



Disease and the Rise of Christianity in Europe, 150–800 C.E.

Through him [Saint Antony], the Lord healed many of those present who were suffering in body and freed others from evil spirits.

(Athanasius's *Life of St. Antony*, c. 360 C.E.)¹

A letter from Martin happened to be brought to him and he placed it in her bosom at the very moment when her temperature was rising and at once the fever left her.

(Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Saint Martin*, c. 396 C.E.)²

The glorious tomb of the blessed martyr Baudilius is in Nimes . . . The inhabitants of the region realized that this tomb often possessed a heavenly remedy for many illnesses.

(Gregory of Tours's *Glory of the Martyrs*, c. 590 C.E.)³

Early Christian literature abounds in references to sickness and the miraculous cure. Indeed, the miraculous cure is perhaps the most common type scene in sacred biography and history.⁴ Why are stories of sick

¹ Sister Mary Emily Keenan, S.C.N., trans., "Life of St. Antony by St. Athanasius." In *The Fathers of the Church, Volume 15, Early Christian Biographies*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, pp. 127–216 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952), 148.

² F. R. Hoare, trans. and ed., *The Western Fathers, Being the Lives of SS. Martin of Tours, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, Honoratus of Arles and Germanus of Auxerre* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 32.

³ Raymond Van Dam, trans., *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 100.

⁴ Clare Stancliffe, "From Town to Country: The Christianization of the Touraine, 370–600." In *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. Derek Baker, pp. 43–59 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 57.

people who are cured by monks and bishops so common, particularly relative to accounts of other “miracles” such as villages saved from marauding enemies or of crops saved from locusts or drought? To date, scholars of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages have shied away from this question. To quote one distinguished historian, “It is usually fruitless to indulge in speculation about what might have been the ‘real’ basis of miracle stories.”⁵ Since the Enlightenment, miracles largely have been seen as beyond the bounds of historical analysis.⁶ Correspondingly, sacred biography and history, because they are replete with miracles, have been ignored or cast as overly fictitious. More recently, poststructural theorists have not only eschewed metaphysical inquiry but also have questioned the ontological status of language itself; for many, narrative cannot reflect any reality other than its own.⁷ The very notion of historical processes that reflect cause and effect has been cast as symptomatic of an Enlightenment project that occludes “. . . the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations.”⁸

Rather than pursue the question of a pretextual reality underlying the miraculous cure, scholars have turned to literary–critical analysis of what is understood as a biblical type scene.⁹ It is generally assumed

⁵ Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 45.

⁶ Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 84.

⁷ Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 17.

⁸ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, pp. 76–100 (New York: Random House, 1984), 81.

⁹ In her study of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, Petersen comments: “It is not my intention to search for some kind of scientific basis for miracle stories. . . . My efforts . . . will be directed chiefly towards showing that there was in the Mediterranean area a common fund of stories and teaching, upon which Eastern and Western Christian writers alike could draw.” Joan M. Petersen, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great in Their Late Antique Cultural Background* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), xxi. A number of scholars have remarked on this trend of literary–critical analysis: Caroline W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 44; Averil Cameron, “On Defining the Holy Man.” In *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward, pp. 27–45 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36–37; Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs, Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 16.

that early Christian authors – most of whom were clerics or monks – borrowed the miraculous cure from the Gospels to impart authority to their own works and to restate what is perhaps the most fundamental of Christian beliefs: that God became man. Like the *Song of Songs*, which speaks of human love yet purportedly is about loving God,¹⁰ miracle stories purportedly are not about sickness but Christ’s enduring promise.

More recently, Van Dam has suggested that the miraculous cure and early medieval notions of illness and healing provided a powerful idiom with which people could think about and describe not only God but also their own identities.¹¹ Following Foucault, Perkins has argued that this identity – “the suffering self” – was more imagined than real and essentially was imposed on the masses by bishops seeking to maintain and extend their own privileges as elites.¹²

Early Christian literature reflects a variety of contingencies (e.g., theological, political/institutional, literary, historical), and thus it is true that references to diseased bodies at times had little or nothing to do with sickness or epidemics. That said, the question remains as to why sacred biography and history focus so much on physical illness, suffering, and bodily resurrection, and why this discourse proliferated when it did, in late antiquity. Is it just fortuitous that “sickness” became such a popular signifier at this time?

The central argument of this chapter is that the miraculous cure and other referents to illness and healing were not just another powerful idiom, but a *particularly* powerful idiom by virtue of the appearance of new and more virulent strains of infectious disease. If people understood their lives as short and prone to sickness, it was not simply because sickness was a powerful metaphor or that a regime of power convinced the masses to value their own suffering. People were sicker and died prematurely in greater numbers during late antiquity and the early Middle

¹⁰ For a more literal interpretation of *Songs*, see Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982).

¹¹ Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*, 84, 91.

¹² Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self, Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995). Although Foucault was less than explicit naming the agents of what he refers to as “pastoral technology,” it is apparent that he had bishops, abbots, monks, and deacons in mind. See Michel Foucault, “Politics and Reason.” In *Michel Foucault, Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. L. D. Kritzman, trans. A. Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 63.

Ages, as compared with the earlier reign of Augustus. As detailed later, smallpox, measles, plague, and malaria devastated Europe during the early Christian era and the subsequent early Middle Ages. Christianity provided a belief system as well as rituals to deal with disease and its profound consequences. Beginning with the earliest *ekklésiae*, and continuing with the rise of monasticism during the fourth century, the Church made charity, particularly care of the sick and orphans, central ministries of priests and monks. In what essentially was a disease environment, *ekklésiae* and monasteries functioned as centers for organizing and reorganizing lives that were shattered by epidemic disease as well as migration, warfare, and social unrest.

In pursuing the above argument, I focus on the western Roman Empire and especially Gaul (modern France, Belgium, and westernmost Germany) during the period 150–800 C.E. (Figure 1). My restricted temporal and spatial analysis of formative Christianity has been dictated by both the enormity of the subject and the fact that it is the Christian literature of the western Empire, and again, especially Gaul, that informed Jesuit missionary texts in the seventeenth century. Jesuit favorites such as Sulpicius Severus, Caesarius of Arles, Gregory the Great, and Gregory of Tours all focused on Gaul. I have not explored in earnest the early Byzantine world, except where it seems directly relevant, as in the diffusion of Eastern ascetic practices and monasticism to the West. It should be noted, however, that the argument advanced for the western Empire appears applicable to the eastern Roman Empire. Here, too, epidemic disease undermined the structure and functioning of communities and Christianity provided “social welfare programs” as well as beliefs and rituals that benefitted the sick and needy.¹³ Correspondingly, the literature produced by Eastern authors abounds in miraculous cures. Written accounts of cures performed by patron saints (“miracle collections”) survive in hundreds of versions and manuscripts dating to the fifth through seventh centuries.¹⁴

¹³ See H. J. Magoulias, “The Lives of the Saints as Source of Data for the History of Byzantine Medicine in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries.” In *Byzantinische Zeitschrift, Bergründet Von Karl Krumbacher*, eds. Hans-Georg Beck, F. W. Deichmann, and H. Hunger, pp. 127–150 (Munich: C.H. Beck’sche, 1964).

¹⁴ D. Abrahamse, “Hagiographic Sources for Byzantine Cities, 500–900 AD” (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967).



Figure 1. The Western Roman Empire in 200 C.E.

With few exceptions, notably McNeill and Stark, scholars largely have ignored the evidence of disease from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.¹⁵ The writing and rewriting of history always entails the present intruding on the past. Our “present” largely is free of epidemic disease; it has been that way for Americans and Europeans since the great flu pandemic of 1917. Arguably, our relative success controlling and eradicating maladies such as smallpox has made it difficult to imagine epidemic disease having changed the course of history, contributing to the rise of something so otherworldly as Christianity.¹⁶ In keeping with recent trends in theory, particularly the eschewing of material causality, many scholars in the humanities¹⁷ clearly perceive biological processes as somehow too mundane or irrelevant.¹⁸ Scholars who have been entirely comfortable talking about the east-to-west flow of ideas and practices such as the Egyptian ascetic ideal have ignored the same dynamic with respect to infectious disease agents.¹⁹

Perhaps the biggest contributor to the neglect of disease has been the historical record itself. Late Roman and Byzantine chronicles frequently mention epidemics but infrequently elaborate on their extent and consequences.²⁰ Typical is Jerome’s *Chronicon*, which includes this entry for the year 332 C.E.: “A countless multitude died from pestilence and famine in Syria and Cilicia.”²¹ Gregory of Tours’s *History of the*

¹⁵ William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976); Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁶ William Johnston, *The Modern Epidemic: A History of Tuberculosis in Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles*, 84.

¹⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 74.

¹⁹ For instance: Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10; Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. D. M. Grace (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, [1905] 1981), 171–173; Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 82.

²⁰ Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, trans., *Chronicon Paschale 284–628 AD* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 196.

²¹ Malcolm D. Donalson, trans., *A Translation of Jerome’s Chronicon with Historical Commentary* (Lewiston, Australia: Mellen University Press, 1996), 41.

Franks is likewise replete with passing comments about sickness and epidemics: “The plague ravaged the cities of Viviers and Avignon.”²² This frequent yet brief mention of disease has led scholars in different directions. Some have concluded that disease was indeed a fact of life in antiquity; so common, however, that it seems hardly worth considering as a dynamic force, contributing, for instance, to the development of Christian rhetoric or Christianity in general.²³ At the other extreme are scholars who have dismissed disease as important because particular authors or extant sources make no mention of epidemics.²⁴

As Biraben and Le Goff pointed out many years ago, contemporaries of the plague often completely ignored its devastating consequences, even though they were aware that it killed tens of thousands of people.²⁵ Eusebius, Theodoret, Jerome, Isidore, and Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours all were preoccupied with “invisible” truths and first and final causes (God and God’s often inscrutable intention). We forget that the Renaissance and Enlightenment relegated God to the status of a distant observer; humankind has since held center stage as both the maker and interpreter of history.

