

Hagiography

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Lives of the saints became one of the most popular forms of Christian literature: indeed for some periods of the Middle Ages, both in the East and the West, our literary sources are dominated by the hagiographical. The earliest Christian biography extant is the *Life* of St Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258), by his deacon Pontius, but the most influential without doubt is the *Life* of St Antony, by his contemporary, the pope of Alexandria, Athanasius. Another early Christian biography is the *Life* of Origen, which originally formed part of the *Defence of Origen*, written by Pamphilus and Eusebius of Caesarea in the first decade of the fourth century: it is now lost, but it was almost certainly the source for most of book 6 of Eusebius' *History of the Church*, which is mainly concerned with the life of the great Alexandrian. Both this lost *Life* of Origen and the *Life of St Antony* demonstrate marked similarities with the pagan genre of the *Lives* of the philosophers, which must therefore be counted as a literary source for the genre of the saints' *Lives*.¹ However, the nature of the saint's *Life*, from its beginnings, was more deeply affected by the emerging Christian cult of the saint, of which the *Life* soon came to form a part. The cult of the saint was originally the cult of the martyr, a cult that can be traced back at least to the second century, as the *Martyrdom of St Polycarp* shows. The mortal remains of the martyr – the relics – were buried, if at all possible, and yearly commemorations, involving the celebration of the eucharist, were made at the place of burial. When it became feasible, a small chapel, a *martyrium*, was built, with the altar placed over the relics of the saint. As the cult of the saints developed, it became a common practice for some portion of the relics of one or more saints to be placed beneath every Christian altar, a practice made obligatory by the Seventh Œcumenical Council (canon 7).

The origin of the notion of the saint in the cult of the martyrs had a marked effect on the genre of the saint's *Life*. First, at a literary level, it suggests the already well-developed genre of the *Acts of the Martyrs* as a source for the saint's *Life*, and this is borne out in several ways. The *Acts of the Martyrs* focused on the

martyr's death, and saw this death as a struggle (an ἀγών), used metaphors of athletic contest (cf. Heb. 12:1–2) and military combat (cf. Eph. 6:11–20) to depict it, and saw the combat as directed principally against the demons. All this is carried over into the saint's *Life*. Secondly, it explains the close affinity between hagiography and monastic literature, for the ascetic, too, saw himself as a successor to the martyr, and engaged in the same struggle. Further, the very nature of Christian sanctity is affected by this lineage. Although Basil speaks of 'the lives of saintly men, recorded and handed down to us, [as lying] before us like living images of God's government, for our imitation of their good works' (*Ep.* 2: in fact, referring to the holy men of the Scriptures), the Christian saint was not regarded as simply an ethical model from the past: he was seen much more as one who, in his earthly life, demonstrated his closeness to God, not only by his godly life, but by his ready access to God in prayer, and the divine power he was thus able to wield, and who now, as a friend of God in the heavenly court, is able to intercede with God for those for whom he is concerned – in short, a figure of power that can be drawn on by those who cultivate a relationship with him. The saint's *Life*, then, is concerned to depict one whose closeness to God is a source of power, manifest in miracles – not just the miracles worked by the saint during his lifetime, but also the miracles he continues to work through his earthly remains: his relics.

The *Life* of the saint came to conform to a conventional structure (though in our period this is still developing). It began with the birth of the saint, frequently accompanied by some miracle portending his future acclaim; something might be recounted about his childhood years (it would normally be pious invention, in the likely absence of any authentic tradition, and as such, again adorned with the miraculous); often there would be some dramatic conversion experience (more commonly with male than female saints, though inevitably essential in the *Lives* of converted harlots); a period of ascetic training followed, usually involving a spiritual father and often monastic; then the saint is depicted in the fulness of his earthly powers, manifesting his friendship with God and, consequently, his παρρησία, meaning both his ready access to God and his directness with men and women, including those of great rank, together with his miracles, and in appropriate cases evidence of his wisdom (the *Life of St Antony* includes a lengthy sermon: a precedent sometimes followed); much attention was paid to the account of the death of the saint – it was usually disclosed by God to the saint in advance and was his passage into the presence of Christ and the heavenly court; finally, the continued activity of the saint, principally through his relics (though sometimes, also, through dreams), was normally established. In many cases it is clear that the author of the saint's *Life*

had little information at his disposal, in which case material was adapted from other saints' *Lives* on the grounds of analogy.

