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Saints and Hagiography

Mark Humphries

Saints and society in Christian late antiquity

At the very beginning of the fifth century CE, the Spanish poet Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348-*circa* 405) composed his *Peristephanon* (*The Crowns of Martyrdom*), a set of sophisticated literary hymns praising a variety of martyrs (Palmer 1989; Roberts 1993). The work is very instructive both of the developing cult of saints in the Christian Roman Empire and of the ways in which the stories of these saints were told and retold. Among the most famous of Prudentius' martyr stories is his account of the third-century Roman martyr Laurence, who was roasted alive on a gridiron and taunted his tormentors to check if he was properly cooked (*Peristephanon* 2.406-8). The tale of Laurence's death was plainly popular, since not only is it reflected in Prudentius' poetic version, but is also probably depicted in a mosaic, which shows Laurence beside his gridiron, in the small chapel erroneously known as the 'mausoleum of Galla Placidia' at Ravenna in northern Italy (Deliyannis 2010: 78-9; Grig 2004: 136-41). The presence of a Roman martyr in a work by a Spanish poet indicates that some saints were being celebrated far beyond their original homes. Prudentius was particularly interested in Roman saints, and mentions others, including the apostles Peter and Paul (*Peristephanon* 12), and the girl martyr Agnes (*Peristephanon* 14).[1] In fact, Prudentius's vision stretches further to include martyrs such as the African Cyprian

[1] Prudentius invokes Roman saints also in a verse polemic against paganism, the *Contra Symmachum* (for the context, see Cameron 2011: 337-49). Its two books are dedicated to Paul and Peter respectively. The evocation of Paul as 'saviour of the race of Romulus' (*Contra Symmachum* 1, praefatio 80), echoes themes found in the *Peristephanon*, where the martyrs are often described as rescuing pagans from their heathen folly (e.g. *Persitephanon* 1.94-6, on the people of the Ebro valley converted from paganism; 2.413-84, where Laurence prays that the people of Rome might be delivered from worship of the pagan gods).

of Carthage (*Peristephanon* 13), the north-Italian Cassian of Imola (*Peristephanon* 9), and the Danubian Quirinus of Siscia (*Peristephanon* 7).

But the one of the most interesting aspects of the *Persitephanon* is the light it sheds on a string of Spanish martyrs, for whom Prudentius is often our earliest source. Some of these became quite celebrated, like the headstrong virgin Eulalia of Merida (*Peristephanon* 3), whose martyrdom is the subject of a famous painting by the English Pre-Raphaelite John William Waterhouse. But the majority are shrouded in local obscurity, like Emeterius and Chelidonius, martyrs of Calagurris (modern Calahorra) (*Peristephanon* 1), or the eighteen martyrs of Caesaraugusta (Zaragoza) (*Peristephanon* 4). Prudentius seems to have been particularly keen on Emeterius and Chelidonius: not only does his hymn praising them come first in the *Peristephanon*, but also a later poem in the collection describes a baptistery built on the site where they had been martyred (*Peristephanon* 8). About the martyrs themselves, Prudentius reports that they had been soldiers who renounced their careers for their faith, and who could not be persuaded to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods during an episode of persecution. They were immediately subjected to tortures, but held firm and died for their faith. Prudentius' account is often sketchy, and with good reason – for, as he reports:

> We are denied the facts about these matters, the very tradition is destroyed, for long ago a reviling soldier of the guard took away the records, lest generations taught by documents that held the memory fast should make public the details, the time and manner of their martyrdom, and spread them abroad in sweet speech for posterity to hear.
>
> (Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 1.74-8; Thomson 1949-53 trans., 2.105)

In Prudentius' view, however, the destruction of authentic court records of Emeterius and Chelidonius' trial meant only the loss of trivial details, such as how long the martyrs' hair grew during their imprisonment; altogether more important truths had been preserved by memory, and, more importantly, were re-enacted in the miracles that daily took place at the saints' shrine

(Grig 2004: 74-5). In other words, the absence of precise historical data relating to Emeterius and Chelidonius was no obstacle to their cult – or, indeed, to Prudentius writing his own 'sweet speech' about their martyrdom.

Prudentius' account chimes in harmony with other evidence for the developing cult of saints between the second and fifth centuries. This chapter will explore various manifestations of the cult, particularly the writing of hagiographical accounts of saints' sufferings and achievements. It will begin by outlining the basic categories of saints venerated in the early Christian period, before examining how such saints were recorded in hagiography. Neither the cult of saints nor hagiography traditionally have enjoyed much esteem among rationally minded historians. To Edward Gibbon (1737-94), that great son of Enlightenment reason, the cult of saints represented the worst excesses of medieval superstition. He wrote in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

> In the long period of twelve hundred years which elapsed between the reign of Constantine and the reformation of Luther, the worship of saints and relics corrupted the pure and perfect simplicity of the Christian model: and some symptoms of degeneracy may be observed even in the first generations which adopted and cherished this pernicious innovation (Gibbon, *DFRE* ch. 28).

