An Age of Saints?

Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity

EDITED BY
Peter Sarris, Matthew Dal Santo & Phil Booth

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An Age of Saints?
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AASS  Acta Sanctorum quotquot toto urbe coluntur (Antwerp-Brussels, 1643–1902)
BHL    Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina antiquae et mediae aetatis (Brussels, 1898–1899)
CPG    Clavis Patrum Graecorum (Turnhout, 1974–)
CSCO   Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CCSG   Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca (Turnhout, 1977–)
CCSL   Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout, 1953–)
CSEL   Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna, 1866–)
MGH    Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Hannover, 1826–)
PG     Patrologia Graeca (1857–)
PL     Patrologia Latina (Paris, 1844–64)
PO     Patrologia Orientalis (Paris, 1907–)
RIS    Rerum Italicarum Scriptores (Città di Castello, 1900–)
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At some point perhaps in the final decades of the seventh century, the monk and priest Anastasius of Sinai penned a little-known sermon On the Holy Synaxis.¹ Therein Anastasius lambasted the sinfulness of his audience, and chided their failure to approach their attendance in church with the proper reverence. ‘We spend the entire day in the theatre,’ Anastasius proclaims, ‘in swearing and in other works of the devil…But in the church of God, in prayer and reading, we do not want to be near God even for an hour.’ His Christian congregation ‘hasten to leave the church as from a fire’; it is irritated if the priest reads a long passage from the Gospel; and ‘if when he makes the prayers he stretches these things out a little, we glower’. Even the sacred host cannot inspire the expected respect: ‘And when he brings the bloodless sacrifice, if he does it slowly, we are bored. We are propelled by the devil to set these things aside as vain’.²

Some Christians, Anastasius continues, ask ‘What is the point of communion’? and then burst into the church ‘like dogs’, seize the bread and leave. Still more do not keep silence, but chatter to their neighbours and ‘are practised more in prater than in prayer (φλυαρίαις μᾶλλον, ἡ προσευχαῖς συγκροτοῦμενοι).’ Certain members of the congregation leave in the middle of the service to engage in the pleasures of the flesh; others spend their time lusting after women in the church; and others, ‘speak about their affairs and business, and turn that place appointed for the most awesome hour into a market-place’. Certain women, Anastasius claims, attend church more to be seen than to offer supplications. Worst of all, perhaps, some spend their time slandering the officiating priest.³

¹ The text is available at PG 89.825A–849C but still lacks a critical edition. For the various manuscripts, see A. Sakko, Περὶ Ἀναστασίων Σιναϊτῶν (Thessaloniki, 1964) 241f.; and the note of M. Geerard, Clavis Patrum Graecorum, III (Turnhout, 1979), 456 no. 7750.

² Anastasius Sinaita, On the Holy Synaxis 3 [PG 89.829AB].

³ Ibid. 4 [PG 829C–832A]. This concern for the unassailability of the officiating priest is reflected later in the sermon (esp. at ibid. 20–21), but also in Anastasius’s other surviving works, in particular the Tales B1, B7, C17. For the Tales of Anastasius see Geerard, CPG III: 458–62 no. 7758, which divides them into three collections: for collection A (1–40), see F. Nau, ‘Le texte grec des récits utiles à l’âme d’Anastase
This vivid introduction to Anastasius’s sermon is salient for several reasons. On the one hand, it presents us with a powerful ecclesiastical figure intoning from the pulpit, chastising his congregation and attempting to impose upon them ‘proper’ practices and beliefs. At the same time, however, it serves as a welcome antidote to the comparable treatises of such eastern contemporaries as Maximus the Confessor and Germanus of Constantinople, whose liturgical commentaries present the eucharistic rite as a solemn, undisturbed drama of cosmic proportions. Anastasius’s sermon focuses our attention not only on the articulation of that vision but also on its reception (or lack thereof). It reminds us that the problems that formed the interest and the horizon of the Christian texts that have come down to us were not the sole, or even primary, concern of the inhabitants of the early medieval world, and that behind such texts were societies which were far more complex, creative and (perhaps) impious than the glittering facade of grand Christian culture for the most part allows us to perceive. To be sure, Anastasius remains able to gather around him the local congregation, and from the pulpit to control a significant form of public speech. But, as he himself reminds us here, some within his congregation did not care to listen; others even turned to slander.

