

The image features three panels of early medieval stone relief carvings, likely from a church facade. The top panel shows a group of figures, including a central figure with a halo, possibly a saint or Christ, surrounded by others in a narrative scene. The middle panel depicts a figure seated at a desk or altar, writing or reading, with others standing around. The bottom panel shows a group of figures in various poses, including one seated and others standing. The carvings are set within a decorative border of stylized foliage and scrolls.

EARLY MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHY

James T. Palmer

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Early Medieval Hagiography

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Making Saints (Up)	15
Chapter 2 Collecting Saints' Stories	41
Chapter 3 Historians and the Quest for Truth	65
Chapter 4 Hagiographies and Early Medieval History . . .	89
Further Reading	111

For Justine

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Introduction

Books about saints have an enduring appeal. In many ways, saints are heroes in the commonly understood sense. Most went on adventures or faced some kind of adversity, and therefore people looked to them in admiration and for inspiration. Saints could be ordinary people who worked hard to achieve standards few others could reach, and people looked up to them for that. Sometimes they were more otherworldly: outsiders, or the unimaginably rich, or the unimaginably poor. Stories about saints capture the imagination and many have become a staple part of modern culture—St. Patrick ridding Ireland of snakes, St. George fighting the dragon. Saints' stories even form part of the long-standing Penguin Classics series, making them from one perspective part of the modern literary canon of world culture. The stories tell of saintly and heroic ideals, but these are always shaped by the ways in which the stories are told, the way the author and audience relate to each other, and expectations about what a good hero/saint should do. Indeed, the hero/saint themselves, even a reluctant one, usually knows what is expected of them in these stories and is able to take on specific predetermined roles as necessary. The boundaries between stories and real life are not especially strong in that sense, because it is natural for people to interpret their experiences as stories or parts of stories.

The saint as exemplar, the saint as embodiment of story, is a fascinatingly ubiquitous phenomenon—a fact that should

open up rich worlds for understanding hagiography that go beyond the familiar Western canon.¹ Buddhism in India had a variety of figures portrayed for emulation or devotion, including the Buddha, the pratyekabuddha, the arhant, and the bodhisattva.² The tradition of venerating holy men was strong in Buddhist Tibet, too, where Padmasambhava, the eighth-century founder of the monastery of Samye, was popular; and a significant tradition of *Nathar* developed, revealing enlightenment through example. Biographies about holy men can be found in Japan, such as the various stories that circulated about the Buddhist priest Gyōki (d. 749). Hinduism also had its iconic figures, such as Adi Shankara (d. 820, or possibly over a millennium earlier), who founded monasteries and wrote commentaries on Hindu sacred texts. In Islam, there were revered figures who attracted biographical treatment, starting with the *Sīra* about the Prophet and extending to other inspirational figures such as the learned jurist al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820). Jewish traditions, too, have a kind of holy man with the *tzadik*, a particularly righteous individual, even if there are no saints per se. Western Christian traditions are often studied without reference to such things but, in our globalized world, a more global perspective is often needed—and, in fact, it helps to sharpen our investigations to see the ways in which common, timeless concepts of religious cultural heroes were developed to meet specific local contexts.

The present book represents a playful attempt to capture the nature of saints' stories in the early medieval West while attempting to identify some ways forward for a more global, comparative approach in future. It aims to consider what hagiographies specifically reveal about European history during and after the fading of the Roman Empire in the Latin world that other sources do not. In doing so, I want to try to highlight the diversity and complexity of the period, rather than to reduce things to simple stereotypes or typologies. (As this is a short book, I warn you I will not always be successful.) Biographical or historiographical stories about saints—i.e., hagiography in the commonly understood sense—were a near-universal way of framing the past and

society at a local level. Communities rallying around towns or monasteries, from Ireland to Syria and beyond, revelled in accounts of the efforts of people who founded their worlds, who defined their place in an always-evolving Christendom, who transcended normal things to become closer to God. Hagiography provided something of a common cultural resource alongside religious texts and the calendar, but one which lent itself to endless adaptation to fit local tastes, circumstances, and political needs. Indeed, many stories found expression in different ways in language, too, from Syriac to Old Irish, even if my expertise means that I will tend to focus on Latin texts from across the West. There were, of course, ritualized settings for encountering the stories—read out or retold during church services, or during feasts, or while on pilgrimage—all occasions when choice of language and register might be important. These tales often fed back into further stories, as people wanted to know about the posthumous power of the saint. If one wanted to understand the many varied experiences of the early Middle Ages across time and space, hagiography would offer an unrivalled source-type—always familiar, and yet so often distinctive.

