Realism in Hagiography

Douglas Whalin and Claudia Sode

When historians use hagiography as a source, interpretation frequently follows a seemingly-obvious binary of 'fact' versus 'fiction.' Is it reasonable to assume that a modern scholar can confidently categorise all evidence from such documents into either mundane facts or magical fictions? In this project, I propose to explore a different paradigm for reading hagiography: its writers were always interested in communicating 'truth' to their audiences through depiction of a 'realistic', believable setting. Typically this truth was founded on factual, verifiable evidence, but where narratives depart from this the narrative still attests to a truth shared between writer and audience, not fiction. This interpretative perspective informs our understanding of the mundane and miraculous details in hagiography, for both are realistic according to the shared understanding of mediaeval writers and readers. Hence, we shall ask and investigate: Were there rules and limits for the truthfully miraculous? Is there evidence that some miracle stories were disbelieved for transgressing these unwritten codes? Can we identify changes over time and space in the types of miracles which are accepted to be true?

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Prevailing historical narrative and its challenges

The contemporary academic use of hagiography began with Peter Brown's watershed article, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity'. Appearing in 1971, this and a series of follow-up articles published over the following decades have profoundly shaped the study of hagiography. The major hurdle to using hagiography as a historical source has been establishing rationality. Earlier scholars had placed the burden of rationalism on the literature itself and were disappointed by the result. After all, if approached uncritically with the view of using hagiographies as sources for the daily lives of the peoples of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, hagiographies can be exceedingly frustrating. Their rural landscapes are a strange reflection of anticipated medieval reality, filled not with peasants, villages, and a landed aristocracy who fight Arabs or Bulgars, but with monks, monasteries, and isolated hermits who combat demons and heretics. Their heroes' lives are often confoundingly short on concrete details, at other times being so formulaic as to frustrate any hope of identifying true biographical particulars. Brown's brilliant article performed a simple task: it shifted the burden of rationalism from this literature onto us as readers. It will no longer do to dismiss the overly-excited medieval religious mind; ever since, we must first assume rationality in the source, and extrapolate how this might be from there. This has been the basic pattern of hagiographic studies for the last forty years.

Brown's work established that holy men were not a reflection of an increasingly irrational and superstitious society, but a reflection of the increased value placed on human agency in a period when institutional traditions were weakening. This late-antique 'revolution' individualized society and transferred many social functions onto the person of the holy man himself.[1] Furthermore, Brown has shown that the late antique holy man and his life served as a social exemplar. Classical exemplars, such as those whose biographies were collected in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, extolled for their personal virtues and civic accomplishments, formed a body of models upon whom well-educated Romans could draw inspiration for proper behaviour. Holy men, whose biographies were recounted through hagiographies, were exemplars because of their relationship to God.[2] These works have grounded the study of hagiography and its subjects in a practical and rational world, and established a sympathetic means of approaching these texts.

Further work has refined Brown's initial studies. Philip Rosseau challenged Brown's search for 'function' in a holy man, observing that, as the subject of hagiographical texts, the more important function is of the text itself as a tool for establishing the narrative of a religious cult.[3] Paul Magdalino expanded on this distinction, and pointed to a fundamental paradox of hagiography: the text is a literary construct which separates readers (both historical and contemporary) from its subject, the historical holy person, but is also the cornerstone of the holy person's historical existence. Through hagiography, literary constructs replace flesh-

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[1] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 98–101.

[2] Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 2, no. 2 (1983): 19–21.

[3] Philip Rousseau, "Ascetics as Mediators and as Teachers," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51–54.

and-blood men and women as figures with historical 'function'.[4] Averil Cameron expanded on the liminal nature of the holy man and his cult as a mediator of the late antique / early medieval landscape, between sacred and mundane, urban and rural, elite and peasant. She also expanded upon the difference between *vitae* and biography as we know it, as the former omits private details and inner consciousness, denying us insights into the attitudes and patterns of daily life which we so crave to know.[5] Matthew Dal Santos observed that there are multiple historical audiences at whom these texts are addressed. One group already accepted the reality of saintliness and of miracles, and was persuaded to believe in this particular saint's cult. Another group accepted that miracles could happen, but were sceptical concerning this particular saint, for whatever reason. Finally, there was also a sceptical audience who were unwilling to believe in the sacred fantastic, and who posed a very real challenge to the cults of holy men in the late antique and early medieval Mediterranean.[6]