The papers collected in this volume attempt to explore both sides of this coin: on the one hand, the construction of social power through person, text and space; but, on the other, the reception of that same

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5 For this approach to the liturgy, compare the wonderful R. Taft, Through their own eyes: The liturgy as Byzantines saw it (Berkeley, CA, 2006).
process, and with it indifference, re-appropriation and resistance. Because Christian sacred sites and persons became so significant as foci for the construction of Christian social and cultural dominance (and, in particular, *episcopal* dominance), those same sites and persons were also the arenas around which these forms of dissent might be effectively deployed. In their attempts to realise that dominance, therefore, Christian leaders were confronted with challengers at the heart of their power: most obviously, of course, with rival impresarios of Christian culture (opposition theologians, heteroprax monks, etc.); but also, this volume emphasises, with less obvious figures whose significance can sometimes go unobserved: powerful Christian aristocrats, unofficial cultic authorities, or secularising intellectuals.

At the same time, we suggest here, the congregations whom Christian authorities confronted were both more creative and less credulous than those same authorities would like us to believe. Doctrinal boundaries and identities, for example, were far more fluid than the polemic of invested theologians implies, and some (if not all) Christians could put on or shed their doctrinal colours as and when it suited. Moreover there persisted in all social classes ingrained patterns of explanation which remained sceptical of, resistant to, or unenthused by the claims of Christian culture: the truth of miracles, for example, was not assumed but had to be established; the intervention of deceased saints within the world of the living required proper proof. Christian authorities were confronted, therefore, with a constant need both to reassert their own positions against rival impresarios, and to re-establish the truth of the claims on which their power rested, in the face of congregations who were perhaps, in Anastasius’s memorable phrase, ‘practised more in prater than in prayer’. This volume holds the modest aspiration of attempting to recapture something of this complex, diverse, and raucous Christian world.
In 1961, in his justly famous essay What Is History?, E.H. Carr wrote of the problems caused to the medievalist by an over-reliance on ecclesiastical sources: ‘When I read in a modern history of the Middle Ages that the people of the Middle Ages were deeply concerned with religion’, Carr declared, ‘I wonder how we know this, and whether it is true. What we know of the facts of medieval history have almost all been selected for us by generations of chroniclers who were professionally occupied in the theory and practice of religion, and who therefore thought it supremely important, and recorded everything relating to it, and not much else. The picture of the Russian peasant as devoutly religious was destroyed by the revolution of 1917.’

The Russian analogy that Carr draws is a highly appropriate one, especially for the Byzantinist, for in many respects the myth of ‘Holy Russia’ (Sviataia Rus’) drew upon the ideal of a Holy Byzantium to which Moscow was heir. In Muscovy, as in Byzantium, the concept of the Tsar/Emperor as God’s vice-gerent on earth, and of the empire as a bulwark of true religion, did much to legitimise and sanctify the state in the person of the ruler. But how deep in society did such claims penetrate? To what extent did they impact upon the minds and imaginations of the Tsar/Emperor’s overwhelmingly rural subjects? For Byzantium, we will never know, but the Russian evidence is highly suggestive. As Orlando Figes has put it, ‘the religiosity of the Russian peasant has been one of the most enduring myths – along with the depth of the Russian soul – in the history of Russia. But in reality the Russian peasant had never been more than semi-detached

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with the Orthodox religion. Only a thin coat of Christianity had been painted over his ancient pagan folk-culture’. Moreover, as the events of the Revolution were to reveal, a great deal of animosity and hostility had built up towards the personnel of the Church on the part of many Russian peasants. This was largely due to social tensions resulting from the reality of economic relations between peasant and priest on the ground: ‘the clergy relied heavily on collecting peasant fees for their services: two roubles for a wedding; a hen for the blessing of the crops; a few bottles of vodka for a funeral; and so on. The crippling poverty of the peasants and the proverbial greed of the priests often made this bargaining process long and heated [...] “Everywhere”, wrote a nineteenth-century parish priest, “from the most resplendent drawing rooms to smoky peasant huts, people disparage the clergy with the most vicious mockery, with words of the most profound scorn and infinite disgust”.’

