I

Hagiography and Sacred Models

HAGIOGRAPHY IS AN EXALTED DISCOURSE that has formulated the literary representation of saints in popular and elite imagination during the two millennia of Christian history.[1] The often allegorical lives (*vitae*) of the saints were recited by priests during mass,[2] read by literate audiences, and depicted in art for illiterate Christians. The *vitae* of Christian holy women and men served the important function of reminding medieval Christians of their otherworldly citizenship and anticipated celestial residence. Saints, as superhuman mortals, were venerated locally or even universally as martyrs, confessors,[3] ascetics, pastoral administrators, and cloistered servants of God. While ordinary Christians were God's foster children, the saints were the Creator's special friends.[4] Hagiographers recorded the manifestations of the Holy Spirit to these friends of God who acted as intermediaries between the divine and the temporary.[5] The ability of the saints to exist simultaneously in both worlds empowered them to work miracles and to serve as arbitrators for Christian communities in imitation of their biblical predecessors. As the heroic protagonists of hagiographical narratives, saints performed the symbolic function of acting out the sublime ideals of the faith as set forth in the biblical presentation of Hebrew and Christian holy men and women.[6]

The biblical lives of Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ, and the apostles form the charismatic prototypes for the sacred biographies of Christian saints. Elijah and Elisha, who hold "the word of the Lord" (1 Kings 17.24) in their mouths, function as intermediaries between God and humans. As such, the prophets accomplish a variety of miraculous deeds on behalf of humankind. The two holy men resurrect the dead: "Then Elijah stretched himself upon the child three times. . . . And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived" (1 Kings 17.21–22). Elijah multiplies both meal and oil for an impoverished widow during a terrible famine: "For thus says

the Lord the God of Israel, the jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruse of oil shall not fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth" (1 Kings 17.14). Elisha miraculously traverses the Jordan River: "The water was parted to the one side and to the other; and Elisha went over" (2 Kings 2.14). The terrifying Elijah slays the prophets of Ba'al: "And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and killed them there" (1 Kings 18.40). Angels and ravens nourish the undomesticated Elijah and Elisha, who dwell under trees, in caves, and on the tops of hills and who wear hairy mantles and leather girdles. "[Elijah] wore a garment of haircloth with a girdle of leather about his loins" (2 Kings 1.8).

Christ and John the Baptist similarly find the source of their charismatic authority in the wilderness. John the Baptist "was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1.6). In the desert, Christ "was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him" (Mark 1.13). When the Son of God emerged from the desert, he possessed the mysterious *charismata* of the Hebrew prophets. After Christ's death and resurrection, the human apostles continued his marvelous deeds and active ministry. The heirs to the prophetic, charismatic, and apostolic missions of biblical holy men are the saints who recreate the celestial feats of Elijah, Elisha, and Christ for diverse audiences of far-flung gentiles. Saints' lives served as the medium through which Christian writers chronicled the post-biblical intervention of the divine in human affairs.

The Origins of Christian Sanctity

Most world religions venerate the hallowed lives of extraordinary women and men who live in close proximity to the divine.[7] Sacred biography is not an exclusively Christian genre, for classical antiquity and Hebrew writings similarly produced the miraculous *vitae* of holy mortals.[8] The classical Greek *hagios* or Latin *sanctus* ("holy one") refers to a "quality possessed by things or persons that could approach divinity."[9] The Septuagint, or Greek translation of the books of the Hebrew Bible and apocrypha, uses *hagios* to describe the celestial nature of the angels (Job 5.1; Tobit 11.14, 12.15; Zechariah 14.5; Psalm 89.6; Enoch 1.9). Both the Septuagint and Christian scripture characterize the prophets as *hagioi* (Wisdom 11.1; Luke 1.70; Acts 3.21); and the gospel of Mark (6.20) portrays John the Baptist as "righteous and holy" (*díkaion kaì hágion*). In the gospels of Mark (1.24) and Luke (4.34), a demoniac acknowledges that Jesus of Nazareth is the

"holy one of God" (*ho hágios tou theou*); and, in John (6.69), Simon Peter recognizes Jesus as the "*hágios tou theou*." Sacred discourse terms the Israelite tribes holy because they share an intimate, if not tempestuous, relationship with their Creator. The Hebrew Bible also designates assemblies of humans who have been called together by God as holy (Exodus 12.16; Numbers 16.3; 28.18ff), while Acts (9.13) names the Christian community in Jerusalem as the holy ones of God. The Pauline epistles generally use *hagioi*, which is often translated as "saints," to identify those humans who belong to the Christian community or *ecclesia*. The apostle Paul provides a more specific definition of "saint" in Romans (12.1), where he equates *hagios* with a consecrated state: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Thus a saint is an individual who has attained a state of spiritual and bodily purity.

Sacred discourse not only applies *hagios* to celestial beings and humans, it also identifies certain geographic locations, architectural structures, and objects as holy. In Exodus (3.5; see also Acts 7.33), God cautions Moses: "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Other mountains, hilltops, and even cities function as "holy ground." The prophet Nehemiah (11.1, 11.18) refers to Jerusalem as the "holy city," as does the evangelist Matthew (4.5). In the Hebrew Bible, holy ground possesses the power to sanctify material culture, such as tabernacles, incense, priestly garments, and the flesh of sacrificial animals. In Acts (19.11–12), Paul's handkerchiefs heal the sick and exorcize demoniacs. Scripture therefore applies the term *hagios* to immortals, mortals, places, edifices, and objects, all of which are consecrated by their proximity to the divine. Hagiographers, however, would transform the definition of human *hagioi* during the first centuries of Christian history.

Although the Pauline epistles most often depict the universal community of believers as "saints" (*hagioi*, *sancti*), one epistle, Hebrews (7.26), characterizes the holiness of Jesus as "blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens." Gradually, the extra-biblical definition of sanctity ceased to embrace the universal *ecclesia* and instead came to signify only those "unstained" mortals who had immediate access to divine power through their physical and spiritual imitation of Christ. The earliest humans to be venerated as superhuman Christians were the martyrs or "witnesses" of the faith. The literary prototype is provided in Acts, where a certain Stephen, "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6.5), who

"did great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6.8), undergoes an arrest, trial, and execution that parallels Christ's own passion. During his trial, Stephen receives ecstatic visions and exonerates his tormenters: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7.60). Stephen's sacrifice of his own life emulates Christ's death on the cross and the ensuing divine forgiveness of human sin. The biblical protomartyr's successors, the North African, Syrian, Greek, and Roman martyrs, comprise a special category of sanctity because they reenact Christ's torment and death. In return, God endows their bodies with salvific powers, for before their executions they received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including miracle working, celestial visions, prophecy, and absolution.

