



A Brief Guide to Scholarship on Western Hagiography

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In the decades around 1900, a Bollandist named Hippolyte Delehaye laid the foundations for modern hagiographic scholarship. Although Delehaye wrote in French, his seminal essay on hagiographic method has appeared in two separate English translations, see *Legends of the Saints*, trans. V.M. Crawford (from the first French edition; London, 1907; reprint, Notre Dame, IN, 1961) and trans. Donald Attwater (from the fourth French edition; New York, 1962). Also available in English is Delehaye's history of the Bollandist enterprise, see *The Work of the Bollandists Through Three Centuries, 1615-1915* (Princeton, 1922). Approaches to the history of medieval Christianity have changed greatly since the time of Delehaye, who was concerned to provide a Catholic response to positivist historicism. One of the most influential works in the development of medieval religious history has recently been translated into English; see Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (German original, 1935; Notre Dame, IN, 1995). For an interesting, but controversial, study of these historiographical developments, see John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 519-52.

The formative work in applying these new methodologies in religious history to the subject matter of medieval hagiography was written, ironically enough, by a Czech Marxist. František Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger. Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* [People, lords, and saints in the kingdom of the Franks: studies on the hagiography of the Merovingian period] (Prague, 1965) remains one of the most innovative and important studies of medieval history written in the second half of the twentieth century, although it has lamentably never been translated into English. In essence Graus challenged historians to use the then relatively neglected genres of hagiography to serve as sources for the social history of Western Christianity. That challenge has been taken up explicitly or implicitly by a wide variety of scholars of medieval religion, society, literature, and art over the course of the last three decades.

Recent studies of medieval hagiography, however, would be almost literally inconceivable were it not for the pioneering work of three magisterial scholars--Peter Brown, André Vauchez, and Caroline Bynum--published initially over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. Peter Brown investigated the function of sanctity as a form of social or political power in the later Roman Empire. He first explored the role of living ascetic

saints in the villages of fifth- and sixth-century Syria in "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101, which is more easily available as reprinted in a collection of his articles entitled *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 103-52. He thus coined an important scholarly concept which has influenced virtually all later Anglophone scholarship on hagiography--that is "holy man"--through the brilliantly simple expedient of taking his sources literally. Since the original publication of that article, he has regularly reevaluated his findings in the light of newer scholarship: "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Hawley (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 3-14; "Arbiters of the Holy: The Christian Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 55-78; "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971-1997," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 353-76. (The autumn number of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* for 1998, in which the latter essay appeared, is a special issue, edited by Susanna Elm, devoted to analyses and reconsiderations of the scholarly heritage of Brown's original article.) Brown also analyzed the posthumous role of saints in *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), a pathbreaking work on the beginnings of the cult of relics in Western Christendom. Secondly, André Vauchez interrogated the ways in which hagiographic sources themselves were produced and how this process in turn formed ideas of sanctity in *La sainteté en occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques*, Bibliothèque des Ecoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 241 (Rome, 1981; second edition, 1987), which has been translated as *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1997). In it Vauchez examined the records of the formal processes initiated for the canonization of saints between 1198 and 1431 in the hope of illuminating the practices of Western Christianity--and the attempted control of those practices by the papacy--during those centuries. Anglophone readers may garner a sense of his extensive work on related topics from the essays collected in *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices* (Notre Dame, IN, 1993). Finally, Caroline Bynum highlighted gender as a crucial category in the analysis of hagiography and sanctity in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987). She has further explored and deepened her analysis in the articles collected in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Boston, 1991).

Much innovative scholarship has appeared on saints and their cults since the 1980s. the following paragraphs survey some of the more important works by working chronologically through the subject matter of medieval hagiography. (Please note that the early middle ages is better treated than the later middle ages.) For more detailed guides to studies, see the bibliographies available through the [main page](#) of the "Hagiography" section of ORB.

Clare Stancliffe provides a thorough examination of the work of Sulpicius Severus in *Saint Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford, 1983). Aline Rousselle, *Croire et guérir. La foi en Gaule dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 1990) presents a sensitive and provocative reading of the transition from Roman to

Christian culture in Gaul, and of the role of Martin and his cult in that transition. A summary of her argument may be found in "From Sanctuary to Miracle-Worker: Healing in Fourth-Century Gaul," in *Ritual, Religion, and the Sacred*, ed. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (Baltimore, 1982), pp. 95-127. Sharon Farmer's exemplary study of twelfth-century social history, *Communities of St. Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca, 1991), studies the function of Martin's cult in a later period. The chief hagiographer of early medieval Italy was Gregory the Great. A fine introduction to his work may be found in Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley, 1988). More specifically on his hagiography, see Joan Petersen, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great in Their Late Antique Cultural Background* (Toronto, 1984).

