

CHAPTER I

Origins (100–500)

The Martyrs

“Why can the dead do such great things?” Such is a question asked by one of the most important of all Christian thinkers, St. Augustine, as he pondered the miracles worked by the saints.¹ Of all religions, Christianity is the one most concerned with dead bodies. Many religions have the idea of a holy man or woman—a living human being with extraordinary powers derived from special contact with the divine. Medieval Christianity developed to an extreme degree a distinctive form of this concept: the idea that the dead bodies of these holy people should be cherished as enduring sources of supernatural power. There were thousands of shrines in medieval Europe containing the dust, bones, or (an elect group) the undecayed bodies of the holy dead. Men and women came to these places, revered those whose mortal remains lay there, asked them for favours, and, to judge by their accounts, were cured of their ills. The ecclesiastics who guarded these shrines wrote of the lives of those whose bodies they tended, recorded the wonders they performed after death and gave them solemn liturgical commemoration in the churches that often bore their names. These were the saints.

The origins of the cult of the saints lie in the early centuries of Christianity. From at least the second century AD some Christians were regarded as higher, exceptional, in a class of their own. These were the martyrs, a word of Greek origin meaning “witnesses,” those who died for their faith, tortured and killed in the elaborate public way typical of imperial Roman civilization. Christians prayed *for* their (ordinary) dead but they prayed *to* the martyrs. Their sufferings were seen as a sacrifice undergone on behalf of other Christians. Even while they were in prison awaiting examination or execution, the martyrs were deemed to have the power of forgiveness of sins. At their tombs, usually located in the cemeteries found outside the walls of Greek and Roman cities, the local Christian community would gather on the anniversary of their deaths to celebrate the Eucharist and perhaps have a commemorative feast. Local churches kept lists of their martyrs, recording the dates of their deaths, and sometimes sent accounts of recent martyrdoms to other churches.

¹ Augustine, *De civitate dei* 22. 9 (2, p. 827).

CHAPTER 1

Persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was not unremitting. In some periods (notably 260–303), decades passed peacefully, even if Christianity remained technically illegal. But, periodically, major state-sponsored assaults were launched against the religion. The first was under Nero, in AD 64, when the victims probably included St. Peter and St. Paul. In the third century, large-scale persecutions followed the issue of anti-Christian edicts by the emperors Decius, in 250, and Valerian, in 257. The culmination of this policy came in 303, when the emperor Diocletian opened a campaign to wipe out the Church completely. The “holy struggles of the martyrs of God’s word” in this “Great Persecution” lasted, in many parts of the empire, until 311.² Under Licinius, who ruled only in the eastern half of the empire, persecution was revived for a few years in the early 320s.

The dramatic last days of some of the early Christian martyrs are reported in contemporary accounts. Amongst the earliest of these remarkable records is *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which recounts the death of the bishop of Smyrna (in Asia Minor, modern Izmir) at some time in the years 150–80.³ The aged Polycarp, facing execution, is described praying to God that he may be received “as a sacrifice.” When he is brought into the arena and burned at a pyre, there is no stench of burning flesh, but it is rather as if “bread were being baked, or gold or silver purified in a furnace.” Afterwards the Christians of Smyrna wish to collect his remains, desiring “to have a share in his holy flesh.” Before they are allowed to do so, they have to overcome the objections of pagans and Jews who fear they might worship Polycarp.

Thus at last, collecting the remains that were dearer to us than precious stones and finer than gold, we buried them in a fitting spot. Gathering here, so far as we can, in joy and gladness, we will be allowed by the Lord to celebrate the anniversary day of his martyrdom, both as a memorial for those who have already fought the contest and for the training and preparation of those who will do so one day.

One of the most moving accounts of a martyr’s end is that of Perpetua, much of which was actually composed by the martyr herself while in prison.⁴ Perpetua was an inhabitant of Carthage in North Africa, an important early centre of Christianity in the western part of the Roman Empire. She was a married woman in her early twenties, reasonably prosperous and well educated. In the year 203 she was rounded up with other Christians and urged to perform pagan sacrifice. Amongst the other pressures on her was the insistence of her father, who begged her to give way, and worries about her baby, much assuaged when she was permitted to keep the child with her in prison. Perpetua’s status as a martyr was already recognized during her imprisonment. She tells how one of her brothers said to her, “Sister, you are now

²Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 8. 2. 3 (3, p. 7).

³*Passio Polycarpi*.

⁴*Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*.

ORIGINS

so greatly privileged that you could ask for a vision, to show you whether you will suffer martyrdom or not"; this she asks for and obtains. In a later dream-vision she sees another, deceased brother, suffering after death, but, she says, "I knew that I had the privilege of pleading for him," and by her prayers obtains his release. Intercession is at the heart of the Christian conception of sainthood, and here Perpetua, the living martyr, shows that she possesses the power to intercede, even beyond the grave. It would be left to later theologians to work out doctrines to fit with these experienced realities.

Perpetua and the other Christians with her, including the pregnant slave-girl Felicity, were condemned to be thrown to the wild beasts in the public arena. The day before their execution, Perpetua dreamed that she was brought to the arena to face a villainous-looking Egyptian; handsome young men came up to her to be her seconds in the fight and took off her clothes; she suddenly found that she was transformed into a man; her seconds rubbed her down with oil; in the contest with the Egyptian she was victorious and left the arena through "The Gate of Life," reserved for gladiators whose lives were spared. "Then I woke up," she writes, "and knew that I would not be fighting with beasts but with the Devil; but I knew that victory would be mine." Naturally this is the end of Perpetua's first-hand account, but a contemporary takes up the tale of her martyrdom and that of her companions, including Felicity, who rejoiced that she had given birth in prison and so would be executed with the others and not have her death delayed because she was pregnant. We know the fate of Perpetua and Felicity, but not that of their babies.

Fifty-five years after these dramatic events, another famous martyrdom took place in Carthage, that of its bishop, Cyprian. Although he composed no first-hand account of his sufferings, he left a large body of writings, including 65 letters and a dozen or so treatises. From these it is possible to learn details of the cult of the martyrs in his time and to see the part that martyrdom played in his thinking. He not only faced martyrdom himself but also offers a window on the world of those who venerated the martyrs.

Cyprian was a wealthy and educated inhabitant of Roman Africa, who converted to Christianity in the 240s and was very quickly promoted to the bishopric of Carthage. He thus became head of a growing Christian community in the most important city in Roman Africa. By the time he became bishop he had already established himself as a powerful Christian writer, and the treatises and letters he went on to produce as a bishop have an eloquent and authoritative tone, even when dealing with the vexed and controversial issues that arose during the ten years of his episcopate (248/9–58). One of the main stimuli to such controversies was the renewed persecution of Christians after Decius's edict. This began soon after Cyprian took up office and lasted throughout 250 and into 251. During this persecution Cyprian himself went into hiding and, although he defended this response at length and with apparent sincerity, it may be that the high value he attributed to martyrdom, and the stress he placed on preparation for it, reflect a lingering self-doubt about his own behaviour at this time.

CHAPTER 1

Cyprian's writings represent martyrdom as the highest attainment of a Christian's life.⁵ Martyrs are soldiers in Christ's army, fighting in a war against Satan and winning heavenly rewards. The African martyrs Laurentinus and Egnatius, who actually were soldiers in the Roman army, were "in truth spiritual soldiers of God, striking down the Devil by their confession of Christ, earning by their glorious suffering palms and crowns from the Lord."⁶ Martyrdom was a "baptism of blood" that sent the martyrs straight to heaven.⁷ Hence persecution should be a source of rejoicing: "Because when there are persecutions, then crowns of faith are given, then the soldiers of God are put to the test, then heaven opens to the martyrs."⁸

After their death, martyrs attained an exceptional reward and had powers of intercession. Cyprian believed that, at the Last Judgment, "the merits of the martyrs" would have special weight with God the Judge.⁹ But even those who were about to be killed or those who survived imprisonment and torture, to whom Cyprian was also willing to give the name "martyrs," since they too were "witnesses," had, in his view, extraordinary powers and status. They had a right to be ordained without some of the usual formalities.¹⁰ The power of their prayers on behalf of others, especially for "the lapsed," those who had given way under persecution, was great. Some contemporaries even spoke as if martyrs about to die could "remit sin." Although this would not be Cyprian's formulation, he nevertheless gave some weight to the "letters of pardon" that the lapsed sometimes sought from the martyrs.¹¹

According to Cyprian, the martyred dead deserved especial reverence. The day of their death should be carefully noted, so that they could be commemorated each year on the anniversary with the celebration of the Eucharist: "We offer sacrifices (that is, the Eucharist) for them whenever we commemorate the sufferings of the martyrs on their anniversary day."¹² These heroes, whose death was commemorated annually and who had special intercessory powers, were the prototype of all subsequent Christian saints.