The lives of the martyrs, however, constitute an "unrealizable imperative" for ordinary Christians who could not bear the imitation of Christ's crucifixion.[10] After the age of the persecutions ended in the early fourth century and the church emerged as a legitimate institution, Christian sanctity focused more on holy endurance than on sacrificial death. Late antique sacred biographers concentrated on the asceticism, pastoral activity, and miracles of holy women and men.[11] If the martyrs were God's exceptional dead, then the saints were the Creator's miraculous living.[12] Yet sanctity itself was not a very well-articulated phenomenon in the late antique and early medieval church. The ecclesiastical hierarchy at that time did not institutionalize the process of making saints, and there were only sporadic attempts to systematize the cults of holy women and men.[13] Canonization as a formal, ecclesiastical process is the product of a thousand-year history of Christian sanctity.[14]

A contemporary author has asked, "Is Mother Teresa a saint?" Although millions venerate her as a "living saint" who ministers to the wretched and outcast, she is not. In order for her to become an official saint in the Roman Catholic Church, a papal commission would have to validate the orthodoxy of her writings and would have to call witnesses to attest to her righteous life and post-mortem miracles. Only after this elaborate legal process would Mother Teresa be declared a saint. In the twentieth century, the pope is the exclusive arbitrator of Roman Catholic sanctity. The papacy, however, did not begin to expand its authority over the process of saint-making until the late tenth century, and, even then, local veneration and not papal sanction continued to establish cults of the holy dead. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century papacy proclaimed that the pope alone had the power to make saints, and in the late Middle Ages canonization developed into a legalistic and bureaucratic procedure. The late antique and early medieval church, however, did not rely on such papal machinery. The sacred biographies of Christ-like humans sparked the popular cultic veneration of anchorites, priests, and pastoral bishops; written texts expedited the "canonization" of early saints and immortalized their local cults.[15]

Hagiographers and Medieval Audiences

The scholarly study of hagiography has had a conflicted history. Eighteenth-century intellectuals, such as David Hume and Edward Gibbon, condemned saints' lives to the murky world of popular polytheism and credulity.[16] The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scholarly neglect of and contempt for saintly biography resulted from a tenacious belief in historical "objectivity" and the ability to recover the authentic past as well as an anti-ecclesiastical sentiment. Hagiographical discourse is notorious for its fallacious biographical details and fantastic phenomena and therefore did not appeal to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers dedicated to rational inquiry into antiquity. In the past few decades, however, intellectual and cultural historians have transformed the study of saintly narrative by focusing not only on the scant biographical information that can be gleaned from a text but also on the cultural paradigms transmitted to medieval audiences through the symbolic lives of the saints. Since the 1930s, social and economic historians also have recognized the value of hagiography for the study of daily life, material culture, and even commerce.[17] There now exists a multiplicity of approaches to the study of hagiography, ranging from concentration on political uses of saintly biography to the search for gendered meanings in these allegorical texts.[18]

Since the early 1980s, historians of the church and popular religion have reevaluated the relationship between the privileged, literate authors of sacred texts and their intended audiences, suggesting that the over-used categories of popular and elite religion were the creation not of ancient Christianity but of post-Enlightenment scholarship.[19] Medieval Christians of all social classifications consumed saints' lives in various forms, and therefore holy *vitae* were part of a universal Christian culture. Artistic, verbal, and written accounts of heroic humans who emulated the suffering of Job, the visions of Ezekiel, the ascension of Elijah, Jesus' exorcism of the Magdalene, the raising of Lazarus, the passion of Christ, and the mourning of the Marys circumscribed the pious Christian. These earthly representations of divine truths were ubiquitous in the villages and urban centers of northern Europe and the Mediterranean.

Hagiologers and linguists have attempted to identify the early medieval lay audience of saints' lives and have tried to ascertain how well these congregations comprehended what they were hearing, seeing, or reading. One scholar of early medieval Latin has argued that Merovingian *vitae* were "used with direct pastoral objectives." Another has suggested that saints' lives were a major tool of edification in Merovingian Gaul.[20] Merovingian hagiographers themselves remark that they are aiming at illiterate audiences, and they note that their lives were read publicly during mass and on saints' feast-days. Sociolinguists have recognized that both the colloquial language and repetitious vocabulary (*audire*, *auditores*, *spectare*, *vulgo*, *plebs*, *populus*, *fideles*, *multi*) of Merovingian *vitae* suggest that these texts were aimed at a general public.[21] By the ninth century, however, the intended audience for sacred biography increasingly was restricted to monastic houses. Theorists have explained the change from Merovingian "pastoral communication" to Carolingian "internal monastic use" by pointing to the ninth century's "clericalization" of Latin.[22] Of course, all hagiographical narratives possess more than one specific public. For example, Venantius Fortunatus could have written the *Life of Radegund of Poitiers* with an eye toward the select group of nuns at Poiters, but more than likely the bishop solicited a wider audience of holy women and men, and, perhaps, an even more expansive congregation of lay aristocratic women.[23]

The work of linguists who focus on the intersection of oral and written culture has shed light on the reciprocal relationship between hagiographer and audience.[24] An individual hagiographer's successful promotion of a saint's cult depended on "the flexibility of a collective oral tradition."[25] By the sixth century, the Bible had become the normative text of European culture, and the majority of medieval Christians received instruction in the gospels through the medium of oral culture. Thus, medieval hagiographers could evoke an unspoken, extratextual dimension that would be understood by medieval audiences who were culturally versed both in scripture and in the lives of the saints. Linguists refer to this process as *metonymy*, or a "mode of signification wherein the part stands for the whole."[26] Biblical culture enabled medieval Christians to decode these symbolic narratives. For example, Fortunatus describes how the young Radegund engaged in sacred play: she organized her fellow toddlers into penitential processions and marched them into churches. Such images were evocative of a greater biblical context: the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2.41–52) and the young Samuel, putting on the Hebrew ephod and ministering as a boy-prophet (1 Samuel 2.18). Radegund, like Samuel, "grew in the presence of the Lord" (1 Samuel 2.21). Thus many of the textual clues that may be overlooked by modern audiences were undoubtedly recognized by medieval Christians, whose childhood instruction would have focused on the legendary feats of prophets, martyrs, and saints. So, the audience for medieval hagiography was not a blank tablet on which hagiographers' "representations of a story or person could impress themselves."[27] Public response to oral readings or visual depictions of saints' *vitae* constituted a crucial stage in the evolution of sacred biographies.

The multivalent uses of hagiographical discourse can be understood only by examining the spiritual and cultural environment of both hagiographers and their intended audiences. Sacred biography was an omnipresent literary genre in medieval Europe, and hagiographers wrote hundreds of *vitae* during the first seven centuries of Christian history. Male theologians, exegetes, and members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy composed the majority of early sacred biographies, although there have been several attempts to claim female authorship of important hagiographical accounts, such as the apocryphal acts of the apostles.[28] There were a handful of anonymous female hagiographers during the early medieval period, including the seventh-century Frankish nun Baudonivia who wrote the *vita* of the Frankish queen, Radegund of Poitiers, and is the only extant self-named woman hagiographer of the late antique and early medieval period.[29]

The church fathers, or patristic authors, composed some of the most famous sacred fictions of the late antique period. Athanasius (c. 296–373), the theologian and bishop of Alexandria, wrote the archetypal desert ascetic *vita*, the life of the Egyptian hermit Abba Antony.[30] The bishop's narrative fashions the austere Antony as an Egyptian Christ, a prototypical desert anchorite, and a charismatic preacher against the Arian heresy in Egypt. Other patristic writers created sacred biographies of women and men to promote the virginal life among the Mediterranean elite in both Rome and Byzantium.[31] The eastern fathers Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–389), Basil (c. 330–379), and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395) combined the simple beauty of Christian parable with the highly stylized rhetoric of late antiquity in *vitae* that immortalized the sanctity of their most intimate friends and family.[32] Patristic hagiography served a variety of purposes, which included evoking the experience of desert asceticism, reinforcing theological orthodoxy, promoting virginity, and sanctifying members of patrician families who would then serve as models for worldly renunciation.