Fifteen hundred years ago, historians thought it foolish and presumptuous to construe history in terms of efficient or material causality; history was more a matter of showing how events were a fulfillment of prophecy or reiteration of a truth revealed in scripture.²⁶ Given this preoccupation with God’s unfolding plan for humankind, it is understandable that late antique and early medieval authors ignored the consequences of disease. Only occasionally did writers deem it useful to detail how smallpox or the plague impacted populations. For instance,

²² O. M. Dalton, trans., *The History of the Franks, by Gregory of Tours*, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), II, 459.

²³ Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire*, 10.

²⁴ Malcolm Todd, “*Famosa Pests* and Britain in the Fifth Century.” *Britannia* 8 (1977): 319–325, 322.

²⁵ J. N. Biraben and Jacques Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages.” In *Biology of Man in History*, eds. E. Forster and O. Ranum, trans. E. Forster and P. Ranum, pp. 48–80 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 49.

²⁶ Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., *Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 20–21; Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 193, 210.

Gregory of Tours, who often mentioned “great plagues” in passing, offered the following detailed comments on an epidemic in 589 C.E.:

The city of Marseilles being afflicted, as I have just said, by a most grievous pestilence, I deem it well to unfold from the beginning how much it endured. At that time Bishop Theodore had journeyed to the king to make complaint against the patrician Nicetius. King Childebert would scarce give ear to the matter, so he prepared to return home. In the meantime a ship had put into the port with usual merchandise from Spain, unhappily bringing the tinder which kindled the disease. Many citizens purchased various objects from the cargo, and soon a house inhabited by eight people was left empty, every one of them being carried off by the contagion. The fire of this plague did not spread immediately through all the houses in the place; but there was a certain interval, and then the whole city was blazed with the pest, like a cornfield set aflame. . . . After two months the affliction ceased, and the people returned, thinking the danger overpast. But the plague began once more, and all who had returned perished. On several other occasions Marseilles was afflicted by this death.²⁷

The above quote is unusual in its epidemiological insight.²⁸ Note, however, that even detailed descriptions of an epidemic such as Gregory of Tours’s comments above are likely to be insufficient in terms of determining the extent and consequences of a disease episode. Because disease is dynamic and changeable, and often several rather than one disease agent are responsible for epidemics, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether measles, smallpox, typhus, plague, and so on, were responsible for a contagion mentioned by early chroniclers, historians, or hagiographers.²⁹ This uncertainty makes it hard to fully

²⁷ Dalton, *History of the Franks*, II, 395–396.

²⁸ Giselle de Nie, *Views From a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 56.

²⁹ P. M. Ashburn, *The Ranks of Death* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1947), 92; J. R. Busvine, *Insects, Hygiene and History* (London: Athlone Press, 1976), 53; A. Lynn Martin, *Plague? Jesuit Accounts of Epidemic Disease in the 16th Century* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996); Jean-Pierre Peter, “Disease and the Sick at the End of the Eighteenth Century.” In *Biology of Man in History*, eds. E. Forster and O. Ranum, trans. E. Forster and P. Ranum, pp. 81–94 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

model and assess the spread of disease and its demographic and cultural consequences.

Disease and Its Consequences in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 150–800 C.E.

When early Christian literature is systematically scrutinized from an epidemiological perspective,³⁰ linking disparate and sometimes disguised mentions of disease (disguised in the sense that an epidemic may be represented in one or more texts by accounts of miraculous cures or brief suggestive comments such as “fevers laid waste the province”), it becomes apparent that infectious diseases played a dynamic role in the synchronous fall of the Roman Empire and rise of Christianity.

During the second century C.E., the Roman Empire was at its height, including the size of its population, which peaked at near fifty million. By 150 C.E., the Romans had introduced or encouraged urban life throughout Europe; the city of Rome in the second century C.E. had a population of close to one million.³¹ Cities and towns with populations numbering in the thousands were spread throughout the Middle East, southwestern Asia, northern Africa, and Europe, and were everywhere linked by regular trade and communication, particularly along the Mediterranean, the heart of the Roman world (Figure 2).³² Ships carrying wine, grain, slaves, or other commodities sailed in three weeks’ time from one end of the Mediterranean to the other.³³ Road and water transport systems that were developed under Augustus during the first century B.C.E. extended

³⁰ Here I am thinking of Biraben and Le Goff, “Plague in the Early Middle Ages”; McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*.

³¹ George La Piana, “Foreign Groups in Rome During the First Centuries of the Empire.” *The Harvard Theological Review* XX (1927): 183–403, 188–195.

³² Tonnes Bekker-Nielsen, *The Geography of Power, Studies in the Urbanization of Roman North-West Europe* (Oxford: BAR International Series, 1989), 477; J. F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul: The Three Provinces, 58 BC–AD 260* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 127, 239; Ray Laurence, “Afterword: Travel and Empire.” In *Travel and Geography in the Roman Empire*, eds. Colin Adams and Ray Laurence, pp. 167–176 (London: Routledge, 2001); Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 17–18; N. J. Pounds, *An Historical Geography of Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 52–53; Benet Salway, “Travel, Itineraria and Tabellaria.” In *Travel and Geography in the Roman Empire*, eds. Colin Adams and Ray Laurence, pp. 22–66 (London: Routledge, 2001).

³³ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 11.

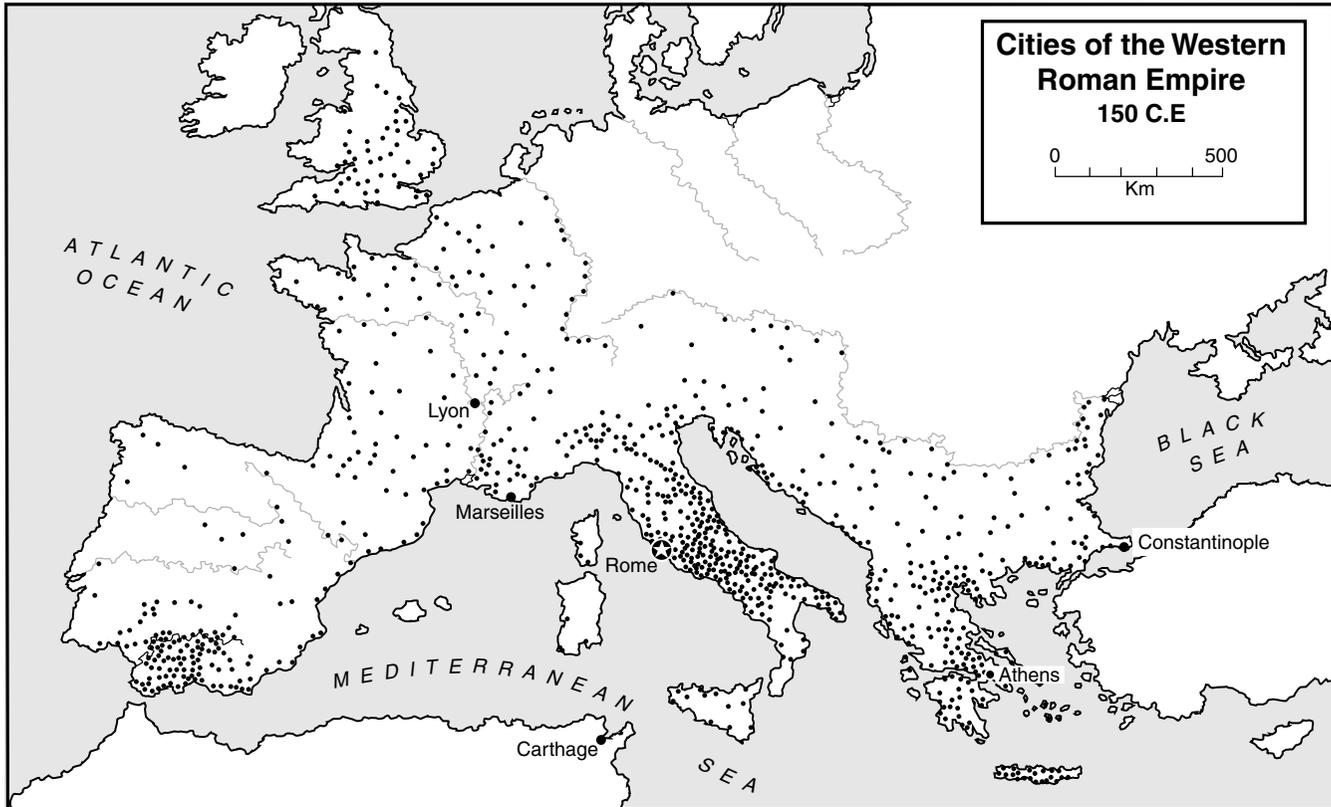


Figure 2. Distribution of Cities in the Western Roman Empire (After Pounds, *An Historical Geography of Europe*, 56).

Rome's reach far to the north and west, as evidenced by the ruins of innumerable Roman villas in present-day France and Iberia, and large numbers of trade goods recovered from archaeological sites in Germany, Britain, Denmark, and the Baltic region.³⁴

No civilization that unites tens of millions of people for the first time can escape the appearance of new forms of infectious disease. The question is not whether new diseases will arise, but whether for reasons of disease ecology and chance they will become both easily spread and lethal to their human hosts. Those who have escaped the ravages of AIDS, an apparent byproduct of our own global economy,³⁵ are fortunate that the disease has not evolved along the lines of measles or smallpox, which literally are spread by a mere cough. (As I write, the world is holding its breath, literally and figuratively, fearing SARS, which apparently is spread by a mere cough.)

The citizens of Rome also were fortunate, at least for a while. Besides luck, the Romans' impressive feats of engineering in public sanitation and water control helped keep infectious diseases in check.³⁶ In time, however, the Greco-Roman proclivity for urban life, rapid transportation, and, paradoxically, improvements in sanitation,³⁷ increased the populations' vulnerability to new forms of acute and chronic infectious disease. By the late second century, cities such as Rome had become very unhealthy places to live; the same was true of distant towns in Roman Gaul.³⁸

³⁴ Michael McCormick, *Origins Of The European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 53–63; E.A. Thompson, *The Huns* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 191.

³⁵ Carl Zimmer, *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 216–222.

³⁶ Angelo Celli, *The History of Malaria in the Roman Campagna from Ancient Times*, ed. and enlarged by Anna Celli-Fraentzel (London: J. Bale, Sons & Danielsson, 1933); J. L. Cloudsley-Thompson, *Insects and History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 91.