"The soldier of Christ who has been educated in His commands and admonitions does not shrink fearfully from the fight but is ready for the crown."¹³ So wrote Cyprian, and a few years later he had a second chance to demonstrate it, for in 257 the Roman imperial authorities renewed their persecution of Christians. At first exiled, Cyprian was recalled to Carthage the following year and interrogated before

⁵Hummel, *The Concept of Martyrdom According to St. Cyprian*.

⁶*Epistularium* 39. 3. 1 (3B, p. 189).

⁷*Ad Fortunatam*, p. 185; though see his reservation in *Epistularium* 57. 4. 1 (3B, p. 305).

⁸*Epistularium* 58. 3. 1 (3C, p. 323).

⁹*De lapsis* 17, p. 230.

¹⁰*Epistularium* 38. 1. 1 (3B, p. 183); cf. Hippolytus, *Traditio apostolica* 9, p. 64, on "confessor-martyrs" not requiring laying on of hands to be ordained deacon or priest.

¹¹For example, *Epistularium* 15, 27 (3B, pp. 85–89, 127–32); see Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung durch Taufe, Busse und Martyrerfürbitte in den Zeugnissen frühchristlicher Frömmigkeit und Kunst*, pp. 171–78 (pp. 173–74 specifically on Cyprian).

¹²*Epistularium* 39. 3. 1 (3B, p. 189).

¹³*Ibid.* 58. 11 (3C, p. 335).

ORIGINS

the governor of Africa. Faced with the command to participate in pagan religious ceremonies, the bishop replied simply, "I will not do it." On hearing the sentence that he was to be executed, he responded, "Thanks be to God." Cyprian was at once taken outside, followed by a huge crowd, including the Christians of Carthage, and beheaded with a sword.¹⁴ If he had felt any shame over his earlier flight and concealment, he had now made up for it. Within a very short time after his death, other African martyrs were to be comforted by his appearance in dreams and visions, and he was to become one of the most widely revered of the early martyrs.¹⁵

The Religious Revolution of the Fourth Century

Fifty-five years after Cyprian's martyrdom, an imperial edict granted toleration to Christianity, marking the beginning of a period that was to be one of the most momentous in religious history. At the start of the fourth century Christian worship was illegal; by its end pagan cult had been outlawed. Christianity went from being a persecuted religion to being a state religion, and a major step had been taken toward that identification of the Church and society which was to characterize medieval Europe. After the conversion of the emperor Constantine (306–37), the authority of state and Church became ever more closely intertwined, with bishops and clergy granted legal and fiscal privileges, emperors taking a stand on questions of doctrine, and the organs and institutions of secular and ecclesiastical coercion becoming interdependent. Thus, in the words of Eusebius, Constantine's adviser and the first chronicler of the Church, "a day both bright and radiant, not darkened by a single cloud, shone upon the churches of Christ throughout the world with beams of heavenly light."¹⁶

Alongside the new relationship with the state, new patterns and habits of worship developed, which it is possible to sum up simply by saying that in this period Christianity became a religion. The Middle Eastern world in which Jesus and his first followers lived had a clear and distinct concept of "religion": the temple cults in which ritual specialists, the priests, represented the people and sought divine favour through sacrifice. In its origin Christianity was a radical revivalist cult that rejected most of these things. By the end of the fourth century they were back again: holy buildings, priestly rituals, the language of sacrifice and mystery. A priest of Baal or of Isis or of Yahweh would certainly have recognized what kind of thing the Christianity of the late fourth century was. It was as part of this immense transformation that the cult of the saints came into new prominence and assumed new forms.

One of the most visible innovations was architectural. The martyrs had originally been buried in the ordinary cemeteries of the Mediterranean world, located along

¹⁴*Acta proconsularia sancti Cypriani*.

¹⁵*Passio sanctorum Mariani et Iacobi* 6, p. 202; *Passio sanctorum Montani et Lucii* 11, p. 222.

¹⁶Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10. 1. 8 (3, pp. 78–79).

CHAPTER I

the roads leading away from the cities. At Rome most were interred in underground cemeteries, the “catacombs,” a vast network of tunnels and chambers which lay beneath the funerary areas. Their graves were simple. One that was discovered in the nineteenth century in the catacombs of Bassilla or Hermes bore the plain inscription “Hyacinth, martyr, buried 11 September.”¹⁷ And these places could be gloomy, even frightening. St. Jerome describes how, when he was a schoolboy in Rome around the year 360, he used on Sundays “to go around the tombs of the apostles and martyrs and frequently enter the crypts which had been excavated in the depths of the earth and which contain the bodies of those buried there in the walls on either side of those who go in.” He remembered how dark these places were and how rarely a beam of light from above “would temper the horror of the shadows.” The “blind night” down there brought to his well-educated mind a line of Virgil: “Horror and very silence fill the mind with fear everywhere.”¹⁸

With its new wealth, security and prestige following Constantine’s conversion, the Christian Church could establish a public physical presence in the cities of the empire in a way previously impossible. One way was to open up the catacombs by making the burial chambers of the martyrs bigger, building steps and shafts for light, dispelling to some degree “the horror of the shadows” that Jerome felt.¹⁹ Jerome’s employer Pope Damasus (366–84) was an enthusiastic promoter of the cult of the martyrs of Rome and enlarged and beautified their burial places in the catacombs, composing elegant Latin epitaphs, inscribed on marble slabs, some of which survive or have been rediscovered. “Look!,” begins that for the martyrs Felicissimus and Agapitus, “this tomb contains the heavenly limbs of the saints whom the palace of heaven snatched up.”²⁰ Damasus’s epitaph for Sixtus II looks back to the sufferings of the Church in the time of persecutions, “the time when the sword cut the holy entrails of the Mother.”²¹ Those times were now over, and the Church could embrace public triumphalism.

More striking than the simple elaboration of underground shrines was the building of huge churches over the tombs of the martyrs. Many of these were basilicas—that is, large timber-roofed halls with a central nave, aisles, and a semi-circular apse. Such buildings were common in Roman secular life and often served as courts and throne rooms. In Christian churches it became conventional for the holy end, with the altar, to be at the east, and the public face to be the west. Soon after his conversion, Constantine raised in Rome one of the most important basilican churches in Christian history, St. Peter’s on the Vatican hill. This was the traditional site of the tomb of the apostle Peter, in a large cemetery adjacent to Nero’s circus, a place

¹⁷ *Inscriptiones Christianae urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores*, n.s. 10, no. 26672; it is illustrated in Bisconti and Mazzoleni, *Alle origini del culto dei martiri*, pl. 7; see BS 10, cols. 1221–23, s.n. “Proto e Giacinto.”