It was the Franks who adopted orthodox Christianity and its notions of sanctity most quickly among the Germanic peoples. The essential foundation to all other treatments of hagiography in the early Frankish kingdom remains Frantisek Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger. Studeien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague, 1965). In English, see J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford, 1983); Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley, 1985) and *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1993); Paul Fouracre, "Merovingian History and Merovingian Historiography," *Past and Present* 127 (1990), pp. 3-38. On the role of the cult of the saints in that society, see Peter Brown, "Relics and Social Status in the Age of Gregory of Tours," in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 222-50 and Ian Wood, "Early Merovingian Devotion in Town and Country," *Studies in Church History*, 16 (1979), pp. 61-76. Relatively little exists in English on hagiography in Visigothic Spain, but see Jacques Fontaine, "King Sisebut's Vita Desiderii and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography," in Edward James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 93-129. For a guide to the extensive literature in Spanish, see Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400-1000* (London, 1983), pp. 280-2.

The literature on hagiography and sanctity in Anglo-Saxon England is enormous. Fortunately David Rollason has provided a comprehensive overview, with full bibliography, in *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1989). Further guidance to the sources may be found in Michael Lapidge, "The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England," in Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 243-63. Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, third edition (University Park, 1991) provides a useful introduction to the conversion of England, as well as many interesting observations on Anglo-Saxon saints both in England and on the continent. For a wide-ranging introduction to the most famous of all Anglo-Saxon hagiographers, see Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede*, second edition (Cambridge, 1990). Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, and Clare Stancliffe (eds.), *Saint Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200* (Woodbridge, 1989) treats one important Anglo-Saxon saint and his cult. On the development of the cults of Anglo-Saxon royalty, see Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1988), although it primarily treats

texts composed after the Conquest. Walter Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946) remains essential on Boniface and other missionaries.

Nora Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London, 1961) and Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland* (Ithaca, 1972) provide good introductions to the piety and hagiography of the Celtic lands. For more scholarly detail, one can consult Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives* (Oxford, 1991) on Ireland, Elissa Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Woodbridge, 1991) on Wales, and Julia Smith, *Province and Empire: Brittany and the Carolingians* (Cambridge, 1992), chapter 6 on Brittany. For a comprehensive guide to the sources, see Michael Lapidge and Richard Sharpe, *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature, 400-1200* (Dublin, 1985). Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints* (Ithaca, 1991) makes innovative use of hagiographic sources to consider the wider religious history of early Ireland. Julia Smith, "Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c. 850-1250," *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 309-43 contrasts Celtic ideas of sanctity with those prevalent in Carolingian Europe.

A number of good introductions to Carolingian history and culture exist, among them two works by Pierre Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara (Philadelphia, 1978) and *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*, trans. Michael Allen (Philadelphia, 1993). Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, pp. 258-390 has much of interest to say about the role of the church and of the saints in the Carolingian empire. Patrick Geary has provided an entertaining and absorbing study of one aspect of the cult of saints in this period in *Furta Sacra. Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978; second edition 1990). The most wide-ranging study of Carolingian hagiography, however, remains Joseph-Claude Poulin, *L'ideal de sainteté dans l'Aquitaine carolingienne d'après les sources hagiographiques (750-950)* (Quebec City, 1975). Suzanne Wemple has also used hagiography to study the history of women in *Women in Frankish Society* (Philadelphia, 1981). On the importance of the papacy and the institutional church in the formation of the Carolingian order, see Thomas Noble, *The Republic of St. Peter: The Birth of the Papal State, 680-825* (Philadelphia, 1984). For an exemplary study of the iconography of a hagiographic text from this period, see Cynthia Hahn, *Passio Kiliani . . . Passio Margaretae: Faksimile-Ausgabe des Codex. . . Ms. I 189 . . . aus dem Besitz der Niedersächsischen Landesbibliothek Hannover* (Graz, 1988). On the conversion of Scandinavia, see Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland* (London, 1975) and Birgit Sawyer, Peter Sawyer, and Ian Wood (eds.), *The Christianization of Scandinavia* (Alingsås, 1987). On the conversion of the Slavs, see Francis Dvornik, *The Making of Central and Eastern Europe* (London, 1949) and A. P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom* (Cambridge, 1970).

On Europe after the collapse of the Carolingian empire, see Jean-Pierre Poly and Eric Bournazel, *The Feudal Transformation, 900-1200*, trans. Caroline Higgitt (New York, 1991) and Heinrich Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century: Mentalities and Social Orders*, trans. Patrick Geary (Chicago, 1991). Both have perceptive comments about saints and their cults; the former also has an excellent bibliography. A study of the cult of saints which spans the Carolingian and post-Carolingian periods in one important region may be found in Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints. The Diocese of*

Orléans, 800-1200 (Cambridge, 1990). Little is available in English on Ottonian hagiography, but see Patrick Corbet, *Les saints ottoniens. Sainteté dynastique, sainteté royale et sainteté féminine autour de l'an mil* (Sigmaringen, 1986).

This essay will be continued for the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries in the near future.

No adequate general guide to the history, study, and use of hagiography exists in English. See instead René Aigrain, *L'hagiographie: ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire* (Paris, 1953); Réginald Grégoire, *Manuale di Agiologia. Introduzione alla Letteratura Agiografica* (Fabriano, 1987); and Jacques Dubois and Jean-Loup Lemaitre, *Sources et méthodes de l'hagiographie médiévale* (Paris, 1993). For further introduction to hagiographic sources, see [An Introductory Guide to Research in the Medieval Hagiography](#).

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