



Hagiography

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The term **hagiography** is derived from Greek roots (*hagios*=holy; *graphe*=writing) and has come to refer to the full range of Christian literature which concerns the saints. The scope of that literature has been breathtakingly wide over the course of two millennia of Christian history, including such genres as lives of the saints, collections of miracle stories, accounts of the discovery or movement of relics, bulls of canonization, inquests held into the life of a candidate for canonization, liturgical books, sermons, visions, and the like. These works have been composed not only in the official clerical languages of the Christian churches, such as Latin and Greek, but in the full range of vernacular languages as well. Works of hagiography, in this sense of the term, have been written by Christians from at least the middle of the second century of the Common Era to the present day. The middle ages, however, was a particularly fruitful time for the composition of hagiography, and hagiographic texts remain particularly important to our understanding of the history of medieval Christianity and society. The focus of this essay, and of the other essays which I have prepared for ORB in connection with it, is on the middle ages, and in particular on western Christendom. (Two good places to search for material related to hagiography in eastern Christendom are the [Internet Medieval Sourcebook: Saints' Lives](#), edited by Paul Halsall and the [Survey of Translations of Byzantine Saints' Lives](#) compiled by Alice-Mary Talbot. The term "hagiography" and other terms related to sanctity, such as "saint," have specifically Christian roots, but have been adopted by modern scholars and practitioners to apply to parallel practices in other religious traditions. See my ORB essay [Christian Sanctity in Comparative Perspective](#).)

Before proceeding further with a consideration of hagiographic texts composed in the middle ages, it is important to note that the term "hagiography" can also be used to refer to the modern discipline of studying such writings. In these current usages, the term hagiography is a term of relatively modern vintage. Medieval writers usually used cognate terms to refer instead to the "holy writings" of the Bible. The Greek word *hagiographa*, by contrast, was used in late antiquity to specify one of the three divisions of the Hebrew scriptures. Similar usage continued in medieval Latin: Notker the Stammerer (+ ca.890), for example, used the word *hagiographi* to refer to the "holy writings" of the Bible. The systematic study and criticism of writings about the saints

began in the seventeenth century with the work of clerics of the Congregation de Saint-Maur and the Société des Bollandistes (who are still very active scholars and who maintain a site on the World Wide Web, click [here](#)). It was only then that the term "hagiography" came to refer to this new discipline and its subject matter, in what might be called its modern sense.

Hagiography can only be understood with reference to the concept of sanctity and to the practice of the cult of saints. For medieval Christians saints were those "holy people" (*sancti* or *sanctae* in Latin) who had posthumously entered the kingdom of heaven. According to certain theological definitions of sanctity, anyone who entered heaven was a saint. In practice, however, Christian communities honored only a limited number of people with the title of saint. Crucial to such official recognition of sainthood was the celebration of a feast which marked the day of the saint's death, that is the day considered to be that person's birth into the kingdom of heaven. Thus in practice a person becomes a saint only when he or she is accepted as such by an audience and provided the blessing of an institutional authority. In late antiquity and the early middle ages, bishops controlled the celebration of such feasts. By the thirteenth century the papacy came to assert its authority over this process (or canonization as it came to be known) for the western (or Roman Catholic) Church as a whole. More limited cults, however, continued to be fostered at the local level, while varied forms of episcopal and imperial authority continued to be decisive in eastern (or Orthodox) churches. Because of the varied ways through which the veneration of saints could be authorized, there was and is no single universally authoritative list of Christian saints. Rather there are many lists, litanies, and calendars of the holy people given public honor by Christian institutions and communities in varied times and places. Hagiography played a pivotal role in this process, for the very composition and use of a hagiographic text implied that its subject has received institutional recognition. The very composition of a hagiographic text does serve as evidence, however, that its subject once received some form of such public honor. The celebration of a feast or the existence of a relic shrine are other indications of officially sanctioned status as a saint. In practical terms then, the living holy man or woman only gained sainthood when accepted by a community of believers and blessed by an ecclesiastical authority. In one important sense sanctity is thus a social construct, and as such the ideals and practice of sanctity changed, often greatly, over the course of time and place in Christianity.