³⁷ Exposure generally promotes resistance to what otherwise become more virulent forms of disease. See Arno G. Motulsky, "Metabolic Polymorphisms and the Role of Infectious Diseases in Human Evolution." In *Human Populations, Genetic Variation, and Evolution*, ed. Laura N. Morris, pp. 222–252 (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1971).

³⁸ Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 157; Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 154–156. Note that the towns and cities of medieval Europe remained very unhealthy places well into the

The appearance and rapid diffusion of new forms of infectious disease were made possible by Rome's legions, caravans, and sailing ships, which apparently brought new and often more virulent strains of disease back from southwest Asia and beyond. Incursions of Huns and Goths from eastern Europe, beginning in the third century, contributed further to what McNeill termed a "confluence of disease pools."³⁹ Indeed, McNeill has suggested that by the early Christian era the Roman Empire was in an epidemiological position analogous to America in 1492. Although authors such as Livy, Suetonius, and Orosius recorded serious epidemics during the pre-Christian era, few seem to compare with the series of disease episodes that began in the mid-second century C.E.⁴⁰ At this time and on numerous occasions during the centuries that followed, variants of the same diseases that later devastated Amerindian populations (smallpox, measles, malaria, plague) regularly wrecked havoc on the Roman Empire.

The first such disease episode was a true pandemic of what appears to have been at least in part smallpox.⁴¹ Known as the "Antonine Plague," the disease episode affected the Roman world for close to two decades, beginning in about 165 C.E. Roman soldiers fighting at the time in Mesopotamia were stricken with smallpox and subsequently

modern period. See Chris Wilson, "Understanding the Nature and Importance of Low-growth Demographic Regimes." In *Asian Population History*, ed. Ts'ui-jung Liu et al., pp. 24–44 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32.

³⁹ It has been argued that the initial westward migration of the Huns from Asia, which began in 80 C.E., actually was coincident with an epidemic that killed horses and cattle as well as large numbers of Huns. Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History*, 135.

⁴⁰ Hopkins, *Princes and Peasants*, 22; McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 115–116. Note that whereas Orosius's *The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, which was written around 414 C.E., casts the centuries prior to the Christian era as a time of numerous "unspeakable disasters and intolerable plagues," Orosius was a Christian apologist rather than a historian; he wrote to defend Christianity from the attacks of Romans who noted a correlation between the rise of Christianity and the demise of the Roman Empire from disease and other calamities. See Roy J. Deferrari, trans., *Paul Orosius: The Seven Books Of History Against The Pagans* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), xx.

⁴¹ Smallpox is suggested by clinical characterizations of the disease, such as Galen's references to a rash and skin ulcers, which is consistent with modern descriptions of *variola major*. C. W. Dixon, *Smallpox* (London: J. and A. Churchill Ltd, 1962); Hopkins, *Princes and Peasants*, 22–23; Zinsser, *Rats, Lice, and History*, 101.

introduced *variola* to Syria and then Italy.⁴² At the outset of the epidemic, two thousand people a day died in Rome. Smallpox raged on and off in the city and its environs for fifteen years,⁴³ eventually killing the emperor, Marcus Aurelius.⁴⁴ Roman doctors, annalists, and historians such as Galen, Cassius Dio, and Ammianus Marcellinus reported that the epidemic spread throughout Europe (“from the frontiers of the Persians to the Rhine and Gaul”), contributing to widespread famine.⁴⁵

It has been conservatively estimated that during the first three years of the pandemic, between 3.5 million and 5 million people died;⁴⁶ ten million people, about 8 percent of the population of Europe, died before smallpox at last subsided in 190 C.E.⁴⁷

The Antonine Plague was perhaps the most devastating disease episode in late antiquity. It was not, however, the last time that the Roman world experienced smallpox. The historical record mentions or alludes to what appear to have been frequent outbreaks of *variola* during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.⁴⁸ Eusebius, for instance, mentions an epidemic in 312–313 C.E. whose clinical symptoms (e.g., malignant pustules; blindness) are highly suggestive of smallpox;

⁴² J. F. Gilliam, “The Plague under Marcus Aurelius.” *American Journal of Philology* 82 (1961): 225–251.

⁴³ The epidemic apparently began in Smyrna in 165 C.E. and reached Rome the following year; after subsiding in 180 C.E., it reappeared in Rome in 189 C.E. Richard Duncan-Jones, *Structure and Scale in the Roman Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 72; Zinsser, *Rats, Lice, and History*, 136.

⁴⁴ Donald R. Hopkins, *Princes and Peasants: Smallpox in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 22–23.

⁴⁵ Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 174; A. E. Boak, *Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955), 109–110; Malcolm Todd, “*Famosa Pestis*,” 323.

⁴⁶ More liberal estimates are that 10 percent of the empire’s population was destroyed; large cities and military camps were particularly hard-hit and may have lost 20 percent of their population. Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 174.

⁴⁷ R. J. Littman and M. L. Littman, “Galen and the Antonine Plague.” *American Journal of Philology* 94 (1973): 243–255, 254–255.

⁴⁸ Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. by D. M. Grace (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981[1905]), 171–173; Hopkins, *Princes and Peasants*, 23–24, 230.

the epidemic devastated the Middle East and the southern part of Asia Minor:

It was the winter season, and usual rains and showers were withholding their normal downpour, when without warning famine struck, followed by pestilence and an outbreak of a different disease – a malignant pustule, which because of its fiery appearance was known as a carbuncle. This spread over the entire body, causing great danger to the sufferers; but the eyes were the chief target for attack, and hundreds of men, women, and children lost their sight through it. . . . In the Armenian war the emperor [Maximinus Daia] was worn out as completely as his legions: the rest of the people in the cities under his rule were so horribly wasted by famine and pestilence that a single measure of wheat fetched 2,500 Attic drachmas. Hundreds were dying in the cities, still more in the country villages, so that the rural registers which once contained so many names now suffered almost complete obliteration; for at one stroke food shortage and epidemic disease destroyed nearly all the inhabitants.⁴⁹

The destruction wrought by smallpox appears to have been equaled by epidemics of measles, including a pandemic in 251 C.E., which once again was said to have devastated parts of the Roman Empire. At the height of the pandemic, five thousand people a day died in Rome.⁵⁰ How many died elsewhere is unknown. As Drinkwater⁵¹ has pointed out, the history of the Roman world during the third century C.E. is extremely difficult to reconstruct, owing to a paucity of literary texts. Still, historians such as Zosimus wrote of several devastating plagues, including one in 251 C.E. that was unprecedented: “With war thus pressing heavily on the empire from all sides, a plague afflicted cities and villages and destroyed whatever was left of mankind; no plague in previous times wrought such destruction of human life.”⁵²

⁴⁹ G. A. Williamson, trans. *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Dorset Press, 1984), 365–366.

⁵⁰ Boak, *Manpower Shortage*, 26, 111.

⁵¹ *The Gallic Empire* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1987) 45.

⁵² Ronald T. Ridley, trans. and ed., *Zosimus, New History* (Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982), 8, 12, 14.

The pandemic of 251 C.E. is known as the “plague of Cyprian,” owing to the saint’s detailed account of the disease episode in his *De Mortalitate*.⁵³ As McNeill suggests, the Cyprian and earlier Antonine Plague were co-conspirators in the devolution of the Roman Empire:

What seems to have occurred in the Mediterranean lands was that a tolerable macroparasitic system – the imperial armies and bureaucracy of the first century A.D. superimposed upon a diverse muster of local landlords who generally aspired to an urban, Greco-Roman style of life – became unbearably top-heavy after the first disastrous ravages of epidemic disease hit home in the second and third centuries. Thereafter the macroparasitic elements in Roman society became agents of further destruction to population and production, and the resultant disorders, famines, migrations, concentrations of human flotsam and jetsam, in turn, created fresh opportunities for epidemic diseases to diminish population still more.⁵⁴

The Roman Empire’s failure to rebound from successive epidemics of smallpox and measles as well as other calamities (e.g., wars, invasions) is partially explained by chronic infectious diseases, particularly malaria (*Plasmodium vivax*). Human populations can relatively quickly replace numerical losses from war or epidemics, even when acute infectious diseases claim a third or more of a population. However, it is very difficult to recoup population losses when they occur in the context of endemic, chronic infectious diseases such as malaria. Malaria, once it becomes endemic, kills large numbers of infants and leaves those who survive with anemia and poor general health.⁵⁵

During the pre-Christian era, the Romans worshipped a goddess of fevers (*Dea Febris*) who seemingly kept malaria at bay in southern Italy.⁵⁶

⁵³ Daniel D. Sullivan, *The Life of the North Africans as Revealed in the Works of Saint Cyprian* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1933); Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History*, 138–141.

⁵⁴ McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 120.

⁵⁵ Mark F. Boyd, “Epidemiology of Malaria: Factors Related to the Intermediate Host.” In *Malariaology*, Vol. 1, ed. Mark F. Boyd, pp. 551–607 (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1949), 566; Cloudsley-Thompson, *Insects and History*, 76; Daniel Gade, *Nature and Culture in the Andes* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 75–101; Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1991), 273.

⁵⁶ Cloudsley-Thompson, *Insects and History*, 90.

However, by the Christian era, Rome had become highly malarious.⁵⁷ Writers such as Celsus make clear that malaria became an even greater problem during the latter part of the second century.⁵⁸ The third and fourth centuries were no better; Constantine the Great (337 C.E.) and his son Constantius (363 C.E.) are two of many who apparently succumbed to malaria.⁵⁹ Alaric (c. 370–419 C.E.) – the first of the “barbarians” to sack Rome – apparently died from malaria, as did many subsequent Vandals and Goths.⁶⁰

As the fourth century unfolded and Roman infrastructure and water control devices deteriorated, the incidence of malaria increased dramatically.⁶¹ Writing in circa 359 C.E., the historian Ammianus Marcellinus outlined what became a centuries-old pattern of malaria in Rome and southern Italy:

Now the first kind of plague is called endemic, and causes those who live in places that are too dry to be cut off by frequent fevers. The second is epidemic, which breaks out at certain seasons of the year, dimming the sight of the eyes and causing a dangerous flow of moisture. The third is *loemodes* [pestilential], which is also periodic, but deadly from its winged speed.⁶²

Consistent with Marcellinus’s observation, the exceptionally dry hills to the south of Rome and the islands of Sardinia and Sicily historically had the highest incidence of malaria.⁶³ (It is a misconception that malaria occurred only in lowlands or in southern Europe.)

