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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

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In 987 Hugh Capet was elected king, finally bringing an end to the power of the Carolingian dynasty in the west Frankish kingdom and completing the transformation of the Robertian clan of nobles, based in the Ile-de-France into the new ruling Capetian dynasty. The social and political order of France was reshaped in the following decades. During the following two centuries many ancient monastic houses were reformed and, in the process, the cults of their traditional patron saints were renewed. Frequently, as part of this process, the churches which housed the relics of the saints were rebuilt. Rodulphus Glaber (+ca.1047), describing a profusion of church building in Italy and France during the first decade of the new millennium, commented that it was as if "the world itself, shaking off the old, had covered itself with a shining robe of churches." In the 1130s Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis argued that it was necessary to rebuild his abbey's church because of crowding caused by the throng of pilgrims who "spilt out of every door."

During this revival of the cult of saints, the concept of saintly patronage was based on the evolving social practices of vassalage, feud, and gift exchange. Devout Christians gained the protection and intercession of the holy dead by bringing them gifts or providing them with services. A detailed picture of this process can be found in the stories gathered together in numerous miracle collections composed by monks at this time. The "family" of a patron saint included many people: the monks or canons of the community, the serfs who worked the lands of that community, the nobles who donated land to the saint, the pilgrims who brought offerings or simply their prayers to the shrine. In exchange for their services and gifts, the saint provided his or her friends with intercession in the divine court and protection against disease and enemies in this world. The power of the saints was also portrayed by monastic authors as an effective deterent to the saint's enemies. A story from the Anjou told how a son of a knight had injured himself while riding illegally on the property of the monastery of St. Albinus. The boy began to curse the saint and was struck dumb. His friends, attracted by his tears, led him back to his father. On the advice of the monks the boy came to their church where he lay prostrate in supplication before the relics of Albinus. Eventually he rose and told how the saint had appeared to him and loosed his tongue on the condition that he warn others not to treat the saints irreverently.

The relationships between saint and servants were reciprocal, for the saints became obligated to their servants as can be seen in a story told by the monks of Conques about a man who had been punished by his master for having attended the feast of their patron St. Faith by having his eyes gouged out. The saint, bothered by the suffering incurred on her behalf, appeared to the man one night and promised him a cure saying, "With great shouts I have moved the righteousness of the divine judge to mercy as regards the injury which has been done to you. I have exhausted God through my incessant prayers until I could obtain this cure for your." In times of trouble, when they thought that their patron had deserted them, monastic communities sometimes performed a ritual humiliation of that saint's relics, in which they were taken out of their shrine, scattered on the floor of the church, and cursed as a means of forcing the saint to reverse the sagging fortunes of the community.

While the relics served as a focus for the charismatic power of the saints, the miracles were not thought to be performed not by the relics, but by the saints themselves, or, as the hagiographers themselves insisted, by God working through the saints. The relics themselves, of course, could be put to good use. One group of monks dunked a casket containing relics of their patron into a vat of wine from Sancerre and then drank its contents in an attempt to combat an outbreak of disease. When a nobleman tried to steal some vineyards which belonged to the monastery of Glanfeuil, its abbot threatened the malefactor with a reliquary of the monastery's patron, saying, "Omnipotent God through the merits of Blessed Maurus and other saints, whose relics are venerated and perserved in this small box, will claim punishment and vengeance from those who are scornful of his own and their servants, and most especially he will extract it from you, who, devoted to the evil of pillage, causes such robbery to occur." Reliquaries were also brought forth from their shrines for other important occasions: processions which marked a feastday, journeys made by representatives of a monastic community in search of donations, episcopal councils held as part of the movement known as the Peace of God, and even battles fought to protect monastic property. The unscrupulous sometimes used falsified relics for the sake of religious sensationalism or profit. Rodulphus Glaber recorded how a "swinlder" sold "the bones of some anonymous man from the lowest of places" as the relics of a martyr named Just.