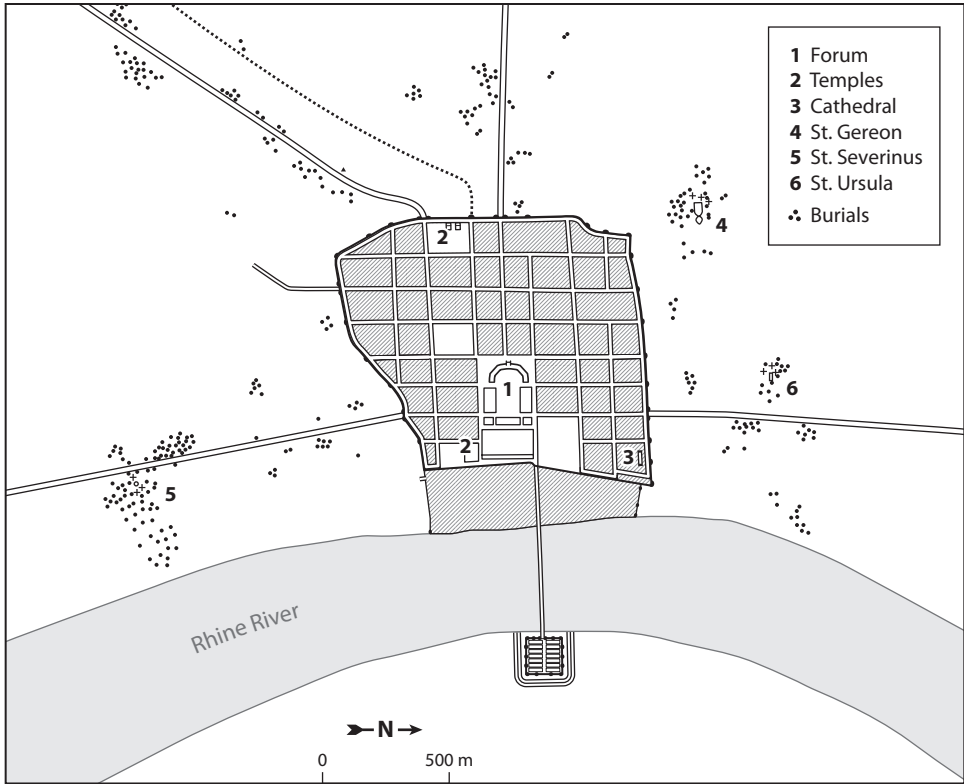
¹⁸ Jerome, *In Hiezechielem* 12, on Ezekiel 40:5–13, pp. 556–57 (PL 25: 375).

¹⁹ Nicolai et al., *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*, pp. 37–59.

²⁰ *Damaso e i martiri di Roma*, pp. 37–38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

ORIGINS



MAP 1.

Cologne in the fourth century. Source: *Topographie chrétienne des cités de la Gaule 12: Province ecclésiastique de Cologne*, pp. 42–43.

where many Christians had been martyred in AD 64. Because the cemetery was on a hill, an enormous amount of levelling and excavating was necessary to obtain a flat surface for Constantine’s huge church. (This also meant that, unusually, the church was aligned to the west, not the east.) It has been calculated that more than 40,000 cubic metres of soil had to be moved. The basilica measured 123 metres (403 feet) in length and 66 metres (216 feet) across the aisles.²² The building of such monumental martyr churches transformed the setting of the cult. Whereas previously Christians had gathered in cemeteries, above or below ground, to reverence the martyrs at their tombs, they could now assemble in vast and elaborately decorated halls which had these tombs at their heart, a veritable “monumentalization” of the cult of the martyrs.²³

²²Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome*, p. 96.

²³Saxer, *Morts, martyrs, reliques*, p. 301.

CHAPTER I

Churches such as those erected over the graves of St. Peter on the Vatican hill or of St. Paul on the Via Ostiense to the south lay outside the city walls—indeed, the church of St. Paul is known as San Paolo *fuori le mura* (“St. Paul’s outside the walls”). This was typical, since the martyrs were buried in the cemeteries located outside the walls and the churches were built above their graves. As a result of this development new foci arose in the suburban parts of Greek and Roman cities. In the words of St. Jerome, “the city itself is moving; the people flood past the half-ruined temples and run to the tombs of the martyrs.”²⁴ When Christians assembled at martyr shrines on the feast-days of the saints, they could be described as “pouring out of the city.”²⁵ John Chrysostom spoke enthusiastically about leaving behind “the tumult of affairs and the throng of everyday anxieties” when he went out of the city to the martyr shrine and “enjoyed the company of the saints,” later returning refreshed.²⁶ The ground-plan of fourth-century Cologne shows exactly the new distribution of Christian topography: a cathedral within the walls, near the government buildings, and three new Christian shrines in the cemeteries outside the walls to the north and south (map 1).²⁷ In some places, Roman if far from Rome, the long-term magnetic attraction of the martyr churches was so great that the settlement itself eventually relocated around them: the English town of St. Albans focuses on the shrine of the martyr Alban, not the nearby Roman town of Verulamium, while in Germany the town which grew up in the cemetery outside of Colonia Ulpia Traiana is even called “By the Saints” (*ad sanctos*)—that is, Xanten.²⁸

Translations

Not every church possessed the tomb of a martyr. Within the cities there were basilican churches that were seats of bishops and centres for Christian communities, but not martyr churches. Such churches, built within the cities in the early fourth century, did not incorporate the tombs of the martyrs in the way that the martyr churches in the suburban cemetery areas did. In Rome, as well as building the great shrine-church of St. Peter’s (at that time outside the walls), Constantine constructed the church of the Lateran within the walls, to serve for the bishop of Rome. These urban churches lacked saints’ remains. But that lack could be remedied. Often this was done by acquiring the bodies of martyrs from elsewhere—the technical term for the ritual relocation of a saint’s remains is “translation” (it simply means “transfer”).

The earliest certain case of the removal of a martyr’s body is the translation of St. Babylas, a bishop of Antioch who had died in prison during the persecution of

²⁴Jerome, *Epistula* 107. 1 (5, p. 145) (PL 22: 868).

²⁵Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia XVIII in Gordium martyrem* 1, col. 489.

²⁶John Chrysostom, *Homilia de sanctis martyribus* 2, col. 649.

²⁷*Topographie chrétienne des cités de la Gaule* 12: *Province ecclésiastique de Cologne*, pp. 42–43.

²⁸Sharpe, “Martyrs and Local Saints in Late Antique Britain,” pp. 75, 82–83, 114–17.

ORIGINS

Decius in the mid-third century.²⁹ Babylas's remains were moved as part of an offensive against the power of the old gods. An hour's stroll outside Antioch was the pleasant and leafy hilltop site of Daphne. Here there was a temple of Apollo. It was also, according to Christian commentators, a scene of "revels and drunkenness."³⁰ The Christian ruler Gallus, Constantine's nephew (351–54), was inspired to harness the energy of a martyr saint to challenge the pagan cult and wicked practices at Daphne. A martyr church was built there close to Apollo's temple, and Babylas's remains were transferred into it from the cemetery at Antioch. The results were immediate: sobriety and modesty spread, the oracle at Apollo's temple fell silent. However, when Gallus's half-brother Julian became emperor, and initiated a campaign to restore traditional pagan religion, an attempt was made to reverse the process. The pagan oracle at Daphne complained to Julian that it was the presence of dead bodies (that is, Babylas) that had silenced it, and Julian commanded that the saint's body be returned to its original location. But the saint fought back: "he asked God to send forth fire on the temple" and both the roof and the image of the god were destroyed (an event that is well attested).³¹ After Julian's death the bishop of Antioch built a big new church across the river from the city to house Babylas's remains. Meanwhile, the empty martyr church at Daphne continued to manifest special powers. "Such is the might of the martyrs . . . such is the might of the saints."³²

Babylas's remains had been removed from the cemetery at Antioch to the martyr church at Daphne, back to the cemetery, and then into the new martyr church. They had not been brought into the city. This was the next barrier to be broken, and it was breached partly as a result of the hunt for saintly bones that began after the emperors adopted Christianity. Amongst the most renowned of the martyrs revered in the early Church were the apostles, the followers of Jesus who had spread the Christian faith in the decades after his death. The chief of these were Peter and Paul,³³ and there were strong and plausible traditions about where their remains lay. Both appear, in historical reality, to have suffered martyrdom at Rome. For a while their bones seem to have been moved to a common site on the Via Appia, and here graffiti of the third and fourth century show that visiting Christians invoked their aid and intercession.³⁴ From the fourth century they were venerated at their tombs outside the ancient city walls, at the sites marked by Constantine's St. Peter's and San Paolo *fuori le mura*. Little, however, was known of the fortunes of the other apostles, but before long stories were created about their far-flung missions and their brave deaths. Inventive writers of the third and subsequent centuries told of Thomas's mission to India, John's activities in Ephesus, Andrew's crucifixion at Patras in Greece, and so

²⁹John Chrysostom, *De sancto Babyla*; Downey, "The Shrines of St. Babylas at Antioch and Daphne."