Church fathers devised the rhetorical framework from which later hagiographical models were derived. Erudite biographers such as Athanasius,

Jerome, Basil, and the two Gregorys blended Christian conventions, pagan eulogies, and the lives of virtuous men of antiquity. Their *vitae* fused Hebrew, classical, and Christian formulaic patterns of behavior. The result is the invention of saints such as Jerome's Paul the First Hermit, whose charisma is Hebrew and whose knowledge is classical, or Sulpicius Severus's (c. 363–420) Martin of Tours, who is both a Roman soldier and an Elijah-like exorcist.[33] Texts written by the church fathers chronicle the triumph of Christian morality over classical *virtus*, of saints' lives over the lives of philosophers and Caesars. They underscore the victory of Christian biography over its classical counterpart, that is, the symbolic *vitae* of male intellectuals and politicians.

Sixth-century western hagiographers, inheriting many of these textual models, acknowledge the literary debt owed to the church fathers. Gregory of Tours in his *Glory of the Martyrs* asserts that Jerome was one of the two great doctors of the Merovingian church, second only to the apostle Paul.[34] There are, however, important rhetorical differences. Sixth-century hagiographical discourse is characterized by the ubiquitous intervention of God in the most mundane matters. Whereas patristic authors exploit Christian and classical rhetoric to endow their subject saints with Christian virtue and divinely given wisdom, early medieval hagiographers stress biblical miraculous texts in order to bestow on their saints the charismatic and miraculous powers of the Hebrew prophets and Christ.[35] Early medieval saints heal, curse, exorcize, raise the dead, walk on water, multiply food and drink, control nature, and live on earth as heavenly citizens through their *imitatio Christi*. In fact, the sixth century represents a turning point in the history of Christian discourse, for during that time scriptural models overpowered secular or classical ones.[36] The sixth-century East witnessed a massive increase in the number of Christian miraculous texts, saints' lives, relics, shrines, and images, with little room left for secular narrative.[37] The sixth-century proliferation of Hebrew- and Christian-influenced images, objects, and literary *topoi* in both the East and West presented Christian audiences with visible, tangible, and audible manifestations of divine power. In fact, the great majority of Christians probably received their training in saintly narrative through the vehicles of visual art and public readings of holy *vitae*.

Sacred biography thus communicated the *vita Christi* to antique and medieval Christians through both verbal and nonverbal means.[38] Monastic libraries housed collections of written saints' lives, and wealthy individuals apparently owned private devotional copies of popular texts. For example,

the court of the ninth-century Carolingian king, Charles the Bald, possessed a small volume of the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, and some laity probably owned manuscript copies such as the *vita* of the Egyptian Mary to use for devotional purposes.[39] Most devotees of the saints, however, had access to hallowed *vitae* through art and liturgical performance. The shrines and tombs of the holy dead contained numerous works of art depicting the miraculous deeds of the saints. Roman pontiffs and local bishops commissioned artists to embellish places of worship with lavish ornamentation, such as crucifixes, jeweled reliquaries, and images of saints and biblical figures. Relics and images of saints were also worn as protective palladiums or amulets.[40] Many of these objects themselves became focal points of veneration and pilgrimage, as did the material remains from saints' shrines and tombs, such as shrouds, dust, votive candles, and clothing.[41] Representational art and material culture from the tombs of the holy dead consequently contributed to the discourse of the sacred.[42]

In the highly ornate churches, shrines, and tombs of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, consecrated priests recounted the lives of famous holy women and men for illiterate Christian audiences. It is likely that saints' lives were dramatized by the clergy prior to the sacrificial climax of the mass. With exaggerated gestures, priests recited the holy biographies of the saints as part of a broad attempt to Christianize the northern kingdoms and to edify barbarians in the *imitatio Christi*.[43] Public ceremonies, rituals, images, and liturgical performances preached to Christian audiences the acceptance of social, religious, and political norms as illustrated through the lives of the saints. Sanctity was thus part of a universal yet diverse late antique and early medieval community.

Saints' *vitae* also served a variety of metaphorical, mimetic, and moralizing functions. Hagiography is a discourse that represents the deeds and values of holy persons so that a mundane audience can have access to their transcendent experience. Few worshipers responded to these numinous lives literally. Holy biographies induced a minority of Christians to act out the ascetic and miraculous deeds of God's saints. For most of Christendom, however, sacred lives represented good moral lessons but did not oblige ordinary mortals to mount pillars or inhabit caves to escape both family and worldly comfort.

The sacred biographies of the saints compelled the faithful to worship the omnipotence of God which manifested itself through the miraculous deeds of the saints. The word, both written and spoken, was the primary metaphor of Christianity because Christ, the Word (*logos*), had become

flesh (John 1.14).[44] Each word of holy scripture therefore represents the earthly manifestation of the heavenly *logos*. The public readings of scripture during mass were designed to illuminate divine truths for earthly congregations. The text of a saint's life, like a liturgical object or the eucharist, functioned as an earthly doorway to the divine because the reading, hearing, and seeing of these "moving icons" united the audience with God.[45] Because hagiographical texts expropriate the language, symbols, and literary commonplaces (*topoi*) of Christian scripture, the words of a saint's *vita* similarly function both as temporal revelations of divine truths and as liturgical aids to mystical meditation. Aside from serving the primary function of celebrating the Christ-like lives of the saints and the power of the *logos*, narrative *vitae* also chronicle the post-biblical intervention of the divine in human affairs. They thus demonstrate how humans can enact metaphorically the sublime precepts of the faith.

Hagiographers used the miraculous deeds and heroic virtues of holy women and men as cultural and religious symbols for eclectic audiences from Ireland to Syria. Saints' lives provided an ecumenical arena of discourse for a highly diverse Christendom, incorporating local (and relatively recent) heroes into an evocative biblical context. Thus Martin of Tours, who conversed with the departed, and Mary of Egypt, who miraculously levitated, recalled for audiences the revered stories of Saul speaking with the dead (1 Samuel 28.8–20) and of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14.25–26; Mark 6.48–50; John 6.19–20). Through these hagiographical performances, Christian saints promoted knowledge of the Bible in terms familiar to the audiences who heard or read their *vitae*. All saints' lives, whether mythical or historically based, provided widespread audiences with human examples of the imitation of Christ. Even the highly legendary and fantastic *Life of Mary of Egypt* became a popular paradigm for the process of converting sinners to the *imitatio Christi*.

The hagiographical recasting of the *vita Christi* not only exemplified the mysteries of the faith for audiences unfamiliar with Hebrew culture, it also enforced theological orthodoxy and institutional power. Through saints' lives, sacred biographers demarcated Christian asceticism, dogma, and miraculous power. Hagiographical images therefore operated as the popular manifestation of didactic power and, as such, they provided vital lessons of institutional authority and hierarchical control over most aspects of Christian spirituality. For example, sixth-century Gallo-Roman hagiographers argued for the superiority of corporate monasticism over solitary asceticism by employing the imperative power of holy *vitae* to discredit such independent action.

Western saintly discourse delineated the limits of Christian self-mortification precisely because the fourth- and fifth-century hagiographical construction of the Egyptian and Syrian desert hermit, whose motto was "no authority save God," presented a dilemma to the developing organization of the church. The legends of powerful desert hermits challenged the authority of the ecclesiastical structure. Desert anchorites lived independently in caves and tombs, fought demons, overshadowed wealthy urban churchmen, and consecrated themselves through their asceticism. These icons of the faith possessed the charisms of healing and exorcizing—or the powers of inclusion and exclusion from the Christian community—without the sanction of the church hierarchy.[46] Indeed, fourth- and fifth-century desert chroniclers sometimes portrayed these charismatic hermits as outspoken censors of the episcopacy. Sixth-century writers, however, gradually softened the radical, extra-institutional images found in desert ascetic texts by creating new texts which placed such independent manifestations of spirituality under the control of the organized church. Saints' lives served as the medium through which bishops promoted themselves as the arbiters of Christian spirituality.

