

Hagiography

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hagiography

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Summary:

Hagiography is a problematic yet widely used term with varying connotations; it resists narrow definition. Outside the ‘hagiographa’ of the Hebrew Bible (i.e. the books other than the Law and the Prophets), the concept is based on a core of Christian Greek and Latin works from the second to fifth century CE which range from martyr accounts to monastic and episcopal biographies. A significant factor motivating their composition and reception is the cult of saints. Biblical heroes, especially Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself are the primary models, but non-Christian literary traditions, especially biographical and novelistic, are also important influences.

Key words:

Christian martyr acts; Christian *Lives*; Christian ascetics; Christian bishops; rewriting; fictionalisation; stylisation; typology; cult of the saints.

‘Hagiography’: Definitions

Coined originally to indicate a group of books of the Old Testament (cf. *TLL* s.v. *(h)agiographus*, VI.3.2513.22–9), since the nineteenth century the term ‘hagiography’ has been used for writings associated with and promoting the cult of saints,¹ and more particularly for the *biographical* literature on ascetics which took its starting point from

Athanasius' *Life of Antony*.² 'Hagiography' can also signify the academic discipline of categorising and evaluating such texts in terms of their historical veracity.³ In a less technical sense the term is used of depictions which uncritically elevate their human subjects to make them appear as saints. All of these uses are unsatisfactory to some degree for analysing Christian texts of the second to fifth century CE that are commonly subsumed under this heading, especially accounts of martyrdoms and biographies of monks, bishops, and ascetic women, which develop a recognisable idiom that might be termed 'hagiographical'.⁴ In these texts historical events (such as the periodic persecutions of Christians in the Roman empire before *Constantine*), social habits (e.g. the cult of martyrs and confessors and the spread of desert monasticism), and literary codes are seen to inform and influence each other to varying degrees. Given the variety of literary features and socio-historical elements found in texts often claimed as 'hagiographical', it is difficult to give a unified account of what constitutes a 'hagiographical' text.⁵ While works conventionally gathered under this heading are not always a direct result of the desire to further the cult of a pre-existing holy person, they are often inspired by the same impulses as other practices of commemoration (e.g. preservation and translation of physical remains, or annual celebrations of significant dates).⁶ It seems best to propose an organic model of hagiography as a community-building type of storytelling using a shared set of topoi and motifs, where every text is shaped primarily by the authorial conception of how the subject should be thought of (a conception that is at least influenced by the author's knowledge of the subject's actual life and/or death – if, that is, the subject had a historical existence – and existing cults), and secondarily by any existing works, in literary or other media, that the author considered suitable as a model for appropriation or emulation. The subject of this article are therefore early Christian works (outside the Bible and its apocrypha) that participate in hagiographical discourse.

From the 17th century onward, the critical study of hagiographical writings has been conducted mainly from a viewpoint of credibility and authenticity, led by the Jesuit *Société des Bollandistes*. More recently, socio-historical approaches have garnered much attention, especially in the wake of Peter Brown's seminal work.⁷ Literary treatments, especially investigations of the narratological features and intertextual connections of hagiography, have long been comparatively neglected, but they are becoming increasingly prominent.

Martyr Acts and Passions

Among the first non-biblical writings of early Christians are some texts which record the trials and executions of Christians at the hands of officials of the Roman empire. The precise chronology of these works is generally hard to establish.⁸ A revealing case study is Otto Zwierlein's analysis of the corpus of writings associated with Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (executed between 161 and 168),⁹ arguing that an Old Armenian translation of Pionius' *Passion of Polycarp* is closest to the form of the text as it was written before 180 CE,¹⁰ whereas the longer extant Greek and Latin versions of the text seek to add meaning, e.g. by inserting details designed to assimilate Polycarp more closely to the passion narratives of the *gospels*.¹¹ The *Passion of Pionius*, another pre-Eusebian text, engages explicitly with the tradition of Polycarp's martyrdom.¹² The tendency to elaborate martyr accounts rhetorically and to fictionalise them by adding material and stock narrative scenes is observed throughout the later tradition, alongside the opposite phenomenon of epitomisation and other forms of rewriting existing texts, including translations into a wide network of languages. Cultic veneration of martyrs at the sites of their tombs encourages a proliferation both of supposed relics and of stories,¹³ some of which may have been preserved in local memory, while others were invented in accordance with existing patterns, down to the medieval period.¹⁴

Lives of Monks, Bishops, and Ascetic Women (hagio-biography)