⁵⁷ George W. Bryun, *An Illustrated History of Malaria* (New York: Parthenon Publishing Group, 1999), 7.

⁵⁸ Sallares, *Ecology of the Ancient Greek World*, 278.

⁵⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus’s account of Constantius’s demise is highly suggestive of malaria, inasmuch as Constantius came down with a slight fever that grew increasingly worse: “Gradually the extreme heat of the fever so inflamed his veins that his body could not even be touched, since it burned like a furnace; . . . Then the death-rattle began and he was silent, and after a long struggle gave up the ghost.” Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, II, 171; see also Bryun, *Illustrated History of Malaria*, 7.

⁶⁰ Cloudsley-Thompson, *Insects and History*, 91–92, 94.

⁶¹ Celli, *History of Malaria*; Cloudsley-Thompson, *Insects and History*, 84; McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 38–41; L.W. Hackett, *Malaria in Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 7.

⁶² Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, I, 489.

⁶³ Hackett, *Malaria in Europe*, 11.

In the fourth century, if not sooner, malaria escaped from the narrow bounds within which it had been confined by drainage, sanitation, and agriculture.⁶⁴ Malaria became widespread in Europe, apparently in part because of the abandonment of villas and towns.⁶⁵ The corresponding devolution of agriculture and animal husbandry encouraged mosquitoes, in general, and certain subspecies of anopheline mosquitoes,⁶⁶ which fueled epidemics of malaria among humans.⁶⁷ During the fifth and sixth centuries, when many previously abandoned farms or secondary forests were resettled by monks and internal migrants,⁶⁸ malaria was further encouraged.⁶⁹ Thus, medieval texts such as the *Life of the Fathers*, written by Gregory of Tours (592 C.E.), and *The Life of Saint Columban* (642 C.E.) often speak of individuals incapacitated by fever:

Today many people who are sunk in melancholy obtain at his tomb [Bishop Quintianus] relief from their quartan fever and from their illness. (*Life of the Fathers*)⁷⁰

... he began to ask earnestly that the holy man should pray to God on behalf of his wife, who for a whole year had been burning with so violent a fever that it now seemed impossible that she could be restored to health. (*Life of St. Columban*)⁷¹

Fevers of one kind or another – reflecting malaria as well as other infectious diseases – abound in literature from late antiquity and the

⁶⁴ Cloudsley-Thompson, *Insects and History*, 91.

⁶⁵ Boak, *Manpower Shortage*, 127; J. C. Russell, “Late Ancient and Medieval Population.” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, Volume 48, Part 3 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1958), 39–40.

⁶⁶ Europe historically has been home to a number of species of anopheline mosquito that evolved to survive the coldest winters (mostly by moving indoors); the mosquitoes also have remarkable flight ranges (three to ten miles). See Hackett, *Malaria in Europe*, 206–207.

⁶⁷ Bryun, *Illustrated History of Malaria*, 21–22; W. H. S. Jones, *Malaria: A Neglected Factor in the History of Greece and Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Bowes & Bowes, 1907), 75.

⁶⁸ J. N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 21–22.

⁶⁹ Hackett, *Malaria in Europe*, 90, 225.

⁷⁰ Edward James, trans., *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1991), 27.

⁷¹ Dana C. Munro, trans., *Life of St. Columban by the Monk Jonas* (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1993), 24.

early Middle Ages. During the sixth century C.E., there appeared a new contributor to these fevers: plague. What came to be known as the Justinian plague raged in Mediterranean Europe in 542–543 C.E. Procopius reported that the epidemic persisted for four months in Constantinople and that at the height of the epidemic ten thousand people died per day.⁷² For the next two hundred years,⁷³ the plague reached epidemic proportions every nine to twelve years, affecting primarily Mediterranean Europe, Spain, Gaul, and Italy. On the basis of miracles recorded in hagiographic texts, Biraben and Le Goff⁷⁴ believe the plague spread as far north as the Loire, Marne, and Rhine rivers, and the Alps. One should not assume from this statement that northern Europe escaped the plague entirely or did not suffer from epidemic disease. Anglo-Saxon records mention at least forty-nine disease episodes or epidemics between 526 and 1087 C.E.⁷⁵

The consequences of plague were everywhere severe, particularly when the disease occurred with other maladies. In 570 C.E., the plague as well as smallpox affected much of continental Europe.⁷⁶ Gregory of Tours has a telling description of its impact:

At the coming of the disaster itself, there was made much slaughter of the people through all the region, that the legions of men who fell there might not even be numbered. When coffins and planks failed, ten dead or more were buried in a common pit. In the single church of Saint Peter there were counted on a certain Sunday three hundred corpses.⁷⁷

The Demographic Consequences of Disease

What were the consequences of the Antonine, Cyprian, and Justinian plagues and endemic or near-endemic chronic diseases such as malaria?

⁷² McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 127.

⁷³ For reasons that are not known, the plague appears to have disappeared around 750 C.E., not appearing again until the fourteenth century. Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages,” 63.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁵ Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds., *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 288n; McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 128–129.

⁷⁶ Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages,” 60.

⁷⁷ Dalton, *The History of the Franks, by Gregory of Tours*, II, 143.

The question is not easily answered, given the fragmentary nature of the historical record and the fact that civil disorders, famine, and migration were coincident with many disease episodes. Although scholars may disagree over the numbers and the relative importance of disease, there is a consensus that the population of Europe experienced a significant decline or collapse in late antiquity; this collapse continued well into the Middle Ages.⁷⁸ Russell⁷⁹ estimated that the population of the Roman Empire declined by half during the first five centuries of the Christian era (by 543 C.E.). Biraben and Le Goff suggest that the great plagues of the sixth century, combined with smallpox, caused further catastrophic losses.⁸⁰ Between 300 C.E. and 530 C.E., the population of the city of Rome declined by over 90 percent, from eight hundred thousand to sixty thousand.⁸¹

Egyptian census records, which provide some of the most credible demographic evidence from the Greco-Roman world, indicate that the chances of surviving to adulthood in the Roman Empire declined appreciably during the second and third centuries. Life expectancy at birth during this time was twenty-two to twenty-five years of age⁸² – about what it was during the late Neolithic.⁸³ Detailed research on life expectations in the Danube provinces indicate that only one out of five people lived to age sixty-two.⁸⁴

Epidemic disease was not the ultimate cause of Europe's population decline, inasmuch as natural selection operates on fertility not mortality.⁸⁵ Repeated epidemics contributed to failed harvests and the abandonment of villas and farms, which resulted in famines and chronic

⁷⁸ Boak, *Manpower Shortage*, 111; McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 38–41; McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 116; Pounds, *Historical Geography of Europe*, 77; Wilson, "Understanding the Nature and Importance of Low-growth Demographic Regimes," 28.

⁷⁹ Russell, "Late Ancient and Medieval Population."

⁸⁰ Biraben and Le Goff, "Plague in the Early Middle Ages," 62.

⁸¹ McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 66.

⁸² Disaggregation of the data suggests that life expectancy at birth was thirty-two for upper-class Romans and less than twenty for slaves and freedmen. Duncan-Jones, *Structure and Scale in the Roman Economy*, 103.

⁸³ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 109–110.

⁸⁴ A. R. Burn, "Hic Breve Vivitur: a Study of the Expectation of Life in the Roman Empire." *Past and Present* 4(1953): 2–31, 23.

⁸⁵ Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World*, 222–224.

malnourishment, and in turn, declining fertility.⁸⁶ There is evidence that men outnumbered women during the early Middle Ages,⁸⁷ implying that young, married women often died during pregnancy and childbirth, presumably from concurrent infections. As early as the reign of Diocletian (285–305 C.E.), Roman emperors sought to address the twin problems of famine and population decline by passing laws that prohibited farm laborers from leaving their land or even entering the army.⁸⁸ Archaeological evidence also attests to widespread abandonment of villas and other profound settlement system changes in Gaul beginning around the time of the Antonine Plague.⁸⁹ Where town or urban life continued it was much attenuated.⁹⁰ During the late third century, following the measles pandemic of 251–270 C.E., Roman defenses against barbarian incursions became tenuous and many towns drastically reduced the area contained within newly fortified walls.⁹¹ It is perhaps a testament to the consequences of “crowd infections” that many of these newly fortified towns, after a brief revival, subsequently became impoverished and perished.⁹² Boak noted that by the early fifth century the area of untilled

⁸⁶ Pierre Riché, *Daily Life In The World Of Charlemagne*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978[1973]), 47–49. One can imagine any number of scenarios whereby fertility was undermined. Chronic malnourishment, for instance, would have meant women lacked sufficient body fat for ovulation and lactation.

⁸⁷ Joseph Lynch, *The Medieval Church* (New York: Longman, 1992), 213.

⁸⁸ Dom John Chapman, *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), 155; McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 118; Pounds, *Historical Geography of Europe*, 77.

⁸⁹ William E. Klingshirm, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 203–206; C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 232.

⁹⁰ Pounds, *Historical Geography of Europe*, 70.

⁹¹ Christopher Pickles, *Texts and Monuments: A Study of Ten Anglo-Saxon Churches of the Pre-Viking Period* (Oxford, UK: Archaeopress, 1999), 102; Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 207–208. Note that archaeological research in northern France, Belgium, and the left bank of the German Rhineland indicate that at least some settlements were being abandoned even before the destructive invasions of the late third century. Although Whittaker has speculated that this abandonment may have been for economic reasons, epidemic disease also may have played a part. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 211.

⁹² Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 157–158; Guy Halsall, “Social Identities and Social Relationships in Early Merovingian Gaul.” In *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Ian Wood, pp. 141–165 (Rochester, NY: Boydell

land had reached astonishing proportions, and many of the cities of the Roman Empire had become ghost towns.⁹³ As noted, by the turn of the sixth century, the population of the city of Rome had plummeted to around sixty thousand (down from over a million in the late second century and perhaps eight hundred thousand at the outset of the fourth century C.E.).

