
INTRODUCTION TO THE 2012 EDITION

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The *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, of Jacobus de Voragine was one of the most influential books of the later Middle Ages. It is a compendium of saints' lives and of liturgical and doctrinal instruction, culled in the 1260s from a wide range of patristic and medieval sources. Its compiler, Blessed Jacobus de Voragine (the Latin form of Jacopo or Giacomo de Varrazze, ca. 1229–1298), intended his book as an aid for busy priests and preachers in need of a handy source of vivid anecdote, instruction, and edification to bulk out their sermons and catecheses.¹ Many such compilations were produced in thirteenth-century Europe, as the Church sought both to promote more active religious engagement among parish clergy and laypeople, and to police the orthodoxy of popular belief and practice. The new orders of mendicant friars were in the forefront of this campaign to instruct and enthuse ordinary Christians, and Jacobus, an Italian Dominican friar who became Prior of the Lombard Province in 1267, was working in a tradition established earlier in the same century by members of his own relatively new order. Jean de Mailly began work on his *Abbreviatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum* in the late 1220s, within ten years of the foundation of the Order of Preachers, and his fellow Dominican Bartholomew of Trent produced his *Epilogus in gesta sanctorum* in the mid-1240s.² Jacobus drew freely on both these collections, but those books, popular as they were, survive now in just a couple of dozen manuscripts apiece. Jacobus's *Legenda Aurea*, by contrast, has survived in almost a thousand manuscript copies of the Latin text alone, with another five hundred or so manuscripts containing translations of all or part of the *Legenda* into one or another of the great European vernaculars. His own order seems not at first to have considered Jacobus's *Legenda* definitive, and other Dominicans went on compiling similar hagiographical works well into the fourteenth century. But even in Jacobus's own lifetime his book, doubtless transmitted across Europe through Dominican networks initially, had moved well beyond the confines of the order, and was establishing itself as the most widely used compendium of its kind. As early as the 1280s it was already one of the shaping influences on local hagiographical projects far removed from Italy, such as the vernacular

¹ The only full-length study is G. Monleone, *Jacopo de Voragine e la sua Cronaca de Genoa* (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1941).

² For both, see Sherry L. Reames, *The Legenda Aurea: A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 164ff.

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South English Legendary.³ Within two generations, hagiographical compilers all over Europe were adopting Jacobus's framework and lifting material wholesale from his book. Its popularity earned it the nickname the *Golden Legend*, with the implication that it was worth its weight in gold: the word "legenda" then meant simply a text to be read aloud, with none of the associations with fiction or fancy that the word "legend" has since acquired. In the two centuries after its composition, Jacobus's *Legenda* was translated and retranslated into most of the major languages of Western Europe. There were seven versions in French alone, and two in English. And with the advent of printing, Jacobus's text became as big a bestseller in the new medium as it had been in the old. Between 1470 and 1500, at least eighty-seven Latin editions of the *Legenda* were printed, as well as sixty-nine editions in various vernaculars, including four editions in English, considerably more than all the known printings of the Bible in any language during the same period.⁴

At first sight modern readers may find this remarkable medieval popularity a bit of a puzzle. The *Legenda Aurea* is not an easy book to use. For convenience of reference, any modern encyclopedia of religion would be likely to present its subject matter alphabetically. Jacobus organized his book on quite different principles. A brief and rather confusing prologue claims that its contents are arranged under "four distinct periods" corresponding simultaneously to epochs in the world's history, to phases of human life, and to the representation of those phases within the cycle of the liturgy. Jacobus characterizes these four periods as the times of deviation, of renovation, of reconciliation, and of pilgrimage. In practice, however, his book actually falls into five unequal sections, corresponding to the main divisions of the liturgical year: namely, the periods from Advent to Christmas (covered in chapters 1–5); from Christmas to Septuagesima (i.e., the Sunday nominally seventy days before Easter) (chapters 6–30); from Septuagesima to Easter (chapters 31–53); from Easter Day to Pentecost (chapters 54–76); and from the octave of Pentecost to Advent again (chapters 77–180). The lives of the saints occupy just 153 of the 182 chapters in the standard modern edition of Jacobus's book, and are clustered chronologically, as their feast days fall within these larger liturgical seasons. Twenty-three nonhagiographical chapters mark off the larger divisions of the book, and these are devoted to the systematic exposition of the medieval Church's understanding of salvation, arranged according to the main liturgical seasons and feasts. The feast days covered include the Annunciation, Advent, Nativity of Christ (i.e., Christmas Day), Circumcision, Epiphany, the Sundays leading up to Lent—Septuagesima,

³ Manfred Gorch, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1974), although Gorch is inclined to minimize the influence of Jacobus.