Hagiography has fared little better, often being regarded as little more than a whimsical devotional literature that served to instruct the docile faithful in tales of the heroic age of the Church. It is only in the last century, particularly with the work of a scholars like Hippolyte Delehaye (1859-1941) and Peter Brown (born 1935), that the texts have been subjected to a more critical approach. Even so, the insistence of some scholars in dividing hagiographical texts into the categories of 'authentic' and 'fictional' (e.g. Barnes 2010) is less than helpful. While such a distinction is understandable, it obfuscates the reality (discussed below) that many (perhaps most) hagiographical texts, however much they sought to present a record of historical events, were shaped by the literary milieu and ambitions of their authors. More than that, as we will see,

hagiography sought to articulate intimate connections between dead saints and later generations of Christians. In short, this is a sophisticated literature deserving of serious appraisal.

From martyrs to ascetics

The founding myths of Christianity emphasise the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of humankind though the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Implicit in that story is a particular set of views about the relationship between the material and immaterial world, and specifically that earthly existence is but a prelude to an eternal hereafter. As a consequence, what mattered most was the soul, with the body acting only as a vessel for it during its terrestrial journey. But this did not mean that the body was unimportant: on the contrary, excessive indulgence of physical desires and appetites could seriously jeopardise the soul's progress to eternity. The apostle Paul had already spoken of a conflict in his body between spirit and flesh, of which the only hopeful outcome was deliverance 'from this body of death' (Romans 7:18-24) Viewed in these terms, the body could, like Christ's body, be subjected to torment so long as the purity of the soul was preserved intact. Furthermore, bodily torments could achieve greater perfection for the soul, because 'the [Holy] Spirit might grant the human body the supreme gift of endurance in the face of death' (Brown 1988: 82). This can be seen as central to the two major models of sainthood that emerged in the early Christian centuries: the martyr and the ascetic.

Emerging Christianity's earliest heroes were the martyrs, those who bore witness (the very name martyr is derived from *martys*, 'witness' in Greek) to Christian truth and salvation by willingly subjecting themselves to pain, torment, and death. In so doing, the martyrs vividly re-enacted the Christ's sufferings on the cross, and in turn could inspire other Christians to remain steadfast in their faith when facing persecution. Thus one of the earliest accounts of a martyrdom, that of Polycarp of Smyrna in the mid-second century,[2] recounts how the martyr

[2] For dating the martyrdom to 157 (and not the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus [i.e. 161-169], as Eusebius mistakenly does), see Barnes 2010: 367-73.

calmly awaited his fate 'just as the Lord did' so 'that we might become his imitators' (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1; Musurillo 1972 trans., 3). In a powerful demonstration of Paul's teaching that there was no distinction between male and female in Jesus Christ (*Galatians* 3:28), such performances were by no means solely a male preserve: when the girl Blandina was martyred at Lyons in 177/8, her brethren gazed upon her hanging from the gibbet 'in the shape of a cross … and with their outward eyes saw in the form of their sister Him who was crucified for them' (Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.1.41; Lake 1926 trans. 427). These actions exemplified the ability of Christians to prevail even when living amid a society that was hostile to them and which periodically unleashed persecution against them. A vivid explanation of the meaning of such sufferings is offered by the African Christian Tertullian, who had seen the horrors of persecution with his own eyes:

> Torture us, rack us, condemn us, crush us; your cruelty only proves our innocence. That is why God suffers us to suffer all this. … But nothing whatever is accomplished by your cruelties, each more exquisite than the last. It is the bait that wins men for our school. We multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed.
>
> (Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 50.12-13)

Such views help to explain how the sufferings of martyrs became emblematic of the history of Christianity under the pagan emperors. For Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), the experience of martyrdom was one of the four chief themes in his foundational narrative of Church from Christ to Constantine, alongside the succession of bishops, the preservation of orthodox faith, and the misfortunes experienced by the Jews because of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah (*H.E.* 1.1.1-3). Towards the end of the fourth century, the monk Jerome (347-420) too planned to write a history of the Church; although he never realised this ambition, some sense of what he intended can be gleaned from remarks in his hagiography of the Syrian hermit Malchus:

> I have decided to write an account of the Church of Christ from the coming of the Saviour down to our own time, in other words from the apostle down to the dregs of our

> own period, showing by what means the and through what agents the Church was born, and how it grew up under the persecutions and was crowned by the martyrs, and how, under the Christian emperors, it became more powerful and wealthy but less rich in virtues.
>
> (Jerome, *Life of Malchus* 1; White 1998 trans., 121)

Once more we can see how the experience of the martyrs epitomised an aspirational, virtuous age in the Church's history.

A ready supply of heroic martyrs relied, of course, on a hostile state, so the conversion of Constantine to Christianity and the development of the Christian Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries presented a challenge to Christian notions of sainthood and spurred a quest for a new focus of Christian heroism. It is about this time that we get a shift in emphasis from martyrs to ascetics, both those who lived solitary lives remote from society as hermits, and those who engaged in communal living, such as monks and, later, nuns (Brown 1971; Brown 1988: 213-58). Just as the martyrs signalled their rejection of conventional understandings of the relationship between body and society by undergoing tortures and execution, so ascetics advertised their disdain for the material world by enduring extreme privations of anything that could be construed as bodily comfort (ranging from sex to food to soft clothing, furniture, or washing). Their achievement of holiness through such acts was advertised by the performance of miracles: many holy men and women were credited with working wonders such as healing or prophecy or the divinely inspired destruction of pagan temples.