The first Christian life narrative outside the gospels and the *apocryphal apostolic acts* (including the mysterious *Acts of Thecla*, whose first extant version is found in the *Acts of Paul*) is Pontius' *Life and Passion of Cyprian*, written in the later third century CE, and specifically in its first half. This part – the *Life (uita)* – is motivated by the need to defend *Cyprian*'s initial decision to withdraw from his see of Carthage to the countryside to escape the Decian persecution. His flight meant that his episcopal authority was subsequently challenged by the moral authority of those members of his congregation who had stayed, refused to compromise over the request to sacrifice to the emperor, and survived as 'confessors'. To salvage the bishop's reputation, Pontius not only depicts his heroic martyrdom in the second half of the text (the *passio*) but uses the first part to paint Cyprian as an ideal bishop whose responsibility for his congregation forces him to eschew an earlier death. The narrating of a bishop's life as that of an unchanging, ideal character, devoted both to Christ and to his flock, became a favoured method in later bishops' biographies, such as those of *Ambrose*, *Augustine*, and Caesarius.¹⁵ Polycarp's martyrdom is also supplemented by a *Life of Polycarp*,¹⁶ which fills in the bishop's humble origins, his exemplary conduct in his youth, and his ecclesiastical career promoted by his virtues, as well as visions and miracles.

But for more than a century, until Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin of Tours* was composed in c. 397 CE, Pontius' episcopal *biography* remained without direct imitators, while attention turned to desert ascetics, who were portrayed as the inheritors of the martyrs' position at the top of the saintly hierarchy.¹⁷ The key work in this development is Athanasius'

Life of Antony (written shortly after Antony's death in 356 CE), which appears to have redacted pre-existing accounts into a loosely chronologically-ordered narrative of Antony's life from birth to death, with a long section in the ascetic's own voice teaching his followers (ch. 16–43). This text contributed decisively to an explosion in monastic literature, especially after it was translated twice into Latin not long after its first appearance. The bloodless martyrdom of ascetic self-denial became a new model for Christian heroism that could be romanticised in narrative and imitated by those who wanted to be heroes. Something approaching a hagiographical genre was established in Latin through *Jerome*'s three *Lives* of Paul (mid 370s CE), Malchus, and Hilarion (both c. 391 CE), which responded in highly creative ways to the model of the *Life of Antony*, and through Sulpicius' *Life of Martin*, which appears to have been influenced by Jerome's *Life of Hilarion* at least.¹⁸ The perception that these texts form a genre is expressed in the first sentence of Paulinus' *Life of Ambrose* (422 CE), which lists Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, Jerome's *Life of Paul* (but not the others), and Sulpicius' *Life of Martin* as models which the author has been asked to emulate. Echoes of the openings of the *Life of Hilarion* and the *Life of Martin* in particular can be found throughout the medieval Latin tradition, as word searches of the *incipits* recorded in the Bollandists' *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* manuscript database demonstrate.¹⁹

Monastic biography links up with martyr acts in that its subjects are often faced with the prospect of a violent death but are spared by providence or for other reasons; and in return their whole life can be read as an extended passion.²⁰ Another pre-literary model for monastic biography are the 'Sayings of the Desert Fathers', which were eventually collected into editions of *Apophthegmata*. The influence of this form is especially noticeable in compilatory works about desert monks and associated characters which mix biography, martyr accounts, and other types of literature, such as the anonymous *History of the Monks in*

Egypt (c. 395 CE, translated from Greek into Latin by Rufinus), Palladius' *Lausiaca History* (419/20 CE), and Theodoret's *Historia religiosa* (440 CE). These conjure a counter-civilisation in the desert (and, for women ascetics, in the privacy of the home and other confined spaces like tombs). They are effectively miscellanies of edifying life summaries or individual episodes, with varying focus on holy persons' deeds or teachings. But their literary expression owed much to the Graeco-Roman traditions – themselves frequently hybridised – of biography exposing the subject's virtues and vices, the 'hypothetical genre' of aretalogy,²¹ encomium, travelogue, and novel.²² At the same time, while the martyrs imitate primarily the passion of Christ, the subjects of monastic biographies have a wider scope in imitating Christ's miracles as well as the deeds of the apostles and Old Testament prophets by means of typology. They are depicted as embodying the ongoing presence of God in the world.

Sulpicius' *Life of Martin* not only provides a picture of Western monasticism but also reinvented episcopal biography by bridging the gap with the monastic life: Martin retains his monastic lifestyle even after being elected to the see of Tours. Later bishops' lives are by the nature of their high-born subjects more akin to rulers' biographies and encomiastic forms than monastic lives. These texts negotiate the tension between the Christian virtue of humility with the real-life demands of exercising power and authority.²³ A number of bishops' lives, including Pontius' *Life and Passion of Cyprian*, contain no explicit miracles; Possidius' *Life of Augustine* (written before 439 CE) contains only one, in chapter 39: during his final illness, Augustine heals another sick man.