⁴ Robert Francis Seybolt, "Fifteenth Century Editions of the *Legenda Aurea*," *Speculum* 21, no. 3 (July 1946), pp. 327–338; brief discussion by Alain Boureau in André Vauchez, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers; Paris: Editions du Cerf; Rome: Città nuova, 2000), pp. 620–621, and sources there cited.

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Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima—Quadragesima (i.e., the first Sunday of Lent), the Ember Day fasts, the Passion, Resurrection, the Rogation days, Ascension, Pentecost, and the Invention (i.e., Discovery) and Exaltation of the Holy Cross. To these, Jacobus added a cycle of Marian feasts (the Birth, Purification, and Assumption of the Virgin), which he used to set forth an elaborate and ardent theology of the Virgin Mary, the feasts of All Saints, All Souls (in the course of which he expounds the doctrine of purgatory), and the Dedication of a Church.

Most of these expository chapters differ markedly from the chapters devoted to the lives of the saints. Instead of the eventful narratives enlivened by miracle stories and other sensational happenings that characterize most of the “sanctorale” entries, in these “temporale” chapters Jacobus offers a dense doctrinal and symbolic analysis of the main features of the Christian faith as the medieval church understood it. In effect, these sections of the *Legenda* form an encyclopedic handbook of doctrine, clearly designed to provide material for instruction and preaching. Though presented in highly compressed form, these parts of the book are also self-consciously learned, and abundant citations of sources and authorities are mustered to underpin Jacobus’s teaching. Although these chapters occupy less than one-sixth of the book’s total bulk, they contain at least half of Jacobus’s thousand-plus citations from the writings of early Christian Fathers and theologians like Saint Augustine, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Bede, and Saint Bernard, as well as from the standard medieval theological reference books, like Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica* and Cassiodorus’s *Historia Tripartita*. The scholastic urge to order, systematize, tabulate, and analyze is especially in evidence here, reminding the reader that Jacobus was an exact contemporary of Saint Thomas Aquinas (they entered the Dominican order in the same year, 1244). But Jacobus was essentially deploying here an intensive form of a characteristic medieval form of catechesis, which was routinely organized and structured into numbered categories—the ten commandments, seven deadly sins, four cardinal and three theological virtues, seven corporal works of mercy, and so on. In this mode, Jacobus’s chapter on the Passion of Christ [53] is structured around a dense series of numerical lists, themselves divided into subclauses and lesser lists—the five pains of the Passion, the four prerogatives of Christ’s nature, the four modes of mockery to which he was subjected, the three reasons for his silence before his judges, the three special fruits of his passion, and the fourfold benefits flowing from his death by crucifixion. That dense and at times dauntingly numerical framework for doctrinal and devotional exposition is especially characteristic of Jacobus’s “temporale” chapters, but it spills over also into some of the lives of the saints—for example, in his account of the preaching of Saint Andrew [2], or the whole chapter on the birth of John the Baptist [86]. The complexity of this expository material reminds us that the *Legenda* was never intended as straightforward devotional reading for the ordinary layman, although it would eventually be adapted for just such use. It was essentially a handbook for preachers, a quarry from which material could

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be extracted, to be presented more palatably and discursively in the pulpit. Many vernacular sermon collections drew very heavily on the *Legenda*, such as the late-fourteenth-century English *Festial* compiled by the Augustinian Canon John Mirk, for whom Jacobus's text was the invariable and in many cases the sole source of sermon material. It is notable, though, that Mirk, like many other homilists normally dependent on Jacobus, often modified or set aside altogether these formidable doctrinal sections, in favor of greater simplicity and more entertaining anecdote.⁵

But important as these “temporale” chapters are for the structure of his book, Jacobus's coverage of the greater feasts and seasons is highly selective. The whole forty days and six Sundays of Lent are dealt with in a single short and scrappy entry [34], and he provides no coverage for the major liturgical celebrations of either Palm Sunday or Maundy Thursday. By the same token, Jacobus ignores the brand-new feast of Corpus Christi (established by Pope Urban IV in 1264). Despite its recent institution, this seems a surprising omission, given Thomas Aquinas's authorship of the texts for the feast, and the wider Dominican investment in the propagation of orthodox Eucharistic teaching. Because he also omits any treatment of Maundy Thursday, there is no extended discussion of the Mass in Jacobus's book, a striking omission in an age increasingly concerned about heresy.

