



The Development of Hagiography and the Cult of Saints in Western Christendom to the Year 1000

Thomas Head
Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY

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The Roman Empire

The cult of saints was forged in the crucible of persecution to which the Roman government subjected early Christians. While the varied religions of the ancient Mediterranean world had their own diverse concepts of heroes and holy persons, scholarly attempts to locate the origins of Christian sanctity in specific facets of Roman religion or of Judaism have failed. To be sure, various aspects of the cult of saints bear functional similarities to antecedent religious practices and concepts, such as curing shrines associated with the Greco-Roman divinity Asclepius, sanctuaries dedicated to heroes such as Hercules, family feasts at the tombs of deceased ancestors, the popular cult of good luck, or Jewish ideas of sacred place. The Christian ideas of sanctity and saintly patronage, however, were intimately tied to unique Christian notions of the afterlife, an eschatology which involved an ultimate divine judgment of each person either to eternal salvation or to eternal damnation. It was those promises and perils which encouraged the earliest Christians to persevere in their faith during almost three centuries of periodic but often severe attacks by local and imperial authorities.

Those Christians who suffered execution because of their faith were called martyrs, a word derived from the Greek term (*martus*) for witness, because in the manner of their deaths they bore the ultimate witness to the name of Jesus Christ. Martyrs were the first Christians to be honored as saints. Christian communities began at an early date to collect and preserve stories of the sufferings which they endured. By the middle of the second century, independent works were circulated concerning the martyrdoms of specific individuals. It is in these "passions" or "acts" of the martyrs that we find the origins of Christian hagiography.

The earliest extant example of the genre is an anonymous work in Greek concerning the [Martyrdom of St. Polycarp](#), a bishop of Smyrna (Izmir in modern Turkey) in the province

of Asia Minor who died circa 155. Some writings of the bishop survive, attesting to the great stature he had attained in both his own and neighboring communities. The *Martyrdom* provides a vivid eyewitness testimony to Polycarp's suffering and death recorded by his disciples. The bishop was remembered as having answered the Roman governor, "The fire you threaten me with burns merely for a time and is soon extinguished. It is clear you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgment that is to come, which awaits the impious." The Christian eschatological equation could not be rendered more simply or directly. For Polycarp and other martyrs, it was preferable, indeed desirable, to accept the proximate sufferings and tortures offered by the Roman government in order to avoid the punishments ordained by divine judgment.

The account of Polycarp's martyrdom goes further, for it records how the Christians of Smyrna gathered up the bishop's bodily remains "dearer to us than precious stones and finer than gold [which] we buried in a fitting spot." They then gathered together as a community each year "to celebrate the anniversary day of his martyrdom, both as a memorial for those who have already fought the contest and for the training and preparation of those who will do so one day." Quite likely they recited an early version of the *Martyrdom* as part of these liturgical celebrations. Here we glimpse the very origins of the cult of saints. For Polycarp was not regarded as holy in the manner of ordinary martyrs; his community had subtly but definitively changed the meaning of that term by raising him to the rank of a designated "holy person," that is a saint, through commemoration of a shrine to his relics and a feastday in his memory. Already they urged future generations to imitate the heroic example offered by the executed bishop.

Over the course of the next century and a half, the varied Christian communities of the Roman empire came to do what that of Smyrna had done: raise up the memory of select martyred heroes from their own ranks. Cities great and small had their favored sons and daughters. The great port of Carthage in North Africa celebrated the sisters Perpetua and Felicity, as well as its bishop Cyprian; tiny Nola near Naples in Italy nurtured the memory of its bishop Felix. Rome, as the imperial capital, had perhaps more martyrs than any other community. Greatest of its saints, from an early date, were Peter, chief of the apostles and first bishop of Rome, and Paul, the great convert and apostle to the Gentiles. By unintentionally giving the impetus for the cult of martyrs, the imperial persecutors unwittingly provided one of the chief means through which Christian communities created a sense both of identity and of historical consciousness.

In the second decade of the fourth century, in the wake of one of the most severe of all persecutions, the fortunes of Christianity changed. Beginning with a victory over a rival at the Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine gradually gained control over the Roman Empire. The following year an imperial edict granted Christians freedom of religious expression. Persecutions, at least within the empire, were at an end. Although it is difficult to say exactly when the new emperor converted to Christianity, he was consistently supportive of the religion and used it as part of his strategy of consolidating and maintaining control of the empire. Christianity quickly achieved a position of dominance among the creeds and philosophies of the Roman world. Traditional religion

was in retreat. In 382 the statue of Victory, the divinity symbolic of Rome's military power and success, was removed from the meeting hall of the Senate. Temples to the old gods were closed in the imperial capital and elsewhere, frequently transformed into Christian churches. In 392 an edict of the emperor Theodosius effectively rendered the practice of the Roman religion illegal.

The triumph of Christianity was complete. In little over a century, what had been a persecuted minority sect had come to be the imperial state religion. It was not, however, total, for throughout the empire there were still, and would be for some time, adherents of the ancient divinities, but their religion came to be known as paganism, that is the religion of the *pagenses* or countryfolk. Bishops launched campaigns designed to root out such idolatry. As Maximus of Turin (d. ca. 415) remarked in a sermon, "Hardly anyone's field is unpolluted by idols, hardly any property is kept free from the cult of demons."

The official expansion of Christianity over the course of the fourth century led to a similar growth in the cult of the martyrs, which had hitherto remained fragmented and local. A calendar of Christian feasts dedicated to these saints developed, a cycle of sacred time which intentionally rivaled the old Roman calendar of secular festivals. The list of people honored on these feastdays was called the canon of the saints. While it varied to some degree from region to region, many feasts--such as those of Peter the chief apostle or of Stephen the first martyr--became universal among all Christian communities. Following traditions established in Roman North Africa, bishops exercised authority over the canon used in their own diocese.