Saints' *Lives* from our period fall into a number of categories: they are not so narrowly focused as later medieval *Lives* (at least in the West), which almost invariably serve to validate some aspect (often the authenticity of wonder-working relics) of what has been called the vast 'thaumaturgy of the dead' that characterized medieval society. The vast majority of saints' *Lives* is monastic: the *Life of St Antony* is an important piece of monastic literature, as well as the archetypal saint's *Life*; there are several versions of the *Life of St Pachomius*: another early monastic saint's *Life* is the *Life of Paul the Hermit* by Jerome. Although, however, there is no reason to doubt that there was an early hermit of that name, there is equally no reason to suppose that Jerome knew much about him: it is a romantic tale of the desert. Many other monastic texts are, in form, collections of saints' *Lives*, notably Palladius' *Lausiac History*, the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, and Theodoret's *Religious History*. Several saints' *Lives* take the form of panegyric sermons or eulogies. Basil gave eulogies on the local Cappadocian saints Julitta and Mamas, as well as on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, who were celebrated by many others, including Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian, and became popular saints in Byzantium. Gregory of Nyssa also celebrated his brother, Basil, and Stephen, the first martyr. Gregory of Nazianzus gave eulogies on Athanasius and on Basil, as well as on Cyprian of Carthage, whom he conflates with the legendary Cyprian, the Antiochene magician, thus preparing the way for the Faust legend.² John Chrysostom preached several hagiographic sermons, for example on the Antiochene saints, Ignatius, Babylas and Eustathius, as well as on Lazarus, raised from the dead by Jesus, and much celebrated in the East. In the West, Augustine preached many sermons on the martyrs, not least sermons on St Stephen the Protomartyr after the discovery of his relics in 415 and their journey down the Mediterranean. Hilary of Arles' sermon on Honoratus, the founder of the monastic community on Lérins, is a *Vita*. Some of these sermons conform very closely to the form of a *Vita*, though this is no guarantee of historicity, as Gregory's largely fabulous account of Cyprian makes plain (it ends, closely following the form of a saint's *Life*, with the discovery of his relics). Another apparent category of saints' *Lives* is that of *Lives* of bishops. This is very erratic: apart from the eulogistic sermons just mentioned there are no contemporary, or nearly contemporary, *Lives* of such figures as Athanasius, or Cyril, or any of the Cappadocian Fathers (though there is of the 'Cappadocian Mother', Macrina). But in the West there are *Lives* of several bishops, notably Cyprian, Martin, Ambrose and Augustine: the first is linked to the genre of the Acts of the Martyrs, the latter three, however, all

present their subjects not simply as bishops, but as monk-bishops, so they are not unrelated to monastic literature. Another, rather different, example of a bishop's *Life* is Palladius' dialogue on the life of John Chrysostom, which is mainly concerned to defend the memory of the victim of the Synod of the Oak. Yet another genre of saints' *Lives* is represented by Prudentius' *Crowns of the Martyrs* (*Peristephanon*), though it is strictly a series of accounts of martyrdom, in verse.

These saints' *Lives*, both by their conventional form and the inclusion of the miraculous, pose problems for modern historians. Traditionally modern historians have approached them, rather in the way Spinoza approached the Bible, by filleting them and removing the indigestible element of the improbable. The classic statement of this approach to the *Lives* of the saints remains the work of the great Bollandist, Hippolyte Delehaye, especially his *Les Légendes hagiographiques*.³ What survives as historically usable often has little to do with the saints themselves: such material can provide evidence for historical events through which the saint lived, or by which his biographer marked the course of his life; it can also provide evidence for the social history of the period (of the biographer, if not of the saint) – an extreme example might be Kazhdan's account of sexual behaviour in Byzantium, drawn entirely from hagiography.⁴ Another way of reading saints' *Lives*, however, is to see them not so much as a rather grubby window through which we can catch glimpses of a few historical events and historical conditions, but rather as a mirror in which we can see reflected the mind and values of the society to which they belong.⁵

Notes

- 1 For a comparative discussion of the *Lives* of Origen and Plotinus, see Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*.
- 2 See A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, I, Appendix II, 369–83.
- 3 Originally published in 1905; ET from the 4th edition, 1955, by D. Attwater, *The Legends of the Saints* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1962).
- 4 A. Kazhdan, 'Byzantine Hagiography and Sex in the Fifth to Twelfth Centuries', in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), 131–43.
- 5 For two recent and complementary discussions of the use of hagiography by historians, see P. Fouracre and R. A. Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France. History and Hagiography 640–720* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 26–58, and Rosemary Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium 843–1118* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 64–89, and the literature they cite.