One of the most important factors in the changing character of sanctity over the course of the Middle Ages was gender. The recognition of, or more importantly the failure to recognize, women as saints betrays many of the misogynist traits typical of medieval society and culture. While most medieval theologians conceded a theoretical equality between men and women in their ability to be saved, they almost uniformly saw men as more likely to practice the virtues necessary for salvation. Moreover women were excluded from the Christian clergy and thus from the callings which produced the majority of saints recognized during certain periods. Throughout the Middle Ages women were a distinct minority among those Christians whose reputation for holiness received public celebration and thus earned for them the title of saint.

Saints were venerated long after their deaths and thus long after memory of them had faded. The most common type of hagiography, that is lives of saints (*vitae*), served to record the actions which had formed and demonstrated their holiness. Excerpts from such lives were often read out as part of the liturgical celebration of a saint's feast. In the mid-ninth century Bertholdus of Micy, in his *Life of St. Maximinus of Micy*, described the purpose of hagiography, "The churches of the faithful scattered through the world celebrate together with highest praise the fame of holy men. Their tombs, which are wreathed in the metals of gold and silver, as well as in layers of precious stones and a shell of marble, now bear witness to their pious memory. . . Surely to no less a degree than miracles, which incite the love proffered by the devotion of faithful people, the monuments of letters which are set down on pages also fully satisfy the senses of those who read and hear them. For what has been said and done by the saints ought not be concealed in silence. God's love provided their deeds to serve as a norm of living for the men of their own times as well as of those years which have since passed; they are now to be imitated piously now by those who are faithful to Christ."

The aim of hagiographers was not to produce biography in the modern sense, but rather sought rather to portray a saint as an exemplar of the Christian life. Gregory of Tours (+595) wrote that he decided to name a work the *Life of the Fathers* rather than the *Lives of the Fathers* because he deemed most important the "merits and virtues" common to a single ideal of sanctity, rather than the diverse singularities of the individual lives of his many subjects. Elsewhere Gregory remarked, "I have recently discovered information about those who have been raised to heaven by the merit of their blessed conduct here below, and I thought that their way of life, which is known to us through reliable sources, could strengthen the Church. . . because the life of the saints . . . encourages the minds of listeners to follow their example." The lives of the saints thus provided a model, albeit an extraordinary and almost unattainable one, of the Christian life. The records of the lives of the saints were a template of Christian virtue, a map of the path to salvation. Just as epics such as Beowulf or the Norse sagas provide a key to understanding the ideals of Germanic culture, so too the works which follow will help to unlock the ideals of early medieval Christianity. When Eddius Stephanus, an Anglo-Saxon priest, sat down to write the *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* in the early decades of the eighth century, he mused, "This very task of preserving the blessed memory of Bishop Wilfrid is of great gain and value to myself. Indeed it is in itself a ready path to virtue to know what [Wilfrid] was." And so he did not simply record the actions of Wilfrid, but did so both to advance the cause of his own salvation and to educate his audience in the proper practice of Christianity. Pedagogic and pastoral, as well as spiritual, concerns lay very much at the heart of the enterprise of composing hagiography. The student of hagiography should remember that these works tell us at least as much about the author and about those who used the text--their ideals and practices, their concerns and aspirations--as it does about the saints who are their subjects. Hagiography thus provides some of the most valuable records for the reconstruction and study of the practice, as well as the spiritual ideals, of medieval Christianity.