Holy Women

The fact that women participated in the propagation of Christianity and its virtues from the start is also reflected in hagiographical literature. The *Passion of the Scillitan Martyrs* records three women named Donata, Vestia, and Secunda as confessing their Christian identity

(section 9), and the early-third century *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* even purports (perhaps truthfully) to include Perpetua's own writings during her captivity. Among *Lives* of ascetic women, Gregory of Nyssa's *Life* of his sister Macrina (early 380s CE) proposes a contrasting model to that of Sophronius' *Life of Mary of Egypt* (sixth or seventh century CE): whereas Macrina refuses to marry after the death of her fiancé and devotes herself to domestic seclusion, Mary is a repentant former prostitute working miracles in the Egyptian desert. Both women are presented as spiritual teachers of men: Macrina of her brothers, Gregory and Basil, and Mary of the narrator Zosimus. A further model was that of aristocratic women who supported male monks and clerics through their wealth and networks as part of their ascetic discipline. Among these, Melania the Elder, the companion of Rufinus, is included in Palladius' *Lausiac History*, whereas her niece Melania the Younger is afforded a full *Life* in her own right by Gerontius (452/3 CE). Jerome himself praises his female supporters mainly in letters and prefaces to his biblical translations and commentaries, while his three free-standing *Lives* are all devoted to men. Besides six obituary letters for women (alongside three for men), Jerome's *Ep. 24* stands out as a description and commendation of Asella's life while she is still alive. As far as we can tell, no such texts were composed by female authors (with the possible exception of Perpetua's first-person narrative);²⁴ furthermore, it is a common trope that women who are presented as living up to Christian ideals are often figured as honorary men.²⁵

Shared Concerns and Individuality of Hagiographical Texts

If the core interest of classical biography lies in the 'realisation of morally evaluated ways of acting in the course of a human life considered as a unity',²⁶ then hagiography might by analogy be defined as the 'realisation of theologically endorsed modes of conduct in the course of (part of) a human life and beyond'. Whereas the human person still serves as a

unifying feature, the main concern is to present them as a conduit of divine grace in the world, and this does not end with their death: hagiographical literature, especially of the later centuries, frequently records the miracles worked by a dead saint's relics (see for example August. *De civ. D.* 22.8 on Stephen, and the final sentence of Jerome's *Life of Hilarion*: 'And yet great miracles happen every day in both places [that of Hilarion's death in Cyprus and that of his burial near Gaza], but more in the garden of Cyprus, perhaps because he loved that place more'). Written accounts of post-mortem miracles are not very different in form from episodes detailing miracles worked by saints during their life time. While hagiography often appears formulaic,²⁷ each individual text or version of a text can be shown to have its own specific identity and purpose,²⁸ and the very similarities between texts can be read as an assertion that Christian virtue and divine inspiration are consistent over time and space.

Primary Texts

Anonymous, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*

(<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/perpetua.asp>)

Pontius, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian* (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0505.htm>)

Pionius, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

(<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/martyrdompolycarp.html>)

Ps.-Pionius, *The Life of Polycarp*

(http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/pionius_life_of_polycarp_01_text.htm)

Anonymous, *The Martyrdom of Pionius*

Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2501.htm>);

The History of the Martyrs of Palestine

(http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_martyrs.htm)

Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony* (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2811.htm>)

Jerome of Stridon, *The Life of Paul* (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.vi.i.html>); *The*

Captive Monk (Life of Malchus: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.vi.iii.html>); *The Life*

of Hilarion (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.vi.ii.html>); *Letters*, especially 24 (on

Asella: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001024.htm>), 108 (obituary of Paula:

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001108.htm>), 127 (obituary of Marcella:

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001127.htm>).

Sulpicius Severus, *The Life of Martin of Tours* (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3501.htm>)

Paulinus, *The Life of Ambrose of Milan*

Anonymous, *A History of the Monks in Egypt*, translated from Greek into Latin by Rufinus

Palladius, *Lausiac History* (http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/palladius_lausiac_02_text.htm)

Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia religiosa* ([https://www.scribd.com/doc/142038526/A-](https://www.scribd.com/doc/142038526/A-History-of-the-Monks-of-Syria-Theodoret-of-Cyrrhus-2008-OCR)

[History-of-the-Monks-of-Syria-Theodoret-of-Cyrrhus-2008-OCR](https://www.scribd.com/doc/142038526/A-History-of-the-Monks-of-Syria-Theodoret-of-Cyrrhus-2008-OCR))

Possidius, *Life of Augustine*

(http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/possidius_life_of_augustine_02_text.htm)

Life of Caesarius (written by five clerics in two volumes)

Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*

(http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_macrina_1_life.htm)

Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*

Sophronius, *Life of Mary of Egypt* (<http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/reading/st.mary.html>)

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Notes:

¹ Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les légendes hagiographiques* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1905; 2nd edition Brussels: Subsidia Hagiographica, 1927): 2.