What is especially striking about the population collapse in Western Europe during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages is that it seems not to have been slowed by the steady and sometimes rapid in-migration of large numbers of peoples from eastern and central Europe (Figure 3). The Visigoths and Ostrogoths, who were driven across the Danube by the Huns in 376 C.E., are thought to have numbered at least one hundred thousand.⁹⁴ In 406–407 C.E., tens of thousands of Vandals, Alans, and Sueves crossed the Rhine. In 454 C.E., the collapse of Attila's empire sent thousands more "barbarians" streaming across the Danubian frontier.⁹⁵ Numerically speaking, these three major incursions represent the tip of the iceberg, as most scholars today acknowledge that the majority of Goths and other "barbarians" crossed the frontier into the Roman Empire in small bands.⁹⁶ In this regard, terms like Goths, Franks, and Alamanni are generic terms that elide the multiple and often separate identities of barbarian invaders. The Gothic migration in 376 C.E., for instance, was led by at least seven or eight different chieftains who often fought with each other.⁹⁷

Press, 1998), 146; Colin Haselgrove, "Roman Impact on Rural Settlement and Society in Southern Picardy." In *From the Sword to the Plough: Three Studies on the Earliest Romanisation of Northern Gaul*, ed. N. Roymans, pp. 127–189 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 166–168; Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 211.

⁹³ *Manpower Shortage*, 127.

⁹⁴ P. J. Heather, *Goths and Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 327.

⁹⁵ E. A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 15–19.

⁹⁶ Patrick Geary, "Barbarians and Ethnicity." In *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowerstock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, pp. 107–130 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999); Brent Shaw, "War and Violence." In *Late Antiquity, A Guide to the Postclassical World*, pp. 130–170; Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 209.

⁹⁷ Hans J. Hummer, "Franks and Alamanni: A Discontinuous Ethnogenesis." In *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Ian Wood, pp. 9–21 (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 1998); Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 212–213.

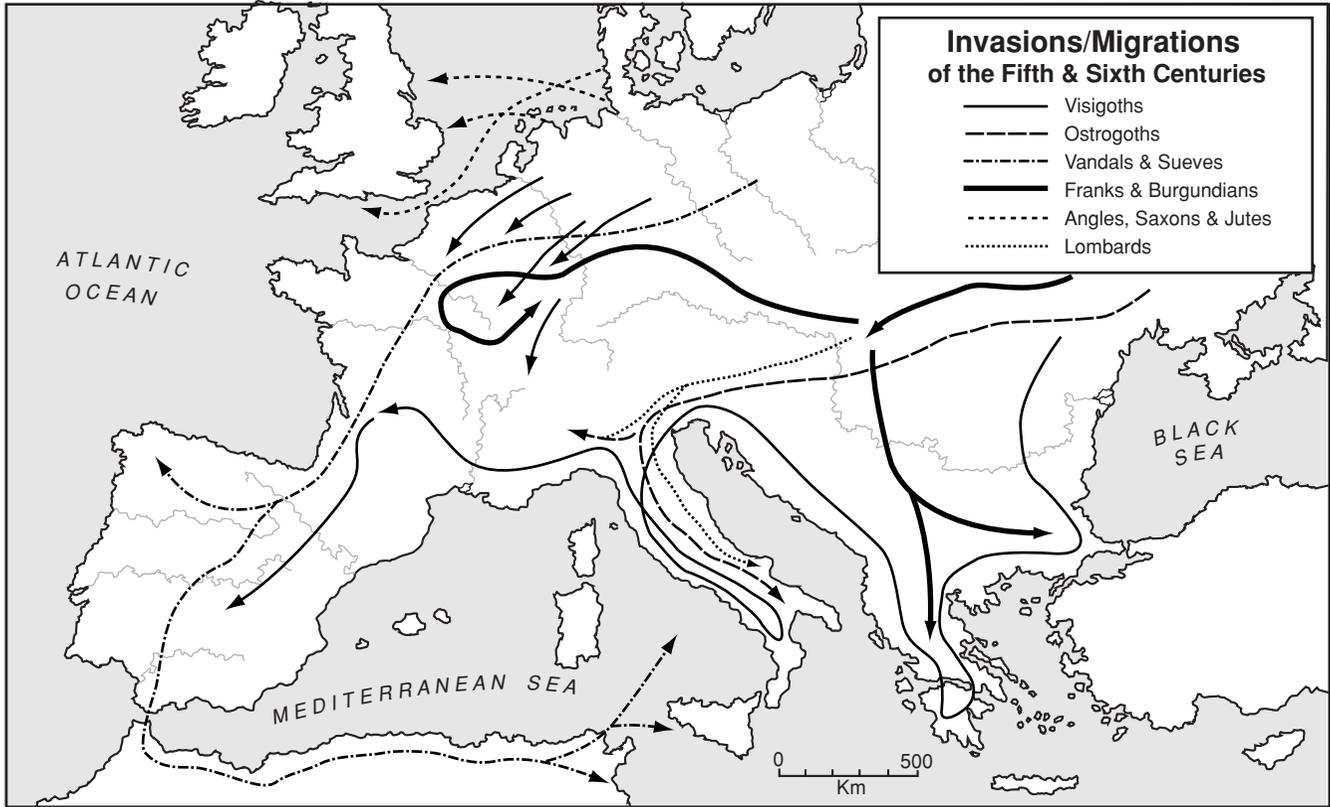


Figure 3. Invasions and Migrations of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries (After Pounds, *An Historical Geography of Europe*, 79).

It has been suggested that well over a million foreigners crossed the Rhine and Danube frontiers during just one century, from circa 250 to 350 C.E.⁹⁸ One would think that such significant migration would have offset Europe's pronounced population decline in late antiquity. But the "barbarians" themselves were ravaged by epidemics.⁹⁹ Moreover, those barbarians who survived and then settled within the empire – becoming more sedentary in the process – suffered further from disease.

Goths, Franks, Burgundians, and so on often supplemented rather than displaced what was a disappearing Gallic population. This perhaps explains why Gallic nobles were willing to part with gold rather than agricultural laborers, and why native Gauls offered little or no resistance to invaders.¹⁰⁰ Although the Gallic Chronicle of 452 suggests that the settlement of barbarians was encouraged by the Roman government, there clearly were significant tracts of land available for settlement, presumably owing to disease-induced reductions in the native Gaulish population. Thus, the Chronicle tells of Alans who were allotted "deserted lands" around the city of Valence and still other invaders who divided the land with the Gauls.¹⁰¹ In the region about Tours, there is likewise archaeological evidence of dramatic settlement shifts in circa 270 C.E. that may reflect reoccupation of Roman villas by Germanic invaders and the withdrawal of remnant groups of Gallic speakers to hamlets in the more remote parts of the Touraine.¹⁰² In northern Gaul and in the lower German province, there is clear evidence that the Franks, who were an amalgamation of small tribes who came together in the first and second centuries between the Weser and Rhine rivers, expanded for the most part peacefully across the Rhine and into Belgium, settling in

⁹⁸ Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 231.

⁹⁹ Boak, *Manpower Shortage*, 112, 128–129; Hopkins, *Princes and Peasants*, 23; E. A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 236; Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History*, 136; Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 220–222.

¹⁰⁰ Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians*, 16, 37, 239.

¹⁰¹ The chronicle does include one instance where Alans were opposed by local inhabitants. See Steven Muhlbberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers: Prosper, Hydatius, and the Gallic Chronicle of 452* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1990), 176–177.

¹⁰² Clare Stancliffe, "From Town to Country: The Christianization of the Touraine, 370–600." In *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. Derek Baker, pp. 43–59 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 45–48.

areas abandoned by Gallo-Roman landlords, and coexisting with what remained of the local Gallic-speaking population.¹⁰³ What happened in Gaul happened in Spain. According to Isidore of Seville (570–636 C.E.), epidemics devastated the indigenous population of Spain, paving the way for the “barbarians:”

In the era 449 (411), after the terrible destruction of the plagues by which Spain was destroyed, finally through God’s mercy the barbarians were moved to make peace and divided Spain’s provinces by lot for their occupation. The Vandals and Suevi took Galicia. The Alani obtained the provinces of Lusitania and Cartagena, and the Vandals called Silingians received Baetica. But the Spaniards in the remaining cities and strongholds, having been struck down by the plagues, placed themselves in subjection to the ruling barbarians.¹⁰⁴

The Sociocultural Consequences of Epidemic Disease: The Case of Gaul

In Spain, Gaul, Britain, and elsewhere, ethnogenesis, or the reforging of cultural identities and sociocultural systems, largely was a consequence of disease, famine, and warfare during the period 150–600 C.E. In Gaul, legal protection afforded Roman subjects by barbarian kings encouraged the “mixing” of Germanic peoples with what was once a large, native population of Gallic-speakers.¹⁰⁵ At the height of the Roman Empire, during the mid-second century C.E., the three Gallic-speaking provinces of Gaul had a thriving population of twelve million.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Gallic flourished to the point that the emperor Severus in circa 200 C.E. permitted the use of Gallic in courts of law; also at this time native leagues officially replaced Roman miles on road signs in Gaul.¹⁰⁷ If the demise

¹⁰³ Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 237, 240.

¹⁰⁴ Guido Donini and Gordon B. Ford, Jr., trans., *Isidore of Seville’s History of the Kings of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), 35.

¹⁰⁵ Ralph Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 133.

¹⁰⁶ Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 170; Russell, *Late Ancient and Medieval Population*, 83–85.

