



Of saints and shadows

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This newsletter's guest columnist is Samantha K. Herrick, Associate Professor of History at Syracuse University. Her publications have advanced the understanding of hagiographies as valuable historical sources. She is currently writing a monograph about a sizeable but neglected body of apostolic saints' lives, tentatively entitled "Networks of Shared Imagination: Apostolic Legends in Medieval Europe." This book explores the legends' local significance, how they traveled over space and time, and how numerous authors drew on them to construct a larger historical vision.

After several years of pursuing Saint Fronto of Périgueux, I started seeing him everywhere. Or, at least, I began finding references to him in unexpected places, such as texts and artworks honoring other saints. He turned up, for instance, in the *vita* of Martha of Bethany, whom he purportedly accompanied from Judea to Gaul (along with her supposed sister, Mary Magdalen, and about a dozen other saints). Martha's *vita* also credited Fronto with conducting her funeral, a scene depicted in late-medieval manuscripts, paintings, and even the sculpture that graced Martha's tomb. Fronto similarly turned up in two *vitae* celebrating Clement, first bishop of Metz, with whom he reportedly traveled from Rome to Gaul. These appearances were puzzling. Although, according to their legends, all three saints lived at the dawn of Christianity—Fronto and Clement were both remembered as founding bishops while Martha featured in the gospels of Luke and John—I couldn't find a more specific link among them. In addition, their cult centers were very far from one another and, so far as I could tell, not connected in any way.

This confusion also stemmed from my sense that Fronto was a somewhat obscure saint. Other than his basilica in Périgueux, I found only one small church dedicated to him. Evidence of his liturgical veneration is also thin. Altogether, his three *vitae* survive in about two dozen manuscripts, which is not particularly impressive either: by way of comparison, there are roughly 96 copies of Hilduin's *Passio Dionysii* and over 250 copies of Sulpicius Severus's *Vita Martini*. Moreover, there are nearly twice as many copies of Fronto's first *life* as of his third. That detail gives the impression that the third *vita* was a flop, and that Fronto's renown faded over the course of the Middle Ages. It seemed reasonable to view Fronto as never having achieved great success. (*continued*)



SANO DI PIETRO, "THE BURIAL OF ST. MARTHA" (C.1460–70), METROPOLITAN MUSEUM



OF SAINTS AND SHADOWS

Yet here he was, popping up in the stories of other saints, and in ways that seemed to expect medieval audiences to know something about him. Martha's *vita*, for instance, simply cast Fronto among the disciples of Jesus who, it said, sailed from Jerusalem to Gaul after the Resurrection, without any explanation of who he was. That idea that Fronto was Martha's contemporary and, like her, hailed from Judea, matched the claims of his third *vita* closely. For this text transformed Fronto from a native of the Périgord and disciple of Peter to a native of Judea and direct disciple of Christ. Did Martha's hagiographer know Fronto's *Vita tertia*? Did she or he take for granted that others knew it too? It seems possible that this was the case, for the same author alluded briefly to another episode in Fronto's legend as though readers would catch the reference, even though it featured nowhere in Martha's *vita*. If the audience of another saint's legend could be assumed to know Fronto's story as recounted specifically by his third *vita*, then perhaps that text had not flopped after all. Perhaps Fronto was not as obscure as he seemed.

Fronto's appearances in other saints' legends reminded me of the shadow cast by something that itself remains unseen. For what I saw in these references was not so much Fronto's actual presence in medieval veneration as allusions to it. These references hinted that he occupied a greater place in medieval devotion than evidence pertaining to his own cult would suggest. Like shadows, they seemed at once insubstantial and potentially significant.

So I began hunting for more of this shadowy evidence. It turned out that Fronto featured regularly in Cistercian legendaries. A significant number of the surviving copies of his *vitae* are found in these collections, which in turn hint at many others, now lost. For even though these multi-volume legendaries rarely survive in their entirety, they were relatively consistent in their content. Fronto's shadow was discernible in Dominican *legendae novae* too, including the *Legenda aurea*. For although his legend did not make it into this vast compendium, he nevertheless appeared, sometimes fleetingly, in the entries for both Peter and Martha. Members of these immense orders clearly knew Fronto's legend (although, I also discovered, they knew different versions). This shadowy evidence again suggested that Fronto was much better known than I'd thought.

The idea that saints might cast a "shadow" beyond the sources directly pertaining to their cult was intriguing. For one thing, it seemed to help offset the loss of key evidence. In Fronto's case, Huguenots had completely destroyed his basilica, along with its shrine and manuscripts, and tossed his relics in the river Isle. That makes it hard to study his cult, and consequently renders oblique evidence particularly valuable. It also means that the quantity of surviving evidence cannot simply be equated with the actual extent of his medieval veneration. (*continued*)

OF SAINTS AND SHADOWS

The loss of nearly everything associated with his cult center no doubt played a role in making him seem obscure. It is almost certainly one reason that he has received so much less attention than his neighbor, Martial of Limoges, whose church's manuscripts were preserved. But if traces of Fronto's "shadow" survive, then there may be ways to get around this gaping evidentiary hole. Additionally, the notion that saints' legends could provide evidence for the veneration of other saints highlights the fact that these cults did not exist in isolation. They related to and influenced each other in ways that merit greater attention.

Ultimately, I do not know how the Cistercians or the Dominicans first encountered Fronto's legend or how much it featured in their devotion. Nor do I know how it reached the authors who celebrated the deeds of Martha and Clement or why they decided to cast Fronto in their saints' stories. But I believe that the fact that Fronto's legend reached these various parties, and that they incorporated it—to varying degrees—into their liturgical celebration and their stories, is worth thinking about. If saints cast figurative shadows, then such traces have something to tell us about those saints' cults and the construction of sanctity.



A FOLIO FROM A DOMINICAN BRIVIARY (PARIS BN MS LAT. 10484, FOL. 262; C. 1323-26), AT THE TOP, MARTHA RECEIVES JESUS IN BETHANY. IN THE BOTTOM MARGIN, FRONTO SLEEPS ON HIS EPISCOPAL THRONE IN PÉRIGUEUX (LEFT) WHILE ALSO PERFORMING MARTHA'S BURIAL WITH CHRIST (GALLICA).