Despite these real advancements in the field, hagiographies remain liminal with respect to their use as historical documents. After all, they were documents which witnessed the fantastic and miraculous, not the sober facts of historical reality. As a result, despite the presence of hagiographies about patriarchs and others who had been prominent in the imperial administration, most political histories avoid them. James Howard-Johnston, despite having been the editor of a volume on hagiography, found no use for hagiography in his study of the documentary evidence for the reign of Heraclius.[7] Social historians more typically find hagiographies useful, as witness for social strata which otherwise have few voices in the late antique and medieval world. Nevertheless, hagiography can be a challenging source for social history as well. The life of St. Theodore of Sykeon has been extensively used as one of the few literary sources for Asia Minor in the decades preceding the Arab conquests, but its information contained therein has proved challenging to interpret.[8] Hagiography's sacred realism remains a tempting source of material for the historian, whose usefulness has steadily increased as scholarship has continued to develop more sympathetic approaches to the problems it presents. In the next section, we will look at what early medieval hagiographies exist, how they have come down to us, and what that can say about the evolving concept of the holy man and his cult at the end of late antiquity.

Themes and Sources

One can distinguish hagiography from biography by the logic of their setting. Like the postmodern genre of magic realism, hagiographies are set in a landscape of *spiritual realism*. Although the goals of the two genres are ultimately different, their methods are fundamentally similar. Both aim to "prevent an overwhelming sense of disbelief" and "radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have

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[4] Paul Magdalino, "'What We Hard in the Lives of the Saints We Have Seen with Our Own Eyes': The Holy Man as Literary Text in Tenth-Century Constantinople," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 85–86.

[5] Averil Cameron, "On Defining the Holy Man," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27, 34, 39–41.

[6] Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great*, Oxford Studies in Byzantium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8–10, 151–59.

[7] James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[8] Michael Decker, *Tilling the Hateful Earth: Agricultural Production and Trade in the Late Antique East*, Oxford Studies in Byzantium (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96–99; Brigitte Pitarakis, "Female Piety in Context: Understanding Developments in Private Devotional Practices," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vasilakē (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 259.

become virtually invisible because of their familiarity" so that they arrive at a state of meta-realism.[9] Hagiographers went to great length to ground their stories in the observable and believable reality in order to provide proofs of the miracles which they include.[10]

Hagiography as a literary field did not evolve in an exclusively Christian setting. Stories about the miraculous lives, deaths, and afterlives of holy men were commonplace across many languages, religions, and cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world. Latin Christian hagiography developed in close dialogue with Greek Christian hagiography, both as translations as well as its own early independent traditions, such as the lives and passions North African Donatist martyrs.[11] Lives of holy people exist from other ancient religious traditions, such as the philosopher Apollonius of Tyana and the prophet Mani.

The literary tradition of hagiography in the Eastern Roman, Greek speaking, Orthodox tradition is closely tied to the development of the liturgy.[12] The exact role and presentation of hagiography in the liturgy evolved over centuries, as would the manuscript collections in which they were found. These scaled according to the needs and ambitions of the institution which commissioned the manuscripts: the smallest churches and monasteries used *Year Collections*, written as only one or two volumes, which contained readings for fixed and movable yearly feasts.[13] Large institutions could afford greater investment, both in terms of capital to create the books and in dedicated manpower for performing more elaborate ceremonies. For them, hagiographical readings for the fixed calendars were in *Menologia*, while the readings for the movable feasts were provided either by *Homiliaria* or larger *Panegyrika*.[14] The other major type of hagiographical collection is the *Synaxarion*, collections of short summaries (between one line and one page) of every saint recognized by the church. These collections have been tied to the encyclopaedic movement of the tenth century, reflecting an experiment with standardization of religious practice across the Eastern Roman Empire.[15]

As the lowest branch of the liturgy, hagiography was the only part explicitly open to new candidates. Holy people could live in any generation, and new cults could claim as much divine connection as their predecessors. In contrast with the emerging traditions of the Latin west, eastern churches had no formal system of 'canonisation,' which meant that the potential paths for saintly cults to spread were informal. While many texts in a *Menologion* would be the same across the world (particularly for well-known and popular early martyrs), each manuscript was a highly individualized affair, as institutions were always permitted to add stories of local significance.[16]

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[9] Scott Simpkins, "Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism," *Twentieth Century Literature* 34, no. 2 (1988): 145, 151.

