



Women and Hagiography in Medieval Christianity

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Sanctity is in a very fundamental way a social or institutional construct. Sanctity is an ideal which developed historically: different sorts of people were recognized as saints by Christian communities during different periods. 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. Thus Athanasius (+373) claimed that female martyrs demonstrated how something "against nature" (that is, female bravery) could give proof of something "higher than nature" (that is, the truth of Christianity). 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.

Two works which have charted the study of women and sanctity are the pioneering research of Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (German original, 1935; Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1995) and the more recent work of Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

The first Christians to be recognized as saints were martyrs, those who had died for their "witness" (the meaning of the Greek term *martus*) to the name of Christ and who had thus earned immediate entrance into heaven. A number of contemporary descriptions survive of the deaths of various martyrs. These *passions*, as they are often called, constitute the earliest known pieces of hagiography; the very earliest is the [Martyrdom of Polycarp](#) composed around 167. Many *passions* were, however, written at a much later date and even concerned martyrs whose very existence is apocryphal. Christian women shared the sufferings of martyrdom in significant numbers and many women figure in the earliest *passions*. The oldest surviving hagiographic account of a woman, the [Passion of Perpetua and Felicity](#) (c. 200), preserves Perpetua's remarkable first-person account of the visions which she experienced during the time spent in prison awaiting execution.

(Note that an important discussion of the *Passion of Perpetua* [Peter Dronke](#) is available on-line.)

Female martyrs were not, however, memorialized in the same manner or to the same degree as their male counterparts. From an early date Christian communities favored prominent clerics, and thus by definition men, in their recognition of communal heroes. Thus it is not surprising that among some 120 martyrs listed by name in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 313) only fifteen were women. Some women did have their feasts celebrated and their relics venerated by the fourth century: in addition to Perpetua, we know of Agnes of Rome, Eulalia of Merida, Euphemia of Chalcedon, and a handful of others. With the exception of Perpetua, few of the authentically early *passions* focus on women. It was only in the later fourth century, long after their martyrdoms, that accounts of the lives and deaths of most of the authentic female martyrs on the calendar of saints began to be written. And many of the most familiar female martyrs-including Cecilia of Rome, Margaret of Antioch, and Catherine of Alexandria-were the inventions of hagiographers writing in the seventh century or later. Indeed even in the fourth century the most influential account of a female martyr was of a fictive saint, that of Thecla included in the apocryphal [Acts of Paul](#). The story inspired sharply differing reactions: the holy woman Macrina (+379/80) read it and considered Thecla to be her patron, while the controversialist Jerome (+419/20) denounced it.

The end of the persecution of Christians marked by the so-called [Edict of Milan](#) in 313 did not only allow the growth of the public recognition of the martyrs, but led to the recognition of new types of saints. The first important category was that of bishops, such as Martin of Tours (d. 397), Augustine of Hippo (+430), Cyril of Alexandria (+444), or the shadowy fourth-century Nicholas of Myra whose cult survives today under the guise of Santa Claus. Women were as fully excluded from this form of sanctity as they were from membership in the clerical hierarchy.

The second important new path to sainthood was asceticism, the rigorous practice of self-denial and even mortification of the body-through disciplines such chastity and fasting-which led to a kind of symbolic martyrdom. Many of the saints of the fourth and early fifth centuries were drawn from the so-called "athletes of Christ" who lived singly or communally in the deserted wastelands of the Roman empire. For Christian women the ascetic life, in a way similar to martyrdom, promised a means of subverting misogynist ideals. According to contemporary theologians such as Athanasius and Jerome, women could make up for their natural inferiority to men through leading a life vowed to virginity as an ascetic bride of Christ. But the promise was largely illusory. The homeland of the monastic movement was the Egyptian desert. When Palladius (+425) wrote his influential record of saintly Egyptian monks, he commented, "I must also commemorate in this book the virile women to whom God granted struggles equal to those of men, so that no one could plead as an excuse that women are too weak to practice virtue successfully." Yet only eleven of his seventy-one chapters concerned ascetic women.

Women were, on the other hand, preeminent in the smaller ascetic movement centered in the cities of the Roman empire. A number of women who chose to pursue a life dedicated to chastity and charity within an urban landscape gained a great deal of fame. Records of their lives were composed by male clerics who were friends and relatives in order to serve as ascetic guidebooks for other women: Gregory of Nyssa (+c.395) wrote the [Life of Macrina](#) (+379/80), who was his sister; Jerome an epitaph for Paula (+404), John Chrysostom (+407) letters memorializing Olympias (+410), Gerontius a life of Melania (+439). While all these men considered their subjects "holy," the only one who was unequivocally regarded a "saint" was Melania.