Feastdays and shrines were the public expression of the cult of the martyrs, but there were private expressions as well. People strove to have the bodies of their relatives buried close to those of recognized saints. For on the day of judgment those very bodies were to be reunited with the souls of the saints. Would it not be prudent to have one's own body and the body of those one loved in the same vicinity? Moreover, the power of the martyrs extended well beyond the boundary of the grave. When Paulinus of Nola (d. 431) decided to inter the corpse of his son near the shrines of martyrs in his native land, he remarked, "We have sent [the body of my son Celsus] to the town of Complutum [Alcala in modern Spain] so that he may be joined near to the martyrs in his tomb and so that in proximity to the blood of the saints he may draw forth that which refines our souls like fire."

Shrines were also built over the tombs of the sainted martyrs. These *martyria* were located in cemeteries scattered outside city walls, for Roman law and custom both militated against the burial of human remains within the urban community of the living. Ancient Roman legal practice was reaffirmed in 381 in a law which read in part, "All bodies that are contained in urns or sarcophaguses and are kept above ground shall be carried and placed outside the City, that they may present an example of humanity and may leave to the homes of citizens their sanctity." Constantine himself sponsored a church over the traditional site of the tomb of Peter on the Vatican hill, across the Tiber from Rome, as well as other churches not only in Rome, but in the northern imperial capitol of Trier. The patronage of the martyrs was closely associated with the region in which they had died. As Maximus of Turin noted, "All the martyrs, therefore, are to be

very devoutly honored, but the ones whose relics we possess are to be especially venerated by us. For they all help us by their prayers, but these help us also by their suffering." Slowly relics were brought in from the suburban cemeteries to the cities themselves. One of the first instances occurred in Milan, where in 385 Bishop Ambrose (d. 397) announced the discovery of the relics of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius and then moved their bodies to a newly completed cathedral in the city center. (Click [here](#) for the text of the letter in which Ambrose described the discovery of the relics of his sister.) In creating this urban shrine, the bishop effectively challenged the deeply rooted Roman sense--expressed in the law of 381--of the pollution which a corpse presented when near the habitats of the living.

Families gathered at the tombs of the martyrs to hold banquets in their honor. These feasts were in some sense a continuation of the Roman custom of the *refrigium*, meals shared at the graves of the ancestors. The calculus was, however, crucially altered. For the Romans held their picnics on the shores of the hereafter in order to provide sustenance to the pathetically suffering shades of their forefathers and foremothers. Meat and drink were poured out on the ground, real food for unreal, or at least insubstantial, people. Where "pagans" had once given succor to their dead, Christians partook of their feasts in order to celebrate, and hence to gain the assistance of, deceased martyrs. Now it was the dead who would aid the living. The clergy, however, sometimes demurred at lay practices. In the *Confessions* (6.2), Augustine recalled how Bishop Ambrose had criticized the homage which Monica made at the tombs of the martyrs, although there was no one closer to Augustine's heart than his own mother. Later, as bishop of Hippo, Augustine complained about people who returned home drunk from feasts held at martyrs' shrines.

While the legends, feasts, and shrines of the martyrs certainly formed the foundation for the cult of the saints, by the fourth century martyrs were no longer the only saints. The end of the official persecution of Christianity within the empire had greatly reduced the opportunities for martyrdom. To be sure, Christians would continue to suffer death as witnesses to their faith in the wake of foreign invasions and raids, or during the course of missions to non-Christians, or even as the result of violent disagreements among Christian sects. The churches of the fourth century, however, were generally secure and powerful communities which had a need for new ideals to add to the exemplar offered by the martyrs. These communities now had to learn to live with success. They also had to learn to live with dissent, for a variety of controversies splintered Christian communities into rival sects. Those who considered themselves to be the upholders of traditional orthodoxy, or "correct teaching," branded groups like the Arians and the Donatists as heretics. The Donatists, however, held up their own martyred colleagues for veneration as saints, rejecting the canon of the orthodox or Catholic Church.

The orthodox found appropriate new models of heroic Christianity in the monastic movements which were at that time experiencing spectacular growth throughout the Mediterranean world. The strict self-denial of asceticism had always played a significant role in Christianity. It was in monasticism, however, that its role became institutionalized. Disillusioned with what they perceived to be the vanity of ordinary society, monks (the

word comes from a Greek term *monachoi* meaning "those who live alone") abandoned the settled life of towns and cities in favor of the Egyptian desert and other desolate places. There they created an alternative society devoted to prayer and rigorous ascetic discipline. They sought to purify their souls and their bodies through spare diet, frequent fasts, life-long chastity, lack of personal property. Their life was passed in a silence which was often broken for prayer but rarely for personal conversation. Others adapted the monastic life to varied circumstances. Some women, for example, lived as consecrated virgins or widows, alone or as part of small communities, thus creating their own desert within the city. In the highlands of Anatolia, some men went to even further extremes than the desert monks, erecting small platforms on the tops of pillars. There these stylites (so-called from the word for column) practiced their ascetic discipline literally nearer to God, as well as in full view of any who came to observe. Varied and extraordinary acts of self denial marked ascetics as holy and also separated them from the sometimes suffocating ties of family and community, from the petty power of bureaucrats and professionals. Villagers and townspeople, jaded by their own dull routine, perceived the ascetic friends of God to be charismatic figures possessing great sacred power. Removed from society, the ascetics came to influence it by settling disputes, dispensing charity, counseling the troubled, and healing the sick.

Some of those who endured the so-called "white" (that is bloodless) martyrdom of the ascetic life came to be celebrated as saints. One of the earliest was Anthony (d. 356), a young man from a wealthy family who abandoned his inheritance to become a hermit in the desert wastes and abandoned pagan temples of Upper Egypt. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) celebrated his story in a work designed to teach both the monastic life and orthodox Christianity to others: "Read these things now to the other brothers so that they may learn what the life of the monks ought to be . . . And if the need arises, read this to the pagans as well, so they may understand by this means that our Lord Jesus Christ is God." Many other hagiographic works about the Egyptian monks came into circulation, including the anonymous collection entitled *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* and Palladius' *Lausiac History*. They helped to spread monasticism east to Palestine and Syria and then, via Latin translations, west to the provinces of Gaul (modern France) and Iberia (modern Spain). The heart of the new hagiography was didactic; the new type of saints came to be known as confessors, those who confessed or taught the faith.