It has long been noted how, in the aftermath of the Constantinian institutionalisation of the Christian Church and clergy, and as bishops in particular came to play an ever more significant role in public life, the representatives of the Church found themselves increasingly caught up in political struggles and machinations. This was not always to the Church’s advantage: in Merovingian Gaul, for example, the growing involvement of bishops in court and factional politics was to lead to a strikingly high rate of episcopal murder and assassination. What has received far less attention, however, are the implications of the process whereby the Church emerged as an increasingly significant landowner from the fourth to the sixth centuries, and the role played by the Church’s ever more pronounced involvement in exploitative, and potentially highly antagonistic, economic and social relations, in

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5 Figes, A People’s Tragedy, 67–68.
6 For the ongoing process of institutionalization from the fourth to the sixth centuries, see C. Rapp, Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in An Age of Transition (Berkeley, 2005). For episcopal murder, see P. Fouracre, ‘Why were so many bishops killed in Merovingian Francia?’, in Bischofsmord im Mittelalter – Murder of Bishops, ed. N. Fryde and D. Reitz (Göttingen, 2003), 13–36.
informing and shaping peasant attitudes to the Church, its representatives, and perhaps even its doctrines.7

The growth of the church as a landowning institution from the fourth century onwards was, on one level, one of the most significant economic developments of late antiquity. Through imperial grant, pious donation, and straightforward opportunism, bishops and, ultimately, monasteries came to acquire extensive estates across the Mediterranean world and its northwestern appendages.8 As Rapp has noted, ‘real estate and the income it generated, church buildings, liturgical vessels, and adornments made of gold and silver were liberally given to the Church. The *Liber Pontificalis*… gives a detailed inventory of Constantine’s gifts to the churches in Rome and elsewhere in Italy. These amounted to hundreds of pounds of gold and silver in chalices, patens, candlesticks, and other adornments, in addition to income from estates and commercial enterprises worth thousands of *solidi*.9 This process continued apace in Italy across the fifth and sixth centuries, such that, as Robert Markus has put it, ‘by the end of the sixth century [churches] were the largest landowners in Italy. In Gregory [the Great’s] time the Roman Church must have been by far the richest’.10 As Philip Booth has noted, by Gregory’s day ‘papal estates stretched from Gaul to North Africa, and included vast holdings within Campania’.11 Nor was it simply the great patriarchal Sees that built up extensive property portfolios: in his classic study of 1931, *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt*, E.R. Hardy speculated that, by the sixth century, the Church may have owned even more land around the Middle Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus than the regionally predominant aristocratic household of the Flavii Apiones, members of which held high office in Constantinople and dominated local politics.12

The expansion of ecclesiastical estates necessarily involved the Church and its representatives in what Chris Wickham has described

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7 For peasant hostility to secular landowners and the imperial authorities themselves, see P. Sarris, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2006), 222–227.
9 Ibid., 216.
12 E.R. Hardy, *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt* (New York, 1931), 44. For the Apion family, see Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 17–24.
as ‘the politics of the land’, and would appear to have elicited a certain degree of suspicion and hostility on the part of those more traditionally-minded elements of senatorial and curial society that were perhaps ill-at-ease with imperial programmes of Christianisation, and who increasingly found themselves in competition with the Church for prime agricultural real estate. As the sixth-century Greek historian Procopius complained in his Secret History, the Emperor Justinian ‘seemed to be a convinced believer in Christ, but this too meant ruin for his subjects; for he allowed the priests to use violence against their neighbours almost with impunity, and when they looted estates next to their own he wished them joy, thinking that in so doing he was honouring the Divinity. When he judged such cases he thought that he was showing his piety if anyone for allegedly religious purposes grabbed something that did not belong to him and, after winning his case, went scot-free. For in his view justice consisted in the priests getting the better of their opponents.’13

From the perspective of the peasantry and agricultural labourers who worked such estates, however, this concentration of landownership in the hands of the Church is likely to have carried few tangible consequences. All it meant for them was a change of master. There is no evidence that ecclesiastical estates in late antiquity were organised or administered on terms any different to those of the lay aristocracy: both the Church and lay aristocrats made use of agricultural slaves; both the Church and the lay aristocracy made extensive use of the obligatory services of tied agricultural labourers (coloni adscripticii) and their families, bound in perpetuity to their estates; and the administrators of both Church and lay estates geared production towards the market, so as to maximise cash incomes, intensifying the exploitation of their labourers accordingly.14 Importantly, the documentary record