[10] Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great*, 151–56.

[11] Maureen A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*, Translated Texts for Historians (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996); Jesse A. Hoover, *The Donatist Church in an Apocalyptic Age*, First edition., Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: University Press, 2018).

[12] Apostolos Spanos, ed., *Codex Lesbiacus Leimonos 11 : Annotated Critical Edition of an Unpublished Byzantine Menaion for June*, Byzantinisches Archiv 23 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 3.

[13] Christian Høgel, *Symeon Metaphrastes: Rewriting and Canonization* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002), 37–40.

[14] Høgel, 40–42; Spanos, *Codex Lesbiacus Leimonos 11 : Annotated Critical Edition of an Unpublished Byzantine Menaion for June*, 2–9, 15.

[15] Andrea Luzzi, *Studi Sul Sinassario Di Constantinopoli*, Testi e Studi Bizantino-Neoellenici 8 (Rome: Università di Roma La Sapienza, 1995).

[16] Spanos, *Codex Lesbiacus Leimonos 11 : Annotated Critical Edition of an Unpublished Byzantine Menaion for June*, 15.

The gradual development of systematic hagiographical collections and the act of rewriting (metaphrase) point to the possibility the shared realism expressed in these texts changed dynamically alongside social and material conditions. Does the scope of what can be considered credibly miraculous differ across time and space within the same linguistic and doctrinal tradition? Conversely, do competing faith groups who live together share common boundaries for truth, both spiritual and mundane, in their respective hagiographical literary traditions? Finally, as saints' cults spread with the conversion of new groups to Christianity, can the paradigm of 'realism' shed light on the cross-cultural processes by which stories about early saints were made relevant for new generations of faithful? These interdisciplinary questions which inevitably arise from the study of hagiography highlights the logic behind pursuing this project as a collaborative effort.

Fitness of researcher and environment

The concept for this project follows on from a paper which Dr. Whalin gave at the 2019 SPBS Spring Symposium hosted at the University of Cambridge. The paper explored the parallels between the genres of hagiography and magical realism as applied to the *Vita* of St. Simeon Stylites, a fifth-century pillar saint from Syria.

The Byzantine research group within the Department of Classics at the University of Cologne headed by Prof. Dr. Claudia Sode, who has worked on saints' lives in the iconoclast period, would make a great host and partner group with whom to pursue this project. Her current PhD student, Niels de Ridder works on Jews and Judaism in Greek hagiography, and she has funding for a new hagiographical project which will see an additional PhD student working under her starting in autumn 2022. Other recent and current contacts at Cologne who would be interested in involving in this project from an early stage include Staffan Wahlgren (Trondheim), an expert in Byzantine historiography who was previously a Morphomata Fellow, and Julia Weitbrecht has expressed interest in contributing to the workshop.

Furthermore, Whalin and Sode both have connections with the Byzantine studies program at the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations (IHAC) in Changchun, China. Partnering with them would both bring a dynamic cross-cultural component to the research. Li Qiang has an interest in hagiography as a source for research in the Middle Byzantine Period, whilst Sven Günther, an expert in the early first millennium, would broaden the scope of the work. The institute's resources would complement the project as well. Its Byzantine Seminar, held online in the autumn, could be devoted to lectures relating to the topic, while the institute's double-blind peer-reviewed *Journal of Ancient Civilizations* (*JAC*), could be partners during the publication phases of the project.

Outputs

The proposed duration of the fellowship will be from November 2022 through January 2023. The focus of this project will be to host a workshop at the University of Cologne in the final month of the fellowship which will form the basis for a new volume, edited by the organizers.

The format for the workshop involves inviting a selection of scholars to contribute who will be asked to prepare, circulate, and read draft chapters in advance. The workshop itself will be organized as a series of discussions of each of the pre-circulated chapters, fostering a collaborative environment. While obviously hosting a workshop in Cologne has its strengths, the workshop could also be organized virtually, which would both protect against

the unpredictability of the ongoing pandemic as well as minimize financial pressures on participants.

Following the workshop, participants will be asked to revise their chapters based on the collaborative discussions, while the organizers will finalize publication plans, potentially as a supplement to the *JAC*.