By the early fifth century still more types of Christians came to be included in the canon of the saints under the rubric of confessor. Most were clerics: bishops and other men who held an official position within church hierarchies. This clericalization of sanctity occurred more fully in the Latin west than in the Greek east, where only a few great patriarchs of this period, such as Athanasius, were considered as saints. This process also points to the ways in which gender helped to construct ideals of sanctity, for women were completely excluded from such clerical offices. Although Christianity accepted the general misogyny of the Roman world virtually from its inception, a large number of the earliest saints were women. Martyrdom, after all, was little dependent on gender, for Roman authorities made few attempts to treat women more kindly than men when sending Christians to the lions. In the canon of martyrs, Agnes, Cecilia, and Lucy stood alongside Linus, Cletus, and Clement. The shift to an ascetic ideal of sanctity began to

narrow the access of women, for in the late antique world women were viewed as being by nature less capable of living such a spiritual life than were men. Despite misogynist social attitudes and ecclesiastical regulations, however, there were many women involved in the ascetic movement. Some of these in turn came to be regarded as saints. The theologian Gregory of Nyssa, for example, composed a [*life of his sister Macrina*](#), who had become a learned student of scripture while living as a consecrated virgin. But he and others who composed the lives of saintly women stressed that their heroines had to overcome the natural incapacities inherent to their gender. One common element of the hagiography of this period was a much repeated story in which a female saint was forced to disguise herself as a man in order to live the monastic life. With the change to a more clerical ideal of sanctity in the west, women were even more fully excluded from the paths of sainthood during the fifth and sixth centuries.

A new type of saint emerged in the late fourth and early fifth century in both western and eastern Christendom. Men like Martin of Tours, Porphyry of Gaza, and Augustine of Hippo were seen to be saints not only for their asceticism and their miracles, but for what they did as bishops. (Several older translations of these texts are available on-line: Sulpicius Severus, [*Life of St. Martin of Tours*](#) and Mark the Deacon: [*Life of Porphyry of Gaza*](#)) Most bishop-saints, however, were also formed in a profound manner by asceticism. When Martin converted to Christianity, he abandoned his military career for a life as a monk, becoming a bishop only later as a result of the renown which he gained from his ascetic discipline and charismatic powers. The influence of Athanasius' [*Life of St. Anthony*](#) also reached Augustine, who, in his [*Confessions*](#), tells us that he avidly read and that he consciously modeled his own experience of conversion on that of the Egyptian monk. Indeed Augustine portrays his introduction to Athanasius' work as one of the key moments in the process of conversion: "When then I had told [Pontitianus] that I bestowed very great pains upon those Scriptures, a conversation arose (suggested by his account) on Antony the Egyptian monk: whose name was in high reputation among Thy servants, though to that hour unknown to us. Which when he discovered, he dwelt the more upon that subject, informing and wondering at our ignorance of one so eminent. But we stood amazed, hearing Thy wonderful works most fully attested, in times so recent, and almost in our own, wrought in the true Faith and Church Catholic. We all wondered; we, that they were so great, and he, that they had not reached us." While Martin and Augustine led part of their lives as ascetic recluses, once they became bishops they left behind the "holy leisure" of asceticism and tirelessly labored as pastors to protect their flocks. Stories about Martin's efforts to uproot idolatry in the countryside or Augustine's struggles against heretics showed how the soldiers of Christ did battle on behalf of ordinary people entrusted to their care.

These two saints had very different posthumous careers. Augustine's prolific writings made him the most influential theologian in western Christianity for many centuries. He was quickly and widely recognized as a saint, but there was no shrine for his relics and no major cult dedicated to his memory. Martin's posthumous reputation, on the other hand, was based on his miraculous powers. Pilgrims flocked in increasing numbers to his tomb outside of Tours, which soon became the most important shrine in the province of Gaul. The cult of Martin was also dispersed throughout the west in the form of numerous

churches dedicated to his name. Similarly Sulpicius' life of the saint, a work of great literary sophistication but also of palpable excitement and zeal, became perhaps the most influential of all works of Latin hagiography. As Athanasius had provided a model to Sulpicius, so he provided a model to all later authors in a work which became in the process a virtual mine of stereotypic phrases and themes. The cult of Martin was the archetype for later saints' cults in the west.

The fall of Rome to the Goths and the great Germanic settlements of the fifth century permanently changed the character of life in the western Roman empire. The mantle of imperial rule was gradually replaced by a patchwork quilt of small kingdoms dominated by individual tribes. Augustine himself was profoundly affected. In the last decades of his life he produced the towering edifice which is *The City of God* as a reply to pagans who blamed Rome's downfall on its conversion to Christianity. The bishop died before the Vandals captured and destroyed his city. He thus escaped, and probably never fully envisioned, the full effects of the migrations. Roman imperial authority passed remarkably quickly in the west. In 476 a German general deposed Romulus Augustulus, who was the last to claim the title of emperor in the west.

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The "barbarian" or successor kingdoms (sixth through the eighth century)

By the end of the fifth century the descendants of the imperial aristocracy had become the subjects of Gothic, Vandal, and Frankish kings. In this new world order, men from the old Roman elite turned to ecclesiastical careers as a means of retaining and exercising power. The saints of the fifth and sixth centuries were largely bishops of this sort who guarded the Roman population against their new German overlords, succeeding with the use of divine power where the secular power of the empire had failed. Germanus of Auxerre (d. 448) not only battled metaphorically against Pelagian heretics, as had Augustine, but literally took to the battlefield against an invading army of Alans who had been given permission by a Roman general to pillage part of Gaul. Anianus of Orléans (d. c. 453) used miraculous powers and visions to defy Attila and his Huns until a Roman army arrived to relieve the siege of his city. Fulgentius of Ruspe (d. 533) forged his theological opposition to Arianism into a powerful political weapon to be wielded against the Vandal rulers of North Africa. Hagiography was steadily taking on a public function.