³⁰John Chrysostom, *De sancto Babyla* 69, p. 182.

³¹Ibid. 93, p. 218; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 22. 13. 1 (3, p. 129).

³²John Chrysostom, *De sancto Babyla* 127, p. 274.

³³Although Paul had not been a follower of the living Jesus, he was "the Apostle" par excellence because of his extraordinary missionary work.

³⁴Pietri, "L'évolution du culte des saints aux premiers siècles chrétiens," p. 26.

CHAPTER I

forth. As Christianity underwent the transformation from a minority movement to a majority and public religion, interest was shown in finding the sites of the graves of these other apostles, as also the location of the founding events of the religion. Constantine raised huge churches on the supposed sites of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Resurrection in Jerusalem, and under his son Constantius apostolic remains were found for the new imperial and Christian capital of Constantinople. In 356 “the relics of the apostle Timothy were brought to Constantinople,” and in the following year “the bones of the apostle Andrew and the evangelist Luke were received with wonderful approval by the people of Constantinople.”³⁵ These relics were placed in the Church of the Apostles within the walls. Such supposed discoveries of saintly bones were to have a long future and inspire even the most austere and intellectual Christians, such as St. Augustine, who was an enthusiast for the relics of Stephen, the first martyr, discovered in 415.

The best documented translation of the fourth century took place in 386, when Ambrose, bishop of Milan, moved the remains of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, which had been miraculously discovered in one of the suburban cemetery churches, to his own new basilican church:

At this same time the holy martyrs Protasius and Gervasius revealed themselves to the bishop. For they were situated in the basilica in which there are today the bodies of the martyrs Nabor and Felix. But the holy martyrs Nabor and Felix were well known and visited by great crowds, while the names and burial place of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius were unknown, so much so that everyone who wished to approach the railings which protected the tombs of the holy martyrs Nabor and Felix from damage walked over the tombs of Protasius and Gervasius. But when the bodies of the holy martyrs had been raised up and placed in shrines, it is well known that many people's ailments were cured.³⁶

Here we have a picture of a successful martyr church, where the shrine of the martyrs Nabor and Felix are visited by crowds and marked out by special railings. Inside it, through a miraculous revelation, Ambrose finds new martyrs, whose remains he removes. The new basilica to which they were relocated (today known as the Ambrosian basilica) was to be the site of Ambrose's own burial as well as a martyr church housing the remains of the saints. The physical remains of the previously unknown martyrs Protasius and Gervasius were placed beneath the altar of Ambrose's new building. The church of Milan was no longer so “barren of martyrs.”³⁷

Such translations of physical remains were rare, however. More usual than the removal or discovery of the bones of a saint was the creation of “contact relics,” that is, small objects that had been in physical touch with the saint's tomb: oil from the

³⁵Jerome, *Chronicon*, pp. 240–41; Wortley, “The Earliest Relic-Importations to Constantinople.”

³⁶Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 14, p. 70.

³⁷Ambrose, *Epistularum liber decimus*, *Epistula* 77 (22). 7, p. 131 (PL 16: 1021).

ORIGINS

lamps that burned there, perhaps, or dust—dust which was regarded as “a treasure.”³⁸ These relics could easily be multiplied. Hence in Christian Africa, for example, there were not only great churches above the tombs of the native martyrs, but also dozens of relics scattered throughout the churches of the region, relics not in the sense of fragments of saints’ bones, but tiny jars containing earth, dust, oil, and so on.³⁹ The multiplication of such relics, along with the occasional translation of physical remains (“corporeal relics”), gave a new fluidity and mobility to the cult of the saints.

Rituals of Commemoration and Invocation

Along with these big changes in the venue and staging of the commemoration of the martyrs came other important developments in the cult of the saints. These were of two types, since members of the Christian community connected with the shrines of the martyrs in two ways: they undertook regular routine rituals to honour them, and they expected extraordinary help from them.

The earliest evidence for the cult of the saints, from the account of Polycarp’s martyrdom, mentions the faithful gathering together for an annual commemoration of the martyr’s death, and thus indicates routine rituals concentrated on the martyr’s feast-day, or “birth-day” as it was known (their birth into heaven).⁴⁰ Naturally, for this to happen, a record needed to be kept of the day of martyrdom. Local churches would build up lists of their own native martyrs. The earliest surviving list of martyrs comes from Rome, and was compiled in its present form after persecution ended during the reign of Constantine; it was subsequently incorporated into a chronological compendium of 354.⁴¹ It contains the names of fifty martyrs, giving the day of their commemoration, that is, the day of their death, and usually adding the site of their burial. For example, under 10 August, the list reads “Lawrence in Tiburtina,” that is, the cemetery on the Via Tiburtina, the road leading out of Rome to the north-east. Very occasionally, the year of death is also recorded (and sometimes modern historians can deduce it, as in the case of Pope Sixtus II, who was executed in 258, as other sources reveal). Most of the martyrs in the list are Roman, but a handful of those recorded suffered elsewhere in the empire: “7 March, Perpetua and Felicity, Africa”; “14 September, Cyprian, Africa; commemorated at Rome in the cemetery of St. Callixtus.” Some of the saints mentioned, such as Sebastian and

³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *De sancto Theodoro*, p. 63 (PG 46: 740).

³⁹ See Duval, *Loca sanctorum Africae: le culte des martyrs en Afrique du IV^e au VII^e siècle*.

⁴⁰ *Quando natus sit* [Cyprianus], ignoramus; et quia hodie passus est, natalem ejus hodie celebramus. Sed illum diem non celebraremus, etsi nossemus. Illo enim die traxit originale peccatum: isto autem die vicit omne peccatum: Augustine, *Sermo* 310 (PL 38: 1413); *Natalem sanctorum . . . nolite putare illum dici, quo nascimur de carne . . . sed de terra in caelum*: Petrus Chrysologus, *Collectio sermonum* 129.1 (24B, p. 793) (PL 52: 555).

⁴¹ *Liber Pontificalis* 1, pp. 11–12; *Codice topografico della Città di Roma* 2, pp. 1–28; see the discussion in Thacker, “Rome of the Martyrs,” pp. 20–23.

CHAPTER I

Lawrence, are well known and were to be commemorated on the days given in the list throughout the succeeding centuries, while others are entirely mysterious. No one has been able to say anything further about the last entry: "13 December, Aris-ton, in Pontus." But, on the whole, this calendar from the fourth century sets out a framework for fixed ceremonies of the Christian year, with some basic elements that would be recognizable a thousand years later: commemorations of Peter and Paul, Perpetua and Felicity, Sebastian and Lawrence—as well as the very earliest mention of Christmas. Long-lasting annual commemoration, which was the essence of martyr cult, really was achieved in these cases. St. Lawrence's day is still 10 August, as it was in Rome 1700 years ago.

