

THE LIFE OF ISMAIL OF VORDONOS

A summary with partial translation, notes, and commentary

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The *Life of Ismail of Vordonos* was preserved in a single manuscript, a fragmentary Menologion for the month of April, once Leipzig Municipal Library Ms. Gr. 23, sadly destroyed in the Allied bombing of 1945; fortunately, it survives in an unpublished transcription by G. Schlumberger, upon which the following summary and translation is based.¹ From the orthography, Prof. Schlumberger dated the manuscript to the early eleventh century – that is, not long after the final incident it records – and attributed it to the famous scriptorium of the Stoudios Monastery in Constantinople. I see no reason to doubt his assessment.

Heading: ❖ ΜΗΝΙ ΑΠΡΙΛΙΩ Α΄ ΜΝΗΜΗ ΤΟΥ ΙΕΡΟΥ ΠΑΤΕΡΑ ΗΜΩΝ
ΙCΜΑΗΛ Ο ΜΕΤΑΝΟΕΙΤΕ ΤΟΥ ΒΟΡΔΟΝΟΥ [April 1: Remembrance of our holy
father Ismail the Penitent of Vordonos]²

Chapter One (summary): Oddly, the text begins and ends in the first-person voice of Ismail, who introduces himself: *Φώνάζε με Ισμαήλ*.³ Shifting to the third person, the text tells of his early life as an orphan in an impoverished fishing village on the Sea of Marmara. He endures many hardships. His only friend is the goose herder, Κουίκουηκι (henceforth Q), a foreigner judging by his name.⁴

Chapter Two (summary): In their teens, the two decide to escape their wretched existence and seek a life on the sea. In secret, they construct a small boat which they christen Πίκουαδ.⁵ Shortly after they depart, however, they encounter a terrible storm

¹ A passing reference in G. Schlumberger, *Les Iles des Princes* (Paris 1884), p. 27, n. 3; the alternate name of Gordonos is suggested.

² From the personal papers of Prof. Schlumberger, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. I thank archivist Mme Rose Selavy for her gracious assistance. NB: Prof. Schlumberger was in the early stages preparing a critical edition of the *vita* for the *Annalecta Bollandia* at his untimely death in 1929.

³ Translator's note: Ismail is an unusual name, perhaps one he assumed as a monastic, indicating he self-identified as an outcast.

⁴ There is speculation Q's unusual name is onomatopoeia for goose-calls; see R. Dawkins, *The Greeks of Asia Minor* (London, 1914), for similar examples.

⁵ Translator's note: Πίκουαδ may be a local variation of *πικροδάφνη* = oleander, a native flowering plant.

and are tormented by Satan in the form of a great fish. Together they pray to the all-holy Theotokos, vowing that if their lives are spared, they will take monastic orders.

Chapter Three (summary): Their boat runs aground on the rocky shoals of the tiny islet of Vordonos, where they are rescued by the only inhabitants, the monks of the Monastery of Armeniakoi.⁶ They are duly tonsured and join the penitential community, devoting themselves to a life of prayer, abstinence, and asceticism.⁷

Chapter Four (summary): Although they are impressed by the piety of Ismail, the monks of Vordonos are rife with sin: they drink, gamble, and consort with sailors and other low people from the mainland.⁸ Ismail lectures them on the evils of the world and calls on them to repent, repeatedly, but to no avail. He predicts a great cataclysm. Q meanwhile becomes fearful of final judgment and obsessed with death. In expectation, he prepares his coffin.⁹

Chapter Five (translation): Suddenly in the dead of night there came a violent wind, a raging sea, and a great heaving of the earth. The brethren abandoned all hope as they fled from their cells. They put dirt on their heads and cried out in a loud voice, “Woe is us! The end is nigh!” and rushed to the chapel in fervent supplication. An angel dressed in white appeared to the blessed Ismail, still asleep in his innocence. He took him by the hand and spoke: “You who are sleeping, arise. The Panagia will be with you.” He led him to the rock as the sea gathered around them. The waters quickly engulfed the chapel, the cells, all the monastery, all the brethren. And Vordonos was no more. “You will be the witness,” the angel told him and departed. And all was silent, but for swirling sea and howling wind. The rock on which he stood trembled and sank.

“As I was drawn down into the briny vortex, Q’s coffin shot from the sea and floated by my side. Buoyed by that coffin for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirgelike main. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. They found but another orphan. For I only am alone escaped to tell thee.”¹⁰

* * *

The text ends abruptly. The later life of Ismail remains unknown. Scholars now associate the disappearance of the islet of Vordonos / Vordonissi with the earthquake of 1010.¹¹

⁶ Known from the exile of the Patriarch Photios in the late ninth century, location otherwise unattested; see R. Janin, *Les églises et monastères des grands centres byzantins* (Paris, 1975), 84.

⁷ For comparanda, see A.-M. Talbot, “An Introduction to Byzantine Monasticism,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 12 (1987), 229-41.

⁸ Similar stories of debauch are told about the Monastery of Mavromolos on the Bosphorus; see C. Finkel, “An Ottoman Visitor to Mavromolos/Karataş,” *Türk Tarih Kurumu Belleten* 43 (1995), 17-23.

⁹ One of the few clear textual references to a wooden coffin; see A. Kazhdan, “Coffin,” *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 1991), 1:476, for the archaeological evidence.

¹⁰ The final quote is from Job 1:15.

¹¹ G. Downey, “Earthquakes of Constantinople and Vicinity, A.D. 312-1454,” *Speculum* 30 (1955), 506-600.