Many of the relics in the far along provinces of the Roman world, and thus in the successor kingdoms to that empire in the west, were the bones of martyrs imported from Italy or Iberia. A good example is provided by the relics of varied Roman martyrs whose reception at Rouen (located in Normandy in modern France) in 396 was recorded by Bishop Victricius in a panegyric. But many of the most prominent saints of the provinces

were local martyred bishops, such as (in Gaul) Julian of Brioude, Trophimus of Arles, and, most important of all, Martin of Tours. The saintly patrons of this age were not, however, exclusively bishops. Geneviève of Paris (d. 502), a consecrated virgin who had been inspired to follow the religious life by Germanus of Auxerre, rallied the people of her city against the invading Huns in 451. The growing stress on patronage also affected the memory of older saints. In Tours a new church was built over Martin's tomb in the 460s. An inscription presented the hopes of the pilgrims who came there, "When you have bowed down to the earth, your face sunk in the dust, your wet eyes pressed to the beaten ground, raise your eyes, and, with a trembling glance, perceive wonders and commit your cause to the best of patrons. . . Ask for [Martin's] assistance: it is not in vain that you knock at this door." It was an enticing message to a people wracked by war.

The Gallo-Romans regarded their saints as one of their chief bulwarks against the invading Germans. As they converted to Christianity, however, the Franks themselves enthusiastically adopted the cult of relics. Clovis, for example, allegedly endowed the church which housed the relics of Martin. Over the course of the sixth century, the Franks tightened their grip on Gaul, but Christianity, particularly in the form of the veneration of saints, tightened its grip on the Franks.

The greatest chronicler of the cult of saints in the early Frankish kingdom was Bishop Gregory of Tours (+595). A man of proud lineage who counted a martyr and a saintly bishop among his ancestors, Gregory himself was a bishop and one of the leaders of the Roman population of Gaul, now ruled by the Franks (who gave their name to the kingdom of France). A prolific author, he produced the monumental *Ten Books of Histories* and eight linked collections of miracle stories (for translations of selections from these *libri miraculorum* click [here](#)). The bishop's purpose was above all else pastoral, that is to provide the Roman community of Gaul with a record of its glorious Christian past which would serve as a comfort and a guide in the rather more difficult present. While he recorded the lives of many saints, it was the posthumous presence of long-dead men like Martin of Tours and Germanus of Auxerre which dominated his world. The shrines of saints were special places: their walls were adorned with hangings and murals depicting scenes from the lives of the saints; candles and incense burned ceaselessly before the shrine; pilgrims jostled one another for physical contact with the holy tomb, going so far as to spend the night sleeping over the remains. People did not only come into the presence of the saints to be cured, they also swore oaths to end feuds or begged the saint's support on the judgment day. In return the faithful presented their prayers, deposited offerings, or provided service to the saints. Gregory saw his own writings as a means of repaying what Martin had done for him, hoping that they would serve as propaganda and thus "gain for [Martin] such veneration as befits a friend of God, who has so often restored us to health when we have been stricken by so many kinds of severe illness."

Gregory's work confirms that the veneration of relics had become central to the practice of Christianity and one of his goals was to endow the cults of local saints with trustworthy histories. The shrines of the saints were special places: their walls were adorned with ornate hangings and murals depicting scenes from the lives of the saints;

candles and incense burned ceaselessly before the shrine; pilgrims jostled one another for physical contact with the holy tomb. One common practice was incubation, that is sleeping on the grating which covered the tomb. But people did not only come into the presence of the saints to be cured, they also swore oaths in an attempt to end feuds or begged the saint's aid at the final judgment. Gregory himself hoped that on that day the angels would say of him, "This is a man on whose behalf St. Martin petitions."

Romans were not the only clients of the saints discussed by Gregory. The Franks had, beginning with their king Clovis (d. 511), converted to orthodox Christianity. Clovis himself endowed the church of Martin at Tours, while his widow Clothild retired to that city to be close to Martin's tomb. Martin was slowly transformed from the patron of Tours to the patron of the Frankish kingdom. The relic of the saint's cloak, cut in two to clothe a beggar in a famous episode recorded in his life, came into the possession of the Frankish royal family. It was jealously guarded by the clerics of the palace, where it gave its name (*cappa*) to the private church or "chapel" where it was enshrined. Over the course of the sixth century, the Frankish nobility followed this royal example and gave lavishly to the saintly patrons celebrated by Gregory. While saints of Frankish origin were conspicuously few in the works of Gregory, the Franks had largely been converted to Christianity. Venantius Fortunatus (+ca.601), bishop of Poitiers, celebrated saints among the women of the Frankish aristocracy. Foremost among them was Radegund (+587), a queen who had left her husband and the court for ascetic retirement in the convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers. Fortunatus composed his memorial of Radegund shortly after her death. Over two decades later Baudonivia, a nun of the Holy Cross, composed a second life. A short time thereafter an anonymous nun of Chelles recorded the life of Balthild, another Frankish queen converted to the monastic life. These two women were probably the earliest female hagiographers in the Latin west. The cult of the saints became one of the main avenues through which the Franks became enmeshed in the practice of Christianity.

If Gregory of Tours was one of the most eloquent expositors of the logic of saintly patronage, the logic of saintly asceticism still had its proponents in the west, none stronger than Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604). In a rambling and endlessly fascinating collection of stories known as the *Dialogues*, Gregory celebrated the memory of the holy men, and less commonly women, of central Italy. They were ascetics who abandoned the cities for lives as hermits and monks in the wild valleys of the Appenines. Typical of their conversion was that experienced by Benedict of Nursia (d. c. 540), author of the famed *Rule* for monks and later celebrated as the father of western monasticism: "[His] parents sent him to Rome for a liberal education. But when he saw many of his fellow students falling headlong into vice, he stepped back from the threshold of the world in which he had just set foot. For he was afraid that if he acquired any of its learning he, too, would later plunge, body and soul, into the dread abyss. In his desire to please God alone, he turned his back on further studies, gave up home and inheritance and resolved to embrace the religious [i. e. monastic] life." (The second book of Gregory's *Dialogues*, that is the section on Benedict, is available [on-line](#).) At first glance Benedict and the other subjects of Gregory's work look much like Anthony and the monks of the Egyptian desert. Their world, however, was much different. Living in a land dominated by Goths

and Lombards—who had converted to Arian, rather than orthodox, Christianity—their asceticism served as a form of political protest which strengthened the resolve of the Roman community. Like the bishop of Tours, the bishop of Rome dwelt at length on the miraculous powers possessed by his heroes. Benedict, for example, worked miracles to cure the sick, chastise lax monks, and free the prisoners of Arian overlords. Moreover, Gregory emphasized that Benedict continued to work these miracles after his death. Thus was patronage married to asceticism.