Such a list laid down a series of days on which commemorative rituals should take place. The nature of some of these rituals and the controversy that could surround them is clear from a story St. Augustine tells about his mother, Monica, who was visiting him in Milan in 385.⁴² Back home in north Africa, she had been accustomed to celebrate the anniversaries of the martyrs by going to their shrines with a basket of pottage, bread, and wine. She would taste a little of these and share them with others visiting the shrines. In Milan, however, Monica found her way to the shrines barred by a door-keeper who told her that Ambrose, bishop of Milan, had prohibited such customs. Monica immediately abandoned her old-fashioned ways, henceforth content that only the Eucharist should be celebrated at the martyrs' shrines. Later in life, Augustine reflected on this issue: "Some people bring banquets to the places of the martyrs but this is not done by the better Christians, and in most parts of the world there is no such custom."⁴³

Objections to Monica's practice saw it as too close to traditional paganism, "very similar to the festival in honour of the dead of pagan superstition."⁴⁴ Communal commemorative meals at the tomb were indeed a standard feature of Roman memorial practice, and some of the more elaborate burial sites even incorporated stone tables and benches for this purpose, while it was not unusual for the graves themselves to have access tubes down which wine or oil could be poured, so that the dead themselves could join in the meal.⁴⁵ Bishops like Ambrose and Augustine, shaping religious practice in the first century of official Christianity, clearly viewed this as a semi-pagan anachronism to be discouraged. In their view, the martyrs were to be commemorated by a Eucharistic celebration, not by such private and picnic-like rituals as Monica had engaged in. The very nature of saintly cult was being hammered out by these debates and prescriptions.

Anyone in the local Christian community could visit the martyrs' shrines and participate in the annual rituals performed there. Much more exceptional was the privilege of being interred close to a martyr's grave, so-called burial "*ad sanctos* (next

⁴² Augustine, *Confessiones* 6. 2, p. 74.

⁴³ Augustine, *De civitate dei* 8. 27 (1, p. 248).

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Confessiones* 6. 2, p. 74.

⁴⁵ For a summary, see Volp, *Tod und Ritual in den christlichen Gemeinde der Antike*, pp. 77–86; Saxer, *Morts, martyrs, reliques*, is of enduring value.

ORIGINS

to the saints)” (like the name of Xanten mentioned earlier). Indeed the inscription on one grave even exults, “Many desire it but few obtain it.”⁴⁶ The earliest dateable case occurred during the time of persecutions. After the martyrdom of the North African youth Maximilian in 295, a woman called Pompeiana obtained his body and had it interred next to the body of St. Cyprian in Carthage. Thirteen days later she herself died and was buried in the same place, thus in the vicinity of two Christian martyrs.⁴⁷ Inscriptions in the Roman catacombs and elsewhere have many examples of such treasured proximity. One, from Spoleto, records an interment in the year 384 with the words, “receive to yourselves, O saints, the brother and worthy minister Tullius.”⁴⁸ At about the same time Gregory of Nyssa buried his parents near the relics of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, “so that at the time of the resurrection they will awake with those bold-tongued helpers.”⁴⁹ The interment of a Christian as near as possible to a favoured saint was to be a feature of the cult of the saints for centuries to come.

This practice also provides evidence for an important development in the use of the word “saint.”⁵⁰ When Christianity began, all Christians were “saints.” The word “saint” (*hagios* in Greek, *sanctus* in Latin) was applied to every member of the Christian community, not to an elite. St. Paul’s epistle to the Philippians, addressed to “all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi” and concluding “All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household,” shows this inclusive usage. A particularly telling instance, from about the year 260, occurs in a commentary on the Book of Revelation written by a Christian bishop. He distinguishes various classes or categories of saint, explaining that “the fifth category of saints designates negligent people, who do not behave in the world as they should, who are without value in their actions, Christians only in name.”⁵¹ Obviously the term “saint” here means simply “Christian,” not “perfect or heroic Christian.” This wide sense of the word continued even after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and the number of believers multiplied. In the fifth century Christian writers could still ask, “What is the Church other than the community of all the saints?”⁵²

However, even during the period when the phrase “the saints” had as an ordinary meaning “all Christians,” there are signs also of a more restricted sense in use. The martyrs were “the saints” in the highest degree. They had earned the title more fully. For instance, when Christians like Pompeiana wanted to be buried as near to the bodies of the martyrs as they could, to be associated with their merits, this practice is described as burial “near the saints” (*ad sanctos, meta ton hagion*). When a grieving

⁴⁶ *Inscriptiones Christianae urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores*, n.s. 1, no. 3127.

⁴⁷ *Acta Maximiliani* (BHL 5813) 3, p. 248.

⁴⁸ Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae veteres*, no. 2169.

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *In XL martyres II*, p. 166 (PG 46: 784).

⁵⁰ For a detailed case-study, see Zocca, *Dai “santi” al “santo.”*

⁵¹ Victorinus de Poetovio (Ptuj), *In Apocalypsin* 3.1, p. 60.

⁵² Nicetas of Remesiana, *De symbolo* 10, p. 48 (PL 52, col. 871); cf. Philippus Presbyter (Pseudo-Jerome), *Commentarii in librum Iob* 26, col. 689: *Ecclesia, quae est sanctorum omnium congregatio.*

CHAPTER 1

family erected an inscription saying that their dead relative was buried “near the saints” or “in the place of the saints,” they meant “near to the bodies of the martyrs.” Sometimes they specified the martyr in question: “near Saint Felicity,” “near Saint Cornelius.” Here one can see fully formed the familiar current practice: the name preceded by the title “saint” to describe a special category of dead Christians.⁵³

The saints could be appealed to. As is clear from the case of Perpetua, the martyrs had long been credited with special powers of intercession. In the fourth century it becomes evident just how concrete and how physical their intercession might be. Basil, bishop of Caesarea (370–78), the brother of Gregory of Nyssa, preaching a sermon in honour of the local martyr St. Mamas, addressed

those who have enjoyed the presence of the martyr in dreams, those who have come here and found his help in prayer, those who have called on his name and been helped in your deeds, who have been brought safely to journey’s end, relieved of sickness, had the lives of your children saved or had your life lengthened.⁵⁴

The stress on the healing power of the saint indicates one of the most important facets of the Christian cult of the saints: miraculous healing. When Jesus sent out his apostles, he instructed them to “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils,” and the *Acts of the Apostles* in the New Testament record several miraculous cures, including resurrection of the dead, performed by the apostles. Such powers were now attached to the tombs of the saints, as well as associated with living holy men. The expulsion of demons and the grant of physical healing were a new kind of “witness” of the martyrs: “everywhere the holy blood of the blessed martyrs is received and their revered bones are a daily witness, for through them the demons groan and sickness is driven out.”⁵⁵ The translation of Protasius and Gervasius at Milan, discussed earlier, was vindicated by the fact that at their shrine “many people’s ailments were cured.” Martyr tombs were no longer simply sites of commemoration; they were also sources of supernatural aid.

Confessor Saints

The end of persecution in the early fourth century meant that new martyrs were no longer being created on a regular basis within the Roman Empire. It is possible that at this point the cult of the saints could have been “sealed,” with a finite number of

⁵³ Delehay, *Sanctus*, pp. 30–34; for a full discussion of this subject see Duval, *Auprès des saints corps et âme: l’inhumation “ad sanctos” dans la chrétienté d’Orient et d’Occident du IIIe au VIIe siècle*.

⁵⁴ Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia XXIII in Mamantem martyrem* 1, col. 589.

⁵⁵ *Sanctus ubique beatorum martyrum sanguis exceptus est, et veneranda ossa quotidie testimonio sunt: dum in his daemones mugiunt, dum aegritudines depelluntur . . .*: Hilary of Poitiers, *Contra Constantium* 8, pp. 182–83 (PL 10: 584). The text dates to 360.

ORIGINS

martyr-cults, perhaps refreshed on occasion by discoveries of remains, such as those of Gervasius and Protasius. This did not, in fact, happen, for a new source of Christian saints emerged in the fourth century—not those who had died for their faith but those who had lived for it, in a heroic and resolute way. (They were designated “confessors,” as distinct from martyrs.) It is no accident that this important development in the history of sanctity coincided with the rise of a new movement, that of the ascetics, for these ascetics, beginning with the monks and hermits of the Egyptian desert, were committed to extreme forms of religious life: chastity, poverty, solitude, sleeplessness, deprivation of food and drink. They may not have been tortured and executed by hostile pagan authorities, but their life was “a daily martyrdom.”⁵⁶ Such heroic Christians formed the new style of saint.