The omission of Corpus Christi gives Jacobus's *Legenda* an old-fashioned look, and that impression of old-fashionedness deepens into positive archaism when we come to consider the list of saints whose lives he does include. The early thirteenth century had been momentous for the development of notions of sanctity, and in the actual process of saint-making. The popes had only recently established their monopoly over the canonization of saints, formerly a general episcopal prerogative, and the Roman introduction of more rigorous (and more expensive) forms of scrutiny of the lives and miracles of candidates for sanctity would lead to a marked reduction in the numbers of canonizations.⁶ But in the seventy years before Jacobus wrote the *Legenda*, successive popes had nevertheless carried out more than twenty canonizations, and these new papal saints embodied a wide spectrum of holiness and states of life—from Homobonus of Cremona, a married layman revered for his goodness to the poor, to holy queens and empresses like Margaret of Scotland, Cunegund of Bamberg, or Elisabeth of Hungary. There had been saintly bishops like Hugh of Lincoln, Richard of Chichester, and the Irishman Laurence O'Toole, clerical martyrs like Stanislas of Cracow, and the founders and early heroes and heroines of the mendicant orders, Francis and Claire of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, and,

⁵ For Mirk's dependence on Jacobus, see Susan Powell, ed., *John Mirk's Festial*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Early English Text Society O.S. 339, 2009), pp. xxxii–xxxvii.

⁶ For these developments, see André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 33–84.

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among the Dominicans, Saint Dominic and Saint Peter Martyr.⁷ As a mendicant friar himself, Jacobus predictably included long chapters on the lives of the two great founders, Francis [149] and Dominic [113], as well as a similarly extended treatment of the Dominican order's great martyr, Peter of Verona [63], who had been murdered by heretics in Jacobus's native Lombardy in 1252. He also fairly unsurprisingly included a life of the English martyr-archbishop Thomas Becket [11], an icon for the authority and independence of the Church whose shrine was one of the great pilgrimage venues of Europe. But there Jacobus's interest in modern sanctity appears to have ended: he ignored not only all the other papal canonizations of the preceding hundred years, but all saints of whatever kind from the preceding five centuries. The standard text of the *Legenda* does admittedly include a life of Elisabeth of Hungary [168], canonized in 1235, but that life is so very different in tone and style from virtually every other life in the *Legenda* that it may very well be an interpolation by another hand.

Jacobus's saints, therefore, are overwhelmingly drawn from a traditional list of those who had been venerated for centuries. They include the major figures of the New Testament (the Apostles, Evangelists, Saint John the Baptist, Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Stephen), the Fathers, Doctors, popes, monks, and hermits of the early Church (Saint Silvester, Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Anthony, Saint Benedict), and above all, the martyr saints of the first four Christian centuries. These lives of the martyr saints, filled as they are with lurid detail of gruesome sufferings, with defiance and rejection of the world, and larded with spectacular miracles, undoubtedly appeal to a medieval taste for romance, excitement, and pious entertainment. These qualities gave the *Legenda Aurea* much of its distinctive character, and its huge popularity. But they were also precisely the qualities against which sober sixteenth-century religious reformers, both Catholic and Protestant, would react, which would lead to the widespread repudiation of Jacobus's book as a tissue of unedifying tall tales, and would help to give the word "legend" its negative connotations.

The entry for the martyr Saint Agnes [24] can be taken as representative of Jacobus's handling of the lives of such saints. The historical Saint Agnes was a young girl (twelve years old, according to Saint Ambrose, whose treatise *De Virginitate* is the earliest source) executed for her Christian faith in the Diocletian persecution circa 305. She was buried outside Rome on the Via Nomentana, where in the later fourth century a basilica was erected over her grave. She became one of Rome's most important saints, and her name is one of those recited during the canon of the Mass. Celebrated by Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and other fourth- and fifth-century writers as an exemplar of heroic virginity, the scant details of her martyrdom were soon elaborated. According to Ambrose, she was killed by burning; according to her shrine inscription by Pope Damasus, at her execution Agnes's hair grew miraculously to cover her naked body; and according to the hymn writer Prudentius, her chastity was

⁷ See the table of canonizations in Vauchez, *Sainthood*, pp. 252–256.