Gallo-Roman churchmen championed a corporate model of asceticism over an individual one. The greatest danger facing superhuman desert ascetics, according to early medieval churchmen, was pride. Communal self-mortification and obedience to the episcopal hierarchy safeguarded the individual monk from pernicious fame. Institutional stability channeled the original fluid association of master hermit and disciple into highly disciplined monastic forms.

In his *Histories*, Bishop Gregory of Tours provides a glimpse of the Gallo-Roman transformation of the desert ideal into the western model of organized monasticism. Gregory reconstructs Merovingian sanctity through both popular legend and oral interview. In his *Decem libri historiarum*, the bishop of Tours recounts his own encounter with an unusual holy man, the deacon Vulfoliac, who lived in a monastery at Carignan in Gaul.[47] Gregory prompted the taciturn deacon to describe his failed emulation of the greatest of all Syrian ascetics, Symeon the Stylite or "pillar sitter" (c. 390–459).[48] The Syrian legend claims that Symeon chained himself to the top of a column in the desert in order to live both as Elijah on Mount Carmel and as the crucified Christ. Symeon's pillar dwarfed the pagan temples that stood on nearby earthen mounds, and his column functioned as a kind of ladder of divine ascent. The Syrian holy man himself served as a mediator between heaven and earth. Vulfoliac, a Lombard expatriot in Gaul, professed that he had become so enamored of the power

of superhuman Christians such as Symeon that he aspired to live a life of exemplary austerity. He thus modeled himself on the Syrian stylite and reposed on a tower in Gaul during a winter that froze off his toenails.

The story, however, has an unusual ending. Vulfoliac's asceticism attracted the attention of local bishops, who came to inspect the peculiar ascetic and his pillar. Instead of congratulating the stylite on his perfect replication of the actions of eastern saints, the churchmen accused the holy man of spiritual presumption. They pointed out that the weather of Gaul was too harsh to permit ascetic modes that might be appropriate in desert climes. The bishops ordered Vulfoliac to dismount immediately, destroyed the pillar, and sent the holy man off to the nearest community of monks where Gregory later induced him to recite the events of his life. According to Gregory, the hapless saint remained embarrassed about his youthful excesses.

Gregory of Tours raises Vulfoliac to the superhuman status of Symeon Stylites and then knocks the Lombard pretender off his column to emphasize the subordination of independent asceticism to corporate monasticism and episcopal authority. Vulfoliac "was within an inch of being cast in with the wandering preachers, miracle workers, and other troublemakers who often ended their days rotting in episcopal prisons. He was saved by obedience."[49] Gregory's discourse on Vulfoliac illustrates the use of hagiographical narratives to modify previously established spiritual conventions. In the mini-*vita* of Saint Vulfoliac, Gregory of Tours asserts that bishops are the divinely ordained ministers of Gallo-Roman asceticism and monasticism, and that they alone are the custodians of divine power.

Hagiographical narratives also proclaimed the sacred mysteries of the mass, affirmed the power of those who consecrate the eucharist elements, and illustrated the proper veneration of holy persons, objects, and places. For example, an early medieval miraculous text, the *Mass of Saint Gregory*, describes how an unfaithful woman who had questioned the miracle of the mass became convinced of the magical transformation of bread and wine into body and blood when she beheld a bloody finger in the eucharist. This famous hagiographical narrative, duplicated in countless works of art, reinforced for medieval audiences the miracle of the mass and the power of the priests who perform it.[50]

Early medieval *vitae* dictate proper reverence for the sacred. In imitation of Hebrew sacred discourse which teaches that proximity to the sacred consecrates both locations and objects, hagiographical texts acknowledge that the place and material culture connected with the life of a holy man or

woman must be revered by the faithful. Frankish saints blind, mutilate, and otherwise impair all violators of churches, tombs, shrines, vestments, devotional objects, and even the private living spaces of holy persons. Demons infiltrate the slothful bodies of nuns who forget to bless their food before eating it, and foul spirits haunt married women who engage in sexual activity during the sabbath.[51] Abbesses and abbots punish debased nuns and monks who abandon their vows, and bishops castigate ascetics, like Vulfoliac, who fall into the sin of pride. The spiritual medicine of the saints who cure by means of the sign of the cross (*signum crucis*), prayer, and exorcism overpowers the feeble attempts at healing by pagan magicians. Holy men possess the power of unleashing souls from purgatory and releasing them into God's care.[52] The saints themselves could return from the dead and request that prayers and ritual processions be held in their honor and that their bodily remains be housed in ornate reliquaries. Saints' *vitae* recount numerous examples wherein the holy dead punish slothful Christians who neglect their post-mortem cults and sacred remains. Sacred biographies thus served as coercive discourse and, as such, enjoined proper behavior—liturgical, social, medical, and even sexual.[53]

The Christ Model

First and foremost, saints' lives commanded all Christians to emulate the exemplary life of Christ: "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11.1). The primary model for constructing the lives of holy women and men is the evangelical life of Christ; however, the *imitatio Christi* offers the pious Christian a paradoxical model of behavior. The literary recreation of Christ's brief tenure on earth inverted ancient societal norms for the purpose of segregating the Son of God from ordinary patterns of human existence.[54] This kind of textual inversion is not unique to the Christian gospels, as the great Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Elisha, had similarly existed on the periphery of the human community. John the Baptist, the evangelical heir to the Hebrew prophets, wore camel's hair clothing and ate locusts; his ascetic clothing and diet connected him not with human society but with the animal world. Biblical prophets, who dwell in caves, on hilltops, and in the wilderness validate their affinity with heaven by rejecting such human conventions as family and community.[55]

Christ shares the celibacy and poverty of the biblical prophets who lived in antithesis to ordinary mortals. The Son of God's charismatic powers of healing, resurrection, and control of nature attested to his descent

from Elijah and Elisha. The image of Christ as judge in the gospels confirmed his divinity within the context of the ancient eastern discourse on immortal adjudicators. As Hebrew prophet and exorcist, Christ conformed to the masculinized biblical model of the independent holy man as a masterful wonderworker.

The evangelical presentation of the *vita Christi*, however, also contains fluid gender images, thus harkening back to the Pentateuch which employs the feminine symbols of feeding and nurturing to describe Yahweh's love for the Israelites. Similarly, several of the pivotal metaphors of the Christian gospels rely on a profound feminization of Christ. Thus the *vita Christi* contradicted the traditional gender system of the antique Mediterranean. Participation in war and state service, and the siring of offspring had defined Greco-Roman masculinity. Roman men circulated in a sex-segregated official world where women were ritualistically excluded from the male spaces of government, such as the Curia.[56] Christ, however, displayed both masculine and feminine behavior within the context of a Judaic and Greco-Roman world that adhered to the ancient standard of sex segregation and gender distinction.

