ‘corruption’ (φθορά). This allows the reader to conclude that the statement in Wisdom about human conception has no universal validity as its author claims when he states that he is ‘a human being like all’ (ἀνθρώπος ἴσος ἅπασιν) since it does not apply to Christ who is not only man ‘in all respects according to likeness’ (κατὰ πάντα καθ’ ὁμοιότητα) but also ‘like God’ (ἰσα θεῷ).

This raises the question: what is the significance of this correspondence within the narrative? In the previous discussion we have seen that Methodius constructs a neat parallel between a wedding ceremony that is expected to result in impregnation and a life-style of prayer and asceticism that culminates in the miraculous appearance of ‘sweet smell’. Now we can add that this manifestation of the divine was itself the re-enactment of an impregnation but that that this impregnation was of a superior kind to the one that Theophanes had initially refused to perform. The similarity with Methodius’ treatment of the ‘ointment’ theme is striking. When we discussed this theme we established that Theophanes refuses to fill Megalou’s nose with sweet smell emanating from his body, permitting her sense of smell to seek Christ as sweet smell, and that in the miracle she perceives Christ in the form of a sweet smell that emanates from her husband. Now we can add that Theophanes’ refusal to sleep with his wife permits her to redirect her sexual urges towards Christ as the heavenly bridegroom who responds to these urges through the mediation of Theophanes’ body.

There is only one further element that one would need to add in order to make the parallel complete. In the previous discussion I have suggested that the ‘ointment’ is a sublimation of a body fluid, sweat, which then appears on the surface of Theophanes’ body. If one assumes that the same framework applies to the ‘impregnation’ theme one can argue that Theophanes’ semen is also transformed in this way and that the miracle amounts to an ejaculation into Megalou’s womb. In support of such an interpretation one can point out that sperm and ointment are phenomenologically quite similar – both are white, viscous and smelly fluids – and that this similarity was exploited in Greek literary texts: in Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, for example, where the refusal of women to have sex with their husbands is a prominent theme, we find the lines ‘Shall I anoint you? (βούλει μυρίσω σε) and ‘If only the ointment were poured out!’ (εἴθ’ ἐκχυθείη τὸ μύρον) in which ‘ointment’ stands for semen. If the substance that served as substrate for the divine manifestation as ointment can be identified both as

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50 See e.g. Pseudo-Chrysostom, In natalem Christi diem, PG 56, 387, 53-55: Ὁ Πατὴρ ἀρρεύστως ἐγέννησε, καὶ ἡ παρθένος ἀφθόρως ἔτεκεν.

sweat and as semen we would have an explanation why Methodius refrains from making explicit statements: had he done so, he would not have been able to create polyvalent texts. Yet this does not necessarily mean that two substances – ointment and semen – were exchanged. Instead, I would argue that sweat assumes the function of semen. We have already found a similar case in the Encomium of Agatha where the martyr’s pregnancy with Christ is not realised in the womb but in the swelling of her restored breasts.

At this point we can summarise the discussion. In order to reconstruct the conceptual framework underlying the narrative in Methodius’ Life of Theophanes I had recourse to structural parallels in his Encomium of Agatha. Through comparison with them I came to the conclusion that Theophanes does not cover his cheeks with ointment but instead makes his soul fragrant, and this fragrance issues forth from him in the ointment miracle, whereas Megalou keeps her outer nose free of the smell of earthly perfume and instead directs her inner nose towards the divine perfume, which eventually is also perceived by her outer nose. However, it soon became clear that these parallels are not sufficient to explain all aspects of the narrative in the Life of Theophanes. Theophanes interacts with Megalou already at the first stage of the process when he persuades her to focus her inner being on the sweet smell of the divine ointment. This forces Methodius into extraordinary contortions: in order to show that Theophanes has this effect on his bride he introduces tears, which can be seen with the eyes but not smelled with the nose, and then makes the paradoxical claim that even so he had an impact on her inner sense of smell. A second problem arose from the fact that not only Megalou but also Theophanes searches God with their inner noses and that not only Theophanes but also Megalou is inwardly fragrant. This meant that the excluded situation at the beginning where a bridegroom influences his bride could not be simply repeated with straightforward substitution of the divine for the ordinary as is the case with the parallels in the Encomium of Agatha. Instead the scenario where Theophanes imparts the divine perfume to Megalou had to be complemented with its opposite where Megalou is the emitter and Theophanes is the recipient. I have argued that the body fluid, which serves as the substrate for a divine manifestation, is the sweat that appears on the couple’s skin as a result of their strenuous ascetic exercises, just as blood appears on Agatha’s body in her martyrom. Yet it remains the fact that this point could only be made through circumstantial evidence. This raised the question: why did Methodius not state explicitly that sweat was involved. I have suggested that he could not be more definite because he sought to create a polyvalent text. Indeed, comparison with
other passages of the text suggests strongly that the body fluid could also have been semen. It is possible that this layer of meaning was Methodius’s primary focus. He believed that dissociation from the body and its urges through chastity was only a passing stage, which had to be superseded by sexual intercourse with the partner. Yet this union was not a simple coupling of two human beings since the semen had been divinised. This does not necessarily mean that Theophanes ejaculated into Megalou’s vagina as attractive as the thought might be. It is more likely that sweat functions as a placeholder for semen. This would also make more intelligible Methodius’ claim that Theophanes and Megalou swap places. In his time Methodius appears to have been an isolated figure. I have not been able to find parallels for such complex speculation in other texts dating to the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. Unfortunately we do not know who his audience was. Yet there can be no doubt that it consisted of learned men. Indeed, one cannot exclude that they would have found further layers of meaning encoded in the text, which we can no longer understand.

University of Vienna
Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies

Abstract

This article makes the case that Patriarch Methodius’ Life of Theophanes is not a straightforward hagiographical narrative but a vehicle for theological and anthropological speculation. Focusing on the description of a miracle – the appearance of divine sweet smell in the room where Theophanes and his wife perform ascetic activities – it argues that the sweat of the couple become the locus for a divine manifestation, and that it is at the same time a placeholder for semen through which the marriage of the two saints is consummated.