The reputations of such holy men and women spread rapidly. Just as the sufferings of martyrs provided exemplars for other Christians who might at any moment experience the rigours of persecution, so too ascetics provided models that could inspire other Christians to similar acts of holy privation. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) records such an instance in his spiritual autobiography, the *Confessions*. At a period in his life when Augustine was experiencing profound spiritual doubt – when, famously, he prayed to God for 'chastity and continence, but

not yet' (*Confessions* 8.7.17) – he records how stories of the famous monk (and prototypical ascetic saint) Antony of Egypt (251-356) galvanised him to persevere with his religious struggle. The impetus came from his friend Ponticianus, who related a story of imperial officials at Trier who came across a copy of the *Life of Antony*. One of them 'was amazed and set on fire, and during his reading began to think of taking up this [ascetic] life and leaving his secular post in the civil service to be [God's] servant' (*Confessions* 8.6.15; Chadwick 1991 trans., 143). In turn, Ponticianus' retelling of the story was to be important in nudging Augustine towards his spiritual goal (*Confessions* 8.12.29). Certainly, the *Life of Antony* circulated widely in a variety of versions: in Egypt it was found in Coptic and Greek (although the precisely relationship between these versions of the *Life*, particularly in terms of which came first, is a vexed issue: Barnes 1986; Louth 1988); it was translated into Latin twice by the end of the fourth century, thereby influencing westerners like Augustine. The translations of the Lives of numerous saints into languages other than those of their original composition (which includes not only Latin and Greek, but also a range of eastern languages such as Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian) became something of a growth industry, as accounts of an astonishing array of ascetic saints from monks and hermits to converted prostitutes were disseminated across the Mediterranean world and the Near East.

In later years, Augustine became bishop of Hippo Regius in Numidia. A hallmark of his episcopate was that he adopted an ascetic lifestyle, and for like-minded members of his community, he provided a monastic rule (Lawless 1987). This reflects a wider trend in the Christian Empire in the later fourth and fifth centuries, that saw Church leaders expected to adhere to ascetic modes of behaviour (Rapp 2005: 296-7). An important model in the West for this combination of the ascetic and bishop was provided by Martin of Tours (d. 397): according to the *Life of Martin* (ch. 9) written by his disciple Sulpicius Severus, it was precisely his reputation as a miracle-working ascetic that attracted the Christians of the Gallic city of Tours when they sought a new bishop. Once in office, Martin maintained his ascetic lifestyle, and established a

monastery outside Tours: from there his reputation spread, attracting his hagiographer Sulpicius Severus to visit him and adopt the ascetic lifestyle (*Life of Martin* 25; Stancliffe 1983: 10-19). In the impulse towards selecting bishops who were ascetic masters, we can detect anxieties about the virtue of Church leadership at precisely that time when Jerome, in his hagiography of Malchus, expressed concerns about the fortunes of Christianity in the Christian Empire. Yet while some bishops, like Ambrose of Milan, were successful in securing the appointment of their associates to neighbouring sees, Martin was not: it seems as if, at first, his brand of ascetic bishop was too exotic for his fellow churchmen in Gaul (Stancliffe 1983: 341-62).

It should be noted also that the success of ascetic sainthood depended in no small measure on its endless adaptability. The practice of asceticism had begun in the deserts of Egypt or in the arid limestone massif above Antioch in Syria, but this did not prevent it from spreading into regions where deserts were, in the strict sense, hard to find. Thus in western Europe, ascetics sought to recreate the removal from society that had been characteristic of their Egyptian and Syrian models in a variety of marginal locations. They might choose islands such as Lérins, lying off the French Riviera, chosen by the monk Honoratus for his monastery; hitherto it had been 'uninhabited because of its utter desolation and unvisited for fear of its venomous snakes' (Hilary of Arles, *Sermon on the Life of Honoratus* 3.15; Hoare 1954 trans., 259). Mountains like the Jura in Gaul, the Alps, and the Italian Apennines provided similarly remote locales in which ascetics could devote their lives to God.[3] That this was possible reflects how 'the desert' was as much a symbolic location as an actual one. Western views are neatly encapsulated in a work by Eucherius of Lyons in the mid-fifth century: having reviewed various instances of the desert as a place where monks, following the model of biblical figures like Moses, Elijah, or

[3] For the Jura, see the hagiographies collected in Vivian, Vivian, and Russell 1999; for the Apennines, consider the hermit Bassus mentioned in Eugippius, *Letter to Paschasius* 1; later, we find Benedict of Nursia similarly seeking remote locations in those mountains (Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 2.1.1).

Christ, could commune with God, he reserves special praise of Lérins as the epitome of the desert lifestyle ((Vivian, Vivian, and Russell 1999: 197-215).