Christ's *vita* inverted the traditional gender order: he was apolitical, a pacifist, a nurturer of souls, a friend of women and lepers; his judgments were spiritual and otherworldly, not physical and political. Christ's celibacy proclaimed his prophetic status, while abrogating his virility in a world that honored sexual potency and fruitfulness in marriage. The constructed image of Jesus in the Christian gospels is paradoxical; he was the Son of God and Lord of Heaven, but his physiognomy was that of a simple pilgrim who was indistinguishable from the crowd of ordinary humans (Luke 24.13–35; John 20.15).

The most startling gender inversion in the gospels is that of the anointing of Christ (Matthew 26.6–13; Mark 14.3–9; Luke 7.36–50 and John 12.1–8). The greatest prophets such as Samuel (1 Samuel 10.1) and Nathan (1 Kings 1.34) had performed the symbolic action of anointing Hebrew kings. In Christian scripture, however, a woman ritually consecrates the Son of God, and in two of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 26.6; Mark 14.3) she performs this allegorical gesture in the house of a leper. The medieval exegesis of this event identified the woman with the "alabaster flask of ointment" as Mary Magdalene, a sinful woman (Luke 7.37) from whom Christ had expelled seven demons (Luke 8.2).[57] The metaphorical anointing of the prophet-Christ by a woman illustrates perfectly the evangelical technique of rhetorical inversion. In a society with strict regulations against eating with the diseased or associating openly with women, a sinful woman anoints the Son of God in the house of a leper. The evangelical Jesus embraces the powerless: women, children, and the afflicted. In a manner of speaking, the *vita Christi* turns the world upside down, and, through this reversal of the traditional social, political, and gender order, Christ empowers the marginal sectors of Greco-Roman society. In the gospels, a "hierarchy of piety" supplants the existing social and economic order.[58] The earthly life of the Son of Man thus foreshadows the impending eschaton which will culminate in the destruction of human hierarchies and social stratification. Metaphorical inversions of the status quo are therefore earthly signs of Christ's heavenly mission. Because hagiographical texts function as further revelation of the divine plan, saints' *vitae* contain the same kinds of metaphorical inversions found in the *vita Christi*.

Christian hagiographers incorporated Christ's rebellious, cross-gendering style in their lives of holy women and men. Female saints cut off their hair, dressed as men, traveled as apostles, preached, taught, walked on water, and defeated Satan in battle. Male saints fed and clothed the poor, multiplied food and drink, renounced physical weapons in favor of spiritual ones, and acted as spiritual mothers for Christians.[59] Because all hagiographical discourse contains an element of the Christological "world upside down" leitmotif, women, children, lepers, and the poor become central characters in sacred biography.

Sacred Models (1): The Adam and Eve of the Desert

The first major prototypes for Christian holiness—aside from the life of Jesus and the superhuman lives of the martyrs—are the *vitae* of desert hermits and recluses. Desert asceticism found its origins in third- and fourth-century Syria and Egypt. A series of fourth- and fifth-century writings record the momentous deeds and terse sayings (*apophthegmata*) of the great spiritual men and women of the desert.[60] These texts were incorporated into the institution of the western church through oral legends, private devotional copies, and monastic rules which required the public readings of desert *vitae* during the *lectio divina*.[61] The intrepid piety, demonic warfare, and superhuman asceticism of the hermits who withdrew from the urban centers of the east to dwell in the wilderness, in imitation of Moses, Elijah, and Christ, became emblematic of the golden age of pristine austerity. Erudite hagiographers, including Athanasius of Alexandria, fashioned these charismatic hermits as second-covenant patriarchs who

verify the accuracy of Christian prophesy. Fourth- and fifth-century western chroniclers of Egyptian and Palestinian asceticism, such as Jerome, Rufinus, Egeria, Cassian, and Palladius, created the popular image of the desert as the Garden of Eden inhabited by Christian patriarchs and matriarchs whose rigorous asceticism had achieved for them a cherished prelapsarian status.[62]

Paradox defines the prototypical male hermit or anchorite. The desert ascetic is an uneducated peasant whose divinely given wisdom rivals that of Greek philosophers (1 Corinthians 1.20); he is an unarmed warrior who defeats Satan's toadies with a spiritual weapon, the *signum crucis*. He is not consecrated through any symbolic ritual but is sanctified directly by God. His celibacy makes him spiritually fertile; his denial of the flesh results in superhuman strength; and his rejection of earthly food provokes angels to feed him (1 Kings 19.7). He is physically repulsive and "wild to look at, with unkempt hair, shriveled face, the limbs of his body reduced to a skeleton, dressed in some dirty rags sewn together with palm shoots."[63] Yet his physiognomy is also that of a man who has been highly cultivated through Christ. His terrifying countenance provides a vivid warrant for the apostle Paul's declaration that "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (1 Corinthians 1.28).

The Christian male anchorite thus is a being who exists on the periphery of human society and is "low and despised in the world." His habitat, diet, and appearance bind him to the domain of animals, for he is a scavenger living off wild roots and herbs. The intellectuals who compiled the mythological biographies and wise sayings of the desert hermits seized on the rhetoric of inversion to connect these new Christian heroes with such champions of the biblical past as the locust-eating John the Baptist or the hairy Elisha. The desert fathers continue Christ's warfare against evil, and their recorded lives promote these living icons of the faith as active agents in the salvation of humankind.

The primary charismatic power possessed by desert ascetics is that of exorcism, or the ability to drive out unclean spirits (*'akáthartoi*). In signaling the first step in the long process of expelling evil from the world, Christ's crucifixion itself functions as a kind of exorcism. The lives of desert saints mirror the sacrifice of God's Son in the service of defeating Satan. In fact, the *vitae* of prototypical desert ascetics, such as Athanasius's Abba Antony, mimic the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Antony crucifies himself through the intense mortification of his flesh

and immures himself in a tomb.[64] He engages in such fierce demonic combat that he collapses on the floor of the sepulcher. He finally emerges from the shrine with a new, spiritual body that is the physical manifestation of the apostle Paul's teaching: "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15.44). Through Christian asceticism, the archetypal anchorite becomes the crucified and resurrected Christ. His new body mirrors that of the prelapsarian Adam: "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. . . . The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven" (1 Corinthians 15.45–47; see Genesis 2.7). The hermit thus bears the likeness of "New Adam" or the image of the resurrected flesh. He has successfully liberated himself from the fruits of the fall—avarice, lust, greed, gluttony, and pride—and therefore is free to use his unearthly limbs to cleanse the world of demonic influence.

The sacred fiction of the male desert hermit thus centers on the militant powers of the crucifixion or the expulsion of evil from the world. The image of the female ascetic embraces the biblical archetype of masculine ascetic authority and shares many of the rhetorical motifs found in the lives of holy men. But whereas the *vitae* of male hermits exemplify the militancy of the cross, desert holy women's lives highlight the healing process of the crucifixion. The textual presentation of the conversion of men to the life of radical asceticism stresses the warfare against evil intitiated by the crucifixion, whereas women's lives underscore the restorative powers of the cross.

The mythological image of the desert as a holy paradise where all humans would be emancipated from oppressive social and gender responsibilities attracted numerous women who dwelled in the tombs, cells, and communities of the wilderness.[65] The hagiographical depiction of female anchorites rivals the portrayal of the spiritual prowess of ascetic men. In the fifth-century Syrian corpus of desert texts, two holy women, Marana and Cyra, chastise their flesh to such an extent that their holy example frightens a male pilgrim who visits their cell. The two women "wear iron, and carry such a weight that Cyra, with her weaker body, is bent down to the ground and is quite unable to straighten her body. They wear mantles so big as to trail along behind and literally cover their feet and in front to fall down right to the belt, literally hiding at the same time face, neck, chest, and hands."[66] Other Syrian and Egyptian female anchorites crucify their flesh, scavenge food, walk on water, exorcize, arbitrate disputes, and teach men. The withered breasts, shriveled flesh, and sun-scorched faces of

these holy women demonstrate that an emaciated female body can be a Christ-like spiritual vessel.