The circulation of, and audience for, the lives of such women paled, however, in comparison to that for the stories of Thecla and the other apocryphal female martyrs mentioned above (some of whom were described as having been inspired to their martyrdoms by having heard or read the story of Thecla). A new type of apocryphal female saint--and with it a new genre of hagiography--began to develop in the fifth century, that of the lascivious woman, usually a prostitute or actress, who converted to Christianity and repented her former life through dramatic asceticism. These legends, concerning characters such as Pelagia of Antioch and Mary the Egyptian, bore strong literary ties to classical Greek romances. It is ironic that these fictive female ascetics should have attained a much greater importance in medieval Christianity than their real-life counterparts. These stories of apocryphal female martyrs and penitents had their roots in the Christian east, but became very popular in the Latin west at a later date.

Over the course of the fifth century, imperial authority and many of the institutions of Roman government crumbled in the Latin west, but just as the Roman empire survived in the Greek east, transforming itself into the empire usually called Byzantium, so too did the late antique traditions of hagiography and sanctity. Through the seventh century it was the monastic life of the desert which produced most Byzantine saints, and the cities and monasteries of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine which produced most hagiography. Alongside the stories of male stylites (as one distinctive type of desert ascetic who lived on pillars were known), the stories of Mary the Egyptian and other penitent women flourished not only in Greek, but in Syriac, Armenian, and other eastern languages. Literary production, including hagiography, declined in the latter seventh and eighth centuries, partially as a result of the twin blows of the Islamic conquests and the battles of iconoclasm. In the renewal of hagiography during the later ninth and tenth centuries, generally considered the golden age of Byzantine hagiography, the old themes were repeated, but in a slightly different key. Wise abbots who sagely guided their communities, such as Athanasius the Athonite (+1003), replaced the extravagant ascetics of the Palestine desert, while chaste matrons of the upper classes, such as Mary the Younger (+902/3), stood in for repentant prostitutes. (Two versions of the life of Mary the Younger are available on-line: an incomplete, but useful translation by [Paul Halsall](#) which does not require Adobe PDF, and a full translation by [Angeliki Laiou](#) which does.) The ninth and tenth centuries, however, also witnessed the development of *menologia*, standardized collections of short saints' lives organized by the liturgical calendar and intended to provide readings for monastic communities and other spiritually minded people. These collections included few women. Still, the old Roman models of female

sanctity endured in Byzantine Christianity through the eleventh century. Asceticism itself came under attack from some intellectuals and hagiographic composition declined through the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. It revived under the Palaiologan dynasty of the late middle ages, but largely as a form of polemic in the varied controversies of the period. Concerned almost exclusively with males of the military and monastic elites, there was no room for saintly women, except in rewriting of stories of earlier saints. Among the hagiographers there was one woman, Theodora Raoulaina (+1300), herself a member of the Palaiologan family.

Far to the west in Ireland, a Christian tradition developed during the early middle ages which had little to do with the traditions of the Roman world. Through the efforts of missionaries from Britain and Gaul the myriad Celtic kingdoms of the island were converted to Christianity in the first half of the fifth century. The Irish quickly both adopted and adapted monasticism. The severely ascetic ideals of the Egyptian desert mingled with native concepts of holiness producing a unique form of monasticism, especially severe in its ascetic rigor, but tempered by a boundless enthusiasm for the wonders of the natural world. The early Irish monastic movement produced a large number of men and women of saintly reputation, so much so that by the eleventh century Ireland had become known as "the isle of saints." A handful of Latin works which can be securely dated to the seventh century celebrated the lives of the greatest Irish saints: the chief missionary bishop, Patrick (+c.461); the wandering abbot, Columba (+597); and the extraordinary abbess of Cell Dara, Brigit (+c.523), a figure who combined aspects of Christian monasticism and a native fertility goddess. Later hagiographic works in both Latin and Irish, however, are notoriously difficult to date with any accuracy and virtually all were written at a great remove from the lives of their subjects. While some 119 Irish female saints were recorded in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, lives have survived for only four (Brigit, Monenna [+c.518], Ite [+c.570], and Samthann [+739]).