But more than that, ascetics could live cheek by jowl with settled society, in monasteries or convents on the margins or even within urban centres. These were found dispersed throughout the Roman world by the fifth century, but with clusters in particular places such as the Egyptian and Syrian deserts where they had been so long established that it seemed, in a luminous phrase of Athanasius, 'the desert was made a city by monks' (*Life of Antony* 14, trans. Chitty 1966: 5). There came to be concentrations too in places like the Holy Land, particularly at Jerusalem, where ascetic communities could provide both guides and places to stay for pilgrims visiting the holy places (Chitty 1966: 46-64). In a reflexive turn, the monasteries and abodes of hermits themselves became the focus of pilgrim journeys, as enthusiastic Christians sought not just holy places, but also living embodiments of holiness in the shape of particularly celebrated ascetics (Frank 2000). The fifth-century Syrian bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus wrote a vivid *Historia Religiosa* listing many such individuals. In his prologue, he makes plain the utility of visiting them and of recounting stories of their achievements:

> How fine it is to behold the contests of excellent men, the athletes of virtue, and to draw benefit with the yes; when witnessed the objects of our praise appear enviable and become desireable, and impel the beholder to attain them. No middling profit, however, derives from the mere narration of such achievements, communicated by those who know of them to the hearing of those who do not.
>
> (Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa*, prologue 1; Price 1985 trans., 3)

Theodoret's work is only one example of a significant body of literature generated by this traffic to 'living saints', some of it presenting travelogues of visits to monasteries (such as the *History of the Monks in Egypt* [Russell and Ward 1980] or Palladius' *Lausiac History* [Meyer 1964]), some collecting the most inspirational sayings of monks and nuns (Harmless 2004; Ward 2003).

While there is a perceptible shift in the fourth century from martyrs to ascetics as models of sanctity, we should resist the temptation to draw a sharp distinction between them, or to see one as effortlessly supplanting the other. Even under hostile emperors, not every Christian could become a martyr, and there was already a strong ascetic impulse in early Christianity before the Constantine, as there was also, for instance, in Judaism and certain philosophical strains of paganism (Brown 1988: 37-40; Clark 2000). Many martyrs had manifested traits of renunciation that resembled that of later hermits and coenobites (Brown 1988: 204). Moreover, the idealisation of the martyrs as Christianity's greatest heroes who could inspire the faithful continued long after persecutions ceased. In a number of sermons delivered around 400, bishop Chromatius of Aquileia in northern Italy described the martyrs as an 'ornament of the Church' (*Sermon* 9.1) and noted how the blood of the martyrs was prefigured in the crimson cloak worn by Christ on his way to crucifixion (*Sermon* 19.2). Prudentius' *Peristephanon* attests to the same phenomenon.

But the relevance of martyrs represented much more than abstract idealism. Constantine's conversion was only a staging post in Christianity's journey to dominance; for much of the century (in some places longer) that followed, Christians coexisted with pagans, Jews, and others in relative peace. Yet there were occasional outbreaks of violence, as when a group of Christian missionaries in the high Alps above Verona met their deaths in conflict with local pagans, and were immediately venerated as martyrs (Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 52). A further consequence of Constantine's action was that, beyond the imperial frontiers, non-Christian polities increasingly came to view Christianity as synonymous with the Roman Empire, and regarded Christians in their midst with suspicion. We hear, for instance, of sporadic persecutions of Christians living among the Goths, sometimes in the wake of Romano-Gothic hostilities (Heather and Matthews 1991: 103-32). In no small measure, the Romans themselves encouraged this view: Constantine himself had written to the Persian king Shapur II (309-379) commending to him the Christians living in his realm since they were Constantine's responsibility as Christian

emperor (Eusebius, *V. C.* 4.8-14; Smith 2016); meanwhile, a major impulse for Christian conversion of the Goths came from the appointment of Ulfilas as bishop in Gothic lands by an imperial church council (Heather and Matthews 1991: 133-54).

Even within the Christian Empire, there remained opportunities for confrontation between Christians and the state as Roman emperors championed different versions of Christian orthodoxy and Church order. Those on the opposing side often saw themselves as still at risk of persecution and martyrdom. A particularly pronounced 'church of the martyrs' developed in North Africa as a by-product of the so-called Great Persecution inflicted on the Church by Diocletian from February 303. Once the purge ended, the question arose of what to do with those who had capitulated to the persecuting authorities. A hardline group, known as the Donatists, argued that such 'traitors' (*traditores*) should not be readmitted to the Church, but they found themselves in a minority, opposed by most churches in Africa and elsewhere. Nevertheless, they held firm, and soon found themselves victims of imperial repression. In response, they generated accounts of their own martyrs, in which otherwise unimpeachably orthodox Christian emperors (such as Constantine's son Constans) appear in unfamiliar guise as tyrannical persecutors, as well as producing their own distinctive versions of earlier martyr acts, such as those of Cyprian of Carthage (Tilley 1996).

The trend was wider, however. During the fourth century, many emperors championed the theological teachings of Arius, which had initially been condemned at the council of Nicaea in 325. Defenders of Nicene Christianity, such as the redoubtable bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, could suffer exile for their determined defence of what they regarded as Christian truth. In such circumstances, it was not difficult to imagine the spectre of persecution reviving once more. For example, the pro-Arian emperor Constantius II (337-61) exiled a number of western ecclesiastics who thought in precisely these terms: one, bishop Lucifer of Cagliari, penned a vituperative attack on the emperor called *On the Necessity of Dying for the Faith*; his fellow exile, the Gallic bishop Hilary of Poitiers addressed an angry polemic against Constantius

comparing him with the pagan persecutors of old, and even Antichrist (Flower 2016). Even when bishops remained in their cities, the merest whiff of heretical opposition could provoke lively imaginative recreations of persecution and martyrdom: such was the case in Milan in the mid-380s, where bishop Ambrose found himself locked in a power struggle with the heterodox court of the emperor Valentinian II (375-392) and his mother Justina. Once again, memories of persecution and martyrdom were conjured up, as Augustine tells us in an eyewitness report:

> Justina, mother of the young emperor Valentinian, was persecuting your servant Ambrose in the interest of her heresy. She had been led into error by the Arians. The devout congregation kept continual guard in the church, ready to die with their bishop, your servant. There my mother, your handmaid, was a leader in keeping anxious watch and lived in prayer.
>
> (Augustine, *Confessions* 9.7.15; Chadwick 1991 trans.: 164-5 [adapted])

Ambrose sought spiritual endorsement of his righteousness in the form of discovering, under divine inspiration, the bodies of hitherto unknown martyrs, Gervasius and Protasius, between whose skeletons the bishop remains entombed to this day (McLynn 1994: 209-19).