For comparisons to be meaningful, there need to be appropriate guiding principles. There is no point comparing two things that have no conceptual or structural common ground, especially if they are significantly removed from each other in time and space. A useful rule of thumb is provided by Chris Wickham, reflecting on the insights of Carlo Ginzberg: “[I]f we want to compare across different societies, a good way to do it is by taking *spie* [spyholes] which are sufficiently similar in each society that they are comparable [...] but which articulate with the other elements of each society in different ways.”³ Hagiography from Europe to China provides such “spyholes” because it involves similar ideals and literary structures, articulated in response to different political, social, cultural, or religious circumstances. One can argue productively about whether to privilege similarities or differences, and whether either are more apparent than real. Without a sense of the questions to be addressed and the reasons for comparison,

one is at best left looking for patterns in randomly generated data while relying on unreflexive aesthetic judgements.

The widespread use of hagiography in early medieval Europe is striking because Europe was not culturally homogeneous in every way. If one surveyed the region around 500 CE, one would find a number of relatively new kingdoms emerging, some rooted in the institutions and ideals of the Latin Roman world, others less so. Christianity and its hagiographical traditions had only recently arrived in Ireland and had yet to arrive in the English kingdoms, much of Germania, Scandinavia, and northeastern Europe. While Christianity introduced many common points of reference, including many “universal saints” such as the apostles, there were many debates ongoing about Christ’s nature, the use of relics and images, and penitential practice—so much debate, in fact, that Europe’s Christian communities adhered to a disparate array of practices and beliefs. Fast forward to around 900 and one will not find much less variety: many practices and beliefs had changed, sometimes considerably. Christianity in the north now stretched far beyond the old Roman frontiers of the Rhine and the Danube, creating new heroes in its wake, but it also had a far-diminished presence in the Near East, North Africa, and Iberia because of the Arab conquests and the spread of Islam—two distinct processes—in the seventh and eighth centuries. Many of those nascent kingdoms from the fifth century had collapsed, some spectacularly, and the powerful empires people experienced were now those of the Franks and of the Byzantine world. And everywhere people wrote, circulated, and read hagiography as they reflected on the ever-shifting relationship between their specific circumstances and the universal religion to which they belonged.

An important part of shifting circumstances in the West was a change in how people were connected to the eastern parts of the Mediterranean. The sixth century witnessed a decisive consolidation of imperial authority in Byzantium as the West fragmented. Justinian’s effort to re-establish direct imperial rule in the West between the 530s and 560s failed

abysmally, despite strong support for the principle of empire in areas of Italy, Iberia, and Gaul. Trade and travel persisted, but the patterns changed.⁴ East-West cultural exchange, facilitated by the great translators such as Evagrius (d. 399) and Jerome (d. 420), slowed. Command of Greek in some western areas may have gone into terminal decline, but we should also remember that Latin itself was moving into areas where it was a distinctly foreign language while also evolving into new vernacular forms in Italy and Gaul.⁵ For hagiography, these and other factors reinforced regional variation and a decline in the East-West exchange of stories about saints.⁶ New traditions began to emerge slowly, at least in Old Irish and Old English. For all this, however, Latin hagiographic culture maintained its connections with older Eastern traditions. Indeed, hagiography offers one accessible way to explore East and West in comparison, as traditions with similar core DNA evolved to fit new circumstances and occasionally met up again later.

We need to ask how hagiography reflected all this change. Often, the contours of saints' ideals and struggles reveal much about the values of the society which created her or him, particularly in the way that people might be expected to look up to the hero as a figure to imitate. Hagiographies tell us about sex, marriage, charity, struggles with poverty and wealth, government and corruption, outsiders to the community, and attitudes towards nature and the miraculous, to pick out just a few common topics. Many authors portrayed these issues through accounts of conflict, with saints resisting secular social roles, chastizing sinners, or facing hostility from people who did not share their ideals. But while saints, male and female, had tendencies to act in set ways, the worlds they interacted with could be wildly different. One could flee to the desert, as St. Anthony did in the story written by Athanasius of Alexandria and translated by Evagrius of Antioch, but one might have to contend elsewhere with a metaphorical desert—a remote island for St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne in northern Britain, or a forest for Sturm, founder of Fulda in Germany. One also needed to

be realistic: one pious individual in sixth-century Trier who wished to imitate the famous “pillar saints” of Syria was literally brought down to earth by his bishop because it was too cold in northern Europe for such behaviour (Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, bk. 8, chap. 15). Standards of sanctity were always adapted to their cultural and environmental settings.