¹⁰⁷ Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 83.

of a language is any indication of cultural processes as a whole, it is telling that by 500 C.E. the Gallic language had all but vanished.¹⁰⁸

If the language vanished, what happened to the Gallic and Gallo-Roman cultures of Gaul, including the religious beliefs and “holy men” who played a vital part in maintaining the identity and well-being of Gallic society? Relatively little is known about Gallic or Celtic religion, excepting the formal priesthood of the Druids. In his *Gallic War*, Caesar noted that the Druids:

... are concerned with divine worship, the due performance of sacrifices, public and private, and the interpretation of ritual questions: a great number of young men gather about them for the sake of instruction and hold them in great honour. In fact it is they who decide in almost all disputes, public and private; and if any crime has been committed, or murder done, or if there is any dispute about succession or boundaries, they also decide it, determining rewards and penalties.¹⁰⁹

The Gauls and other “Celts”¹¹⁰ are thought to have had various orders of holy men, including priests, diviners, and what some Roman observers referred to as “natural philosophers.”¹¹¹ Together they fulfilled various functions, principally maintaining the calendar and fixing dates for festivals, sowing, and so on, and acting as go-betweens with Celtic gods, the dead, and various spirits of rivers, springs, forests, and other natural “sites.”¹¹² Long before they had been incorporated into the Roman

¹⁰⁸ Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 151; Alex Woolf, “Romancing the Celts, A Segmentary Approach to Acculturation.” In *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*, eds. Ray Laurence and Joanne Berry, pp. 111–124 (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁰⁹ H. J. Edwards, trans., *Caesar: The Gallic War* (London: William Heinemann, 1916), 337.

¹¹⁰ My use of “the Celts” or “Celtic society” represents a lumping together of what apparently were diverse peoples in Western Europe. Unfortunately, neither the archaeological or historical records have shed sufficient light on this diversity to provide alternative designations. See Stephen D. Jones, *Deconstructing the Celts: A Skeptic’s Guide to the Archaeology of the Auvergne* (Oxford: Archaeopress/British Archaeological Reports, 2001), 4–5.

¹¹¹ James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, 90; Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 164–165.

¹¹² James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, 52–53.

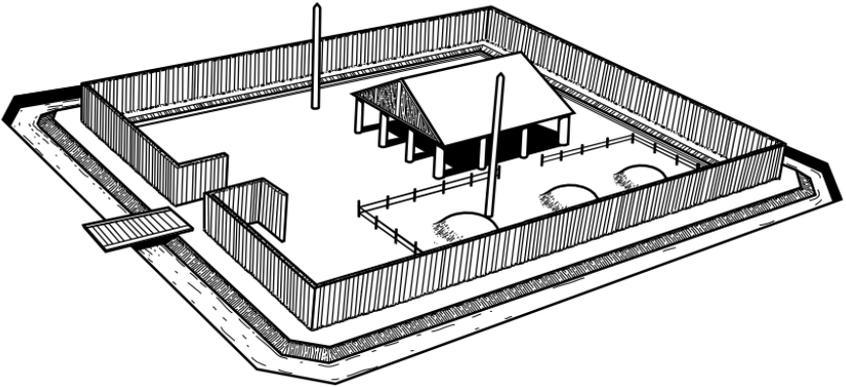


Figure 4. Sketch of the Gallic Shrine at Gournay (After James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, 93).

Empire, the Gauls as well as Germanic groups (east of the Rhine) erected shrines or temples in what were perceived as sacred places (e.g., springs, caves) (Figure 4).¹¹³ The Gauls offered sacrifices (material and human) and left votive offerings to what appear to have been rather abstractly conceived supernaturals, such as shape-shifters.¹¹⁴ As a result of Roman influence, which encouraged the personification of deities, the Gauls by the second century C.E. had turned some of their shrines or sanctuaries into “homes” for mostly local but also some Roman deities (e.g., Mercury), to whom private and communal offerings were left to ensure

¹¹³ Celtic sanctuaries or centers of pilgrimage consisted of a sacred enclosure (*nemeton*) with a Celtic temple (*cella* and ambulatory), which, by the second century, were richly built and decorated in the Roman fashion; the enclosure might also have a nearby complex of buildings including a residence for a temple priest, baths, theater, and buildings and open spaces to accommodate visitors. See Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 179.

¹¹⁴ Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices: The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 78–79; James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*; Thomas Taylor, trans., *The Arguments of the Emperor Julian Against the Christians* (Chicago: Ares Publishing, 1980), 35; Robert L. Wilken, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity: Greek Religion and Christian Faith.” In *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, eds. W. R. Schodde and R. L. Wilken, pp. 117–134 (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1979); *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 148–149.

inspiration, healing, and knowledge.¹¹⁵ In more urban areas, where Roman power and influence were largely felt, tax-supported temples with priests and magistrates enacted rituals and received sacrifices on behalf of Roman state religion. Although these cultic centers were decidedly Roman, votive inscriptions indicate that over time Roman deities became a syncretic blend, as reflected in names that were at once Roman and Celtic (e.g., Mars Camulus).¹¹⁶

By the second century C.E., Gaul was the “strategic linchpin of the Roman West,” providing communications between Spain, Britain, Italy, and the Danube.¹¹⁷ It is hard to believe that Gaul escaped the devastation wrought by disease elsewhere in the Roman Empire.¹¹⁸ There apparently are no eyewitness accounts of how the Antonine Plague or subsequent epidemics affected Gallic religion and the power and influence of Gallic shamans and priests. The first two centuries of the Christian era in areas such as Gaul have been described as “an age without history.”¹¹⁹ Ecclesiastical and secular texts from the early Middle Ages nevertheless suggest that by the fifth century most Gallic temples had disappeared, along with whatever formal priesthood once existed among the Gauls.¹²⁰ In their stead were simple shrines or open-air sites where a seemingly disparate group of *harioli*, *haruspices*, *sortilegi*, *incantores*, and other claimants to the supernatural drew from Celtic, Roman, and Germanic traditions.¹²¹

Of course, farming communities do not fare well during epidemics that kill one in five people and leave another 20 percent or 30 percent of the population incapacitated for days or weeks on end.¹²² Although kinship, particularly lineage and clan systems, may have mattered less in Gallic *civitates* (more urban areas that were administrative units of the Roman Empire), they undoubtedly defined economic and

¹¹⁵ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1964), 34–55; Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices*, 244.

¹¹⁶ Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices*, 242–244.

¹¹⁷ James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, 141.

¹¹⁸ Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 76. ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹²⁰ Halsall, “Social Identities,” 157; Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul A.D. 481–751* (New York: Brill, 1995), 10, 160.

¹²¹ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 61.

¹²² Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 207–209, 221–223.

social life on the large farms or estates (*villas*), and small farms (*aedifica*) and hamlets where 90 percent of Gauls lived.¹²³ Among other things, kinship determined where one looked for a marriage partner or to whom one turned for help when harvesting a crop or caring for a sick child. When 20 percent or more of a village's population suddenly dies, seemingly at random, the very structure and functioning of the community is called into question. Of course, when the dead include trusted elders, bards, and religious specialists – the “bearers” of what was largely an oral culture – the future as well as the present are in jeopardy. Doubts about the future are perhaps reflected in the patterning of coin offerings at water shrines, which were very popular among Gallo-Roman and Germanic peoples. Rouselle's analysis of coins from over ninety shrines and sanctuaries in Gaul¹²⁴ indicates that in the late third century, and even more so during the fourth century, when abandonment of *villas* was widespread throughout Gaul,¹²⁵ water shrines were no longer the site of offerings and presumably pagan devotions.¹²⁶ At roughly this same time (mid-third century), there was a distinct wave of hoarding (burial of coins and objects of value) in northern Gaul and Britain. Drinkwater¹²⁷ has noted that this hoarding can not be entirely explained in terms of barbarian invasions or civil strife; something else had rendered life both difficult and unpredictable.

The demise of the Celtic-speaking population of Gaul (the apparent disappearance of millions of people) was not unusual. Between 200 and 359 C.E., the peoples of western Germany previously described by Tacitus seem to disappear from history and are replaced by Alamanni, Franks, Burgundians, and Saxons.¹²⁸ Similarly, in Britain, the successful Saxon invasion in the fifth century followed or was coincident with the still unexplained end of town life and the disappearance of countless native

¹²³ See M. Millett, *The Romanization of Britain* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Woolf, “Romancing the Celts.”

¹²⁴ *Croire et Guérir: La Foi en Gaule dans l'Antiquité Tardive*. (Paris: Fayard, 1990), pp. 109–132.

¹²⁵ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 205.

¹²⁶ See also Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 333–335.

¹²⁷ J. F. Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1987), 198–199.

¹²⁸ E. A. Thompson, *The Early Germans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 150.

Britons.¹²⁹ Not insignificantly, Gildas, who wrote the only surviving narrative history of fifth-century Britain, noted that the coming of the Saxons followed a deadly plague that “laid low so many people, . . . that the living could not bury all the dead.”¹³⁰

The Rise of Christianity to 313 C.E.

Whether as fertility cult, or as calendar and astrological calculation, or as covenant, the impulse in all thanatologies is to secure human life by an alliance with divinities who will control nature by making it predictable.¹³¹

What role did infectious diseases and their consequences play in the spread of Christianity in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages? With the notable exception of Stark,¹³² the question has not been pursued vigorously by scholars, most of whom readily acknowledge that we know relatively little about the growth of the early Church following the apostolic age. Our principal sources for the period reflect largely the concerns and views of a relatively small Greek and Latin-speaking minority.¹³³ Sadly, some of the more insightful Latin authors are known only from fragmentary works. For instance, Ammianus Marcellinus authored a detailed history of the Roman Empire, but only a portion of the

¹²⁹ E. A. Thompson, “Britain, A.D. 406–410.” *Britanna* 8 (1977): 303–318, 314; E. A. Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Boydell Press, 1984); John Wacher, *The Towns of Roman Britain* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1975), 444.

¹³⁰ Michael Winterbottom, trans. and ed., *Gildas, The Ruin of Britain and other works* (London: Phillimore, 1978[540 C.E.]), 25. Note that Bede ([731 C.E.], who apparently drew from Gildas, also reported that the Britons were devastated by a plague that prompted them to call the Saxons to their aid from across the sea. Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 49.

¹³¹ Jon Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 210.

¹³² *The Rise of Christianity*.

¹³³ Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 5; W. H. C. Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular in the Early Christian Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1976), 3, 488.

history is extant; missing are the first thirteen books, which deal with the all-important period prior to 354 C.E.

