

**Nicolas Varaine**

**The Rhetoric of Martyrdom  
Remarks on a Painted Cycle of Saint Paraskevi's Martyrdom in Venetian Crete**

The *vita* of Saint Paraskevi the Roman is considered a fabrication, typical of the epic passions criticised by Hippolyte Delehay for their lack of historical value. Rhetoric takes over facts, and, therefore, this *vita* is constituted exclusively of hagiographic *topoi*. The visual transposition of Saint Paraskevi's martyrdom, popular in the late Middle Ages, in particular in Venetian Crete, provides evidence to the artists' perception of the rhetorical devices used in panegyrics. This can be observed in the painted narrative cycles of Palaiologan monuments, not only in the most prestigious foundations linked to the imperial capital and the well-read élites, but also in more modest programmes, such as the short cycle of Saint Paraskevi's martyrdom painted by Michael Veneris in the village church of Melampes, in the south of Crete c. 1320. Four episodes are displayed below a Christological cycle: Paraskevi's trial is followed by three different scenes of ordeal: she is burnt with torches, then plunged into a cauldron and into a burning furnace. The unusual structure of this cycle, which includes two uncommon episodes, echoes the cumulative effect of *ekphrasis*, as well as the vividness that this device brings to every episode. Additionally, a comparison is established between the saint and Christ, a process that owes much to *synkrisis*, enabled by the juxtaposition of the two painted cycles. However, in the Melampes cycle, the image goes beyond the text, as the painter seems to suggest an exegetic reading of the saint's martyrdom. The theme of light and fire, present in three of the four episodes, connects Paraskevi's deeds to the words of Christ, highlighting the salvific content of martyrdom in an appeal to the viewer's spiritual elevation.