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tested by exposure in a brothel. These and many other details were elaborated in the highly colored fifth-century *Acts of the Martyrdom of Saint Agnes*, which was Jacobus's main source. He also used and quoted extensively from Saint Ambrose's panegyric on Agnes in *De Virginitate*.⁸

Jacobus's account of Saint Agnes opens, as is his custom, with a fanciful etymological paragraph, offering three different explanations of Agnes's name. It may have come from *agnus*, the Latin for "lamb," reflecting her lamb-like meekness. Alternatively, it might derive from the Greek word *agnos*, "pious," because she was pious and compassionate. Or yet again, it might derive from the Latin participle *agnoscendo*, "knowing," because "she knew the way of truth." In fact, however, there is nothing remotely meek about Jacobus's portrait of Agnes. In his account, she is a defiant, even an aggressive paragon of chastity, the vowed bride of Christ, "a child in body but already aged in spirit." As she returns from school one day, the son of the prefect of Rome sees her in the street and is smitten by her beauty. She repudiates the hapless young man's tentative advances immediately and ferociously, calling him "the spark that lights the fire of sin, you fuel of wickedness, you food of death," and taunting him that "The one I love is far nobler than you. . . . His mother is a virgin, his father . . . is served by angels." Agnes then goes on to enumerate the five transcendent virtues of Christ as a heavenly lover. The lovesick youth, unable to compete, takes to his sickbed, and his worried father attempts to persuade Agnes to yield to his son, first by wheedling and then with threats. When she persists in defiant fidelity to her heavenly husband, the prefect charges her with being a Christian, has her stripped naked, and sends her to a brothel. En route, however, her hair grows to preserve her modesty. Once in the brothel, an angel surrounds her in an even more glorious garment of blinding light, and the brothel itself becomes a place of prayer and spiritual healing. The lovesick young man now shows his true colors by inciting his companions to gang-rape Agnes, and is punished by being throttled by the devil. At the bereaved father's request, Agnes raises the bad lad from the dead, but is then accused of being a witch by jealous pagan priests. The now chastened prefect seeks to release her, but out of cowardice hands the case over to his deputy, who condemns Agnes to be burned. The flames part around her and consume the hostile bystanders. The irrepressible Agnes is finally dispatched when a soldier thrusts a dagger into her throat. Jacobus adds a brief account of the martyrdom by stoning of Agnes's mythical foster sister, Emerentiana, complete with an appearance of the glorified Agnes, clad in gold and attended by angels and a snow-white lamb. He also provides two post-mortem miracle stories, both of which relate directly to Agnes's shrine church on the Via Nomentana. In the first of these, the emperor Constantine's daughter, Constance, a leper, makes a pilgrimage to Agnes's grave and sleeps

⁸ The compact discussion by J. P. Kirsch of the elaboration of the legend in the early sources, in his article on Saint Agnes in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, retains its value, despite its venerable age. It is available online at www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/CEAGNES.HTM.

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there, in search of a cure. Agnes appears to her in a dream and heals her, and the grateful Constance builds the basilica over Agnes's grave and vows to live a virginal life there with her maidens. In the second miracle, a priest assailed by lust is cured of temptation when he betroths himself to Agnes by placing a jeweled ring on the finger of the statue of her "that stood in her church." Jacobus provides two quite different versions of this story but assures the reader that "it is said that this ring can still be seen on the finger of the statue." The entry concludes with a paragraph of extended quotation from Saint Ambrose's eulogy of Saint Agnes in his *De Virginitate*.

This is a lot of color to crowd into fewer than 1,500 words (in the Latin). Such a torrent of incident leaves no room for religious subtlety or refined psychologizing. Jacobus's Agnes is less a holy human being than a cipher for a drastically two-dimensional representation of the virtue of chastity. The saint's monotone angry defiance is in play from the very opening of the account, and the saturation of the story in the miraculous moves it closer to folk or fairy tale than to any kind of biographical study. The story exemplifies Jacobus's apparent fascination with the multiple forms of torture and execution undergone by the martyrs—one modern analysis has identified eighty-one different forms of suffering, mutilation, and death in Jacobus's narratives.⁹ The medieval reader or listener, as well as being entertained, would doubtless have found plenty to relate to, not least the easily recognizable features of contemporary religious practice reflected in the miracles, which feature pilgrimages, shrine images, vows, and ex-voto gifts. He or she would have found in the stories vivid, even lurid, assurances of God's power and providence. But there would not have been much here to emulate, no template, apart from ritual matters, for ordinary Christian living. This was holiness presented not so much as a pattern to be imitated, but as a power to be harnessed, and a source of intercession to be supplicated.