The dominant hagiographic genre in France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was collections of posthumous miracles attributed to patrons of monastic houses. These works were specific in their geographical scope: they included stories from a single diocese or a single monastic house and its priories. They intended to tell how a particular saint aided and protected those people who came under his or her patronage. As Letaldus of Micy (+ca.1010) wrote, "All people should learn these things, for such miracles as were done in the days of our fathers and are still done for us now do not happen on accout of our own merits, but through the kindness of piety and the intervention of those fathers who are provided as intercessors for us." These stories provide in their vivid detail a colorful picture of the social fabric and religious practice of France during these centuries. While eleventh-century collections contained many stories in which the saints miraculously chastised their enemies with beatings and even death, those of the twelfth century came to focus more on the miraculous cures effected at the shrines.

The oldest known literary document in Old French is a brief hagiographic poem, the *Séquence de Ste. Eulalie* which dates to about 880. Significant numbers of vernacular hagiographic works, all in verse, survive from the late tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries concerning such diverse subjects as St. Leodegar, a seventh-century bishop of Autun, St. Brendan, an Irish missionary, and St. Mary the Egyptian, a prostitute turned hermit. In general these works followed the form of *chansons de geste* and appear to have been performed as a sort of pious entertainment. The moralist Thomas of Chobham specifically exempted those *jongleurs* who performed works about the saints from his general condemnation of that profession. The masterpiece among these works was *La vie de St. Alexis*, which told of a wealthy young man who left his family to pursue an ascetic life, only to return years later as an unrecognized holy begger living under the steps of his family house. This poem, which dates in its earliest form to about 1050, was frequently rewritten in later centuries and served as a prefigurement of the movement of the *vita apostolica*.

The high middle ages witnessed the emergence of a variety of such new spiritual movements and ideals, each of which was accompanied by the development of new types of sanctity recorded in hagiography. The first important development was the lives of the hermits and wandering preachers associated with the so-called "new monasticism." Monastic reformers such as Robert of Arbrissel (+1117) and Stephen of Muret (+1124) intended to return to the ascetic practice of the earliest monks in the eastern deserts. Over the previous two centuries hagiography had come to focus ever more exclusively on the miraculous powers of the saint, but in the lives of these men hagiographers returned to an interest in the spiritual life and ascetic exercises of saints. The life of Stephen records how hagiography itself played a role in this process, for the saint required that his monks dine in silence, while one of their number read from *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*.

By the late twelfth century, the Cistercian order was producing its own distinctive hagiography in France and elsewhere. These works depicted the lives of such abbots as Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153) as spiritual ascents to God in a manner characteristic of Cistercian psychology and spirituality. The influence of the eremetic tradition can also be sensed here, as when William of Saint-Thierry reminisced in his life of Bernard about a sojourn spent with the saint, "I remained with him for a few days, and as I looked about me I thought that I was gazing on a new heaven and a new earth, for it seemed as though there were tracks freshly made by men of our own day in the path that had first been trodden by our fathers the Egyptian monks of long ago." The Cistercian monks and saints were thus portrayed as imitators of their ancient predecessors. Cistercians also compiled large collections of miracle stories, but these were not associated with specific shrines, rather they were intended to convey moral messages. The use of miracle stories-some of which were contemporary, others taken from ancient sources-for didactic purposes in the training of monastic novices had been pioneered at Cluny by Peter the Venerable (+1156), but was perfected in such Cistercian collections as the *Exordium Magnum* and the *Dialogue on Miracles* of Caesarius of Heisterbach (+ca. 1240).

In the early thirteenth century, beguinages came to offer women lives of ascetic spirituality which were not strictly cloistered. This new movement was particularly

vibrant in the cities of the low countries. By the 1230s James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré had begun to write an influential series of lives which celebrated a number of beguines and nuns in the region of Liège. Their subjects included Mary of Oignies, Christina of St. Trond, Ivetta of Huy, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywières. In championing this novel approach to the religious life, which combined traditional asceticism with charitable works and teaching, these hagiographers provided a model for late medieval female sanctity whose characteristics included strenuous fasting, ecstatic visions, devotion to the eucharist, and service to the urban poor.