Male hagiographers so successfully incorporate female hermits into the discourse of the desert that certain women appear in the texts as transvestites who masculinize their bodies through extreme mortification, wear men's clothing, and sometimes live in male monasteries. Not all desert holy women were so thoroughly subsumed by the masculine rhetoric of the desert, however. Although the titillating portraits of women who donned male clothing and lived as ascetic men have intrigued scholars for several decades, this mythological *topos* is not the predominant one for holy women.[67] There are very few extensive spiritual portraits of desert holy women, but the ones routinely recorded by desert chroniclers follow the prototype of the female recluse.

The hagiographical portrait of the female recluse, like its male counterpart, is built on a series of reversals. The inversions contained in women's *vitae*, however, illuminate the transformation from Eve to Mary. Because the ancient world associated females with bodily and spiritual sloth, the lives of holy women who could remake their bodies into immaculate vessels of faith dramatized the metamorphosis of the penetrated Eve into the impenetrable Virgin Mary.[68] In order to present this theological evolution, female desert *vitae* accentuate both unyielding enclosure and grotesque asceticism to confirm the evolution of holy women from bodily weakness to spiritual fortitude.

Desert women, according to hagiographical depictions, frequently entomb themselves in tiny cells which have no doors and usually only one window. The Syrian couple Cyra and Marana lived in such a heavily bulwarked space that it was possible to enter only by digging through the door.[69] According to these texts, women's power flows from such enclosed spaces; rarely do female hermits venture into the world to combat Satan's demonic hordes. Rather, most female recluses function as immovable receptacles of divine grace, not as active participants in the history of Christian salvation. The spiritual stratagem of self-immurement allows a holy woman to live as the bride of Christ who is, according to the Song of Songs (4.12), "a garden locked, a fountain sealed." She is the "New Eve" or the Virgin Mary, whose body served as a vessel of the Word. Through self-imprisonment, the desert recluse also removes her body from the sight of men and therefore works for male salvation, so often lost to the lures of feminine flesh. The fifth-century Syrian holy woman Domnina shuts herself in a hut in her mother's garden and there she makes herself invisible:

"[She is] literally covered up by her cloak and bent down onto her knees." Intense penance transforms Domnina's earthly body into a spiritual vessel: "Her skin is very thin, and covers her thin bones as if with a film, while her fat and flesh have been worn away by labors."[70] The symbolic description of Domnina's doubled-over body and withered flesh documents her successful atonement for Eve's sin. The Syrian recluse's tiny dwelling perfects her body by making it inaccessible even to the pilgrims and beggars who solicit her spiritual advice and alms.

Female desert *vitae*, such as Theodoret of Cyrrhus's brief account of Domnina, feature uncompromising enclosure, passionate contrition, and repulsive physiognomy as godly attributes of women's piety. The lives of male saints similarly contain the spiritual motifs of claustration, superhuman fasting, and terrifying appearance. Theodoret, in his *Life of Symeon Stylites*, asserts that Symeon sealed himself in a small cottage for three years but then abandoned his hut to mount the pillar where he publicly fought paganism and imitated the marvelous deeds of Elijah and Christ.[71] Atop his column, Symeon displays his charismatic descent from the Hebrew prophets by wearing animal skins, and he exhibits his body as that of Christ crucified to the multitudes of pilgrims who come to him for a blessing. The ascetic life cycle of desert holy women such as Domnina witnesses similar spiritual configurations. Most female recluses, however, do not roam the open desert and do not display their bodies before Christian pilgrims and disciples. Instead, they conceal their emaciated skin and bones under heavy mantles. They sojourn as enshrined penitents who receive divine gifts as a consequence of their miraculous transformation of the female body into a vehicle of grace. In these sacred fictions, women, who were first alienated from God (Genesis 3.6), can be reconciled to the Creator through fervent asceticism. The heroic *vitae* of Syrian and Egyptian recluses would inspire hagiographers of other women and men, such as the patrician saints of the late Roman empire, who took up the life of radical self-denial in a modified manner.

Sacred Models (2): The Patrician Intellectual and Philanthropist

The problem facing the authors of the lives of patrician saints was how to duplicate the symbolic affinity between desert ascetic and Hebrew prophet within the refined and urbanized milieu of Mediterranean nobility. The solution was found in the very nature of early Christian discourse; because such discourse was structured on a series of paradoxical images, it allowed

the sacred biographers of the late Roman aristocracy to appropriate prophetic and charismatic prototypes and apply them to the urban elite of late antiquity. The result was a brilliant re-creation of the eastern desert model within the bustling urban centers of Rome and Constantinople. If the King of Heaven had assumed the guise of a common pilgrim, then the Mediterranean nobility could devoutly mimic the austerity of desert anchorites. Through the *imitatio Christi*, the wealthy could become symbolically poor, uncultivated, and unwashed. By combining the rhetorical style of classical authors with the simple parables of scripture, the church fathers created lively *vitae* of noble saints whose heroic renunciation inspired Christians of all social classes to venture a symbolic life of poverty.[72]

The church father and biblical exegete Jerome employs the paradoxical imagery of Christian discourse to decode the increasingly peculiar behavior of his most intimate associates in Rome. One of his favorite literary devices is the inversion of material culture to signify the conversion of an aristocratic soul. In *Epistle 66*, Jerome uses the changed clothing of a senatorial aristocrat and personal friend, the patrician Pammachius, to depict the rejection of pagan, political power. Jerome asks his reader: "Who would have believed that this grandson of consuls and the glorious scion of the Furii clan went forth into the Senate cloaked in mourning black amid the Senators' purple robes, and he was not ashamed to pass by the eyes of that assembly, but even scorned those who scorned him."[73] This passage ingeniously exemplifies the appropriation of classical rhetoric by patristic hagiographers in order to glorify Christian ascetics. Jerome's *Epistle* is an inversion of Cicero's famous *Letter to Atticus*, in which Cicero acknowledges that those senators who were publicly *infames* (loss of *fama*, *existimatio*) were required to adopt the dark mourning tunic (*toga pulla*).[74] Jerome's reconstruction of Pammachius's violation of the ritualized space of the Senate heralds the conversion of the Roman elite through the inversion of the official toga.

Roman law regulated the official dress of public men and dictated the kinds of garments that could be worn within the precincts of the Curia. The toga represented the old order of moral righteousness and republicanism and signified the political, social, economic, sexual, and religious status of its wearer. This multifunctional garment symbolized the wordly dignity and authority of politicians, lawyers, and administrators. According to Roman tradition, the *toga pulla* was to be worn only during times of bereavement or during religious rites; donning the garment at any other time was considered "inauspicious."[75] Jerome dressed his ascetic friend in

the distinctive mourning tunic, and, for his readers, the *toga pulla* grieviously desecrated the sober atmosphere of the political arena. The literary image of the reclothed Pammachius serves two additional rhetorical functions: it connects him with biblical prophets, Christ, and the desert hermits; and it signals the eradication of the senator's former lifestyle as the public man. The patrician adopts the attire of "the poor, the mourning, and the ignoble" (*infamia*) to signify his rejection of secular authority in favor of the charismatic power of holy men. Pammachius parades his imitation of the desert fathers in the Senate, the seat of Roman secular power.