At the same time, the stories are fundamentally about conflict—how the hero stood out from the crowd; how they challenged or were challenged by norms, practices, institutions, and people. The classic holy woman or man gained their power from the margins, from the desert, from the renunciation of the sex or wealth or gluttony of everyday life.⁷ Few heroes are ever minted by blandly behaving like everybody else. We might like heroes or celebrities who are in some sense just like us, but by definition they aren’t: there always has to be something about them—some deed, some ability—which sets them apart in a way which makes them hard to imitate. As Peter Brown once noted about the kind of saints we will encounter in this book, the true heroes could not be too easy to imitate, otherwise becoming a hero would be too easy and the distance between sacred and profane would quickly collapse.⁸ In Byzantium (and indeed Buddhist China), different traditions even emphasized hidden sanctity, partly to promote humility, but also to restrict access to the holiness. Sainly heroes were by definition exceptional.

It is not just action and behaviour that matters here but, more explicitly, charisma. In the classical model adapted from Max Weber’s sketch about compelling political leaders, the saintly hero might be an individual whose personal authority moulds and directs a group of followers to such an extent that the group may fall apart without them.⁹ The leader does not have to be “charismatic” in the modern sense of someone charming and magnetic, although no doubt that often helped. Charisma could be “routinized” and ultimately transferred to institutions (such as monasteries or churches), where it would become part of a different kind of long-term institutionalized authority through practices of memory and identity. Hagiographers wrote both to promote

and to routinize charisma for our saintly heroes, so their work can reveal much about strategies for generating and maintaining power in a range of circumstances. Often, crucially, this charisma coincided with patterns of social status and values.¹⁰

Discussion of charisma as discourse of power leads to another crucial reason why we are so interested in these old sacred biographies: we are perpetually fascinated by what makes people do things. Some earlier generations were not so interested in this with regards to hagiography and saints' cults, as they viewed the whole thing as the worst of uncultured, popularist, superstitious nonsense.¹¹ Power, to such sceptics, is anything but those things: it is often exclusive and grounded in the nation state or government, law, war, and money. But in practice we increasingly appreciate that it is rarely just a matter of hierarchy and force. People respond to rhetoric and performance, to stories, to education, to the habits and ideals of their social environment, in ways that are not always planned or limited to those who think they are in control. Wars in Vietnam and Iraq were fought for "hearts and minds," not just bodies and infrastructure. Elections are won by tabloid rumour and lost by body language regardless of political ability. Sex and looking the part matter even when they shouldn't. Saints as semi-marginal figures are interesting in these contexts because of the ways in which they inspired action through good examples, charity, and powerful words, despite not always having the best material backing or social platforms, but by almost always having the best publicity. Indeed, hagiography inspired action by keeping the examples of the saints going, and not a little by distorting the past and offering subjective—sometimes overtly propagandist—views on kings, bishops, and social practices. Hagiography should not be underestimated: it did not just reflect political discourse, but was part of it. Kings and aristocrats read or heard the stories of the saints, and some even played an active role in writing them out.

One of the central reasons why modern historians are interested in hagiography is that it provides evidence about

women, non-elite people, and anyone that chronicles, letters, laws, and other sources simply do not cover. To give but one example: from the Roman *gesta martyrum* (Deeds of the Martyrs) we can find out much about late-antique households, changing gender expectations, and family dynamics, which are at best only hinted at elsewhere.¹² Yet just because there is evidence for something does not always mean that people will value or analyse that evidence. The baggage of people not taking hagiography seriously in the past still weighs heavily today. That has changed profoundly with the development of gender studies, “history from below,” and the study of the relationship between ideas, society, and action in various configurations of literary, cultural, and praxis histories. We will explore the dynamics involved here more fully in Chapter 3 on “Historians and the Quest for Truth.” We need to remember that how we approach hagiography as a historical source is always bound up in our present concerns. As Benedetto Croce proposed, “ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea”—“all true history is contemporary history.”¹³

We have proceeded so far without defining what hagiography is beyond vaguely noting that it tends to be the story about an inspirational individual—that is, a kind of biography. This vagueness is partly a deliberate move, because the definition of hagiography has proven rather controversial. Where once the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye, writing *Legends of the Saints* in 1905, could confidently write about biographies that aimed at edification and pertained to a cult, by the early 1990s there was less certainty about either of those things. Should one include writings about saints that were not biographies? What did it even mean to say that hagiography is a genre or a type of source if so many writers subverted generic expectations? Would talking about “hagiography” in the early Middle Ages have been meaningful given that there was no single comparable term in use, and is it meaningful to us now? Are there better terms, like the “sacred biography” Thomas Heffernan suggested in his 1988 book of the same title to avoid the baggage of “hagiography”?