The miraculous elements in such stories were eventually to earn Jacobus the contempt of humanist and protestant scholars as a peddler of fable to the gullible. But it is worth noting that in his account of the miracle of the lustful priest, Jacobus in fact offered his readers two different and incompatible versions of the episode, leaving them to choose which, if either, they accepted, just as in the etymology he offers three quite different explanations of Agnes's name. Jacobus's etymologies were in a long tradition of medieval learning derived from Isidore of Seville's vast *Etymologiae*, the most widely used encyclopedia of the Middle Ages. The first users of the *Legenda* would have recognized both the genre itself and the element of intellectual playfulness implicit in it. And however marvelous the stories he relates, Jacobus can also display both skepticism and some sophistication in his handling of the incidents and evidence that form the body of his narrative. Famously, in his account of Saint Margaret [93], he

⁹ Alain Boureau, *La Légende dorée: Le système narratif de Jacques de Voragine* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), pp. 118–120.

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repeated the story of how the saint had allegedly been swallowed alive by the devil in the form of a dragon, but burst from his stomach by making the sign of the cross. Jacobus commented, “What is said here, however, . . . is considered apocryphal, and not to be taken seriously.” This is not an isolated case. In his account of Saint Andrew [2] he reports Andrew’s alleged rescue of the Apostle Matthew from kidnappers, but adds, “[So] we are told; but I find the story very hard to believe.” Reporting a revenge miracle in which a servant who slapped Saint Thomas was devoured by lions and dogs, Jacobus cites a long passage from Saint Augustine that casts doubt on the story [5]: “Augustine, in his book *Against Faustus*, will have none of this act of vengeance and declares that the incident is apocryphal.” In the same way, in his section on the Passion of Christ [53], Jacobus compares accounts of the horrible end of Pontius Pilate from an apocryphal Gospel and from the *Historia Scholastica*, and comments, “[L]et the reader judge whether the story is worth the telling.” In his life of Saint Hilary [17] he expresses disbelief about the story of Hilary’s triumph over a heretical “Pope Leo.” These expressions of skepticism are often underpinned by appeal to contradictions or disagreements between authorities and evidences: in his life of Saint Matthew [43] he raises a doubt about the morality of casting lots in the making of decisions, citing varying opinions from Saint Jerome, Saint Bede, and Pseudo-Dionysius.

Jacobus, then, was clearly aware that even revered patristic authorities might contradict one another, and he often leaves it to the reader to choose between conflicting accounts. But we are certainly not dealing here with the kind of critical approach to historical evidence that was ushered in by the Renaissance, and by whose standards the *Legenda* was found lamentably wanting. The contradictions and doubts that trouble Jacobus do so as inconsistencies within a doctrinal system. He doubts the story of the heretical pope defeated by Saint Hilary because a priori popes cannot be heretical, not because the source is suspect. The debate about the casting of lots interests him not because ancient authorities contradict one another about it, but because the legitimacy of lots was a theological question still unresolved in his own day, with a direct bearing on practical morality. He is concerned to guard the internal coherence of Catholicism, not the authenticity of historical evidence.¹⁰

The range of Jacobus’s sources has been quantified by Alain Boureau, and subjected to a more detailed if essentially unsympathetic analysis by Sherry Reames.¹¹ The breadth of the material he drew on is impressive: the Gospels, the book of Psalms, the book of Isaiah, the Pauline epistles, and the Acts of the Apostles head the list of biblical authorities, and Jacobus also made use of apocryphal writings such as the Gospel of Nicodemus. But he also drew heavily on patristic writers, above all Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Jerome, Saint John Chrysostom, and Saint Ambrose (in that order). Among his

¹⁰ Cf. Boureau, *Legende doree*, p. 101.

¹¹ Boureau, *Legende doree*, pp. 75–108; Reames, *Legenda Aurea*, passim.

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medieval contemporaries or near contemporaries, Saint Bernard equals Saint Augustine in the number of citations. A cluster of lives of hermit saints grouped at the end of the book was extracted from the accounts of the desert fathers in the Latin *Vitae Patrum*, Jacobus's account of Saint Anthony was abbreviated from the life by Saint Athanasius, and the story of Barlaam and Josephat, a Christianized version of the life of the Buddha, was taken from a Latin version of a seventh-century Syrian monastic text, attributed in Jacobus's day to Saint John Chrysostom.

