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Uncertain Transformation: The Role of Asceticism in Death in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

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Abstract

Between the second, third and fourth centuries the Christian Church produced biographies chronicling the pious undertakings of monks. These hagiographies borrowed from preexisting Greek biographies to distinguish the Christian monk from the pagan holy man. Patricia Cox Miller's *Biography in Late Antiquity: The Quest for the Holy Man* demonstrates how hagiographers adaptation of Greek biographies allowed them to create idealized portraits of Christian holy men and distinguish them from their pagan counterparts. This paper applies Cox Miller's method to examine portions of *The Saints Lives*, *The Lausiac Histories* and *The History of the Monks of Egypt* in order to demonstrate the shared conception of death within these works. This paper argues that hagiographers desire to present idealized holy men created a distinct and consistent portrayal of death in their writing. Hagiographers' articulation of the monk's power over death established a unique community within Late Antiquity based on mastery over mortality through monastic life.

The monk's mastery over death is a large part of his authority in Late Antiquity. Hagiographers constructed their narratives to not only to edify but to persuade their audience. These narratives transformed individual monks into an imagined community. The monk's triumph at the hour of death mirrors that of the Christian Church over paganism in the religious marketplace of Late Antiquity.



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The *Apothemata Patrum*, known in English as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, chronicles the efforts of desert monks to avoid spiritual pitfalls and obtain the gift of eternal life from God. The Desert Fathers were Christians who formed monastic communities in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine and Arabia between the second and the fourth centuries.¹ Providing exact dates for the individual “*Sayings* is impossible because the collection began “first in oral form and later in written memorials.”² Despite its piecemeal creation, there is general agreement among scholars that the compilation we now have, began in the fourth century and was completed in the sixth century.³ *The Sayings* articulate anxiety and even doubt among the Desert Fathers regarding their fate after death. The turmoil among individual monks concerning their mortality produces an understanding of death that is both consistent in its appearance throughout *The Sayings* and unique when compared with other bodies of monastic literature produced during the same time period. The rigorous ascetic regime of Christian monks has tempted many historians to conclude that monks believed salvation from death was the result of works preformed to atone to for sin and appease God’s wrath. Edward Gibbon provides one of the earliest incarnations of this view in his *Decline and Fall of the Rome Empire*, when states “inspired by a savage enthusiasm which represents man as a criminal and God as a tyrant [monks] embraced a life of misery as the price of eternal happiness.”⁴

Gibbon’s indictment is part of the enlightenment’s religious skepticism, but several modern scholars express a similar view of Christian monks and monasticism. E.R. Dodds called monasticism “dangerous fanaticism...that seeped into the Church like a slow poison”⁵ and Lane Fox called the “single-mindedness” of Christian monks a “dangerous and enfeebling myth.”⁶ These criticisms paint Christian monks as dangerous fanatics and subtly link them with an intellectual decline in Late Antiquity. These audacious indictments rely on a misunderstanding of asceticism’s role in the monastic vocation. Gibbon, Dodds, and Fox impose a ghoulish God on the church of Late Antiquity who revels in the suffering of his servants. The *Apothegmata* rejects this view arguing

that asceticism was the *means* of Christians' transformation as opposed to an end that allowed them to escape the wrath of an angry God. In her introduction to *The Sayings*, Benedicta Ward provides an eloquent explanation of ascetic practices and their role in monastic life, "Monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they were fed by the Word of God. It was the end that mattered, the ascetic practices were only the means."⁷ Gibbon, Dodd and Fox portray ascetic practices as a frantic scramble to endure sufficient personal suffering in exchange for a pardon from a vindictive God. Ward demonstrates that individual transformation and not divine pardon was the goal of such acts, "All ascetic effort, all personal relationships, life in all aspects was brought slowly into the central relationship with God in Christ."⁸ Salvation was not a reward for a life spent in misery atoning for sin; it is a state of being.

Organization

This paper has two sections: The first section examines a selection of three sayings; in each case, ascetic practices aid the monk in his quest to enter into a new state of being rather than atoning for sin. These three sayings express this idea in different ways, describing it as, "blamelessness", "the natural movement of the body" and as "a place for the Lord." These sayings use different words to convey both the goal of the monastic vocation, and the importance of asceticism within it. The contention of the paper is that the uncertainty conveyed by monks in *The Sayings* stemmed from their inability to know if their transformation was complete.