14 For slaves on aristocratic estates, see K. Harper, ‘The Greek Census Inscriptions of Late Antiquity’, Journal of Roman Studies 98 (2008) 83–119; Sarris, Economy and Society, 39–40; P.Oxy. LVIII 3960; P.Princ. II 96; PSI VIII 953; P.Oxy. XVI 1913. For slaves on papal estates, see Greg. Ep. III.18, and T.S. Brown, Gentlemen and Officers: Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy AD 554–800 (Rome, 1984), 202–204. For adscripticii on papal estates, see, for example, Greg. Ep. IX.129. For the gearing of production to the market and the drive for cash incomes, see J. Banaji, Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity, rev. ed. (Oxford, 2007); that the Church operated in the same way is indicated by the background and terms of resolution of the land dispute recorded on P.Oxy. LXIII 4397. For the Church as landowner, see also Sarris,
from Egypt even attests to the employment of clergy as estate supervisors and stewards by members of the lay aristocracy.\textsuperscript{15}

The growing involvement of the Church and its personnel in exploitative agrarian social relations is likely to have had marked implications for how elements of the peasantry viewed their ecclesiastical masters, or those priests and deacons who associated themselves with their secular ones.\textsuperscript{16} That life labouring on the estates of the Church was regarded as far from entirely eligible is strongly suggested by a letter of Gregory the Great, in which he complains of the flight of tied agricultural labourers (\textit{coloni adscripticii}) from Papal estates in Sicily. Gregory fulminates that these peasants, though bound by their legal status (\textit{ex condicione ligati}) to work the estates, had the temerity to behave ‘as if they are in control of their own lives and are free’ (\textit{quasi sui arbitrii [sunt] ac liberi}).\textsuperscript{17}

Exploitation stood at the heart of relations between landowners and peasants in late antique and early medieval society. Whether the landowner in question was a secular magnate, the Church, or the Crown, such exploitation is likely both to have bred animosity and generated resistance.\textsuperscript{18} Accordingly, it should come as little surprise that our sources record numerous examples of peasants pointedly and violently contesting the demands of the Church as a landowning institution, or the activities of its agents.

Indeed, peasant resistance to the economic demands of the Church is described in one of our earliest, and most fully formed \textit{Saints’ Lives}, the \textit{Life of Porphyrius Bishop of Gaza} by Mark the Deacon.\textsuperscript{19} Dating from the late fourth century, this work describes the problems and challenges faced by the text’s eponymous hero in his attempts to establish

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Annick} M. Annick, \textit{Athanase d’Alexandrie et l’église d’Egypte au IV\textsuperscript{e} siècle (328–373)} (Rome, 1996); E. Wipszycka, \textit{Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Egypte du IV\textsuperscript{e} au VIII\textsuperscript{e} siècle} (Brussels, 1972).
\bibitem{Oxyryhynchus} See, for example, \textit{P.Oxy.} I 136 – a contract of employment agreed between the Apion household and a certain Serenos, ‘deacon of the Holy Church of Oxyrhynchus’.
\bibitem{Serfass} For further Oxyrhynchite evidence of the symbiosis and synergy between Church and lay landowner, see the otherwise problematic G. Ruffini, \textit{Social Networks in Byzantine Egypt} (Cambridge, 2008), 81–83.
\bibitem{Sarris} See discussion in Sarris, \textit{Economy and Society}, 222–234.
\end{thebibliography}
Christianity amidst an obdurately pagan population during the reign of the Emperor Arcadius. In one episode, the hagiographer relates how Porphyrius’ deacon, Barochas, ‘went one day to a village not far from the city [of Gaza] to collect a sum of revenue due to the Church.’ ‘However’, the Life continues, ‘the person who owed the sum was a worshipper of idols. When asked for the money, the debtor sought to draw out the repayment, a request that the pious Barochas refused. As a result, they fell into argument, and the misguided wretch called upon the other agricultural labourers of his village, who were similarly inclined, and they set about beating the blessed Barochas with clubs. Then they carried him off half-dead and dumped him in wasteland outside the village, where he lay voiceless and unconscious.’