The most important of these new model saints were Antony of Egypt (d. 356) and Martin of Tours (d. 397). Antony came from a propertied family of Christians in Egypt, was supposedly a well-behaved boy, but, along with his little sister, was orphaned by the time he was twenty (this would probably be around the year 270).⁵⁷ In church one day he was struck by some of the most radical of Jesus’ words in the Gospels: “if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor” and “take no thought for the morrow” (Matthew 19:21 and 6:34). He took these commands literally, distributed his property (after making provision for his sister), and began a quest into the solitary religious life. He sought out the hermits who could be found on the edges of the villages of Egypt and modelled himself on them. Over the course of time, he withdrew further and further from human habitation, first living in some tombs, later in an abandoned fort in the desert, finally in the mountains above the Red Sea (where subsequently the Monastery of St. Antony, Deir Mar Antonios, was founded and still stands). He achieved heroic asceticism, “suppressed and enslaved his body more and more,” and engaged in constant battle with the demons of the desert.⁵⁸ These wicked spirits tried various tactics, attempting to seduce him in the form of a beautiful woman, or, failing that, beating him all over. In fact, like many saints, Antony was more familiar with devils and better informed about them than most Christians. On two recorded occasions Antony left the desert to go to the great Egyptian metropolis of Alexandria, once to give moral support to martyrs during the persecution of 311, and again, after the official acceptance of Christianity, to condemn heretical views. He had the gifts of prophecy and of miraculous healing, and was a wise adviser to those who sought him out—and many did so. He was emulated to such a degree that “the desert became a city of monks.”⁵⁹

The monastic way of life, a full-time commitment to poverty and celibacy, which Antony had pioneered, took institutional form and spread throughout the Roman Empire. One of those whom it inspired was Martin, a young man of military

⁵⁶ Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 47. 1, p. 262, and the references given there on p. 263.

⁵⁷ For the following, Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 7. 4, p. 150.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 14. 7, p. 174.

CHAPTER I

family who, after leaving the army, had come under the patronage of Hilary, bishop of Poitiers (c. 350–367/8), and founded a monastic cell outside that city.⁶⁰ Martin was later chosen as bishop of Tours. It was a controversial choice. Previously, bishops had come from the educated, propertied class of the Roman Empire, and had undertaken the rule of their cities in an aristocratic style. Martin cut a very different figure. Several bishops complained that Martin “was a contemptible person, a man unworthy to be a bishop, despicable in appearance, filthy in his clothing, and with an ugly hairstyle.”⁶¹ Here the assumptions of the aristocratic bishops of Gaul and those of the eastern ascetics came into apparently irreconcilable conflict. Yet Martin did become bishop of Tours, and thereafter the monk-bishop was to be a common and important figure in the Christian Church and a not unfamiliar type of saint, blending the charisma of personal asceticism with the authority of official position. Martin was, like Antony, a healer and a warrior in the battle against demons. Unlike Antony, he was an active evangelist, bringing the Christian message to the still mainly pagan rural population of Gaul, disrupting their rituals and felling their sacred trees. He was no less strenuous in policing the Christian community, on one occasion suppressing the cult of a supposed martyr, who, when miraculously resurrected by Martin, confessed himself to be in truth a brigand.⁶²

Antony and Martin were important not merely because they lived hard lives in the service of God but because those lives were recorded in powerful literary form. The “life” lived by the saint had to be transformed into the Life (Latin *vita*, Greek *bíos*) penned by another, before it could become part of the common heritage of Christians. Antony’s Life was written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (328–73), who spent much of his long episcopate in exile because of his vigorous defence of orthodox belief against what he saw as the heresy of Arianism. It was probably during one of these spells of exile, among the monks of the Egyptian desert, that he composed his Life of Antony. Athanasius had known Antony, and had even been bequeathed a sheepskin by the saint, so he had first-hand knowledge of his subject, but he also used the Life to express his own views and attitudes on doctrine and authority. The long central part of the Life, consisting of almost a third of the text, is a supposed speech of Antony, encouraging monks to persevere in their repudiation of the secular world and setting out, in considerable detail, all he knows about the demons and their tricks. Later in the Life, Antony is emphatic in his opposition to Arianism. It is impossible to know how much of the mix in the Life is Antony and how much Athanasius. Perhaps they would not have troubled over the distinction. Athanasius was a bishop but also a champion of monasticism, and may even have been the first to consecrate monks as bishops.⁶³ Whether the words are his or Antony’s, the func-

⁶⁰For the following, Sulpicius Severus, *Vita sancti Martini*.

⁶¹Ibid. 9. 3 (1, p. 272).

⁶²See later, p. 603.

⁶³*Lexikon der antiken christlichen Literatur*, p. 58; see Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, pp. 99–110; Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, p. 147.

ORIGINS

tion of the Life is clear—to convey in writing an exemplary life. As Athanasius says, “For monks, the life of Antony is a sufficient model of the ascetic life.”⁶⁴

The author of Martin’s Life, Sulpicius Severus, an aristocrat from south-west France, also felt the strong attraction of the ascetic life. Martin’s reputation reached him, and he describes his visit to the saint and his questioning of him and his followers. Very unusually for a saint’s Life, Sulpicius’s Life was written while Martin was still alive, being composed in 396, the year before the saint’s death. This is one of the reasons it is often accompanied in the manuscripts by later writings of Sulpicius describing Martin’s death. Sulpicius is explicitly writing in the awareness that Martin had enemies and detractors—“people envious of his virtue and his life, who hated in him what they did not see in themselves and what they were not able to imitate.”⁶⁵ The Martin of the Life, presented as a wonder-worker, evangelist and ascetic, as well as a bishop, is a strong authorial creation designed to lay such objections to rest. If Martin was an inspiration to Sulpicius, Sulpicius was a champion of Martin. The beneficial relationship of saint and hagiographer was explicitly recognized by Sulpicius’s friend Paulinus of Nola: Martin was “blessed through his merits, he who deserved by his faith and life such a worthy narrator, he who is consecrated to divine glory by his merits and to human remembrance by your writing.”⁶⁶

The Birth of Hagiography

The Lives of Antony and Martin were widely disseminated, serving as models for many later saints’ Lives. Works of hagiography could spread a saint’s reputation quite separately from the translation of relics. Many people read the Lives of Antony and Martin, and were inspired by them, who had nothing to do with their cult, in the traditional sense of commemoration at a tomb or reverence for relics. Within a few decades of its composition the Life of Antony was being read by imperial officials at Trier in the western Roman Empire, and it was hearing of St. Antony’s response to the Gospel injunction, “if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor,” that partially inspired Augustine’s own conversion in 386.⁶⁷

The two Lives had, however, different fortunes in East and West, and this fact adumbrates an important future development in the history of the cult of the saints, the divergence of East and West. Antony won universal recognition as saint. There are more than 165 Greek manuscripts of Athanasius’s Life of Antony, and translations were made into Syriac, Coptic, and, eventually, Old Church Slavonic, this last serving as a model for later Russian hagiography.⁶⁸ It was also translated into Latin within a decade or so of its composition. It was thus accessible to the clergy and

⁶⁴ Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, prologue, 3, p. 126.

⁶⁵ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita sancti Martini* 26. 3 (1, p. 314).

⁶⁶ Paulinus of Nola, *Epistula* 11. 11, p. 70.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *Confessiones* 8. 6, 12, pp. 122, 131.

⁶⁸ Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, pp. 77–101 (editorial introduction).