Writings on the saints

From what has been discussed so far, it is clear that saints, whether martyrs or ascetics, existed not only as objects as veneration, but also as the subjects of texts. A strong narrative impulse is clear in Christian writings from an early stage, with the creation of a gospel tradition already by the late-first century. While one of the chief influences on such texts was to demonstrate how Jesus' earthly ministry confirmed the prophecies found in Hebrew scripture (what became the Christian Old Testament), the texts, written in Greek, were influenced by a variety of models from ancient narrative literature. The different approaches taken by the authors of both canonical and non-canonical gospels in emphasising particular episodes of Christ's life echoes an approach taken to writing the lives of ancient historical figures adopted by the Greek Plutarch

(*circa* 46-120), who was writing roughly in the same period as the gospels took literary form. In particular, he wrote to offer inspiring moral lessons to his readers, by means of both positive and negative examples.[4] Moreover, his approach was self-consciously selective:

> if I do not record all their most celebrated achievements or describe any part of them exhaustively, but merely summarize for the most part what they accomplished, I ask my readers not to regard this as a fault. For I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues and vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or laying siege to cities.
>
> (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 1.1-2)

Such an approach, in which biographical details were selected because they were inspirational, can be found not just in the gospel tradition but also in the accounts offered of Christian martyrs and ascetics.

In the second century, Christians began to feel the need to create texts that dealt with the sufferings of martyrs, not only in terms of providing a narratives of how they had died, but also offering explanations of the meanings that should be attached to their deaths (Perkins 1995). The earliest extant examples come in the form of letters written from communities that had felt the grip of persecution to brethren elsewhere in the Empire: thus the account of Polycarp death was written as a letter 'from the church of God dwelling in Smyrna to the church of God at

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[4] The most explicit statement of this is in Plutarch's prefaces to his lives of the Corinthian *condottiere* Timoleon (*circa* 337–283 BCE) and the Macedonian king Demetrius Poliorcetes (337–283 BCE; king 294-288 BCE). He states that writing biographies allows him 'to treat history as a mirror, with the help of which I can adorn my own life by imitating the virtues of the men whose actions I have described' (*Life of Timoleon* 1.1); and that he aims to show the truth of an otherwise unattested dictum of Plato 'that great natures produce great vices as well as great virtues' (*Life of Demetrius* 1.7).

Philomelium and to all the communities of the holy Catholic Church everywhere' (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, preface; Musurillo 1972 trans., 3).These circulated widely, and can be seen to underpin the narratives of martyrdom that punctuate Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical* History: for instance, his account of the sufferings of Christians in a persecution at Lyons and Vienne in central Gaul in 177/8 is essentially a verbatim quotation from a letter sent by the Gallic Christian communities to their brethren in the provinces of 'Asia and Phrygia who have the same faith and hope in the redemption' (Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.1.3). The extent to which this epistolary convention became part of the accepted literary style of martyr texts can be seen from the way it was imitated in late accounts: a Greek narrative of a fourth-century Gothic martyr, Sabas, is couched as a letter from 'the church of God dwelling in Gothia to the church of God dwelling Cappadocia and all the other communities of the holy Catholic Church everywhere' (trans. Heather and Matthews 1991: 111 [adapted]): the verbal parallels with the preface to Polycarp's martyrdom could hardly be starker.

In some cases, these accounts of martyrdom owe something to court records, of the type which Prudentius claimed were destroyed for the sufferings of Emeterius and Chelidonius, although the extent to which the versions that survive are genuine is contestable (Barnes 2010: 54-66). It is clear that many of the surviving texts were significant literary elaborations of such bare court records. A famous example is the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, recounting the death of Christian lady and her slave at Carthage in 203, where a later redactor has skilfully blended elements of a confrontation in court with other texts, including a prison diary from Perpetua herself, which features an astonishing dream sequence in which she foresees her death in allegorical form (Barnes 2010: 66-74).

