

**THE SISTERS ZENAI AND PHILONILLA (1st cent.)  
THE FIRST WOMEN DOCTORS  
«FRIENDS OF PEACE»\***

BY  
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In the southern part of Asia Minor and near Northern Syria lies the town of Tarsus of Cilicia, the native city of the apostle Paul. The sisters Zenais and Philonilla were born in the area<sup>17,21</sup> Demetrias<sup>22</sup>, outside of this city, during the first century and were relatives of Saint Paul<sup>1,22,25</sup>. They had a high education, particularly loved medicine and studied philosophy and medical science<sup>17,22</sup> in the famous school of their city. After their baptism they left<sup>2,17,25</sup> native land and belongings, denied themselves and, inspired with the zeal of faith and charity, started an apostolic<sup>2,17,22</sup> itineration in Paphos in Cyprus<sup>25</sup>, practising at the same time the art of medicine for free. Finally they went to the city<sup>2</sup> of Demetrias in Magnesia near the gulf of Pagasae, in the area of Greek Thessaly<sup>22</sup>. Demetrias, an Hellenistic centre, was founded in the 3rd cent. B.C.<sup>3</sup> by Demetrius the Besieger, son of Antigonus, one of the successors of Alexander the Great. He was called so, because he besieged the town of Rhodos<sup>4</sup>. Demetrias is mentioned by the geographer Strabo as the capital of the commonwealth of the Magnesians. Manuscript<sup>2,17,18,22</sup> evidence is divided over the Demetrias of the vita. Some place this area<sup>21,19,20</sup> in Tarsus; others opt for the city of Demetrias in Magnesia (Thessaly). We are of the conviction that the latter and older<sup>22</sup> opinion is correct, because the saints left<sup>2,22,25</sup> their native land<sup>17,22</sup> and went to the city<sup>2,22</sup> of Demetrias of Magnesia<sup>21,22</sup>. The Bishop of Tarsus Jason, relative of Saint Paul, also left the town and went as an apostle to the island of Corfu, in the Ionian Sea.

In the country of Demetrias Zenais and Philonilla had recourse

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to a cavern in a mountain of the Pelion range and entering into it they dwelt there. In this cave they founded the first natural cavern-hospital<sup>5</sup> and practised the art of medicine with initiative, originality and improvisation<sup>6</sup>, as they hadn't models before them.

Why did they choose a cavern as a habitat, a center of adoration and an infirmary? We can conjecture the following reasons: In this steep and cavernous area near the sea there were many caverns like those, which were called *ipnoi*<sup>7</sup>, signifying fire places, dining rooms, places of warm baths. In the mountain Pelion also there was the grotto of the centaur Cheiron, the physician and teacher of Aesculapius and Achilles. Probably Zenais and Philonilla wanted to use a cave as a nunnery for their monastic life<sup>18,17</sup> and simultaneously as a medical hostel<sup>8</sup>. Another reason is that they took refuge in the cave during a period of persecutions<sup>25</sup> and remained there. A third explanation is that in this area of Thessaly the first *Asclepieion* at Trikke had been established. Maybe these women physicians had it as an idea and model for their practice and founded a natural clinic according to the Christian spirit of healing with poverty and simplicity. Finally, this cave reminded them of the Cave of Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Saviour, plentiful in peace and grace. Zenais moreover is an example of early monastic life. She allowed her monk - disciples<sup>17,22</sup> Papas, Pateras and Philocyros to dwell near by<sup>25</sup>.

These are the first female doctors of Christianity during the first century and they became saints, equal to the Apostles, martyrs<sup>25</sup> and miracle-workers (their memory is celebrated on 11th October<sup>24</sup>). They offered healing to their patients and their poor society for free with self-denial. In this original and natural cave-clinic they cured every disease and malady<sup>9</sup> with the science of medicine and by the grace of God. At the same time they lived according to the Christian faith and taught the word of Gospel. Many non-believers and hopeless people converted to the true faith and hope<sup>10</sup>. Zenais had a special charisma for healing infants<sup>22</sup> and patients suffering from depression<sup>22</sup> and menorrhagia<sup>25</sup>.

Zenais<sup>11</sup> particularly was a scholar physician, a woman of letters, pious and filled with apostolic zeal. She was the first of the two sisters to leave this transitory life in peace and went to the Lord in deep old age. She was buried in the cave, where many years later her grave was revealed with the miracle of healing a little shepherd<sup>22</sup>. Philonilla<sup>12</sup> continued their medical and spiritual mission, lived with fasting and vigilance in the cavern-hospital, worked many miracles and finally reposed in peace. An old Church and icon are preserved in Paphos<sup>25</sup>.



*The women physicians anargyroi-unmercenary and miracle-workers Ss. Zenais and Philonilla, and St Hermione, protectresses of medicine.*

The title «*friends of peace*»<sup>13,22</sup> was awarded to them for the following reasons: they loved profoundly the peace and charity of true faith; they lived in peace, spiritual serenity and inner tranquility although they found themselves in difficult situations; they preferred a pacific landscape in the country and converted their refuge into a cavern-hospital of peace and social work; they transmitted peace and healing to their desperate and agonizing patients; they were physicians, who worked gratis<sup>17,22</sup>; the end of the lives of both were peaceful<sup>14</sup>; indeed Zenais fell asleep in the Lord while praying for the peace of the world<sup>18,22</sup>.

Zenais and Philonilla were also called saints<sup>15</sup>, martyr-physicians<sup>22,15</sup>! although they didn't suffer martyrdom, for their behavior, i.e.: they abandoned home and property and devoted themselves to apostolic mission and healing with self-abnegation and by divine grace; they spent all their life in the cave-hospital with poverty, humility and simplicity, and worked miracles<sup>16,17,22</sup>; they gave testimony

to the faith and conscience under very severe circumstances; at the end of their life they fell asleep in the Lord with holiness and peace.

**Conclusion.** Zenais and Philonilla are the first Christian women doctors who exercised a medical, apostolic and social ministry, established a cavern-hospital and practised the art of medicine with charity, initiative and modesty. Justly the title «*friends of peace*» was awarded them because they were friends and transmitters of peace. They belong to the same group as Sts. Luke, Cosmas and Damian (3rd cen.), Cyrus and Joannes (3rd cen.), Panteleimon (4th cen.) and others. Zenais and Philonilla, together with Saint Hermione<sup>23,24</sup> (1st - 2nd cen.), who also left her native land of Caesarea in Palestine and founded the first inn-hospital in Ephesus, are the unmercenary and miracle-worker doctors, and they are the female protectresses of medicine. St. Zenais in particular can be considered the protectress of infants and patients suffering from depression and menorrhagia.

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