The new religious movement which had perhaps the greatest impact on western Christendom was the mendicant orders. Although they were active in France, they did not number many saints among their members who were associated primarily with that country. While Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura were masters at the University of Paris, the hagiographic traditions about them come, like the saints themselves, from Italy. As preachers, however, the mendicants represented a vigorous attempt on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to reach the urban laity. Peachers needed collections of exemplary stories of a sort different from that produced for monastic novices. Many such collections were gathered for preaching purposes by Flemish and French mendicants-such as Stephen of Bourbon, Thomas of Cantimpré, and Vincent of Beauvais-which made use of hagiographic traditions. The most influential hagiographic compendium in France as in the rest of western Christendom, however, was the *Golden Legend,* completed by Jacapo da Voragine, an Italian Dominican, in 1258 and available in French translation by the end of the century.

One major factor in late medieval hagiography was the development of papal control over the processes of canonization. This produced a new genre of hagiographic literature, the *processus canonizationis*, which was the record of the official tribunal which investigated a candidate's holiness. A number of such investigations were conducted in France: of Edmond Rich at Pontigny in 1244-45, of Louis IX at Saint-Denis in 1282, of Louis of Anjou at Marseilles in 1297, of Dauphine of Puimichel at Apt and Avignion in 1363, of Charles of Blois at Angers in 1371, of Urban V at Avignon in 1382 and 1390, and of Peter of Luxembourg again at Avignon in 1389-90. The frequency of such inquiries at Avignon in the late fourteenth century can be explained by the dominant position of French clerics in the papal court during its sojourn there. Unsuccessful processes of canonization were undertaken for such French ecclesiasical figures as Robert of Molesme and Stephen of Die. These new procedures also encouraged the composition of more traditional lives, such as that written by William of Saint-Pathus about Louis IX, in order to provide evidence of the sanctity of their subjects.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries hagiography composed in French was also taking interesting new directions. Large numbers of verse lives of saints were composed in this period, some twenty-six of them about female subjects such as Margaret of Antioch and Catherine of Alexandria. In general these poets followed the style of contemporary romances, but they also self-consciously attempted to produce a morally uplifting rival to such secular works. The author of a *Vie de Ste. Barbe* claimed, "I want to tell a new kind of story, / Never heard before. / Know that it does not concern Ogier, /

Nor Roland, nor Olivier, / But a most holy maiden / Who was very courteous and beautiful." Nor were verse lives of the saints the only hagiography available in French. Collections of miracles performed by the Virgin Mary, the most famous by Gautier de Coucy, began to appear in the late twelfth century. The earliest works of French prose hagiography were composed only a couple of decades later. While some were renderings of vernacular verse works, many were translations of Latin texts such as the *Golden Legend* or the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*. Collections of such texts called *légendiers* played a role in the religious instruction of the laity. While most works of vernacular hagiography had their ultimate roots in Latin sources, there were a few original hagiographic works composed in French, notably Joinville's highly personal and moving life of Louis IX and Rutebeuf's poem about Elizabeth of Hungary (+1231). Hagiographic influence can also be detected in works of other genres, such as the *Queste del Saint Graal*.

Relics came to be displayed more prominently in the churches of the later middle ages than they had been in earlier periods. New fragments of saintly bodies were eagerly sought and placed in ornate reliquaries. Many relics were brought back to France as spoils both from Jerusalem during the course of the crusades and from Constantinople after the sack of 1204. In 1248 that vigorous crusader Louis IX had Sainte Chapelle dedicated as a form of relic treasury: the building even imitated a reliquary in its very shape. Traditional shrines of local importance were to some degree replaced in the later middle ages by shrines of international significance, such as that of Saint James in Compostela, those of the martyrs in Rome, that of Thomas Becket in Canterbury, and, most importantly, the holy places around Jerusalem. No shrine of comparable importance was located in France, although the abbey of Saint-Michel did attract long-distance pilgrimage. French pilgrims flocked to distant lands in search of the miracles and intercession many had once found closer at hand.