Although, for obvious reasons, the hagiographer was keen to emphasise the religious identity of the deacon’s assailants, the cause of the dispute described was a purely economic one: namely, what were perceived to be the unreasonable demands of the bishop’s agent. That supposedly Christian villagers were regarded as capable of responding to the stewards and administrators of ecclesiastical estates in precisely the same way, is indicated by the seventh-century Life of Theodore of Sykeon, written by the Galatian bishop’s disciple, the monk George (a hagiographer, interestingly, of peasant stock). As George admits: ‘Theodore used to entrust the administration and the governance of the properties belonging to the Church to men of the city and injustice was done to the peasants; in one case, for instance, he had entrusted them to a leading citizen (protikor) of Anastasioupolis, Theodosius, by name; and he continually acted unjustly and defrauded the peasants. So they came to the servant of Christ and met him in tears, and he, moved with sympathy, grieved over them, for his holy and sensitive soul could not bear to see any one in trouble. He summoned Theodosius and with many admonitions besought him to cease his acts of injustice against the peasants. But Theodosius again invented some pretexts against the villagers and continued in his unjust treatment, whereupon in one of the villages, called Eukraous, when he was proceeding to his usual acts of injustice, the peasants of the village were roused to uncontrollable anger; they all gathered together with a com-

20 Ibid. c.22.
21 La vie de Théodore de Sykeôn, ed. A.-J. Festugière (Paris, 1930). For the social background of the hagiographer, George, see C. Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages (Oxford, 2005), 324 and 406.
mon purpose, armed themselves with various weapons and swords and catapults, and took up their stand outside the village to meet him, and threatened him with death if he did not turn back and leave them’.22

Again, the episode has been filtered through the literary demands of the genre of hagiography, in this instance with a view to establishing the wisdom and philantropia of Theodore. But that the Church was deeply implicated in the brutal realities of provincial social relations, and was viewed with rather less than unquestioning devotion on the part of elements of peasantry, is also evident from the non-hagiographic sources. In a law of 548, for example, Justinian decreed that that the governor or moderator of the Pontus was to restrain the hand of all malefactors ‘be they priests, holders of imperial office, landowners, or private citizens’.23 Likewise, as noted elsewhere, in the fifth-or sixth-century papyrus P.Oxy. XVI 1832, we possess a highly suggestive letter probably written from one estate official to another: ‘the author of the letter informs his correspondent that a woman from Kegethis in the Oxyrhynchite had stolen “the holy treasures of the Church of Aspida” and that “the headman of the villagers” was refusing “either to surrender the holy treasures or hand over the woman”.24 There was no surfeit of piety here.

Nor is our evidence for peasant hostility to the Church or its agents limited to the late antique and early Byzantine East. The Chronicle of Hydatius, for example, records how in 449 a band of peasant rebels or baccaudae, under the leadership of a certain Basilius, entered the Iberian city of Turiasso and ‘killed the bishop Leo in his church’.25 A still more revealing episode is recorded for sometime in the early eighth century in the Frankish marchlands. According to the Passio Thrudperti, the holy man Thrutpert was granted an estate in the region of the Sornegau by a sympathetic lord. Thrutpert proceeded, however, to work his serfs so hard that ultimately they could bear no more, and one of them

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22 Ibid. c. 76: the translation is taken from E. Dawes and N.H. Baynes, Three Byzantine Saints (Oxford, 1948), 139.
23 J. Edict 8 (proemium).
24 Sarris, Economy and Society, 221–222.
crept up to him as he dozed one afternoon and stabbed him to death. On other occasions, issues of status and self-worth appear to have been at the forefront of peasants’ minds: as Fouracre notes, The Lives of the Fathers of Merida record the murder of a certain Abbot Nantus, ‘whose unkempt and lowly appearance horrified the people who were to serve him. Seeing that he was all alone, they broke his neck.’

The Nantus episode aside, at the heart of the acts of violence depicted in the Life of Porphyrius of Gaza, the Life of Theodore of Sykeon, or the Passio Thrudperti were clearly economic issues and complaints. Peasant hostility to the Church and its representatives in late antiquity and early middle ages was also, however, clearly further fuelled by resentment at the introduction of a new religion that was, for the most part, imposed from above. The most vivid sense of this is conveyed by Bede in his Life of Cuthbert. In the third chapter of this work, Bede describes how a body of monks from a monastery near the mouth of the River Tyne, who had set off by raft to collect some timber, found themselves being pulled out to sea. ‘On the other bank of the river’, Bede records, ‘stood no small crowd of the common people, and he [Cuthbert] was standing among them. These were watching the rafts on which the monks [in the monastery] were sadly gazing, being carried so far out to sea that they looked like five tiny birds riding on the waves, for there were five rafts. Thereupon they began to jeer at the monks’ manner of life, as if they were deservedly suffering, seeing that they despised the common laws of mortals and put forth new and unknown rules of life. Cuthbert stopped the insults of the blasphemers, saying, “Brethren, what are you doing, cursing those whom you see even now being carried away to destruction? Would it not be better and more kindly to pray to the Lord for their safety rather than to rejoice over their dangers?” But they fumed against him with boorish minds and boorish words and said: “Let no man pray for them, and may God have no mercy on any one of them, for they have robbed men of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted, nobody knows”.’