Given the scaling-down inevitable in a compilation, all of these materials are paraphrased and drastically reduced, even when Jacobus is following his original's narrative framework very closely. There are exceptions: more than half his long chapter on Saint Paul consists of an immense extended quotation from Chrysostom's sermon "*De laudibus Pauli*" [90]. His life of the fourth-century Roman widow Saint Paula [29] is a shortened version of Jerome's magnificent eulogy in *Epistola* 108, recognizably Jerome's in emphasis and rhetoric, despite the abbreviation. His life of "A Virgin of Antioch" [62] is lifted entire from Ambrose's *De Virginitate*. His life of Saint Augustine [126], one of the longest in the *Legenda*, abbreviates the contemporary life by Possidius but supplements it extensively from Augustine's own autobiographical writings, especially the *Confessions* and the *Soliloquies*.

Modern commentators have been uncomplimentary about Jacobus's use of his early Christian materials, seeing in his abbreviations not merely the inevitable problems of reduction, but an invariable coarsening and externalization of religious motive and feeling, which reflected a similar hardening in the religious culture of his own time.¹² On this account the *Legenda's* focus on sanctity as heroic virtue in conflict with the world, and the typology of the saint as normally a martyr, a cleric, or a monk, deliberately turns away from some of the most vital and inclusive religious energies of his own time, in favor of an unimaginative clericalization of the concept of the holy. None of Jacobus's saints were ordinary men and women living ordinary lives. Jacobus's saints are uncomfortable people, insofar as they can be said to be people at all, often at odds with the world around them. Their virtues are those of absolute world-renunciation and denial, and they themselves are often beset by enemies—demonic forces, unbelieving parents and family, heretics, and hostile secular rulers. In his handling not merely of a contemporary figure like his confrere Peter Martyr, but of remoter exemplars like Saint Ambrose [57], Jacobus certainly reflected anxieties about some of the most pressing preoccupations of the Church of his own day—in the case of Ambrose, the struggle between papacy and Empire; and in the case of Peter Martyr, the campaign to obliterate heresy, in which the Dominican Order was so heavily involved.

Jacobus was indeed a man of his own times. A patriotic Lombard, he included under the pretext of a life of Pope Pelagius a chronicle of Christian

¹² This is the central argument of Reames's *Legenda Aurea*.

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history that focused predominantly on the events and notables of his own region [181], and which earned his book the nickname “The Lombardic History.” He was a man immersed in affairs, as administrator of a great religious order, as a papal diplomat, and finally as an outstanding and much-loved Bishop of Genoa. But Jacobus can hardly be blamed for being of his own times. If he did not transcend the limitations of institutional Christianity in the thirteenth century, he embodied some of its most distinctive energies, as well as some of its tensions and contradictions. His book quite evidently touched a contemporary nerve, and was seen and seized on for three centuries as an indispensable pastoral resource, as well as a source of entertainment and of inspiration and source material for poets, dramatists, and painters.

It was inevitable that the Protestant reformers would see in the *Golden Legend* a source and embodiment of superstition and idolatry, everything they despised and rejected in medieval Christianity. But even before and beyond the Reformation, it had come to seem old-fashioned and passé. In the mid-fifteenth century the great Catholic reformer Nicholas of Cusa forbade his clergy to teach their people the fables of the *Legenda Aurea*, and to successive generations of Catholic humanists, trained by Erasmus to look back to the pure sources of early Christianity, and to ground their religion on sound historical truth and solid moral worth, Jacobus’s book, with its far-fetched miracles and martyrdoms, came to seem anathema. The lives of the saints should be sober and credible, exemplars of virtue rather than chronicles of wonders. The Spanish humanist Luis de Vives articulated this new mentality when he declared, “[H]ow unworthy of the saints, and of all Christians, is that history of the saints called the Golden Legend. I cannot imagine why they call it Golden, when it is written by a man with a mouth of iron and a heart of lead. What can be more abominable than this book? What a disgrace to us Christians that the preeminent deeds of our saints have not been more truly and accurately preserved, so that we may know or imitate such virtue, when the Greek and Roman authors have written with such care about their generals, philosophers and sages.”¹³

Counter-Reformation Catholicism would reform the cult of the saints accordingly, purging the breviary lections of the more bizarre episodes culled from Jacobus, and in the hands of the seventeenth-century Jesuit scholar Jean Boland, hagiography became an exact science. In this new climate, Jacobus’s book fell into eclipse. It would not emerge again from obscurity until the nineteenth century, when Romantic admiration for the Middle Ages and an interest in the sources of medieval and Renaissance art would send readers back to the *Golden Legend*, as a repository of ancient lore, and as the distillation of both the imagination and the soul of the Christian Middle Ages.

¹³ Cited in Reames, *Legenda Aurea*, p. 52.