The purpose of such recastings was to make the martyr acts articulate a cogent message. The account of Polycarp's trail, torture, and death is redacted in such a way as to stress that Polycarp's sacrifice evoked that of Christ during his passion (Clancy 2009: 113-18). Thus Polycarp is arrested on a Friday and goes willingly with his captors, just as Christ had done at

Gethsemane (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 7). Moreover, the official who presides over his arrest and trial is called Herod, a parallel which prompts comment from the author of the text in its present form: 'destiny had given him the same name, that Polycarp might fulfil the lot that was appointed to him, becoming a sharer with Christ, and those who betrayed him might receive the punishment of Judas' (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6; Musurillo 1972 trans., 7). When Polycarp is condemned to be burned alive, he is threatened with being nailed to the gibbet, but rejects this quasi-crucifixion as unnecessary, since Christ's example will suffice to keep him steadfast (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 13-14). After the pyre is lit, the flames do not touch Polycarp, but instead encircle him so that he gives off an aroma like baking bread: here the text evokes both imagery of the Eucharist, and of the three Hebrews whom Nebuchadnezzar had tried to burn alive (Daniel 3). In the end, when the flames do not kill Polycarp, the executioners stab him with a dagger, at which point a great quantity of blood gushes forth from the wound, together with a dove (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16), evoking further episodes of Christ's death on the cross. That the civic official Herod shares the name of Jewish rulers reviled by Christians also points to the text's notable anti-Semitism: it is, for instance, the Jews of Smyrna who cry out (with their pagan neighbours) for Polycarp to be killed (again evoking gospel parallels); and it is they who enthusiastically assembled the pyre on which Polycarp was to be burned (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12-13).

Similar literary concerns can be found in the lives of ascetics. By combating demons, curing the sick, and performing miracles, ascetic saints could be presented as resembling Christ just as much as the martyrs (e.g. Stancliffe 1983: 363-71, for a survey of Martin's miracles). It is also clear that the authors of hagiography were keen to stress a connections between ascetics, and presented their lives accordingly. We saw that the *Life of Antony* was being read in the West already in the late-fourth century. In turn, this Life exercised a powerful influence over the authors of other hagiographies (Stancliffe 1983: 98-9). For example, Paulinus, who was asked to write a life of Ambrose of Milan by Augustine, noted that the commission required

> that I should follow the example set by those holy men bishop Athanasius and Jerome the priest, who penned the lives of St Paul and St Antony, dwellers in the desert, and by [Sulpicius] Severus, that servant of God, who composed the Life of Martin, the revered bishop of Tours.
>
> (Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 1; Hoare 1954 trans., 149)

Episodes in which a saint resembled a model like Antony might therefore be stressed by explicit citation. But the same effect could be achieved more subtly, by means of intertextual echoes, evoking the language in which the saintly archetype had been described. The collection of lives of monks who lived in the Jura mountains in eastern Gaul in the fifth century, for instance, have been shown to be patterned on the *Life of Antony*.[5] The purpose of such references and allusions was to stress that the monks belonged to a correct tradition. Indeed, one of the chief functions of ascetic hagiography was to present lives that provided a charter for their followers to emulate. Thus, in the middle of his hagiography, when Antony is asked by the monks of Arsinoe to provide them with instruction on how to live, he launches into a long speech that amounts to a monastic rule (Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 17-43; Rousseau 2000). The enormous literary outpourings associated with the fourth-century Coptic monk Pachomius reveals striking parallels between stories told about the saint in the various redactions of his *Life* and the monastic rules that emanated from his monasteries (Rousseau 1985: 106, 174-5). In short, anyone who read a life could aspire to live the life too.

Saints' lives were didactic texts, then, advocating a particular position among a number of other possibilities. For example, there was a lively genre of philosophical lives circulating in late antiquity, dealing with philosophers of the Neoplatonic tradition and penned by distinguished philosophers such as Porphyry and Iamblichus (Clark 2000). Some hagiographers plainly regarded this alternative as a target. Antony, for instance, is described as disputing with (and, of course, triumphing over) philosophers (Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 72-80). Suplicius Severus

[5] The commentary in Vivian, Vivian, and Russell 1999 highlights these links.

highlights the opposition in stark language in the preface to his *Life of Martin*, where he contrasts hagiography with secular biography: 'what does posterity gain by reading of Hector fighting or Socrates philosophising?' (*Life of Martin* 1). A Christian reader would do better to study Martin's life, it is implied – but Sulpicius Severus' language was so heavily laden with stylistic tics drawn from a number of classical Latin authors that the ancient past was, in a sense, always present his in writings (Stancliffe 1983: 58-61).

Even within Christianity, the various works of hagiography are also aware of that they should present saints who conformed to correct models, worthy of emulation. For example, martyrs should observe correct deportment: while martyrdoms might prompt other Christians to the ultimate sacrifice, there was always a risk that, when faced with the instruments of death, a candidate's nerve might fail. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* stresses this neatly: the first death in the text is that of one Germanicus, whose heroism inspires others. But one of the next candidates, a certain Quintus the Phrygian, immediately regrets his choice when confronted with wild beasts and succumbs to pressure to offer sacrifice to the gods; to make matters worse, Quintus had actually offered himself up as a martyr (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4). By contrast, Polycarp's calmness – joyousness, even – in the face of death makes it clear how a martyr *should* behave. As for ascetics, it is clear from the outset that they were expected to conform to the correct definition of orthodox Christianity. Thus Antony is presented as a vigorous opponent of the Arian heresy, even engaging in polemical disputations with its supporters (Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 68-70, 82, 86) – it can hardly be a mere happy coincidence that this adheres to the theological loyalties of the author of the life, bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. Similarly, the lives of Martin of Tours and Ambrose of Milan were written in the shadow of recent conflicts over orthodoxy in the West; once again, both saints are presented as unimpeachably orthodox.