CHAPTER I

monks of western Europe, who revered Antony as “the Father of Monks,” and it enjoyed enormous success there throughout the Middle Ages.⁶⁹ Through such media as sermons, pictorial representations, and vernacular translations, its account became widely known even by those who were not literate in Latin or literate at all. In the eleventh century a brotherhood of St. Antony was founded in the south of France at a place that claimed to have his remains, brought from the East. They specialized in care of those suffering from ergotism, or “St. Antony’s fire” as it was known, and enjoyed the privilege of feeding their pigs freely—hence the old English name for the smallest pig of a litter, a “tantony [that is, St. Antony] pig.” The brethren formed an order of hospitallers with, at their height, over 350 hospitals.⁷⁰ The fourth-century Life had thus given birth to a literature and a cult which lasted throughout the Middle Ages in both eastern and western Christendom.

In the West, Martin was an even more prestigious saint than Antony. His cult was taken up by the kings of the Franks, who patronized Martin’s cult-centre at Tours, and he was one of the most popular saints in the area of modern France and Germany, over three thousand churches being dedicated to him in France alone. His feast-day on 11 November (“Martinmas” in England, “Martini” in Germany, “la Saint-Martin” in France, and so on) was widely recognized as a turning point in the year, for rent payments, for university terms, for fairs, and for the hiring of servants. Images of Martin in manuscripts, wall-paintings, mosaic, and sculpture run into the hundreds. In the East, the story is different. Although he was recognized by the Eastern Church, Martin was quite insignificant in comparison with the West. There was a Greek version of his Life, and he is virtually the only western saint to have an entry in the Synaxarion of Constantinople, the great collection of readings on the saints put together in the tenth century, but (with one exception) there is no evidence of images, and church dedications are completely lacking.⁷¹ As the Synaxarion shows, there was a gulf between saints of the East and saints of the West. Apart from the apostles and some of the early martyrs, the overlap between those revered in the Latin West and those in the Greek East was very slight. This was a parting of the ways that goes back as far as the time of Martin.

Between 360 and 400 Athanasius and Sulpicius Severus, along with Jerome, who composed Lives of the Egyptian hermit Paul and other ascetics, shaped Christian hagiography for good. The centrality of this first generation of hagiographic Lives is revealed by the comment of Paulinus of Milan at the beginning of his own *Life of St. Ambrose*, written probably in 422, a quarter-century after the saint’s death. Paulinus addresses Augustine, bishop of Hippo:

⁶⁹ Leclercq, “Saint Antoine dans la tradition monastique médiévale.”

⁷⁰ Fenelli, *Il tau, il fuoco, il maiale. I canonici regolari di Sant’ Antonio abate tra assistenza e devozione*.

⁷¹ *Vita et miracula sancti Martini episcopi* (BHG 1181); *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, pp. 217–18; the image is in the Menologion of Basil II (Vat. gr. 1613), facs. (*Il menologio di Basilio II*), fol. 176, which shows Martin raising a dead man. Other Byzantine images of “St. Martin” are of the seventh-century pope of that name: *Lexicon der christliche Ikonographie* 7, col. 574.

ORIGINS

Reverend father Augustine, you have encouraged me to write the Life of the blessed Ambrose . . . just as bishop Athanasius wrote the Life of St. Antony the hermit and Jerome wrote the Life of St. Paul the Hermit, just, too, as Severus composed in lucid style the Life of Martin, the reverend bishop of Tours.⁷²

By this time, then, there were well-known models for those engaged in the task of writing a saint's Life—it had become a recognized genre. The texts that Paulinus mentions, Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, Jerome's *Life of Paul the Hermit*, and Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Martin*, the great formative saints' lives of the fourth century, served as models and stimuli not just for Paulinus but for hundreds of Christian hagiographers throughout the centuries.

Narratives about holy men and women were not completely new at this time—one has only to think of the historical books of the Old Testament, or the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles in the New. And very early in the history of Christianity the desire to know more about the apostles, especially their eventual fates, had stimulated the writing of the so-called Apocryphal Acts, in which the careers of Peter, Andrew, Thomas, and the others were traced well beyond their New Testament limits, with increasingly romantic elaboration.⁷³ The impetus was evidently the same as that which makes modern readers wonder “what happened” to the characters in a novel they have read after the closing pages. The Apocryphal Acts have indeed been described as novels.

This was one narrative tradition in the writing about holy people. The other was the record of the sufferings and heroic endurance of the martyrs (narratives often called “Passions,” meaning “Sufferings”). Like the Acts of the Apostles, martyr literature too had a historical core and a more or less romantic elaboration. The early Christian martyrs were real people who suffered bravely for something they believed in. Sometimes a fair amount is known about them, even, in a few exceptional cases, like those of Perpetua and Cyprian discussed earlier, through writings from their own hand. However, once the concept of a “martyr” had been born, it developed its own conventions. The model acquired an independent momentum, spurring the elaboration of martyr legends based on pious inference, misidentifications, and pure invention. In the centuries after the conversion of Constantine the number of martyrs diminished, but the number of stories of martyrdom multiplied enormously. For every genuine account from the time of the persecuted Church, there are dozens of ahistorical literary constructions. St. George may well have been a genuine early martyr, but every narrative about him is later fiction.

By the end of the fourth century, then, a Christian literature of the saints had taken shape: the first surviving Christian calendar comes from that century, there were Acts of the Apostles, apocryphal and genuine, Passions of the martyrs, which were in some places read out on their feast-days, and there were the Lives of heroic ascetics as pioneered by Athanasius and Sulpicius Severus. It was a literature that was

⁷²Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 1. 1, p. 54.

⁷³There is a very convenient compendium of translated material in *The Apocryphal New Testament*.

CHAPTER I

to swell to ever greater proportions and to become one of the main types of literary activity in the medieval period.

The First Miracle Books

The final major kind of writing to be added to the Christian literature of the saints was the Miracle Book, a collection of miracle accounts. Naturally, miracles had been recorded from the time of the Gospels, and before, but the collective account of miracles first appears as a literary genre in the early fifth century. This development is particularly associated with the discovery in Palestine of the body of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr.⁷⁴ The Acts of the Apostles (chapters 6–7) recount Stephen's trial for blasphemy and his death by stoning, events dateable to c. 35. Thereafter there is no tradition of his burial place until it was revealed miraculously in 415. His relics were then quickly disseminated throughout the Church, and their coming stimulated numerous miracles. Amongst the places most affected was North Africa, where St. Augustine, now in his sixties, was deeply moved. Over the course of time he had become increasingly sympathetic to the idea that the flow of miracles had not dried up after the biblical period but was still powerful and active in the contemporary world. As a young, philosophically inclined, convert, he had been struck by the majestic regularities of God's creation; as an old man he thought more about miraculous healing.⁷⁵ One of the things that excited Augustine so much about the discovery of Stephen's relics was the stream of cures that followed when relics of the saint were brought to his native Africa. Augustine encouraged those who had received miraculous healing at the shrines housing the relics to make a written record of the event, a *libellus*, which could then be read out to the congregation.⁷⁶ Book Twenty-Two of his own *City of God* (the last book of this huge work) contains a long chapter recounting miraculous cures and other wonders performed through the saints and their relics in his own time and place.⁷⁷

The earliest free-standing collection of miracle stories seems to be that of the miracles of St. Stephen performed in the African city of Uzalis (modern Al 'Aliyah, Tunisia) and written down, at some point in the 420s, at the command of its bishop, Augustine's friend Evodius.⁷⁸ This has all the features of the genre as it is found in the following centuries: a prologue communicating the subject of the treatise ("the things that Christ has done for us through our patron Stephen"), avowing

⁷⁴ *Revelatio Sancti Stephani*.

⁷⁵ De Vooght, "Les miracles dans la vie de saint Augustin"; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 413–18; Lepelletier, "Les réticences de saint Augustin face aux légendes hagiographiques."

⁷⁶ Augustine, *Sermones* 79, 94, 286, 319–22 (PL 38: 493, 580, 1300, 1442–45).

⁷⁷ Augustine, *De civitate dei* 22. 8 (2, pp. 815–27); summary table in Saxer, *Morts, martyrs, reliques*, pp. 255–57.

⁷⁸ *Miracula sancti Stephani* (PL 41: 833–54); general analysis in the same volume, and in Saxer, *Morts, martyrs, reliques*, pp. 245–78.