The second section of this paper contrasts the conception of death and salvation in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* with the numerous biographical forms of the monastic literature composed and circulated between the fourth through sixth centuries. These include *The Lives of the Saints* and *The Lausiac Histories*. These works are Christian adaptations of the Greek biographies each used death to end the story of a monk's life. These works mimic the style of their Greek

predecessors by exulting the pious life and ascetic feats of their characters. Death concludes the story of a monk's life without explaining how the monk understood death or salvation in the context of Christian faith. The holy men of these stories express no uncertainty at life's end; the monastic vocation confirms the monk's victory over sin and death. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* records its hero telling a group of monks that "by dying daily we shall not sin."⁹ Anthony goes on to cite specific temptations monks must avoid, such as material possessions, sexual intercourse and inner feelings of anger toward others. The monastic life facilitates the process of daily death allowing the monk to avoid eternal punishment after his physical demise allowing its practitioner to die daily.

Works such as the *Lives* and *Histories* focus on recounting the spectacular deeds of their subjects and demonstrating the benefits of monastic life to the reader. Patricia Cox Miller notes in her *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* that ancient biographies were "a half way house between history and oratory."¹⁰ These works seek to inform and persuade by exulting the virtues of their subjects. Working outside this biographical framework *The Sayings* spend little time praising the virtues of individual monks. They record conversions between monks about various topics including death, without the biographical concern for a particular monk's life. This work did go through a process of formal compilation and editing, but did not face the generic constraints imposed by Greek biographies.

The arrangement of the *Apothegmata Patrum* was derived from its origin as spoken conversations as "groups of monks would preserve the sayings of their founder or some monks especially remembered by them."¹¹ *The Sayings* discuss a variety of topics, but the goal was always to impart spiritual counsel to Christians seeking guidance. These desert sages exercised considerable influence over the church in Late Antiquity. Physical death and eternal life lies at the heart of the Christian enterprise; *The Sayings* provide an intimate look at *how* Christianity's desert holy men understood this process.

The Pursuit of Perfection: Blamelessness, Natural Movement, and A Place for the Lord as Multiple Articulations of the Monastic Ideal

Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria saying is the most detailed explanation of Christian death in *The Apothegmata*. Theophilus argued that death occurred in three phases. The first was one of “fear and trembling and uneasiness when our soul is separated from our body” next he asks “what anxiety do you suppose the soul will have at that hour before sentence is passed and it gains liberty?” Finally if the soul is deemed worthy of eternal life and “liberated, it will go to that joy and ineffable glory in which it will be established.”¹² The judgment of the soul occurs immediately following physical death, and follows the separation of the soul from the body. The destination of the soul is conditional; if a soul is “found to have lived carelessly” it will be “abandoned to outer darkness and punished throughout the ages.”¹³ Theophilus gave no indication of assurance regarding his hope for eternal life, asking, “ought we not give ourselves to holy and devout works? What love ought we to acquire? What man of life? What virtues? What diligence?” Theophilus calls for a life of radical self-sacrifice and piety “so that its practitioner “may be found blameless.”¹⁴ This transformation to a state of perfection or “blamelessness” was the goal Theophilus’ exhortation to “give ourselves to holy and devout works is a means to reach the state of blamelessness, but only pronouncement by God at the hour of death confirms that such a transformation occurred during mortal existence.

Theophilus’ conception of death demonstrates how monks’ anxiety about their death stemmed from their uncertainty about reaching a state of perfection. The monastic life was a means for its practitioners to enter into this perfected state. The ascetic feats of desert holy men were not efforts to punish the body to placate a vengeful God; instead they were part of the effort to attain a new state of being. This effort concerned the body and soul working together. The abstention from certain foods, sex, and pleasures of the secular world transformed the holy man as opposed to appeasing his God’s anger. The physical body, directed by the soul manifested the state of “blamelessness” that was the goal of the desert holy man.

The view Anthony the Great presented in the *Apothegmata Patrum*, conceived of the perfected state as the body's ability exist in a state "natural movement which it cannot follow without the consent of the soul."¹⁵ Anthony argued that the two other "movements" of the body occur through nourishment which "stirs up the body to work" and a third movement caused by the "jealousy of the demons."¹⁶ He warned Christians to avoid both "drunkenness" and "eating too much" because these acts of gluttony "lead to debauchery."¹⁷ In addition to an austere diet Christians were to avoid succumbing to the jealous wiles of demons whose attacks disrupted the natural movement of the body. Anthony's "natural movement" and Theophilus' state of blamelessness both express states of being hoped for but not yet realized. Anthony's advice concerning the regulation of diet serves only to aid the holy man in his aspiration toward a perfected state, but he/she did not know if the transformation is complete.