Patristic hagiographers, such as Jerome, Augustine, Basil, Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nyssa, tested the boundaries of Christian paradox through their inverted depictions of patrician saints. For them, the mythical eastern desert was less a holy place than it was a style of life. Any elite Christian who repudiated worldly power, property, familial ties, and all the other imperatives of an aristocratic existence could recapture the "primal freedom" of the Egyptian desert.[76] Moreover, in emulating the heroic asceticism of the desert, male patrician *vitae* also stress the importance of these noble saints as church administrators and theologians. The sacred biographies of the intellectual, cultural, and economic elite thus fuse both active and contemplative models of Christian piety. In their *vitae* these holy men supplant classical scholarly retirement (*otium*) with Christian asceticism and replace duty (*officium*) to the state with ministry to the poor.

Although Jerome does describe the radical conversion of a few of his male friends, most of his accounts focus on aristocratic women who substitute apostolic poverty for lavish ostentation.[77] Jerome's *Life of Paula*, for example, provides an excellent female parallel to his depiction of the senator Pammachius.[78] Just as Pammachius shows his contempt for worldly ambition by wearing the mourning toga instead of senatorial garb, so Jerome's disciple Paula obliterates the feminine vice of self-indulgence through her exchange of patrician silks for garments of fetid goat hair. Jerome constructs his sacred portrait of Paula by shrewdly altering established literary conventions of female piety, reworking the classical model of the Roman matron into a charismatic paradigm. Of course, not all such women aspired to the elevated piety of Paula. For those Roman matrons who disdained donning foul animal skins, Jerome's textual image of the ideal holy woman might serve at least as a figurative guide for the restraint of materialistic appetites by aristocratic females.

Classical rhetoric portrayed the ideal Roman matron as attractive, wealthy, well-born, fertile, and chaste.[79] This literary archetype of virtue

centered on female devotion to husband, family, household, and wool-working. A second-century BCE funerary inscription of a woman named Claudia propagates the matron prototype: "[Claudia] loved her husband in her heart. She bore two sons, one of whom she left on earth, the other beneath it. She was pleasant to talk with, and she walked with grace. She kept the house and worked in wool."[80] In his portraits of noble Roman women, Jerome appropriates the familiar literary paradigm of the deferential matron, but he uses it to champion Christian spirituality and asceticism over mundane domestic duty. According to Jerome's holy portrait, Paula is the scion of one of the most noble clans in Rome, and yet she rejects her lineage to embrace a spiritual family of ascetics, bishops, monks, and nuns. The widowed Paula replaces the love of an earthly husband with that of a divine groom; she abandons her children in Rome to nurse mystically the infant Jesus at Bethlehem. The matron works wool not with her daughters in Rome but with her spiritual sisters, the nuns of Bethlehem. She is such a devout philanthropist that she impoverishes her heirs to enrich the church. And the formerly stunning woman ravages her face and body so that she can become the repentant daughter of Zion who wears sackcloth and shaves her head (Isaiah 3.24). In this sacred biography, Jerome employs all the accepted feminine virtues—devotion to husband and children, charity, and physical beauty—to demonstrate how earthly values can be converted to celestial ones.

Jerome also uses his image of the spiritual Paula to castigate the universal degeneracy of womankind and admonish Roman matrons for their excesses. In the first half of the second century CE, the poet Juvenal's *Sixth Satire* savagely mocked the insatiable passions of upper-class Roman women to highlight the moral decline of the capital city. Juvenal provides a catalogue of the vices of imperial women: they engage in perverse sexual acts, abort the offspring of adulterous affairs, sadistically dominate men, disguise their putrid flesh with layers of makeup, and squander ancestral wealth on muscular gladiators and beauty lotions. Juvenal's elite trollops parody the chastity, modesty, and humility of archetypal Roman matrons.[81] Jerome, who in many of his writings reproduces Juvenal's misogynist rhetoric, asserts that the holy Paula attacked her body with a harsh ascetic regime to atone for the years she spent as a sensual woman who painted her face and pursued sexual pleasures. The newly austere matron marred her face with rivers of tears to repent the hours she previously had spent in frivolity. She replaced the jewels and silks she had worn in her debauched life with a coarse mantle of rank animal hair. Jerome's hagiographic depiction of Paula's ascetic exercises serves as a spiritual remedy for that corruption. His account of Paula—no doubt heightened and idealized to suit his exegetical purposes—detailed her transformation from a self-indulgent patrician into a philanthropic recluse and thus provided a model and inspiration for other aristocratic women who might also refashion their bodies into vessels of grace. The spiritual portrait of Paula assured them that they too could appeal to the restorative powers of the cross.

Sacred Models (3): The Pastoral Bishop and Cloistered Nun

The sacred models of pastoral holy man and nun transfer the *imitatio Christi* from the eastern deserts and Mediterranean capitals to the Gallo-Roman episcopacy and cloisters of northern Europe. One of the most influential early Gallo-Roman *vitae* is the fourth-century *Life of Martin of Tours* by Sulpicius Severus, an educated nobleman from Aquitaine.[82] Sulpicius produces a composite conception of the peculiar bishop by fusing Hebrew, Christian, and Roman portraits of exceptional men.[83] Martin (c. 336–397), in his sacred biography, administers monasteries, rules Christian communities, and engages in prophetic, ascetic, and charismatic feats.

In addition to writing the holy biography of his friend and mentor, Sulpicius accumulated an inventory of Martin's miraculous activities in a work known as the *Dialogues*.[84] In the *Dialogues*, Sulpicius proclaims the popularity of his saint, pointing out that his *Vita Martini* had circulated throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East and that, even during Sulpicius's own lifetime, zealous shoppers in Rome had fought over the remaining copies.[85] For emphasis, Sulpicius invents a conversation between himself and a friend who had just returned from Egypt. The author's companion confides in the hagiographer how universal was the appeal of Martin's *vita*: "I saw it being read by an old man in the desert. . . . When I told him that I was your friend he asked me to ask you for more miracles."[86] Sulpicius's apocryphal dialogue thus reverses the direction of ascetic discourse, which had been from East to West. No longer merely the student of the Egyptian fathers, Martin is now the master teacher of the eastern hermits.

In his textual depiction of Martin of Tours, Sulpicius adopts both biblical and extra-biblical spiritual prototypes and creates the monk-bishop *topos* that was to become the primary model for early medieval male saints.[87] He portrays Martin not only as a Hebrew prophet and Christ-like exorcist but also as a missionary apostle, a desert anchorite, and a pastoral

bishop. As Sulpicius relates, Martin, a Pannonian by birth, had quit the Roman army to embrace the life of militant self-denial and, by 372, was elected bishop of Tours. As a bishop, however, Martin had little in common with his aristocratic contemporaries who sat on thrones (*cathedrae*) and wore ceremonial vestments. Moreover, Martin's physiognomy was an anomaly among the elite bishops of Gaul whose refined lifestyles hinted at spiritual sloth. Sulpicius describes how Martin stood out among his colleagues: they were blind to his Elijah aspect and repelled by his looks, finding the holy man to be "a despicable individual and quite unfit to be a bishop, what with his insignificant appearance, sordid garments, and his disgraceful hair."[88] Although Martin was a consecrated member of an educated church hierarchy, his physical presence was that of an uncivilized Hebrew prophet.