To be sure, many works of hagiography--such as Baudinovia's *Life of St. Radegund* or

Raymond of Capua's *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*-were written by authors who had first-hand knowledge of their subject. But even these authors modeled their portraits on existing ideals of sanctity and drew upon a large body of traditional and somewhat standardized stories about the saints which are known to modern scholars as *topoi* or types. Such stories were borrowed, sometimes with little change, from earlier saints' lives and were intended to convey a moral message rather than historically accurate information. Works written centuries after the fact were often little more than bundles of such *topoi*. Some-such as the anonymous *Life of St. Montana*-were composed by authors who knew nothing about their subject's life or identity. These consisted virtually entirely of stories borrowed from the lives of other saints in which the names and other details have simply been changed. This traditional or typical character is one of the most striking aspects of hagiography. Hagiographic works must sometimes be used with extreme caution, recognizing that they reveal more about the religious and cultural world of their authors than about the lived lives of their subjects.

When reading works of hagiography, it is important to keep in mind that the primary aim of the authors was not to compose a biographical record of the saint, but rather to portray the subject as an exemplar of Christian virtue. Hagiographers also sought to show how the saints themselves had imitated such norms, particularly those provided by the life of Christ and previous saints. Just as they encouraged their audience to imitate the example of the saints, so too they employed the literary models offered them by the Bible and by earlier hagiographic works. Stories, themes, and motifs were repeated from the life of one saint to that of another, each hagiographer adapting a traditional pool of material to the needs of the narrative at hand. Hagiographers even went so far as to repeat phrases and whole passages verbatim from earlier works. The effect, largely intentional, was in part to subsume the particularity of a given saint's life into a generalized type of sanctity, such as the martyr, the virgin or the holy bishop. Such use of models aided the moral and didactic purpose of hagiography. As André Vauchez has noted, hagiography was a genre which "aims precisely at blurring the individual's traits and transforming his or her lifetime into a fragment of eternity." At the same time, the traditional character of hagiography can be overstated. The models of sanctity changed considerably over time, as each new author used and thus altered extant tradition.

In addition to exemplary conduct, the "merits and virtues" described by hagiographers also included the miracles which God performed through the saints. Such miracles did not only occur during the lives of the saints, but also posthumously at their tombs or otherwise in relation to their relics. Posthumous miracles included such visible marvels as cures and exorcisms, as well as invisible acts such as the remission of sins. The devout came to the shrines of saint or prayed to them in search of miraculous intercession. Hagiography recorded these aspects of the veneration of the saints through collections of posthumous miracle stories (*miracula*) and accounts of major events in the history of relic cults (*inventiones*, that is the "discovery" or ritual placement of relics in a shrine which inaugurated their public veneration, and *translationes*, the transfer of relics from one shrine to another).

As noted above, sanctity is in many important respects a changing social construct, rather than an immutable theological ideal. Hagiography was formed by and in turn helped to form the history of the changing ideals of sanctity. I have composed four ORB essays to complement this present introduction to hagiography. The first, [The Cult of Saints and their Relics](#), discusses the relationship of hagiography and sanctity to its audience and reception through the veneration of the saints. The second, [Women and Hagiography in Medieval Christianity](#), considers the ways in which gender in particular molded ideals of sanctity in the medieval west. The final two essays provide a survey of the historical development of hagiography and the cult of the saints over the course of the middle ages. [The Development of Hagiography and the Cult of Saints in Western Christendom to the Year 1000](#) has a wide geographical scope, covering western Christendom for late antiquity and the early middle ages. The complementary survey of the later middle ages, [The Development of Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints in the Later Middle Ages: The Example of the Kingdom of France from the Capetian accession to the Reformation](#), is limited to a single important region of western Christendom. I intend to expand the scope of that essay over the course of the 1999-2000 academic year. For the beginning student of hagiography and medieval history, I have made two introductory guides available: [An Introductory Guide to Research in the Medieval Hagiography](#) (focused on primary sources) and [An Introductory Guide to Scholarship on Hagiography in the Early Middle Ages](#) (focused on secondary works). For more advanced students and researchers, I have made available a set of ten detailed bibliographies on various aspects of medieval hagiography. These and other resources may be accessed by returning to the [main page](#) of the hagiography section of ORB.

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