ORIGINS



1.1. Trier Ivory, showing entry of relics. Trier Cathedral Treasury. Photo: akg-images.

the truthfulness of the accounts and expressing the author's personal and literary unworthiness; then, in two books, a series of discrete tales, typically beginning with a standardized introduction of the character who benefitted from the miracle: "at the same time a certain barber of the city, called Concordius," "there was a certain noble woman of the city of Carthage called Megetia." Short narrative segments of this type were, over the course of the Middle Ages and beyond, to be one of the most common types of Christian literature; they number in the tens of thousands.

This account of Stephen's miracles at Uzalis starts with the arrival of the relics in the vicinity. They were corporeal relics ("a portion of his body") in a little container (*ampulla*) and were first placed, provisionally, in the church of the martyrs Felix and Gennadius, which was located, like all early martyr churches, outside the city. From there they were taken into the city by bishop Evodius in a triumphal procession. The text describes how "the holy relics were carried in the lap of the holy bishop, sitting in a carriage." Remarkably, this is exactly how the arrival of relics in a city is portrayed in a unique ivory carving of the subject, produced probably in sixth-century Constantinople: two bishops, seated on a carved wagon, hold a box on their laps while a procession heads towards an urban church (figure 1.1). What is even more extraordinary, it is likely that the scene depicted on the ivory is the reception of relics of this same saint, Stephen, in Constantinople in 421, much the same time as relics reached Uzalis.⁷⁹

Once inside the bishop's church in Uzalis, the relics immediately displayed their miraculous healing power. While they were temporarily located on the bishop's throne, covered with a cloth, a blind woman called Hilara, a well-known baker, approached them, touched the cloth to her eyes, and then went home, praying all the

⁷⁹Holum and Vikan, "The Trier Ivory."

CHAPTER I

while. During the night she went to her door and found that she could recognize the walls and flagstones of the street. When told this, her unsympathetic son responded by asking, "What lies are you telling?" but she persevered: "raising her eyes to the sky, she said, 'Lo, I see also the moon half-full above the theatre!'" She gave thanks to God and next morning went to church and gave a full account of this miraculous happening to all the faithful. "Thus," concludes the author, "there shone forth the first and most well-known work amongst us at the coming of the holy relics."⁸⁰

The *Miracles of St. Stephen* describes twenty or so miraculous events: cures of blindness and paralysis, resurrections, prisoners released from their chains, prophetic dreams, even an incident so mundane as spoiled wine being cleared. On one occasion a woman was tormented with doubt after her husband had been gone on a journey for almost three years: would he return, was he dead, should she remarry? She took her troubles to the shrine of St. Stephen and there heard the words, "Your husband is coming." Soon thereafter the missing spouse came back. More dramatic than this prophetic reassurance was the occasion when, one market day, a huge storm hit Uzalis. Riding on it was a fiery dragon. Everyone sought refuge in the church and prostrated themselves before St. Stephen's shrine. "The lord Stephen's" prayers were, as usual, efficacious in the eyes of God, and the storm and the monster broke up and dispersed.

The text, although quite short, conveys the essential features of saints' shrines as they were to function throughout the medieval centuries and beyond. Pilgrims come to the shrine from some distance, one from Carthage, over 40 miles from Uzalis. They pray before the shrine, seek to get as close to the relics as possible, perhaps spend the night there. When cured, or after obtaining some other favourable outcome, they give thanks and recount the event publicly. The *Miracles* record what may be the earliest mention of an ex-voto, that is, an offering to a saint made in pursuance of a vow. A blind man named Donatianus, from a town about 18 miles from Uzalis, "came to the abode of the most powerful doctor, Stephen," and, on the eighth day, "received his sight through faith." Then, "desiring to fulfil his vow to the holy martyr, he offered a silver candle." The author points out the appropriateness of such a gift for the recovery of sight, but candles were in any case a standard feature of cult by this time.

Twenty years after the composition of the *Miracles of St. Stephen*, which form the earliest Miracle Book, another was put together, this time in Greek, not Latin. This was the *Miracles of Thecla*, an account of 46 miracles, originally composed in the 440s, and subsequently lightly revised and augmented, describing the wonders at her cult centre in Asia Minor.⁸¹ Thecla was a very different saint from Stephen. While the latter was revered as the first martyr, and the account of his trial and death in the Acts of the Apostles entered the canon of the Christian Bible and is generally agreed to be largely historically accurate, Thecla's story is part of the imaginative

⁸⁰ *Miracula sancti Stephani* 1. 3, pp. 276–78.

⁸¹ *Miracula Theclae*; see Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*; Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla*.

ORIGINS

elaboration of apostolic history that took place in the first Christian centuries. From as early as the second century, Thecla's story was widely known.⁸² She is described as a companion of St. Paul, who had spurned the chance of marriage in favour of a life devoted to virginity, and was twice condemned to be executed for her beliefs. On neither occasion did she die, although the texts consistently refer to her as a martyr, or even "protomartyr," that is, "first martyr," thus making her an exact female equivalent to Stephen.⁸³ There are several unusual features in her story. She baptizes herself, when in the arena, by throwing herself into a tank full of savage seals (it has been suggested that there might be a confusion here with sharks).⁸⁴ At one point she dresses as a man. She teaches the word of God, with Paul's approval. And eventually, in the expanded version of her story current by the fifth century, she does not die but sinks alive into the ground.

Aspects of this tale were highlighted by different people for different ends. As early as AD 200, those who wanted "to permit women to teach and baptize" used Thecla as an example.⁸⁵ She could also be praised as the chief of virgins.⁸⁶ From the point of view of cults, however, the oddest thing was that she was not only a martyr who had not died in the arena, she was a martyr without remains. Interestingly, this proved no obstacle to the development of her cult. This was centred near Seleucia (modern Silifke, in south-east Turkey), at the spot where she supposedly sank into the ground. Pilgrims are recorded here in the 370s and 380s, by which time there was a central church surrounded by the cells of monastic men and women.⁸⁷ And, as the text of the *Miracles* shows, this was a centre of supernatural activity.

The 46 miracles recorded in the Miracle Book of the 440s are very diverse. Thecla silences the pagan oracles and replaces their temples with churches, she defends the cities under her protection against marauding raiders, and she takes special care of her "assistant," the bishop, advising him to use oil from the lamps that burned at her shrine as a medicine. She helps in the law courts, prevents shipwreck, heals broken legs, cures scrofula and boils. Towards those who are disrespectful towards her, she can be implacable. A man who lusts after a woman in the congregation during Thecla's feast-day suffers a horrible death, as do two thieves who hold a rowdy party in the saint's precinct. Thecla has a strong physical presence: she appears riding the air in a fiery chariot, she spends the night with one of her devout female followers, holding her tightly in her arms. And she has tastes of her own: she is "a lover of literature" and much appreciates it when her devotees can cite Homer to her.

⁸² *Acta Pauli et Theclae*.

⁸³ *Vita Theclae* (title), p. 167

⁸⁴ *Vita Theclae*, p. 251 n. 5: "Les phoques n'ont pas, dans l'antiquité, cette réputation injustifiée d'être des bêtes dangereuses: on le sait joueurs, on les croit en general bénéfiques." It is good to hear such a spirited defence of seals.

⁸⁵ Tertullian, *De baptismo* 17. 5, pp. 291–92 (PL 1: 1219).

⁸⁶ Methodius, *Symposium* 11.284, p. 308 (her speech in praise of virginity, *ibid.*, 8, pp. 200–258).

⁸⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *De vita sua*, lines 547–49, col. 1067; Egeria, *Itinerarium Egeriae* 22, p. 66.

CHAPTER 1

Just as the Lives of Antony and Martin in the fourth century stand at the head of an enormous stream of Latin and Greek saints' Lives, so these collections of the miracles of Stephen and Thecla in the fifth century do likewise for Latin and Greek Miracle Books. The cult of the saints had generated a new kind of literature and, in its turn, that literature bolstered and embodied the cult of the saints.