It should also be noted that the authors of saints' lives sought to associate themselves with their subjects. Thus the various accounts of martyrdoms were often presented eyewitness accounts. The conclusion to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for example, contains a detailed account of

how the text came to be redacted. Similarly, numerous of the authors of lives of ascetics similarly stressed their affinity with their subject. At the end of his *Life of Antony*, Athanasius claims to have come into possession of a few pieces of the saint's property (ch. 92). Sulpicius Severus and Paulinus both claimed authority for their accounts on the basis that they had been associates of Martin and Ambrose (*Life of Martin* 25-6; *Life of Ambrose* 1). One of the most instructive of these lives about the relationship between author and saint comes in a text that might well be largely fictional, the *Life of Pelagia*, an Antiochene prostitute who converted to Christianity in the fourth century and lived out her days as a transvestite monk (under the masculine form of her name, 'Pelagius') at Jerusalem (Brock and Harvey 1987: 40-62). In large measure, Pelagia is a vehicle through which the author of the life, a priest called Jacob, articulates his views on a number of issues: he presents a gloriously vivid physical description of Pelagia decked out in her courtesan's finery in a passage which exemplifies the danger she poses in terms of carnal pollution. Of equal concern to Jacob are the activities of a bishop called Nonnus, a product of a Pachomian monastery at Tabennesi in Egypt, whose associate Jacob claims to be: it is Nonnus who looks upon Pelagia and sees her for the sinner she is; it is Nonnus who presides over her conversion and baptism; and it is Nonnus alone who knows that the monk Pelagius is none other than the former prostitute, and who instructs Jacob to seek her/him out when he visits Jerusalem. The Life, then, is as much about Nonnus as it is about Pelagia (Coon 1997: 79-82).

Of course, such closer personal connections could arouse suspicions that authors were exaggerating. Sulpicius Severus bookends his *Life of Martin* will expressions of anxiety in this regard (ch. 1) and an assertion that he is simply not up to the task of extolling Martin's sanctity, so great was it (ch. 26). This latter factor, in which the author protests his inadequacy to the task of recounting the saint's life is a well-known classical literary trope, the *captatio benevolentiae*, by means of which an author sought their audience's indulgence. It was a striking feature of Ciceronian oratory; it can also be found in a string of hagiographies from Sulpicius Severus around 400 to Eugippius, author of the Danubian-set *Life of Severinus* in the sixth century, and

beyond. Such special pleading could achieve interesting results. In a life he wrote of his sister Macrina, the Cappadocian father Gregory of Nyssa stated that he would not pile up accounts of her miracles, for fear that they would be disbelieved; but he manages to get around this obstacle by quoting at great length an account of one her miracles told to him by an unnamed military officer whom he met on his travels (*Life of Macrina* 36-9).

The development of cult: saints, place, and power

In one striking respect, Christian hagiography, whether it deals with martyrs, ascetics or any other category of saint, differed from secular accounts of individuals' lives: their accounts did not end with their subjects' deaths. On the contrary, both martyr acts and stories of saints often included lengthy descriptions of miraculous events that happened after their death and burial, and which were proof of their continued power and holiness. If death marked only the end of the earthly sojourn of the immortal soul in the mortal body, then it followed that the saint continued to live, in the company of their Saviour, for eternity. For that reason, the occasion of a saint's death was often recast as their *dies natalis*, their birthday, as the day in which they were born into the life eternal (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18).

A particularly vivid collection of post-mortem miracles is presented in Paulinus account of Ambrose of Milan. He was seen in visions in a number places after his death, not just at Milan but also at Florence, where his appearance galvanised the citizens when they were besieged by the Goths in 406 (Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 49-50). He was also seen in visions in Africa, where Paulinus was writing the work, and even struck down a bishop there who had disparaged his memory (ch. 54). For Paulinus, the message of such occurrences was plain, and they should be regarded as part of a continuum with Ambrose's achievements during his lifetime:

> I exhort and beg each person who reads this book to imitate the life of the holy man, to praise the grace of God and shun the tongues of slanderers if he wishes to have

fellowship with Ambrose in the resurrection of life rather than, with those slanderers, to undergo a punishment that no-one who is wise does not avoid.

Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 55; Ramsey 1997 trans., 218)

These accounts of post-mortem miracles demonstrate that hagiographical texts were a central element in a developing cult of saints, and were as essential to it as the shrines at saints' tombs. From tentative beginnings in the second century, the cult of saints expanded exponentially in the fourth and fifth centuries, as particular local churches actively fostered the memory of their saints, not least by means of a vigorous trade in relics, which were either body parts of saints or items that they had used (or, increasingly, objects that had come into contact with other relics) (Brown 1981; Clark 1999; Yasin 2009). We have seen how the discovery of the remains of Gervasius and Protasius was central to Ambrose of Milan's victories over his foes at the imperial court; in time, they became useful also for the greater glorification of the Milanese church, as relics of those saints (and others, like Nabor and Felix) were disseminated around Northern Italy (and as far as Gaul and Africa) as a sort of saintly buttress to Ambrose's personal influence (Clark 1999: 364-70).