Between these geographical and cultural extremes, the early middle ages witnessed the development of barbarian kingdoms as successors to the Roman empire in the Latin west. For over a century after the fall of the city of Rome to the Goths, sanctity in these regions was a domain almost exclusively inhabited by male clerics, and those mostly from the ever-diminishing ranks of the old Roman elite. The cults and legends of the old martyrs endured, but new saints were bishops such as Caesarius of Arles (+542) and Germanus of Paris (+576) or abbots such as Severinus of Noricum (+482) and Benedict of Nursia (+c.540). Their hagiographers were men of similar background: Gregory of Tours (+593/94) and Venantius Fortunatus (+610) in Gaul, Ennodius of Pavia (+521) and Gregory the Great (+604) in Italy. There was little room for female leaders in the world of this elite struggling for its survival, but the virgin ascetic Geneviève (+c.500) became one of the patrons of Paris by helping to organize the defense of the city against Hunnish and Frankish attacks. By the late sixth century, however, members of the converted Germanic peoples were entering the clergy and the monasteries. Among the nobleman who became bishops and abbots were some, particularly among the Franks, who adopted a fiercely ascetic lifestyle, borrowed in part not from continental monastic traditions, but from the influence of Columbanus (+615) and other missionary Irish monks. They

represented a new type of sanctity, mixing noble blood and asceticism, which was peculiar to the new ruling elites of the barbarian kingdoms.

Women played a distinctive role in these developments, in the persons of new saints who came almost exclusively from royal families or from the ranks of the abbesses of important convents. Sanctity was particularly associated with queens of Merovingian Frankland (for example, Radegund [+587] and Balthild [+680]), Anglo-Saxon East Anglia (Aethelthryth [+679] and Sexburga [+c.700]), and Ottonian Saxony (Mathilda [+968] and Adelheid [d.999]). Female saints also included daughters of these and other clans of the high nobility who served as abbesses of important convents such as Nivelles (Gertrude +659), Gandersheim (Hathumoda +874), Wilton (Edith +984), and Willich (Adelaide +1015). As with their male contemporaries, some combination of noble blood and exceptional asceticism marked these women as holy. This was the dominant model of female sanctity in the west from the sixth century to the year 1100. The *lives* written about these women served as a kind of "mirror for princes" addressed to the female elite of the emerging European kingdoms. Although most were written by male clerics, the Frankish nun Baudinovia wrote the second part of the *Life of Radegund*, becoming the earliest hagiographer to identify herself as a woman. Other female authors from this period include the eighth-century Hugeberc of Heidenheim, the tenth-century Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, and the eleventh-century Bertha of Willich. Their subjects included male as well as female saints. Female sanctity seems to have been regarded as potentially dangerous by much of the episcopal hierarchy. Throughout these centuries, fewer and fewer people became celebrated as saints after their deaths. Increasingly the cult of saints focused on cherished patrons from the distant past, such as martyred bishops or founding abbots. The bulk of hagiography written from the eighth to the eleventh centuries concerned such figures, and few of those were female. The major exception was the development in the Latin west of the traditions of virgin martyrs. Even the lives of those contemporary female saints we considered above tended to have a restricted circulation. Few survive in more than a handful of manuscripts and few of these women were included in liturgical calendars outside the regions in which they had lives. Female sanctity was a strictly controlled form of charisma in the earlier middle ages.

In the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, the revival of eremitic monasticism, the growth of the *vita apostolica*, and the wider reform of ecclesiastical institutions all made the western church more open to seeing contemporary figures as saints. Cults honoring people as different as Thomas Becket (+1170) and Francis of Assisi (+1226) covered western Europe within a few years of their deaths. The period witnessed the composition of many lives of contemporary holy men, but only a few of holy women. According to one calculation, only 18 of the 153 people recognized as saints during the twelfth century were women. Several male founders of new monastic orders for women, such as Robert of Arbrissel (+1116) and Gilbert of Sempringham (+1189), became saints, but none of their female disciples attained similar status. Although convents flourished in England, a *life* was composed for only one English holy woman of the twelfth century, Christina of Markyate (+c.1155). The attempt to win a papal bull of canonization for Hildegard of Bingen (+1179), who had been recognized as a holy woman and visionary by contemporaries including Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius, failed in 1233.