In the eastern Mediterranean, which was less affected by the Germanic migrations, the pre-invasion traditions of ascetic sanctity survived. There the Roman empire continued to flourish as the predominantly Greek-speaking state ruled from Constantinople, known to us as the Byzantine empire. Eastern saints of the sixth and seventh centuries were largely of well-established types: stylites (such as [Daniel of Anaplos](#) and Alypius), monastic leaders (such as Sabas and Theodosius the Cenobiarch), charismatic bishops (such as John of Alexandria and [Theodore of Sykeon](#)), female virgins who disguised themselves as male monastics to protect their chastity (such as Anastasia or [Matrona of Perge](#)), and martyrs who died in the course of invasion or religious persecution (such as the female martyrs of Najran or Maximus the Confessor). Many widely-disseminated collections of saints' lives, such as the *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschos or the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* of John of Ephesus, consciously harkened back to the tradition of the legends of the Egyptian desert. While the cult of relics was well developed in Byzantium, even more important was the veneration of icons of the saints. These images, usually paintings but some in other media, contained and projected the posthumous power of the saints in ways similar to relics. In the eighth century, however, widespread opposition to icons grew, splitting Byzantine Christians into iconoclast (anti) and iconodule (pro) factions. The agony of the Iconoclast controversy—which ended by supporting the orthodoxy of the veneration of images and thus securing the central place of icons in eastern Christianity—led to a reexamination of the function of sanctity and ultimately to new ideals of sainthood.

An ascetic sanctity also flourished far to the west, in Celtic Ireland. Through the efforts of Patrick that land was converted to Christianity in the first half of the fifth century. Monasticism was quickly adopted along with the new faith and came to be the focus of Christianity in Ireland, recruiting large numbers of both men and women. The ideals of the Egyptian desert mingled with native concepts of holiness, such as the magical powers of the druids and the charismatic poetry of the bards. What emerged was a unique form of monasticism, especially severe in its ascetic rigor, but tempered by a boundless enthusiasm for the wonders of the natural world. On the plains of eastern Ireland, for example, a sanctuary dedicated to the fertility goddess Bríg was replaced by St. Brigit and the community which she founded at Cell Dara. The nuns served, like the priestesses before them, as custodians of an eternal flame. Another distinctive aspect of Irish monasticism was its itinerant character. In contrast to the continental tradition, where a fixed abode was the norm, many Irish monks and nuns undertook long pilgrimages in which they wandered from place to place spreading the message of the monastic life and of Christianity itself.

Over the course of the sixth and seventh centuries Irish monks crossed over to Scotland and England, where they helped to convert the Celts and Anglo-Saxons to Christianity and to found a native monastic tradition; to the Frankish kingdom on the continent, where St. Columbanus and his followers implanted a distinctive new brand of monasticism; and on to Italy, where those monks helped to convert the Lombards from Arian to orthodox Christianity.

The hagiographic tradition which recorded the saints of Irish monasticism, in both the Latin and Irish tongues, was itself a unique blend of Mediterranean literature and Celtic folklore. Alongside stories derived from the traditions of Anthony and Martin, one encounters wonder-working animals such as otters who loyally served the saints, as they once had served the heroes of bardic verse, as messengers to the otherworld, retrieving sacred books lost in a lake or tenderly drying a holy man's body after a night of ascetic immersion in the frigid ocean. There were also tales of epic journies in which saints traversed the vividly portrayed seas and coastlines of the North Atlantic, encountering terrifying monsters, edifying visions, and venerable hermits. In *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, for example, the abbot and his "co-warriors in Christ" sailed leather boats called coracles for seven years "glorifying God in all things" and learning lessons of the religious life. The holy men and women, such as Brendan and Brigit, who founded the great centers of Irish monasticism would never be mistaken for the aristocratic Roman saints celebrated by Gregory of Tours.

Until the end of the sixth century, sainthood in western Christendom remained (at least on the continent) largely a Roman domain, despite the political and military dominance of the Germanic rulers. Gregory of Tours was an aristocratic Roman who wrote about Roman saints. Saints of Germanic heritage were conspicuous by their virtual absence from his works. The situation, however, began to change as, over the course of the seventh century, numerous men and women of the Frankish aristocracy came to be viewed as saints. They represented a new type of sainthood, dubbed by German scholars *Adelsheiligkeit* or "noble holiness," which was representative of and attractive to the ruling elite. One of the first of these new saints was Queen Radegund (d. 587). When she learned of her husband Clothar I's plans to murder her brother, she abandoned him and life at the royal court for a politically and religiously acceptable retirement at the convent of the Holy Cross which she founded in Poitiers. There she pursued a life of ascetic service to her fellow nuns and the poor of the surrounding community, while retaining and often using her ties to the leading ecclesiastics of the realm. Her life was recorded by two writers, the second a nun of her own community named Baudinovia who was almost certainly the first female hagiographer. The Frankish female saints of the seventh century were, like Radegund, largely abbesses; the men were almost all bishops. Many had distinctly Germanic names: Balthild, Sadalberga, Rictrude, Wandrille, and Arnulf. Others bore traditional Roman monikers, such as Sulpicius and Eligius, signs that the old Roman elite had by now been almost entirely absorbed through intermarriage into the Frankish ruling classes. In the process the Franks had largely adopted a form of Latin as their spoken tongue, a language known as a Romance vernacular. Although literacy itself was confined to the clergy and the most elite among the lay aristocracy, the stories of the lives

and miracles of these saintly Frankish nobles would have been understood by the laity when read out as part of the liturgy.