And what happens to our definitions when we start to consider non-European, non-Christian “biographies about holy people” if they aren’t tied to the ideas about sanctity that drove traditions of scholarship?

A central concern is whether hagiography is really distinct from other historical writings. A hard separation of the two will not do, especially if what one is talking about is a distinction between fanciful hagiographies and the “hard facts” of chronicles.¹⁴ Such distinctions can be illusory, not least because we often find ourselves trying to impose modern definitions and abstractions on medieval material. At the most sceptical end of the spectrum, such concerns led Felice Lifshitz to declare:¹⁵

The concept of a genre of “hagiography” is a historiographical construction and, *ipso facto*, an ideological tool. It is a tool that had no function in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, and thus as a conceptual category it did not exist. It should not be anachronistically applied in our analyses of [in her example] late Carolingian and early Capetian Franca, because it can only obscure the realities of those centuries, not illuminate them.

Reflecting on this argument in 2013, Anna Taylor conceded that the term “hagiography” is too useful to abandon completely, and that many medieval writers did perceive connections between their works.¹⁶ Many historians working on Latin and Greek traditions have preferred Marc Van Uytenghe’s idea of “hagiographical discourse” defined by four features: the focus on a subject close to God; the stories’ subjectivity, often rooted in oral traditions; the emphasis on idealization, apology, and edification over being informative; and a tendency to see the world in fixed terms revolving around stock themes.¹⁷ It is a bit looser than “genre,” may be more appropriate for non-Christian texts, and may also encourage people to examine texts about saints that go beyond “sacred biographies,” such as sermons or letters.

Arguing about definitions of hagiography, much like arguing about definitions of “the Middle Ages,” does not necessarily get us very far. One is still left with plenty of texts written about saints, many written generically, and many for which there were medieval “conceptual categories” such as *vitae* (Lives), *passiones* (Sufferings), or *miraculae* (Miracles). There was no “one size fits all” approach to any aspect of a saint’s story or any related theological, liturgical, or performative aspects. As a historian, it is still what you do with any given text that matters. Labels such as “hagiography” are often best used as jumping-off points for analysis rather than end points. They should certainly not be used as a substitute for critically evaluating each text on its own merits. Not, alas, that that is always what happens.

In the meantime, there have been a good number of projects aimed at helping people to get a sense of written dossiers about saints in various forms. A significant number of texts are edited in some form in one or both of the Bollandists’ *Acta Sanctorum* and the volumes of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, now both navigable digitally. The Bollandists also contributed significantly to the disentangling of different texts by introducing the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina, Graeca, and Orientalis*, which assigned BHL, BHG, or BHO numbers to each one—also now searchable online. For a grand survey of hagiographies across time and space, one should consult the multi-author, multi-volume *Corpus Christianorum Hagiographies* series, started in 1994 by Guy Philippart and still incomplete, which divides the vast field by time and place. For Gaul, more detail on sources can be found in the scattered contributions to the project “Les sources hagiographiques narratives composées en Gaule avant l’an mil (SHG),” initially driven by François Dolbeau, Martin Heinzelmann, and Joseph-Claude Poulin. Walter Berschin discussed many saints’ Lives in his magisterial analysis of the evolution of biographical forms ca. 300 to ca. 1220, *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter*, taking

the first three volumes (of five) to cover the chronological range the present little book does. For Byzantine hagiography, there is now the exemplary two-volume *Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography* (2011–2014), edited by Stephanos Efthymiadis, with essays covering many aspects of what made hagiography in the East work.