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26 Passio Thrudperti, ed. B. Krusch, M.G.H. S.R.M. IV: 352–363, c. 4–5, 358–360. I was alerted to this episode by a seminar paper given by Professor Paul Fouracre in Oxford many years ago.
In the early medieval West, moreover, animosity towards holy men, monks, and clergy was given added piquancy by broader processes of cultural change and, in particular, by the militarisation of elite culture resulting from the chronic military insecurity and ‘barbarian invasions’ of the fifth century.30 The extrovert, military culture of the emergent elites of the Romano-Germanic successor kingdoms of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, with its emphasis on martial prowess, boastful and exuberant virility, sumptuous feasting and general excess, was in many ways the precise antithesis of the concept of the ideal man embodied in the ascetic self-denial, restraint, and humility of the model Christian holy man, bishop, or monk.31 The dissonance between such markedly divergent models of masculinity and such contrasting visions of the ideal man inevitably led to tension and, at times, conflict. The celibate bishop, in the company, perhaps, of monastic attendants, must have seemed a strange and alien sight to the eyes of many an early medieval warlord: Gregory of Tours, for example, in the late sixth century, records how a certain Palladius, Count of Javols, barracked the Bishop Parthenius at the court of the Frankish King Sigibert: ‘Palladius accused the bishop of being camp and effeminate. “Where are all your little husbands”, he declared, “with whom you live in such filthy debauchery?”.’32 As Jinty Nelson has noted, tensions between the martial vocation and spiritual aspirations of young male aristocrats are a noteworthy feature of the Frankish sources down to the ninth and tenth centuries.33 In one episode, the father-less Rigramnus, a noble Frankish boy from Le Mans, revealed to his uncle his wish to become a monk. His uncle responded furiously: ‘How could you prefer the life of pigs in a vegetable-garden? What about the joy

of hunting? What about the voluptuous touch of a woman?'. Only with the emergence of Crusading warfare and the cult of Chivalry in the eleventh and twelfth centuries would such tensions ultimately be resolved.

Resistance or hostility to the Church, its teachings, and representatives in late antiquity and the early middle ages was not limited, therefore, to the ranks of dissident theologians or conservative intellectuals. Rather, the more the Church found itself politically institutionalised and economically embedded, the more the realities of social and economic relations on the ground are likely to have generated tension, animosity and conflict, focused on the Church and its agents. As a result, the ‘Christianisation’ of the peasantry is likely to have been a far more haphazard, piecemeal, and gradual process than is commonly supposed. Rather, there are long likely to have been many who, like Bede’s Northumbrians, would have been quite content to see their neighbourhood monks, and probably bishops and clergy too, drift slowly out to sea.

34 Ibid., 133.
36 On which see M.J. Dal Santo ‘Gregory the Great and Debate concerning the Cult of the Saints in the early Byzantine Mediterranean and its Hinterland during the later Sixth and Seventh Centuries’, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2008; and, in this volume, id. ‘The God-protected empire? Scepticism towards the cult of saints in early Byzantium’.
Late antiquity was traditionally regarded as a period of widespread superstition and excessive religiosity. Edward Gibbon famously attributed a portion of the Western Empire’s collapse to the rise of Christianity and, in particular, to the otherworldliness of its monastic elite. E.R. Dodds described the late Roman world as an ‘Age of Anxiety’ in which a metaphysical transcendentalism flourished and the phenomenal world ceased to seem entirely real. It can hardly be denied that the intellectual culture of the period embraced religious concerns to a great and unprecedented extent. In hagiography – a genre of historiography notorious amongst modern scholars for its miracles and idealized religious content – the period made its most distinctive contribution to literary history.