Abba Cronius described this perfected state as finding a "place for the Lord." Cronius used a metaphor involving biblical narrative of Moses and the burning bush on Mount Sinai. He likened the burning bush to physical affliction. This analogy prompted Cronius' disciple to ask, "So man does not advance towards any reward without bodily affliction?"¹⁸ Cronius responded by recalling the suffering of Christ's passion and quoted the fifty-first Psalm vowing, "I will not rest my eyes until I find a place for Lord."¹⁹ The vow not to "rest my eyes" in conjunction with the allusion to Christ's passion links physical exertion with the larger goal of finding a place for the Lord.²⁰ This saying indicates Cronius' struggle to find a place for the Lord was ongoing as opposed to resolved. The question of his success had its answer in death and judgment by God.

In each of these examples the monk transformed himself aided by ascetic practices. None of these sayings link ascetic practice with avoiding God's wrath. Theophilus warned that souls "found to have lived carelessly" were cast from God's presence, but this was a result of their failure to complete their transformation to a state of blamelessness. Peter Brown explained this transformation in the context of a "return to paradise" in his *The Body and Society*, "the glory of the

Lord could flash out from their [monks] own humbled countenances in their own times and in its fullness as it had once glowed from the faces of Moses and Saint Stephen.”²¹

The state of blamelessness, natural movement and place for the Lord articulate the same goal. This paradise is found not in some far removed garden but in the transformation of the individual.

Biographical Forms of Monastic Literature

The *Lives of the Saints*, and *The Lausiatic Histories* used death to conclude the story of the main character’s monastic career, but tell the reader little of their understanding of death itself. Death is a tool within these bodies of literature that allowed the author to convey larger narrative ideas such as Christianity’s triumph over paganism or the glorification of a particular saint. Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* noted that at the end of “his life in the body his continence appeared joyful.”²² As Anthony’s pious colleagues gathered to witness his passing “he lifted up his feet and as though he saw friends coming to him and was glad because of them.”²³ Anthony demonstrated no fear or uncertainty as death approached, rather he welcomed it as the final stage of mortal life. The story of Anthony’s death reflects Cox’s model in which biographies recount historical events and use them to promote the virtues of their subjects. Throughout *The Lives* death is an opportunity for a monk to demonstrate the depth of his faith as the author heaps praise upon him.

The Lives remain consistent in their treatment of death because each follows the same Greek model. *The Life of Macrina* furnishes an especially good example of how Christian authors borrowed from Greek biographies when composing *The Lives*. The author Gregory of Nyssa is a Cappadocian with training in Greek rhetoric who constructs “an eloquent homage to his sister.”²⁴ Basil praised his sister for her complete calm in the face of death from a painful illness. The discussion of her passing began with her praising God for His willingness to free humans from the fear of death, “Thou, O Lord, hast freed us from the fear of death. Thou hast made the end of this life the beginning to us of true life.”²⁵ The joyful conti-

nence of Anthony and the thankful prayer of Macrena provide two of many examples of how death concludes biographical forms of monastic literature and demonstrates the virtues of the respective protagonists.

Death has a similar function in *The Lausiatic Histories*, but this body of literature demonstrates that an initial commitment to monasticism does not guarantee victory over death. Palladius writes *The Histories* between 419-420 to aid in the spiritual edification of his friend Lausus, the royal Chamberlain of Emperor Theodosius II.²⁶ These compact biographies highlight the accomplishments of individual monks. Palladius' work differs from *The Lives* in noting the failings of some of his subjects. This is because he is used them to create what William Harmless calls "morality plays."²⁷ Despite the potential for protagonists to fail or "fall" *The Histories* treatment of death differs little from that of *The Lives*.