The shape of the present book is designed to take readers from the creation of medieval hagiography, through the ways in which it circulated, to the different strategies used by historians and literary scholars over the past century or so to interrogate the sources. Such a structure highlights the inevitable processes by which stories acquire new meanings, first as they told or imagined, then as they are written down, then as they are copied or edited or read, and then, with time, as people removed from the initial world of composition engage with the story for new purposes. Chapter 1 examines how hagiographers created saints, working with memories, literary traditions, and outright imagination to create something useful for authors and audiences to pursue their specific agendas. Chapter 2 turns to the world of hagiography after composition to ask how texts circulated, what associations between texts emerged, and how other kinds of sources—calendars, sermons—reframed the original logic of hagiographical stories. Hagiographers may have had all sorts of plans for their compositions, but often had little control over how their texts were actually used. With the medieval world of hagiography sketched out, the second half of the book turns to the modern use of those texts. Chapter 3 provides a potted history of the scholarly study of hagiographies since the nineteenth century, with the intention of identifying strategies for using them and understanding some of the personal and intellectual politics, and heroes and anti-heroes, that have guided people in their work. The final chapter then sketches out some of the ways in which studying hagiography has made a difference to our understanding of the period 500–900.

A Note on References to Sources

In keeping with the mission statements of the Past Imperfect series, I have kept references to a minimum. For primary sources, I have often given book and/or chapter numbers (e.g., bk. 4, chap. 3), which refer to sections in the standard editions. What are the standard editions? Most standard Latin texts cited can be found edited by the Monumenta Germaniae Historica, in the French *Sources Chrétiennes*, or the Bollandists' *Acta Sanctorum* series. I have included some major collections of texts in translation in the Further Reading section, and these too will direct you to the standard editions. If the text or edition is a bit more obscure, I have added further details in an endnote. Most endnotes contain references to essential secondary literature, which, of course, is also useful for identifying editions.

Notes

¹ See the essays in *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, ed. Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

² Reginald Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³ Chris Wickham, "Problems in Doing Comparative History," in *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History*, ed. Patricia Skinner (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 5–28 at 13.

⁴ Michael McCormick, *The Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD300–AD900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵ Walter Berschin, *Greek Letters and the Latin Middle Ages: From Jerome to Nicholas of Cusa*, trans. Jerold Frakes (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988); James Adams, *The Regional Diversification of Latin 200BC–AD600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and his *Social Variation and Latin Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶ Claudia Rapp, "Hagiography and Monastic Literature between Greek East and Latin West in Late Antiquity," in *Christianità d'occidente e cristianità d'oriente*, Settimane di studio della Fondazione

centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo 51 (Spoleto, Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 2004), 1221–80.

⁷ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101; reprinted in his *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 103–52. Claudia Rapp, "Saints and Holy Men," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity* 2, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 548–66; *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Paul Hayward and James Howard-Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. the essay by Averil Cameron.

⁸ Peter Brown, "Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity," *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000): 1–24 at 16–17.

⁹ Albrecht Diem, "Monks, Kings, and the Transformation of Sanctity: Jonas of Bobbio and the End of the Holy Man," *Speculum* 82 (2007): 521–59.

¹⁰ Friedrich Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich: Kultur und Gesellschaft in Gallien, den Rheinlanden und Bayern am Beispiel der monastischen Entwicklung, 4. bis 8. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1965); Martin Heinzelmann, "Neue Aspekte der biographischen und hagiographischen Literatur in der lateinischen Welt (1.-6. Jahrhundert)," *Francia* 1 (1973): 27–44.

¹¹ In different ways, this negative attitude inspired both Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les légendes hagiographiques* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1905); trans. Donald Attwater, *The Legends of the Saints*, 4th ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), and Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christendom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981).

¹² Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300–900*, ed. Kate Cooper and Julia Hillner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially the central trilogy of essays by Sessa, Jones, and Leyser.

¹³ Benedetto Croce, *Teoria della storiografia* (Bari: Gius, Laterza & Figli, 1920), 4.

¹⁴ Baudouin de Gaiffier, "Hagiographie et Historiographie. Examen de quelques problèmes," in *La storiografia altomedievale*, Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo 17 (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1970), 158–59; Friedrich Lotter, "Methodisches zur Gewinnung historischer Erkenntnisse

aus hagiographischen Quellen," *Historische Zeitschrift* 229 (1979): 298–356 at 308; Jean-Michel Picard, "Bede, Adomnán, and the Writing of History," *Peritia* 3 (1984): 50–70.

¹⁵ Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographical' Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994): 95–113.

¹⁶ Anna Taylor, "Hagiography and Early Medieval History," *Religion Compass* 7 (2013): 1–14.

¹⁷ Marc Van Uytvanghe, "L'hagiographie: un 'genre' chrétien ou antique tardif?," *Analecta Bollandiana* 111 (1993): 135–88. Martin Hinterberger, "Byzantine Hagiography and its Literary Genres: Some Critical Observations," in *Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography* 2 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), 25–60.