The foundations had been laid, however, for a remarkable flowering of female piety, and with it female sanctity, in the thirteenth century. For the variety of options open to women interested in the religious life had increased dramatically. Beguinages and other informal urban communities, and later groups affiliated with the mendicant orders, offered women lives of ascetic spirituality outside the boundaries of the traditional rural cloister. These new movements were particularly vibrant in the cities of the low countries and northern Italy. By the 1230s James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré had begun to write an influential series of lives concerning beguines and nuns in the region of Liège. Their many subjects included Mary of Oignies (+1213), Christina of St. Trond (+c.1224), and Juliana of Mont Cornillon (+1258). (See the article by Margot King on these saints, available on-line, "[The Desert Mothers Revisited: The Mothers of the Diocese of Liège.](#)") A similar trend can be found in Italy celebrating women associated with new, particularly mendicant, orders, including Bona of Pisa (+1207), Clare of Assisi (+1253), and Margaret of Cortona (+1297). Nor was the older tradition of royal sanctity dead, rather it had been translated to the recently Christianized realms of central Europe, whose ruling clans produced such holy women as Elizabeth of Thuringia (+1231), Margaret of Hungary (+1270), and Agnes of Bohemia (+1282). Yet this tradition had also been transformed, for these women expressed their asceticism in association with the mendicants rather than traditional convents. According to one calculation, more than one quarter of the thirteenth-century Christians accorded posthumous veneration (themselves in excess of five hundred) were women, probably the highest percentage of any period of the middle ages. It was also during this century that the papacy fully asserted control over the official recognition of sanctity, or canonization. Still the vast majority of late medieval holy people did not receive a papal bull of canonization, but rather a more local cult or form of authorization. Of the seventy-two processes of canonization undertaken by the papacy between 1198 and 1418 thirteen concerned women, while there were but seven women among the thirty-five successes.

The lives of thirteenth-century holy women championed their generally novel approach to the religious life. They exhibited the concerns with voluntary poverty, urban charity, and public teaching so prominent in the mendicant movements. Yet there were aspects which were distinctively female. In addition to the visions which had long been characteristic of female sanctity, these women focused their devotions on the reception of the Eucharist, often rejecting all other forms of food in fasts of heroic-even mortal-length. They thus developed a form of piety which centered on food, whose preparation had always been the work of women in medieval society, and which was replicated in the practices of few male saints. At the same time, this piety illuminates the dependency of religious women on male clerics, for only a priest could consecrate the Eucharist or provide the sacrament of confession. The lived lives of these women created a new model of female holiness which the works which recorded those lives transmitted to new audiences and new generations. Most of those works were written by male confessors who held a position of authority over them. At the same time, many autobiographical writings, particularly detailing visions, survive from these holy women. Taken together these writings allow historians to chart the dialectical processes by which a reputation for sanctity was negotiated and developed.

A different tradition of female sanctity was also developing in western Christendom over the course of the central and high middle ages, that is the traditions of the ancient female martyrs and saintly penitents. Largely traveling from the Christian east, these began to mature in Latin hagiography in the ninth century, beginning a process of development which would continue for the rest of the middle ages. Simultaneously cults focused on the relics of such women as Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria (some also imported from the east) grew. By the thirteenth century the legends of these early Christian women were widely disseminated and incorporated into hagiographic collections intended for preachers. The most important of these was the *Golden Legend*, completed by the Dominican James of Voragine in 1258. Thirty-one of the 182 legends included in this collection concerned female saints, all of them figures from the New Testament or the early church.

The legends of martyrs and penitents also served as the primary inspiration for the development of hagiography about women in the vernacular languages, traditions which began as early as the ninth century. In Anglo-Saxon the enigmatic poet Cynewulf composed accounts of the discovery of the true cross by Helena and a passion of Juliana, probably toward the beginning of the century. The earliest surviving literary work in any Romance language is the Old French *Séquence de Sainte Eulalie*, a brief liturgical piece from the late ninth century celebrating the martyr of Merida. It was in these languages—and in their relatives, Anglo-Norman and Middle English—that hagiography about female saints flourished in the years before 1300. By the late tenth century, for example, the Anglo-Saxon monk Aelfric (+c.1010) had included a number of female martyrs such as Cecilia and Agnes, but only one native female saint (Aethelthryth), in his large prose hagiographic corpus. Over the course of the twelfth century verse *lives* were composed about women in Old French (Catherine of Alexandria, Geneviève of Paris, Margaret of Antioch, and Mary of Egypt) and Anglo-Norman (Catherine of Alexandria and Faith). Many of these works, notably the so-called "Katherine Group" which is one of the masterpieces of Middle English, were composed specifically for audiences of religious women. Far to the north, a group of sagas was composed about a similar group of ancient female saints, but these do not seem to have come into vogue until the late thirteenth century. Other vernacular traditions do not offer the same richness before 1300. Early works are known from Middle Irish (into which the life of Brigit was translated, possibly as early as the ninth century), Church Slavonic (a now lost, and probably contemporary, life of the martyred princess Ludmilla [+921]), and Old Provençal (the earliest surviving example of which is the *Chanson de Sainte Foi*, written between 1030 and 1070), but female saints never became a staple of these flourishing literary traditions. Lives of female saints are not found until later in Middle High German (*Legenden von der heiligen Juliana* of the Priestster Arnold, composed post-1150), Castilian (*Estoria de Santa Maria Egipçiaca*, composed c. 1235), and Catalan (*Canço de Santa Fe*, composed sometime after 1250). Up to 1300 it was the virginal martyr and the penitent prostitute of antiquity who served as the dominant models of female sanctity in vernacular works and the sermon literature, that is in works intended for a broad audience. In contrast, contemporary male such as Thomas Becket, Francis, and Dominic were relatively common in those literatures. Some exceptions, however, did exist, notably Rutebeuf's poem on the recently deceased princess Elizabeth of Thuringia, dedicated (post 1258) to