Few places were as rich in saints or relics as the city of Rome, and the fourth and fifth centuries saw the cult aspects of the veneration of the holy dead on a whole new footing. Particularly under the pontificate of Pope Damasus (366-84), the tombs of martyrs in the catacombs were renovated and decked out with fine verse inscriptions extolling the holiness of earlier martyrs and Roman bishops (Sághy 2015). This focus on the saints helped also to recalibrate the city's calendar away from a litany of pagan festivals to one punctuated by the feast days of particular saints: evidence from the *Chronography of 354* suggests that this was already under way by the fourth century, although Christianity still had to compete with a range of secular festivals until the sixth century (Salzman 1990). Chief among Rome's saints were the apostles Peter and Paul, and their cult received particular attention from both popes and emperors. For the popes, their association with Peter in particular became a matter of more than

otherworldly concern, since by invoking Jesus' statement to Peter that he was the rock on which Christ founded the Church (Matthew 16:18), Rome's bishops could claim to have special authority over other churches across Christendom. This development was only fully articulated by bishops like Leo I in the fifth century, by which time Rome's claims to primacy were attracting competition, not least from Constantine's new imperial city in the eastern empire, Constantinople. As a new (re)foundation, Constantinople was bereft of important saints of its own; but throughout the fourth and fifth centuries we see emperors seeking to buttress their city's religious capital by importing the relics of a range of saints, not least those claimed to belong to apostles who had known Christ during his earthly ministry. That this was no insignificant matter is shown by the elaborate ceremonial that welcomed such relics, in which the emperor and the city's population participated alongside the clergy (Ward-Perkins 2012: 60-2).

The trends outlined here for great centres like Rome and Constantinople can be replicated across the Mediterranean world, where local calendars and local topography were marked by saints' feast days and shrines. Over time the popularity of the saints increased, not least among the Christian laity. Vivid evidence of their enthusiasm can be found in the practice of burial *ad sanctos* ('near the saints'), as Christians hoped, by being buried near a saint, they might share in the grace that flowed from those whom Peter Brown has called 'the very special dead' (Brown 1981: 69-85; Yasin 2009: 222-37). Tales of miracles occurring at saints' tombs become a more common feature of hagiography, attesting to how the saints were regarded as special intercessors between heaven and earth.

While this development of saints' cults was vigorous, it was not without controversy. Already in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* we see anxieties about the meaning of the veneration of saints when the text turns to discuss the fate of the martyr's body. Worries that veneration of Polycarp's relics might mean Christians 'abandon the Crucified and begin to worship this man' are placed in the mouths of local Jews; but the author of the text dismisses this as sheer folly: 'Little did they know that we could never abandon Christ, for it was he who suffered for the

redemption of thos who are saved, the innocent one dying on behalf of sinners' (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17: Musurillo 1972 trans., 15-17). In short, regarding the veneration of martyrs as somehow weakening faith in Christ is absurd; if anything, it gives additional focus to reverence for Jesus, whose salvific majesty is amplified by the martyr. Yet anxieties about cult honours did not dissipate. Athanasius' reports that Antony was horrified that he might be mummified, and that his body become an object of worship, so he gave instructions that the location of his burial be kept secret; none of this was an impediment to his cult, since fame of his holiness spread far and wide, not least through Athanasius' Life, and relics, in the form of Antony's paltry possessions, existed in any case (*Life of Antony* 90-3). Meanwhile, Sulpicius Severus reports that Martin of Tours, in addition to demolishing various pagan shrines, also purged Tours of a spurious saint's cult: near the city was an altar dedicated, so it was believed, to a martyr; but Martin was suspicious and, after praying to God for guidance, was gifted with a dream in which the person buried in the tomb revealed himself to be not a martyr, but a bandit (*Life of Martin* 11; Stancliffe 1983: 164). This insistence on distinguishing the authentic from the false will have served to underscore that any cult developing around Martin would of course be genuine.

In some ways, the cult of saints, and the hagiography that accompanied it, became a victim of its own success. A text preserved under the name of Pope Gelasius I (492-6), but perhaps the product of a church council in Gaul or Italy, offers a stern judgement on the proliferation of saints' lives: there are so many, and their authorship is so often uncertain, that injudicious use of them might lead to pollution by heresy (*Decretum Gelasianum* 4.4). This episode of wariness from the end of the early Christian period is an opportune moment at which to conclude this survey, for it demonstrates that the cult of saints and hagiography were not, as rationalist historians have argued, examples of the degeneracy of late antique Christian culture; on the contrary, they represent something of the dynamic creativity of the age. Moreover, this was a creativity that would be pursued throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, as notions of martyrdom and sainthood became firmly rooted in the Christian imagination.

Additional note: accessing hagiography in English translation

For the acts of the martyrs, there is a complete collection in Musurillo 1972. Unfortunately it is extremely unreliable (see Barnes 2010: 352-3), with poor texts, often inaccurate translations, and overall a lack of critical acumen. It badly needs replacing, but efforts to do so thus far have not come to fruition. Carolinne White has presented two volumes of saints lives. One (1998) contains many of the seminal lives, including those of Antony and Martin; the *Life of Antony* presented here, however, is not based on the Greek text of Athanasius, but on the Latin translation by Evagrius. The other (2010) assembles a range of texts pertaining to female saints, from Perpetua and Felicitas in the third century to a number of fifth century examples. Important series of translations encompassing hagiography include Cistercian Studies (Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo) and Translated Texts for Historians (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), though both contain a great deal of other texts as well. A useful collection of Syriac lives can be found in Brock and Harvey 1987. For western saints, the classic collection by Hoare 1954 is still serviceable, but needs updating in light of new critical editions of the texts.

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