Sprung from aristocratic stock, these saints occupied positions of power within the church and society at large. Their efforts were to provide some semblance of Christian order in an often brutal world: denouncing the abuses of kings, organizing the distribution of charity, settling disputes, converting the countryside, providing sanctuary. These were people of action who tempered their often turbulent careers with a rigorous dose of asceticism learned from wandering Irish monks. Noble blood and ascetic self-denial provided twin roots to a considerable charisma. These were figures whose blessings and curses carried weight among their contemporaries. Their words could destroy the trees sacred to pagans or save fellow travelers from shipwreck. In these men and women, the memory of Martin had been updated and transformed. An ideal of Germanic sanctity had been born.

Such saints were not limited to the Frankish kingdom, although the thirty-odd saint's lives which were written there between 600 and 750 easily outnumber those extant from the rest of Europe. The Visigoths of Spain were converted from Arianism to orthodox Christianity in the last years of the sixth century. The Lombards of Italy followed suit in the early seventh century, in some part due to the heroic efforts of Irish monks. Some native saints were celebrated in both lands. The list of hagiographers even includes the Visigothic king Sisebut (d. 620).

The religious landscape of the western Mediterranean, however, was irrevocably changed with the expansion of Islam in the last decades of the seventh and first decades of the eighth century, military campaigns which extinguished the Christian kingdoms in North Africa and much of the Iberian peninsula. The boundaries of Latin Christendom were thus slowly being defined by geopolitical change. To the north, however, those boundaries had long been expanding. Among their other accomplishments, some of the Frankish *Adelsheilige* undertook missionary activities along the boundaries of their kingdom. In Flanders to the north and Bavaria to the east, followers of Columbanus and his Irish monastic ideal such as [Eligius of Noyon](#), Emmeram of Regensburg, and Kilian of Worms reimplanted Christianity in formerly Roman lands where the Germanic migrations had largely uprooted it. The process of conversion had a secular aspect as well, for it paved the way for absorption of these lands into the Frankish kingdom.

Nowhere were missionary efforts more successful, however, at producing a Germanic Christian culture than in England. The Roman province of Britain had been home to a lively Christian community. In the middle of the fifth century Germanus of Auxerre was welcomed there as a champion of orthodoxy, while its native son Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland. The invasions of the Angles and Saxons, however, drove out much of the Roman population and nearly extinguished the practice of Christianity in much of the island. For, unlike the Goths and Franks who entered Roman territory on the continent, these tribes did not soon convert to any form of Christianity. In the late sixth century missionaries came to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from two sources. One group were wandering Celtic monks, who founded monasteries in the north. The second were

Roman priests sent by Pope Gregory the Great who established a beachhead of sorts in the south around Canterbury. Despite bitter disputes between the two parties, the Christianity which took over England in the course of the next century was a creative fusion of Roman and Irish ideals.

One result of that fusion was the development of a native tradition of sanctity. Later generations remembered the founders of new Christian communities and institutions as saints. For, unlike the continent, there were few shrines which survived from the Roman past. The cult of the saints had to be reinvented from the ground up. These new saints included a wide variety of types: abbots who founded monasteries (Benedict Biscop), monks who were called to work as missionary bishops converting the countryside (Wilfrid and Cuthbert), kings who were martyred by pagan rivals (Oswald and Edwin), hermits who wrestled demons in fetid bogs (Guthlac), queens who retired to monasteries (Etheldreda). They were the creators of a new Christian tradition. Their relics were enshrined in an effort to create a Christian topography of sacred places. The memory of their lives was recorded primarily by monks, for the most vibrant spiritual and intellectual centers of Anglo-Saxon Christianity were monasteries such as Jarrow and Whitby where Celtic asceticism merged with Roman learning. These produced a remarkable cadre of scholarly hagiographers. Head and shoulders above the rest stands Bede (d. 735) who brought to his lives of saints--such as [Cuthbert](#), Benedict Biscop, and the [Abbots of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow](#)-- the same discerning eye for both truth and detail which marks his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. While one can certainly identify Roman, Celtic, and even Frankish elements in this Anglo-Saxon hagiography, it is a novel and surprisingly independent tradition. Its heroes are just that, men and women who share much in common with the aristocratic protagonists of such Old English epic poems as *Beowulf* and the *Battle of Maldon*. They moved in a world little formed by the Roman empire, structured rather by the obligations of blood and caste, gift-giving and pillaging, feasting and feuding. It is no accident that the earliest hagiography composed in a Germanic tongue is to be found in the Old English of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

One trait that is common to the traditions of sanctity from the late Roman, the Frankish, and the Anglo-Saxon worlds is nobility. For the great majority of saints came from the families of the aristocracy. In both late Roman cities and Germanic kingdoms, it was largely people of high birth who were allowed to pursue careers of power and prestige. The society of western Christendom was governed by secular and clerical hierarchies which cooperated closely. When the Anglo-Saxon aristocrat Wilfrid decided that he could no longer bear to remain in his father's entourage because of the abuses of his stepmother, he undertook an ecclesiastic career. This he began not as a priest serving a church, but as a noble with an entourage of fellow warriors in the court of Queen Eanflæd where "he requested that he be allowed to serve God with her counsel and under her patronage." The traditions of hagiography and the practices of the cult of saints reaffirmed connections among holiness, charisma, and noble blood which were deeply rooted in both Roman and German societies. The saints' lives of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages assumed that spiritual virtue could not be easily developed by those who did not also possess an illustrious lineage. Thus did Christianity help to legitimize the dominance of an hereditary elite over other groups, both free and unfree.

This collection does not contain any examples from the seventh-century traditions of hagiography in the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon realms. Those works serve, however, as the background to many of the saints' lives which follow. For, over the course of the eighth century, Frankish aristocrats and Anglo-Saxon monks collaborated in two mutually dependent undertakings of enormous scope and momentous achievement: first, the conversion to Christianity of those Germanic peoples who had remained largely outside the Roman sphere of influence, and secondly, the creation of a new empire in the west based on Roman traditions, but ruled by Germanic emperors. The creative mixture of Roman, Christian, and Germanic elements was continuing.