This period also witnessed a steady growth in the importance of shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary and to Christ himself. Both figures had been of great devotional importance throughout the history of Christianity, but from the twelfth century the faithful came to approach them more directly. Because of the doctrines of the Assumption and the Ascension, corporal relics of the usual sort were lacking. The cathedral of Chartres claimed to possess the Virgin's tunic which made it one of the earliest and most prominent Marian sanctuaries in France. More common were statues of the Virgin which acquired miraculous reputations. One of the earliest was fashioned from gold in Clermont at the end of the tenth century. By the end of the next century others could be found at Coutances, Bayeaux, and elsewhere. Still later Marian statues came to be painted black: the first mention of the black Virgin of Rocamadour was in 1235, while Louis IX brought a similar statue from Palestine to Le Puy in 1254. Since devotion to the relics of Christ centered on bits of the savior's body discarded before his death and resurrection, it took on a sometimes bizarre quality. The monks of Saint-Medard displayed one of the savior's milkteeth, while the abbeys of Charroux and Coulombs both claimed to possess his foreskin. The eucharist, which was the real presence of the body and blood of Christ, came to be treated like a relic in many forms of devotion.

Over the course of the fifteenth century the composition of Latin hagiography declined precipitously in France, as did the official recognition by the papacy of the kingdom's inhabitants as saints. This was in part due to the position of France in ecclesiastical politics during the Great Schism and its aftermath. There were some exceptions to the general lack of new French saints: the Dominican reformer Vincent Ferrer (+1419) was canonized in 1455; while the papacy never pursued the canonization of Jeanne-Marie de Mailly (+1414), she became the focus of a local cult in the Touraine; perhaps the most famous French saint of the period, Jeanne d'Arc (+1431), was not officially canonized until the twentieth century.

Vernacular hagiography, on the other hand, flourished. Many early printed French books contained lives of the saints and were produced for a thriving market in devotional works intended for the laity. In the early sixteenth century a manual of religious practice specifically directed to a female audience reminded its readers, "Our Lord said that the Kingdom of the Heavens is taken by force and, since you do not require ease of your wicked body, you should put before your eyes the example of the blessed saints who have reached heaven and who have acted for the love of our Lord . . . Read their stories and consider the constancy of the male and female saints." The Reformation brought with it a radical reaction against the cult of saints which caused Calvinists to spurn such traditional hagiography. The Wars of Religion, however, spawned the composition of collective biographies of both Huguenot and Catholic "martyrs" which owed much to the medieval genre.

The Reformation brought with it a radical reaction against such practices. Reform theologians and preachers in particular rejected the idea of saintly intercession, which was thought in Lutheran terminology to constitute a reliance on works rather than on faith. John Calvin composed a systematic critique of the cult of relics in the vernacular (*Traité des reliques*, 1547), in which he rejected the veneration of relics on theological grounds and delighted in such absurdities as the multiple heads of John the Baptist enshrined in various churches throughout Europe. Theological opposition often turned to violent iconoclasm on the part of Huguenots during the Wars of Religion. Relic collections were destroyed and the statues of the saints in many French churches still bear the scars of attack. The Council of Trent took many steps to reorganize the practice of the cult of saints and the means by which saints were canonized within early modern Catholicism.

Note: Parts of this essay have appeared in the entries which I wrote on "Hagiography" and "Saints, cult of" in William Kibler and Grover Zinn (eds.), *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 433-7 and 851-5. I would prefer that any published citation of or reference to this essay should be made to the printed version.

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