The hagiographical construction of Martin presents the ascetic bishop as a biblical hero who could withstand poison, demolish pagan temples, and speak with the dead; amid these remarkable feats, he ably performed his pastoral duties. The hagiographer proclaims that his Martin outshines the Egyptian anchorites because, as bishop of Tours, he labors in the arenas of both contemplative asceticism and active ministry.[89] Sulpicius's portrait of the holy man as prophetic, nurturing, and dutiful represents Martin as a point of convergence of all Hebrew, Christian, and Roman virtues.

The successors to Martin's archetypal hagiographical image are other Gallo-Roman administrative bishops who imitate Martin's prophetic and pastoral style. For example, the fifth-century hagiographer of Germanus of Auxerre (c. 378–449) recounts how the future saint joined the ecclesiastical hierarchy after having been the secular governor (*dux*) of a province in Gaul.[90] The ex-governor's sacred biography connects him with the most austere Egyptian hermits as well as the most successful Roman politicians. Although he sleeps on an "Egyptian bed" made of pieces of sacking spread over rough wooden planks cemented with ashes, Germanus remains a judge, diplomat, and urban patron.

In a uniquely feminine manner, the *vitae* of Merovingian holy women also merge the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Sixth- and seventh-century hagiographers compiled a corpus of saintly biographies of noble women to instruct all females in the godly life of renunciation. These women, like their late Roman patristic predecessors, were mainly scions of aristocratic clans who abandoned families and wealth to become abbesses or nuns in important ascetic communities.[91] The hagiographers who immortalized the famous residents of these cloisters, such as Radegund, Sadalberga, Aldegund, and Burgundofara, endow the holy women with the powers possessed by the exotic Martin of Tours. Radegund of Poitiers protects her holy community with the *signum crucis*: "One of the sisters saw a thousand thousand demons standing on top of the wall in the form of goats. When the saint raised her blessed right hand in the sign of the cross, this whole multitude of demons fled, never to be seen again."[92] Her charismatic hair shirt resurrects a diseased child: "As soon as the infant's body touched the most medicinal garment and those noble rags, he came back from the dead to normal life."[93] Saldalberga of Laon experiences celestial visions of paradise reminiscent of the prophet Ezekiel's ecstatic revelations: "And he showed her the city of the most high God, and the seats of the twelve Apostles reddening with gold and gems."[94]

In addition to exhibiting charismatic power in their *vitae*, Merovingian holy women appropriate the consecrated powers and pastoral responsibilities of urban bishops. According to the life of the seventh-century mystic Aldegund of Maubeuge, a sleeping nun receives a vision of Aldegund standing before the altar in the place of a priest, breaking the eucharist and placing it in the chalice.[95] The life of the seventh-century Burgundofara of Faremoutiers claims that the abbess heard the confessions of her nuns three times a day and that she administered communion to a dying woman.[96] Holy women such as Aldegund and Burgundofara mirror the active ministry of Christian bishops by teaching, financing public works, administering cloisters, and procuring relics. Early medieval hagiographers depict female saints who perform many of the functions of the male priesthood, albeit with a subtle, gendered difference.

The hagiographical construction of early medieval female saints probes the limits of Christian paradox. Women's *vitae* contain extreme examples of self-mortification, ecstatic power, and apostolic ministry, yet these symbolic lives also promote a feminized sanctity. Like Jerome's Roman matrons and virgins who take up the cross as an indictment of worldly women, the transformation of Frankish noblewomen into receptacles of the Holy Spirit rebukes universal feminine vice. Hagiographical texts promote austere attire, charity, domestic servitude, self-mortification, and claustration as the spiritual remedies for female profligacy.

The anonymous author of the early sixth-century life of the ascetic Genovefa of Paris asserts that the repudiation of bodily adornment is a primary attribute of female sanctity. According to the *vita*, Bishop Germanus of Auxerre gave the young Genovefa a necklace made from a copper coin inscribed with the sign of the cross. The holy man instructed the child

always to wear this austere necklace, to think of him when she looked at it, and never to allow her body to be decorated with precious gems and pearls. Celestial ornamentation of the soul, the bishop cautioned the little saint, could only be achieved by eradicating earthly luxury.[97] Adult women saints, according to their *vitae*, reject the opulent clothing of the Germanic aristocracy in favor of goat-hair mantles, and they redirect the wealth of their noble families into the service of the church by embellishing altars, oratories, and saintly tombs.[98] The sacred portraits of these abstemious women validate the renunciation of a noble birth by emphasizing domestic servitude. Frankish hagiographers often portray cloistered women as charismatic housekeepers who perform domestic miracles, cheerfully clean latrines, dust altars, wash saints' crypts, tend the hearth, and minister at table. In addition, sacred biographies demonstrate how enclosure and asceticism remake carnal bodies into spiritual vessels.

Merovingian nuns discipline their rebellious flesh through gruesome acts of mortification. In fact, one of the most extreme descriptions of ascetic self-crucifixion is from a woman's *vita*.[99] In the sixth-century spiritual biography of Queen Radegund of Poitiers, the saint literally becomes a superhuman Syrian ascetic. She encircles her upper body with iron fetters, covers her limbs in goat hair, prays by the latrine, and burns the sign of the cross on her flesh with a red-hot crucifix. Radegund, like Jerome's Paula, atones for her former earthly life as a regal spouse through extreme asceticism and is thus transformed into a bride of Christ. The queen performs these rituals of self-torture inside a tiny cell, an enclosure that served to focus her charismatic powers, where she was endowed with the biblical gifts of healing the sick, resurrecting the dead, and exorcizing demoniacs.[100] The dual hagiographical images of self-flagellation and rigorous enclosure, in both Syrian and Frankish female *vitae*, empower holy women with the mysterious *charismata* of the male prophets, martyrs, and ascetics. The Merovingian corpus of *vitae*, like its desert and patrician equivalents, preaches austerity and enclosure as the focal points of women's power and presents the enshrined female body as a vehicle for the salvation of humankind.

Hagiographical discourse is a highly complicated, symbolic genre which serves a variety of cultic, mimetic, and educational purposes for both elite and popular audiences. Christian congregations absorbed the lessons of hallowed *vitae* through the mediums of written texts, liturgical performances, material culture, and art. Sacred biography, in all its various

forms, facilitated the creation, preservation, and extension of Christian sanctity in an era when there was no systematic, institutionalized process of identifying a saint. Hallowed lives played a crucial role in the development of late antique Christianity. Syrian, Egyptian, Roman, Greek, and Gallo-Roman hagiographers used biblical models in their narrative accounts of contemporary holy women and men to recast Palestinian culture in their own terms. Saints' *vitae* provided written testimonies to God's perpetual intervention in human affairs, even in locations as far away from Jerusalem as Tours, Kildare, or Durham. As a coercive discourse, intended to bend the recipient to its imperatives, hagiography dictated proper reverence for sacred behavior. The text of a saint's life, like a liturgical object or the eucharist, functioned as an earthly doorway to the divine because symbolic *vitae* united the faithful with God.

The three paradigms examined in this chapter illustrate the hermeneutical complexities of the genre of hagiography, for, on the surface, male and female models of sanctity share similar rhetorical strategies and biblical images. A careful reading of these texts, however, reveals the subtle differences between the portrayals of women's and men's lives. Whereas male sacred biographies reproduce the militant and prophetic powers of biblical heroes, female *vitae* duplicate the doubled-edged biblical *topos* of impenitent woman as sinful humanity and repentant woman as harbinger of universal salvation.

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