Beginning in the last decade of the seventh century, Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns migrated in great numbers to the continent where they preached Christianity to still pagan Germanic tribes. They worked among peoples—the Frisians, the Thuringians, and, most importantly, the Saxons—spread in an arc along the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom from the North Sea to Bavaria. The missionaries were inspired in part by a sense of kinship with these peoples and in part by the wandering ideals of Celtic monasticism, in essence taking up the missionary project from the disciples of Columbanus. The Anglo-Saxon monks were also true to the Roman side of their dual Christian ancestry, however, for in these regions they established new bishoprics with close ties to Rome. A pattern to this work soon developed. The missionaries first constructed small churches served by monks, both Anglo-Saxons and native converts. These were often located on pagan sanctuaries or in the remains of long abandoned Roman and Christian foundations. Next came more ambitious monasteries for the training of more missionaries, communities such as Fulda and Korvei. Nunneries were also established as the regions became pacified. Finally, the monastic leaders became bishops of newly created dioceses, journeying to Rome to receive their blessings and regalia from the pope.

The task was not an easy one. Tribal leaders resisted the changes, often violently. They recognized that conversion was simply a prelude to political domination by Christian kings. The Saxons destroyed some thirty missionary churches in 752 alone. Opportunities for heroism and even martyrdom were easily found by this new generation of soldiers of Christ. Not surprisingly many were recognized as saints. For lands newly Christianized, a local, if not precisely native, saintly canon was thus established. The subjects of no less than five of the lives included in the present collection were Anglo-Saxon missionaries who left their English homes for work on the continent: Willibrord of Northumbria (d. 739), Boniface of Crediton (d. 754/5), Willibald of Essex (d. 786), Leoba of Wessex (d. 780), and Willihad of Northumbria (d. 789). The presence of Leoba among them, as well as the presence of Hugelberc—an Anglo-Saxon nun from the German nunnery of Heidenheim—among their hagiographers, signals the important role played by women in the second generation of the movement. The work begun by Anglo-Saxons was carried on by continental Germans, some from neighboring regions, others local converts. Sturm (d. 779), whose life may also be found in this collection, was from a Bavarian Christian family who, as a disciple of Boniface, labored as a missionary in Hesse and then was consecrated by his mentor as the first abbot of Fulda. Eigil, Sturm's biographer and successor, and Anskar, the biographer and successor of Willihad as bishop of Bremen,

were also Germans of the second and third generations of missionaries. (For a translation of Rimbert's *Life of St. Anskar* click [here](#).)

The posthumous presence of these recently deceased saints was also important in lands which lacked a long Christian heritage. Boniface's monastery at Fulda, for example, made the tomb of its founder the focus of its church. That sanctuary also functioned as a cathedral for the surrounding region. The monks continued to enshrine more recently deceased saints, such as Sturm and Leoba. But throughout these borderlands, newly founded monasteries and episcopal sees also eagerly sought to obtain relics of saints of an older vintage, most especially martyrs. They obtained these from the ancient Roman cities of Italy, Spain, and France. The monks and clergy of these regions recognized the spatial and temporal distance which separated them from the venerable traditions of the saints within the Roman empire. In 836, for example, the monastery of Korvei in Saxony obtained relics of St. Vitus from Saint-Denis, the royal monastery of the Merovingians located near Paris. A monk of Korvei remarked that, since his fellows had constructed their community "among barbarian peoples" and so had no relics of a saintly patron, they had turned westward "for there are many relics in the land of the Franks."

It was not only bones which came to Saxony from the lands of the Franks. Through the efforts of the Anglo-Saxon and German missionaries, the vast lands between the Rhine and Elbe rivers had been largely Christianized and pacified by the last decade of the eighth century. The missionaries had worked with the enthusiastic patronage and support of the Frankish kings. In the process, closer ties had been forged between the Frankish court and the popes in Rome.

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The Carolingian world

In the middle part of the eighth century, a momentous dynastic change took place in the Frankish kingdom. The Carolingian family replaced the Merovingian kings who had ruled since the time of Clovis. The papacy in turn provided the sacred means of justification required by the upstart Carolingians when Stephan II consecrated Pippin as king of the Franks in 754. Even before that date the Carolingians had begun an ambitious program of territorial expansion. Lands were added to the Frankish realm in every possible direction: to the east in Burgundy and Bavaria, to the south across the Alps and Pyrenees in Spain and Italy, and also to the north in Frisia and Saxony. There conversion had led to annexation. On Christmas Day in the year 800, Charlemagne, the greatest leader of the Carolingian dynasty, was acclaimed emperor in the city of Rome. He was the first man in over three hundred years to bear that title in the west; he was also the first German ruler to be bold and confident enough to assume that Roman title. A German empire had been born in the west, but with Roman and Christian roots.

Within the Carolingian empire, an ambitious reform of government and religion was undertaken in the first half of the ninth century. Scholarly clerics were recruited from all corners of western Christendom to aid the Carolingians and their warlords in governing their empire. These reforms enforced clerical control over lay religious practices, particularly in the realm of the cult of saints. In the *Admonitio Generalis* of 789, Charlemagne ordered that "the false names of martyrs and the uncertain memorials of saints should not be venerated." Five years later, the bishops whom the emperor gathered at Frankfurt were more explicit: "No new saints should be honored or invoked, nor shrines to them erected on the roads. Only those saints are to be venerated in a church who have been chosen on the authority of their passion or on the merit of their life." The effect of such legislation was an examination and sharp reduction of the canon of saints

honored in most regions. To be sure, Alcuin and other court scholars undertook to write the lives of such heroes of the missionary movement as Willibrord. Outside of the newly Christianized lands, however, few people came to be recognized as new saints over the course of the ninth century. There were some exceptions, notably Benedict of Aniane (d. 821), who as the chief leader of monastic reform within the empire was celebrated as a saintly exemplar of the religious life. According to one survey, some forty-five lives had been composed in Neustria during the seventh century celebrating contemporary figures as saints. By contrast, only ten lives of such recently deceased saints were written in the eighth century, while the number dropped to a mere eight in the ninth.