Heron began as a rigorous ascetic, deserted monastic life, and returned to it at the conclusion of his life. Personal conceit led the young monk to defy his superiors, and abandon the monastery. He moved to the neighboring city to engage secular life and take a mistress, "eating and drinking to excess he fell into the filth of lust."²⁸ The wayward Heron's tryst left him infected with a venereal disease that destroyed his genitals.²⁹ This led him "back to a pious resolution" and he rejoins his monastery where he "fell asleep just before going to work."³⁰

The resolution of Heron's story is subtle; Palladius stops short of an explicit vindication of his prodigal monk. The key to understanding Palladius' intent is his metaphorical use of the word "sleep" to note Heron's passing. In his translation of the *Lausiatic Histories* Robert Myer points out that "sleep for die...was a frequent Christian euphemism" and cites Paul's assurance at I Thess. 4:14, "those who sleep in Christ, God will bring with him."³¹ Heron demonstrates the potential of excessive pride to lure aspiring holy men from their faith, but does little to broaden Palladius' discussion of mortality. *The Lives* and *The Histories* discussions of death are superficial providing only cursory descriptions of a monk's death without explaining how these men understood mortality in the context of their faith.

The biographical genre of these works is not the appropriate venue for speculations on Christian death or the nature of salvation. Heron provides an example of the dangers of excessive pride in Christian life. This differs slightly from *The Lives* because its purpose is to convey a moral lesson to the reader, but this still conforms to the rules of Greek biography by combining historical fact with a written argument. The difference between these works lies in what they hope to convey. *The Lives* praise the virtues of the Christian holy man while the *Histories* focus on using him/her to provide a moral lesson for the reader. In both cases death serves only to conclude the narrative and to demonstrate the holy man's passage from physical death to eternal life.

Conclusion

Amid a deluge of biographies chronicling the pious undertakings of Christian monks during the fourth and fifth centuries the *Apothegmata* examines death without forcing it into the increasingly dominant narrative of Christian triumphalism. The holy men of *The Sayings* have multiple understandings of death and the purpose of the monastic vocation.

The Sayings demonstrate that the ascetic lifestyle of Christian monks did not necessarily spring from their fear of a vengeful God. Such a characterization casts a shadow on all of Late Antiquity marking it as a point of religious fanaticism and intellectual decline. Earnest study of monastic texts moves historians beyond an elementary formula of "misery as the price of happiness." Despite the continued interest in Late Antique asceticism, many modern historians continue to use Gibbon's model to understand Christian monks, often casting them madmen presiding over the end of antiquity. *The Sayings* demonstrate that Christian holy men are not sadomasochists at the behest of God; they are pilgrims clearing away the clutter of mortal life to find "a place for the Lord."

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Notes

- 1 Benedicta Ward Forward to *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* revised edition (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), xvii.
- 2 Ward, xxvii.
- 3 Ward, xxvii.
- 4 Edward Gibbon, *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vols., ed. J.B. Bury (London: Methuen, 1896-1900), 4:57-75.
- 5 E.R. Dodds, *Pagans and Christians in An Age of Anxiety* (New York: W.W. Norton 1965), 65.
- 6 Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 366.
- 7 Ward, xxiv.
- 8 Ward, xxvii.
- 9 Athanasius: *Select Works and Letters*, Volume VI The Post Nicene Fathers Series II, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, editors (New York: The Christian Book Company, 1957), 201.
- 10 Patricia Cox Miller *Biography in Late Antiquity; A Quest for the Holy Man* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xiv.
- 11 Ward, xxii.
- 12 Theophilus the Archbishop, 4, Benedicta Ward trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, CS 59 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 81.
- 13 Theophilus the Archbishop 4, 81.
- 14 Theophilus the Archbishop, 4, 81.
- 15 Anthony the Great 22, 6.
- 16 Anthony the Great 22, 6.
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- 18 Cronius 4, 116
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- 21 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men Women and Sexual Reunification in Early Christianity* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 381.
- 22 Athanasius, 221.

- 23 Athanasius, 221.
- 24 William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 431.
- 25 Gregory of Nyssa, [PG 984-986].
- 26 Robert T. Myer, introduction to *The Lausiatic History* (Westminster: Newman Press, ACW 1965), 4.
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- 28 Palladius, 26:4, Robert Myer trans., *The Lausiatic History* ACW, 34 (Westminster: Newman Press, 1965), 87.
- 29 Palladius, 26:4, 87.
- 30 Palladius, 26:4, 87.
- 31 Robert Myer, *The Lausiatic History* (Westminster: Newman Press), 173.