² For this restricted use and for the basis of this literature in oral forms cf. Claudia Rapp, “The Literature of Early Monasticism: Purpose and Genre between Tradition and Innovation,” in Richard Flower, Christopher Kelly, and Michael Stuart Williams (eds.), *Unclassical Traditions: Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Classical Journal, Supplement, 2010) 119–130.

³ See René Aigrain, *L’hagiographie. Ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1953). Marc Van Uytfanghe, “Heiligenverehrung II (Hagiographie)”, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 14 (1988): 151 prefers the term ‘hagiology’ for this meaning.

⁴ This use of ‘hagiographical idiom’ is loosely parallel to Van Uytfanghe’s ‘hagiographischer Diskurs’, which is designed to cover a set of stylised representations typical of but not confined to Christian works: Marc Van Uytfanghe, “Heiligenverehrung II (Hagiographie)”, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 14 (1988): 155–7.

⁵ Already by Dieter Hoster, *Die Form der frühesten lateinischen Heiligenviten von der Vita Cypriani bis zur Vita Ambrosii und ihr Heiligenideal* (Diss. Univ. Cologne, 1963). For an authoritative summary of such classifications and critical comment, see Marc Van Uytfanghe, “Heiligenverehrung II: Hagiographie”, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 14 (1988): 150–183, cols. 152–5.

⁶ See Marc Van Uytfanghe, “L’hagiographie antique tardive: Une littérature populaire?”, *Antiquité Tardive* 9 (2001), 201–18 for the *Sitz im Leben* of hagiographical texts as a ‘littérature “communautaire”’ (p. 216).

⁷ Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80–101; see also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁸ Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford Early Christian Texts; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 21–27, uses evidence from Eusebius and Augustine as the only reliable *termini ante quos*.

⁹ Otto Zwierlein, *Die Urfassungen der Martyria Polycarpi et Pionii und das Corpus Polycarpianum*, vol. 2 (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte; Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014): 30–36.

¹⁰ Otto Zwierlein, *Die Urfassungen der Martyria Polycarpi et Pionii und das Corpus Polycarpianum*, vol. 2 (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte; Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014): 262–266 for the date.

¹¹ Otto Zwierlein, *Die Urfassungen der Martyria Polycarpi et Pionii und das Corpus Polycarpianum*, vol. 2 (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte; Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014). Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford Early Christian Texts; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 47–48, 86–87, rejects Zwierlein’s argument on methodological grounds.

¹² See Louis Robert [edition, translation, commentary], *Le martyre de Pionios, prêtre de Smyrne*, mis au point et complété par G.W. Bowersock et C.P. Jones (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection: Washington, DC, 1994).

¹³ Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004): 86–110, 142.

¹⁴ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, HarperCollins: New York, 2013).

¹⁵ Eva Elm, *Die Macht der Weisheit: das Bild des Bischofs in der Vita Augustini des Possidius und anderen spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Bischofsviten* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹⁶ Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford Early Christian Texts; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 81–86, 107–143; cf. Otto Zwierlein, *Die Urfassungen der Martyria Polycarpi et Pionii und das Corpus Polycarpianum*, vol. 2 (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte; Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014): 297–320.

¹⁷ Pamphilus’ *Apology for Origen*, used by Eusebius for a biography of Origen in the sixth Book of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, is unlikely to be a direct response to Pontius’ *Life and Passion of Cyprian*.

¹⁸ Clare Stancliffe, *St Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983): 68.

¹⁹ <<http://bhlms.fltr.ucl.ac.be/>>

²⁰ Peter Gemeinhardt, “*Vita Antonii* or *Passio Antonii*? Biographisches Genre und martyrologische Topik in der ersten Asketenvita”, in Peter Gemeinhardt and Johan Leeman (eds.), *Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity (300–450 AD): History and Discourse, Tradition and Religious Identity* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012): 79–114.

²¹ Patricia Cox [Miller], *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 1–4.

²² Andrew Cain, *The Greek Historia Monachorum in Aegypto: Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 58–73 lists the various literary affiliations of the *History of the Monks in Egypt* and contests that the text is *sui generis*.

²³ Eva Elm, *Die Macht der Weisheit: das Bild des Bischofs in der Vita Augustini des Possidius und anderen spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Bischofsviten* (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 65.

²⁴ Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350–450* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 13–14.

²⁵ Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350–450* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 212–221.

²⁶ ‘die Verwirklichung moralisch bewerteter Handlungsweisen im Laufe eines unter diesem Gesichtspunkt als Einheit erfaßten Menschenlebens’: Albrecht Dihle, “Die Evangelien und die biographische Tradition der Antike,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 80 (1983): 33–49, p. 40.

²⁷ See Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987).

²⁸ Cf. Thomas Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos. Griechische Heiligenviten in mittelbyzantinischer Zeit* (Millenium Studies 6, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2005): 408.