The contours of hagiography changed dramatically in the ninth century, reflecting the spirit of Charlemagne's religious legislation. The "passions and lives" mentioned by Frankfurt were hagiographic texts. In response to the perceived need for written documentation for the cults of saints, Carolingian clerics produced many works celebrating the saints of the now distant past. Thus Hincmar of Reims wrote about Remigius, Hilduin of Saint-Denis about Dionysius, and Alcuin of York about Vedast, to cite only some of the best known examples. They were forced to piece together bits of written and oral tradition, along with *topoi* borrowed from ancient and respected works of hagiography, such as Sulpicius Severus' (d. c. 420) life of Martin. These works were intended in part as spiritual reading for clerics and in part for a liturgical purpose, that is to be recited on the feastdays of such patron saints. In the ninth century Latin could still be understood, at least in a rough and ready way, by the lay populace in those regions where a Romance, rather than a Germanic, vernacular language was spoken. The laity was part of the audience. Hilduin composed his life of Denis at the request of Emperor Louis the Pious. Hincmar recognized the dual clerical and lay audiences of his work when he marked his life of Remigius with two symbols, one indicating those passages to be recited to the laity, the other indicating those which were to be reserved for the learned.

The ninth century also witnessed the widespread composition of hagiographic works which concerned the posthumous veneration of saints' relics. Monks compiled collections of miracles performed at the shrines of many saints, such as that of Benedict of Nursia at the monastery of Fleury and that of Philibert at the monastery of Noirmoutier. Those shrines were central to the identity and to the economy of the monastic houses. Legal documents specified Fleury, for example, as "the place where St. Benedict rests." When members of the aristocracy made donations to a monastery, the legal documents specified that the gift was made not to the monks, but to their patron saint. The number of pilgrims who came to monastic shrines could be quite large, particularly on the feast day of the saint. Some monastic churches, however, remained closed to women and special arrangements, such as the construction of wooden tribunes outside the cloister, had to be made in order to allow female pilgrims close access to reliquaries. Saints not only provided cures and mediation to their friends, but they also were thought capable of wreaking miracles of chastisement on those noblemen who chose to steal their property. Adrevald of Fleury, for example, recorded how his fellow monks had brought the relics of St. Benedict to Count Odo of Orléans in a vain attempt to stop the nobleman from

plundering their lands. When Odo died in battle, his demise was interpreted as the judgment of God.

Monks compiled collections of miracles performed at the shrines of such saints as Benedict of Nursia at the monastery of Fleury and Richarius at Saint-Riquier. The enthusiasm for relics was not confined to those saints traditionally enshrined in France. Many relics of martyrs were obtained from Italy and Spain, or even other regions of France. In 836, for example, the abbey of Neuvillers in Alsace obtained relics of St. Adelph from Metz because "in our region it was most rare to find bodies of the saints." Numerous translation accounts survive which document these journies. Some authors, such as Einhard, described these relics as the objects of what they termed "holy thefts" (*furta sacra*), a *topos* which suggested that the relics had been carried off to a new home under the inspiration and guidance of the saints themselves.

The reforms instituted by Carolingian rulers and bishops at synods such as those held at Frankfurt (994) and Mainz (813) did much to transform the cult of saints. First, attempts to regulate liturgical practice resulted in the composition of many new martyrologies by such figures as Florus of Lyon, Ado of Vienne, Hrabanus Maurus, and Notker the Stammerer. The most influential of these was the work of Usuard, which eventually formed the basis of the Roman martyrology compiled in the sixteenth century by Caesar Baronius. Secondly, attempts made to regulate the veneration of relics provided each bishop control over the cult of saints in his diocese and led indirectly to the composition of numerous hagiographic works concerning traditionally venerated saints, such as Dionysius of Paris and Remigius of Reims. Thirdly, a number of canons required that every consecrated altar in a Christian church must contain relics and suggested that oaths be sworn over reliquaries. These decrees increased the demand for fragmentary relics. Indeed relics came to be encased not only in altars, but in such objects as the throne of Charlemagne, as well as the hilt of Durendal, the mythical sword of Roland.

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The End of the Early Medieval World

By the last quarter of the ninth century the Carolingian empire was dissolving. Internally it was wracked by feud and civil war. Its lands were also the target of Viking, Slavic, and Arab raiders who came to plunder its wealth or enslave its inhabitants. Many monasteries were pillaged or destroyed, the relics of their patron saints moved to new shrines. The tale of the monks of Noirmoutier who wandered up the Loire river as far as Tournus with the relics of St. Philibert is one of the best known. By the late tenth century two great kingdoms, Germany and France, had emerged from the rubble of the Carolingian empire. At the same time the fabric of western European society was radically altered in a process which some historians have labeled the "feudal transformation" or the "birth of Europe."

The Viking raids of the tenth century caused major disruptions in all phases of public life in France. As numerous monasteries were pillaged or destroyed along the its riverways, the relics of many saints were moved to new homes. The story of the wanderings of the monks of Noirmoutier, carrying the relics of their patron Philibert as they journeyed as far as Tournus in their search for a safer home, is one of the best known. Relatively few lives of saints, either historical or contemporary, were composed during this period. The most important exception was Odo of Cluny's life of Gerald of Aurillac. Odo portrayed this count as a novel type of saint, the Christian knight (*miles Christianus*). Gerald never

entered the religious life, but he practiced a life of prayer and asceticism, while using his political and military power to fight injustice and protect the clergy and the poor. An important part of Odo's message was that a noble might lead a life pleasing to Christ, by providing for the peace and defending God's church. Gerald was certainly noble, for Odo went to pains to demonstrate (or, quite possibly, to invent) the fact that the count was descended from St. Caesarius of Arles, and thus had both senatorial and saintly blood in his veins. Odo himself was also considered to be a saint and his life was composed by a Cluniac monk, John of Salerno. In a sense these two works portrayed the twin faces of an emerging clerical ideal of the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical aristocracies. Both became influential models: Hariulf of Saint-Riquier (+1143) had Gerald in mind when he composed the life of Arnulph of Soissons, while Rodulphus Glaber (+ca.1047) turned to the life of Odo as a model when portraying Abbot William of Volpiano. Odo's was a message geared to a time of violent confrontation between the secular and ecclesiastic aristocracies. But it was a clerical ideal intended for a clerical audience, for by the middle of the tenth century few laypeople could still comprehend Latin as even a spoken language.

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