This image of late antiquity has been challenged over the last four decades by a revisionism whose most prominent exponent is Peter Brown. In a celebrated article published in 1971 Brown deployed the tools of anthropology and sociology to remove holy men from the distortions of a heroic literary lens, and to reveal instead their proximity to, and continuity with, the quotidian concerns of ordinary people. In Brown’s account, the holy man remained sacred, and embodied an idea of the Christian God, but he was also a powerful patron in a world where mundane social, economic, and judicial responsibilities

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1 I would like to thank Matthew Dal Santo and Phil Booth for the valuable observations and comments they offered on earlier versions of this paper.
constituted the main sphere of his activity. Only by recognizing this broader context could the holy man reveal himself; without it, the temptation is always to see in hagiography only evidence of widespread popular credulity.

The importance of Brown’s work in advancing our understanding of the religious life of late antiquity cannot be overstated. Nonetheless, Brown’s initial foray into the world of holy men contained a number of problems, many of which were later highlighted by the author himself. To cite just one example, Brown declared that he had examined sanctity from a purely third person perspective, and overlooked the equally important question of how holy men pursued their own quest for sanctity; to extend the point somewhat, it is not entirely clear how stories about holy men relate to the religious lives of people of the same period. This springs, in my view, from a question at the heart of Brown’s analysis which is never completely resolved: how literally should we interpret hagiographies? How literally were they read and/or meant to be read at the time? Brown is certainly right to point to the dual role of holy men as both representatives of a divine ideal and agents in a complex social world, but he leaves ambiguous the point at which symbol and practice met. In stating that holy men revealed ‘the nature of the average man’s expectations and hopes for himself’, is he referring to career choices or to latent psychological fantasies? When he claims that ‘the occasional coup de théâtre…(was) rather like the cashing of a big cheque on a reputation’, are we supposed to imagine such events (which, presumably, include miracles) as the closing episodes of genuine social processes, or rather as symbolic episodes which somehow encapsulate those processes only textually? When he high-

5 Ibid., 105–106.
6 ‘Faced with so many accounts of the miraculous, the historian of Late Antiquity usually relieves the strain placed on his own credulity by vastly inflating the credulity of his subjects…To be content with such a judgement is of no help to the historian whatsoever’: Brown, ‘Rise and Function’, repr. in Society and the Holy, 141–142.
8 Ibid., 368.
10 ‘The occasional coup de théâtre…(was) rather like the cashing of a big cheque on a reputation’ seems to suggest the former: ibid., 105–106. His analysis of curses and exorcisms (122–124) suggests the latter. A certain ambiguity also prevails in his
lights the tendency of the cult of saints to locate sanctity in a world which was geographically and temporally close to the reader’s own,\textsuperscript{11} does it mean that ordinary people were actually likely to encounter holy men, or was this local, recent emphasis a fiction which ensured they had an uncanny habit of slipping just beyond the horizon of anyone’s direct experience?

It is with these questions in mind that the current paper addresses the literal truthfulness of late antique hagiographies. It must be stated at the outset that, since the vast bulk of the information contained within such hagiographies is unverifiable even when it is not incredible, the question is impossible to answer directly, and this explains the tendency of many modern scholars to circumvent the issue entirely. However, it is important to recognize several reasons why it remains important. Firstly, the question was clearly a major concern of hagiographers themselves as is shown by the various guarantees of truthfulness their works contain. In the absence of testable information, the analysis of such guarantees yields a vital insight if not into the historicity of specific incidents, then at least into the forms and structures of belief which underpinned statements about holy men. By examining a wide range of late antique authors – not just Christian hagiographers, but also their pagan counterparts – this paper will consider three very different types of guarantee.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, it will compare third person hagiographies with descriptions of spiritual experience in the first person, a project intended to go some way to addressing Brown’s desideratum that the concept of sanctity should be considered

\textsuperscript{11} Brown, \textit{Authority and the Sacred}, 57–58.

\textsuperscript{12} Throughout this paper ‘hagiography’ is used as a convenient term for religious/philosophical Lives generally, i.e. pagan as well as Christian works. This convenience follows the welcome trend amongst some modern scholars of comparing works on either side of this religious divide: e.g., P. Cox, \textit{Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man} (Berkeley, 1983); M. Edwards, ‘Birth, Death, and Divinity in Porphyry’s \textit{Life of Plotinus}’, in \textit{Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity}, ed. T. Hägg and P. Rousseau (Berkeley, 2000) 65. For Plotinus and Proclus as ‘Saints’, see \textit{Neoplatonic Saints: the Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students}, trans. M. Edwards (Liverpool, 2000); S. Pricoco, \textit{Monaci, Filosofi, e Santi: Saggi di storia della cultura tardoantica} (Messina, 1992).