Queen Isabelle of Navarre, and Eberhard of Erfurt's *Heinrich und Kunigunde*, written in support of the canonization of the German royal couple around 1200. It should also be noted that collections of miracles associated with that very special female saint, the Virgin Mary, became a staple of both Latin and vernacular literatures over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

These two traditions which had developed over the course of the high middle ages-contemporary women associated with mendicant and other urban religious groups as well as the martyrs and penitents of antiquity-continued to set the pattern for female piety and sanctity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet these traditions were slowly, as it were, transcribed into new keys. Many contemporary holy women continued to be associated with the mendicants, most particularly in Italy: Agnes of Montepulciano (+1417), Catherine of Siena (+1380), Colette of Corbie (+1447), and Catherine of Genoa (+1510). The development of a new lay ideal of sanctity within the married state also began to include women. Yet this still involved chastity, for saintly wives such as Delphina of Puimichel (+1361) and Dorothy of Montau (+1394) either kept their unions strictly chaste or took a vow of chastity after years of childbearing. Other women who lived much of their lives as laywomen, such as Bridget of Sweden (+1373) and Francesca Romana (+1440), founded new religious orders for women as alternatives to the mendicants. Devotion to the passion of Christ and bodily mortification began to take a central place in their spiritual and penitential practices, accompanied by a heightened emotionalism often expressed in the so-called "gift of tears." While poverty and fasting remained important, a new stress was placed upon visionary powers in the lives of most late medieval holy women. Their own accounts of ecstatic experiences were written down, by themselves or by scribes, in works which remain highpoints of the vernacular literatures: Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead* (original Low German before 1268, translated into Middle High German c. 1344), Juliana of Norwich's *Showings* (Middle English after 1373), Catherine of Bologna's *Seven Spiritual Weapons* (Italian published after her death in 1463). The lives of these women also came to be far more available in the vernacular, some of them even written by female friends and disciples. Female sanctity remained subject to close supervision, and may have become even more suspect to some ecclesiastical authorities. Some visionary women were burned for heresy or witchcraft, even when, as in the case of Margaret Porete (+1310), their claims and practices did not vary greatly from some orthodox saints. Joan of Arc (+1431) was sentenced to death for heresy by a corrupt ecclesiastical tribunal, only to be canonized in the twentieth century. Somewhat more mundanely, the earliest piece of English autobiography, the *Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1438), records the process by which its author tried, and largely failed, to become accepted as a lay holy woman by her community.

The traditions of the female martyrs and penitents became much more widely available to and known by the pious laity in the later middle ages. The *Golden Legend* and other important hagiographic collections were translated into virtually every vernacular language. Such collections-which occasionally, as in like Osborn Bokenham's *Legends of Holy Women* (c. 1443), contained only female saints-were common in manuscripts and early printed books. Even the *Lives of the Fathers*, whose dissemination was widespread,

contained models of female sanctity, as penitents such as Mary the Egyptian entered the translated versions. These stories still served the purposes of preachers, but were also read by an ever growing literate lay audience. Paintings, statues, woodcuts, and other art objects (some virtually mass produced) also commonly incorporated the traditions of early Christian women. Stories and images together became part of a fervent culture of devotion. Those practices of devotion, and indeed the entire panoply of the cult of saints, were vigorously attacked by the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century. Yet both traditions of female sanctity—that of contemporary visionary women and that of the ancient martyrs—remained central to the religious culture of Catholic regions in the early modern period.

Note: A version of this essay will appear as part of the entry on "Hagiography" in *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Nadia Margolis (New York: Garland, in press), as well as in my introduction to *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Thomas Noble and Thomas Head (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). I would prefer that any published citation of or reference to this essay be made to the relevant printed version.

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