Neither Church apologists and theologians nor critics of Christianity (e.g., Celsus, Porphyry) were especially concerned with the lives of the many thousands who embraced Christianity during late antiquity.¹³⁴ Scholars have followed the theologians, focusing on doctrinal debates and controversies (e.g., Arianism, Pelageism). The concerns and motivations of the vast majority of illiterate Christians have not been afforded the same research priority.¹³⁵ As Brown¹³⁶ has suggested, there is a long scholarly tradition of ignoring, and even embarrassment with “popular religion.”

During the first and much of the second century, Christianity was a small movement struggling to resolve a host of issues surrounding its founder, his message, and, in general, what it meant to be a Christian.¹³⁷ Note that it was not until the end of the second century that a general consensus emerged with respect to the scriptural canon of the New Testament and a ministry based on the episcopate. Paul’s epistles testify to the theological and behavioral issues that threatened the growth, and in some cases, the survival of the various churches clustered in the eastern Mediterranean. Paul’s missionary strategy, as detailed in his letters and *The Acts of the Apostles*, was to preach in select cities in different provinces and in the process to establish Christian communities,

¹³⁴ T. Barnes, “Pagan Perceptions of Christianity.” In *Early Christianity Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, ed. Ian Hazlett, pp. 231–244 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); Ramsay MacMullen, “What Difference Did Christianity Make?” *Historia* 35 (1986): 322–343, 322–323; A.D. Wright, *Catholicism and Spanish Society Under the Reign of Philip II, 1505–1598, and Philip III, 1598–1621* (Lewiston, Australia: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

¹³⁵ R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4; Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 8.

¹³⁶ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12–22.

¹³⁷ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eight Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Denis Minns, O.P., *Irenaeus* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990), 129–130; Joseph B. Tyson, *A Study of Early Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

whence knowledge of Christ's teachings were spread by elders to outlying settlements.¹³⁸

At the turn of the second century, there were perhaps forty or fifty cities within the Roman Empire with one or more Christian sects. These almost exclusively urban groups (*ekklésiae*), being offshoots of Judaism, often modeled themselves on the diaspora synagogue, consisting of an extended family or slightly larger gathering of people who lived and ate together and who regularly met to study scripture and recite hymns and prayers.¹³⁹ Most *ekklésiae* were small and had perhaps several dozen people; Christian communities of several hundred were unusual in circa 100 C.E. The total number of Christians at this time was probably less than fifty thousand (in a society or empire of sixty million).¹⁴⁰

It was following the Antonine Plague and during the first half of the third century that Christianity began to win significant numbers of converts.¹⁴¹ Many of these conversions were among the underprivileged of the urban, Greco-Roman world.¹⁴² Celsus (160 C.E.), an early critic of Christianity, sarcastically described the leaders of the Church as “wool workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and bucolic yokels.” Worse yet, from Celsus's perspective, were the rank and file of the Church: women, children, and slaves.¹⁴³ Whereas poor immigrants and rootless peasants swelled the ranks of Christianity, it is clear that men and especially women of the middle and upper classes also played a prominent role in the early Church.¹⁴⁴ Thus, Pliny the Younger (110 C.E.) wrote to the

¹³⁸ Glenn E. Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981), 33–38.

¹³⁹ Howard Clark Kee, “From the Jesus Movement toward Institutional Church.” In *Conversion to Christianity*, ed. R. Hefner, pp. 47–63 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians, The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 82–83.

¹⁴⁰ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 31.

¹⁴¹ Terrance L. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 67–81.

¹⁴² Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 44; Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular*, 9; Knut Schaferdick, “Christian Mission and Expansion.” In *Early Christianity Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, ed. Ian Hazlett, pp. 65–78 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

¹⁴³ Barnes, “Pagan Perceptions of Christianity,” 238.

¹⁴⁴ Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 134; Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*; Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (New York: The Institute for

emperor Trajan that he anticipated persecuting Christians “. . . of all ages and ranks, and of both sexes.”¹⁴⁵

During the mid-third century, the emperors Decius (249–251 C.E.) and Valerian (253–260 C.E.) both tried unsuccessfully to halt the spread of Christianity. This first systematic persecution continued, indeed worsened, under Diocletian and Galerius. Intellectuals of the time such as Porphyry (c. 270 C.E.) blamed Christianity for the decline of the cult of Asklepios and frequent epidemics.¹⁴⁶ Despite such charges and persecution, the Church continued to grow in numbers, while pagan cults continued to decline.¹⁴⁷ In Roman North Africa, for instance, Numidian villagers adopted Christianity in large numbers, abandoning the cult of Saturn. Frend,¹⁴⁸ after noting that there is no satisfactory explanation for the Numidian embrace of Christianity, points out that it was correlated with a decline in urban life and institutions. The North African saint, Cyprian, in his *De Mortalitate*,¹⁴⁹ was quite explicit that plague as well as chronic infectious diseases had ravaged North Africa. The biography of Gregory of Nyssa, whose thirty-year mission (243–272 C.E.) to Pontus and Cappadocia coincided with the great measles epidemic, recounts how Gregory broke the hold of traditional priestly families by directly challenging their oracles and cures and replacing their festivals for pagan idols with celebrations for Christian martyrs.¹⁵⁰

With the conversion of the emperor Constantine in 313 C.E., the Church emerged victorious from the shadows of a failing empire. Christian communities could be found at the time in Spain, Italy, North Africa, and Britain. Christianity also had spread up the Rhine to Cologne,

Research and in History, 1983), 56–67; Schaferdick, “Christian Mission and Expansion,” 67; see also Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 36–37; Elizabeth A. Petroff, “Women in the Early Church, St. Perpetua and St. Macrina.” In *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, ed. E. A. Petroff, pp. 60–69 (New York: Oxford, 1986).

¹⁴⁵ Thomas M. Lucas, S. J., *Landmarking, City, Church and Jesuit Urban Strategy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), 42.

¹⁴⁶ E. R. Dods, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 114–115.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 105–115.

¹⁴⁸ *Religion Popular and Unpopular*, 487–497.

¹⁴⁹ Daniel D. Sullivan, *The Life of the North Africans as Revealed in the Works of Saint Cyprian* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1933), 13–15.

¹⁵⁰ Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular*, 8.

throughout the Rhone Valley, in eastern Gaul, most of Auvergne, south Aquitaine, and along the Seine River.¹⁵¹

Christianity as Protector from Evil and Sickness

What attracted tens of thousands of people throughout the Roman world to Christianity during late antiquity? Porphyry is said to have remarked that only sick souls needed Christianity, to which Dods¹⁵² countered, “But sick souls were numerous in our period.”

During the early Christian era there was a proliferation of medical texts and shrines to the Roman god of health, Asclepius.¹⁵³ However, neither Greco-Roman medicine nor Asclepius and other Roman deities (e.g., *Dea Febris*) apparently were much help dealing with new forms of infectious disease. Christianity asserted itself in this vacuum, providing a new and alternative understanding of sickness. Christian theologians and preachers took the previously ambivalent and often faceless *daemons* of pagan belief and gave them a new valence: Satan and his cohort were identified and exposed as the efficient cause of both psychological and physical disorder.¹⁵⁴ By exorcising demons and disease, and by bestowing this power on his apostles and later clerics, Jesus provided a means by which late antique peoples could wage war upon Satan.¹⁵⁵ Exorcism both reestablished the tranquil integrity of the individual body and provided a public ritual by which individuals could be reincorporated into the small, face-to-face world that was basis of socioreligious life in late antiquity.¹⁵⁶ As we have seen, this world was seriously fragmented

¹⁵¹ Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul*, 8.

¹⁵² Dods, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 135.

¹⁵³ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 2.

¹⁵⁴ Brown, *Religion and Society*, 132; Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 66; Flint, *The Rise of Magic*; Harnack, *Militia Christi*: I, 129; Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 189.

¹⁵⁵ J. B. Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 237–240; Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 210; Peter Stanford, *The Devil: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 62.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 18–19; Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 167.

beginning in the late second century, when face-to-face contacts literally implied death and disease.

Augustine's "On the Divination of Demons" became the foremost general treatise promoting the idea of demons, including the notion that they often induced diseases by rendering the air unwholesome.¹⁵⁷ Augustine and other theologians such as Caesarius of Arles were quite explicit that demons did nothing without divine permission. As Flint has pointed out, this theological position on demons both explained events beyond human understanding and saved humankind from having to take full responsibility for calamity:

Demons do not here play that role for which they are later to become so famous in witchcraft trials; the role, that is, of active agents in a drama of fear and repression. Rather they play an almost exactly opposite one. They are used to take the panic, much of the blame, and the extreme penalties from the accused maleficus upon themselves. This humane use of a belief in the magical powers of demons by the early medieval church is one deserving of some emphasis, for, in light especially of later abuses, sight of it can easily be lost.¹⁵⁸

The Christian redefinition of misfortune lifted the burden of guilt from the shoulders of people, and at the same time, through exorcism and baptism, empowered the individual against Satan, who became the cause of disease and death.

Did pagans perceive baptism as an alternative form of "magic" – one that protected them from the demon/devil and the diseases he spread through the Roman world? The Emperor Julian (331–363 C.E.) – a hostile critic of Christianity – certainly suggested as much:

And baptism, indeed, does not take away the spots of leprosy, nor ring-worms, nor warts, nor the gout, nor the dysentery, nor the dropsy, nor the reduvia.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 148.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 153–154. See also Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 67–68.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, *The Arguments of the Emperor Julian*, 74–75.

Christian rhetoric, which beginning with Christ's own parables was highly figural and metaphorical,¹⁶⁰ held out the promise that baptism was indeed more than a spiritual cleansing of the soul. Early Christian texts such as the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* clearly indicate that pagans viewed baptism and chrismation as magical charms with immense healing powers.¹⁶¹ The oldest liturgical texts, the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (c. 200 C.E.) and the late-fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*, indicate that the ingestion or application of holy oil and water were understood exclusively as a means to physical health.¹⁶² Lynch¹⁶³ notes that the “folk interpretation” of baptism was that it drove out the demons who caused sickness, preserving or providing good health.

The sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist also were perceived as a kind of magical talisman against evil spirits, sickness, and death.¹⁶⁴ This interpretation certainly was consistent with the use of medical or disease metaphors in early Christian literature. In Origen's *Contra Celsum* (c. 248 C.E.), Christ is represented as the “universal doctor” of mankind. Ignatius of Antioch referred to the “Bread of Life” in John's Gospel as the “medicine of immortality.”¹⁶⁵ Amulet collections and ritual manuals from various parts of the late antique world lend further support to the idea that many Christians understood their newfound religion as particularly potent dealing with sickness.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*.

¹⁶¹ Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 221.

¹⁶² Frederick Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 29–30, 32.

¹⁶³ Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, 129. See also Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eight Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 140.

¹⁶⁴ Darrel W. Amundsen, “The Medieval Catholic Tradition.” In *Caring and Curing, Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Tradition*, eds. R. Numbers and D. Amundsen, pp. 65–108 (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1986), 97; Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 231.

¹⁶⁵ G. Hall, “Ministry, Worship and Christian Life.” In *Early Christianity Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, ed. Ian Hazlett, pp. 101–112 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 105.

¹⁶⁶ David Frankfurter, “Amuletic Invocations of Christ for Health and Fortune.” In *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. R. Valantasis, pp. 340–343 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Of course, there were many for whom baptism and other sacraments did not provide a cure or protection from disease. Modern medical research nevertheless suggests that the mortality rate among Christians or would-be Christians probably was significantly lower than among contemporaries who rejected Christian rhetoric and promises. Faith can have a very significant impact on whether someone contracts or recovers from all manner of sickness.¹⁶⁷ Perhaps just as important, Christianity held out the promise that those who did suffer and die would nevertheless be healed and made whole again. Prior to the late second century (and the Antonine Plague), most Christians were unsure what to make of Paul's confident assertion that "God having raised Jesus, will also raise us."¹⁶⁸ Christ's bodily resurrection was not a certainty (even if he ascended in spirit to the Father), and most Christians harbored doubts about their own corporal resuscitation. Christians as well as many non-Christians believed that the dead traveled to another realm, separate from the living, although there was contact and continuity of relationships (thus Christians ate with the dead in an extended kinship meal).¹⁶⁹

Sometime during the mid- or late second century, Christianity and other mystery cults switched gears, holding out the promise that human tragedy, which weighed so heavily on the minds of people,¹⁷⁰ was negated by bodily resurrection. Why, Bynum¹⁷¹ has asked, did resurrection become a major theme of Christian discussion and apologetics? Although we may agree with her answer that the promise of resurrection (body restored to soul) made it possible for people, and those they

¹⁶⁷ Ann McElroy and Patricia A. Townsend, *Medical Anthropology in Ecological Perspective* (North Scituate, MA: Duxbury Press, 1979); Jean-Pierre Peter, "Disease and the Sick at the End of the Eighteenth Century." In *Biology of Man in History*, eds. R. Forster and O. Ranum, pp. 81–94 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 123.

¹⁶⁸ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 182.

¹⁶⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990), 193.

¹⁷⁰ Karl Baus et al., *The Imperial Church from Constantine to the early Middle Ages*, trans. Anselm Biggs (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 92–93.

¹⁷¹ Caroline W. Bynum, "Images of the Resurrection Body in the Theology of Late Antiquity." *The Catholic Historical Review* LXXX (1994): 179–237.

loved, to face death,¹⁷² the question remains as to why this seemingly universal need apparently became an imperative during the late second century. The period 150–300 C.E. has been aptly described as an age of anxiety – a time when philosophers increasingly asked the question “what are we here for?” People who are content with their lives do not ask such questions – at least not repeatedly.¹⁷³

The optimistic Christian discourse of resurrection followed or was coincident with the unprecedented and inexplicable suffering and death caused by the Antonine Plague (166–190 C.E.).¹⁷⁴ Arguably at this time, and with succeeding epidemics and disasters, it became particularly comforting to the living to know that they and the deceased would be reunited and that interrupted lives would be continued.¹⁷⁵ Christians presumably took comfort in the idea that an inscrutable but just God had taken their loved ones who were enjoying, or would enjoy, a blissful life in heaven. This promise of life after death is powerfully conveyed in the early-third-century Passion of St. Perpetua (203 C.E.). During her trials and tribulations and prior to her martyrdom, Perpetua had a vision in which she saw a heavenly paradise that martyrs enjoyed immediately upon their self-sacrificing death. Perpetua had two subsequent visions, the first revealed her long-dead brother, still suffering in what amounted to purgatory; in the second vision, which followed Perpetua’s prayers for her brother, he is “released from punishment.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² In a subsequent, book-length study of resurrection, Bynum attributed “a good deal” of the late-second-century Christian embrace of bodily resurrection to a context of persecution, which led to the scattering and dishonoring of martyrs’ remains. There may be some truth to this argument, but I find the evidence for epidemic disease and its devastating consequences more compelling than persecution as a contextual explanation. Caroline W. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 58.

¹⁷³ Dods, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 21–22.

¹⁷⁴ On the optimistic quality of Christian discourse, see Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth*, 196–200; Megan McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints: Prayer for the Dead in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 185.

¹⁷⁵ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 303.

¹⁷⁶ Herbert Musurillo, trans. and ed., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

With the advent of the cult of the saints in late antiquity, Christians could take comfort not only in the promise of resurrection, but also the belief that saints such as Martin of Tours would see to it that all but the utterly damned would realize heaven:

And when, at the Last Judgement, I am to be placed on the left hand, [Saint] Martin will deign to pick me out from the middle of the goats with his sacred right hand. He will shelter me behind his back. And when, in accordance with the Judge's sentence, I am to be condemned to the infernal flames, he will throw over me that sacred cloak, by which he once covered the King of Glory [in the form of a beggar with whom Martin once shared his officer's cloak] and will gain a reprieve for me, as angels tell the King. . . . This is the man for whom Saint Martin pleads.¹⁷⁷

It is worth emphasizing that Stoic and other pagan philosophers, with their emphasis on self-sufficiency, impersonal processes, and natural law, could neither explain the random deaths of young and old, rich and poor, nor alleviate grief through altruism and promises of a compensatory afterlife.¹⁷⁸

Early Christian theologians such as Irenaeus were horrified at Gnosticism, Docetism, and other "heresies" that spoke of the body as some unfortunate epiphenomenon of creation.¹⁷⁹ Around the turn of the third century – again, not long after the Antonine Plague – Christian theologians increasingly began talking about the "enigmatic," rather than hallowed, joining of body and soul.¹⁸⁰ Within a century, theologians as well as the laity were viewing the body as sinful and an impediment to salvation.¹⁸¹ At this same time, Christian literature and discourse championed human suffering or the "suffering self."¹⁸² Simultaneously there

¹⁷⁷ Gregory of Tours, quoted in Peter Brown, "The Decline of the Empire of God." In *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypses in the Middle Ages*, eds. C. W. Bynum and P. Freedman, pp. 41–59 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 50.

¹⁷⁸ Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 27–28; McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 122–123.

¹⁷⁹ Minns, *Irenaeus*.

¹⁸⁰ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 235–236.

¹⁸¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*; Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 14, 96.

¹⁸² Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

emerged “a strange technology of power treating the vast majority of men as flock with a few as shepherds.”¹⁸³

Why fear or hate the body and seemingly value human suffering? Why all the talk of shepherds and their flocks? Certainly the shepherd theme and the idea of the body as an impediment to spiritual perfection or requiring discipline was not new to the third century.¹⁸⁴ One can agree as well with Perkins and Foucault that many bishops found a discourse of the suffering self a source of empowerment, inasmuch as the exercise of power could be justified on the basis of attending to the poor and needy. The poor and suffering presumably were placated by sermons that championed impoverishment or that implied that individual sheep should be ruled in a continuous and permanent way by their pastors.¹⁸⁵

It is quite another thing, however, to suggest that sickness (consciousness of being sick) was largely a social construction,¹⁸⁶ and bore no relation to the Antonine and Cyprian Plagues, or near-endemic malaria, which literally killed many millions of people in the late second and third centuries. Arguably, if people were conscious of sickness, it was because they had ample experience with smallpox, measles, plague, and so on. Once the body’s diseased state became a “fact of life” during the late second century, it made sense for Christians to embrace a discourse that effectively separated the body and soul (a discourse previously articulated through Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism). Moreover, while some and perhaps many bishops and clerics may have found the discourse of suffering useful in their accumulation and exercise of power, the Church, be it conceived as a discourse or an institution, spent as much time “talking” about charity as it did suffering. Even more important, this

¹⁸³ Michel Foucault, “Politics and Reason.” In *Michel Foucault, Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. L. D. Kritzman, trans. A. Sheridan and others (New York: Routledge, 1988), 63.

¹⁸⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society*; Foucault, “Politics and Reason”; Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization: 400–1500*, trans. Julia Barrow (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 96–100; Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 59; Margaret Miles, *Plotinus on Body and Beauty* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

¹⁸⁵ Foucault, “Politics and Reason,” 60.

¹⁸⁶ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 11. Foucault did not deny that late antiquity was a time of great sickness; arguably he was not interested in material causality: “I will pass over the manner in which these things concretely happened.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Random House 1978), 123.

extensive discourse on charity was matched by heroic deeds of compassion. For every “suffering self” there was a “giving self.”

Christianity as Social Welfare

Most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead, turning the common formula that is normally an empty courtesy into a reality: “Your humble servants bid you goodbye.” . . . The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.¹⁸⁷

The above quote is from a letter written by Bishop Dionysius, describing the very different reaction of Christians and non-Christians to the epidemic that raged in Alexandria in circa 259 C.E. Christian communities of Roman antiquity responded to epidemics with not only prayer and healing rituals but also awe-inspiring charity.¹⁸⁸ Although love of one’s neighbor was not exclusively a Christian virtue, Christians apparently practiced it much more effectively than did other groups in late antiquity.¹⁸⁹ Whereas Roman munificence traditionally entailed wealthy citizens raising votive stones, temples, colonnades, baths, and so on, Christian charity was focused on basic needs of food and shelter.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ G. A. Williamson, trans., *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Dorset Press, 1965), 305–306.

¹⁸⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 83–88.

¹⁸⁹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 68; Dods, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 137.

¹⁹⁰ J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 187.

Along these lines, the agape or “love feast,” which was caricatured as a *bacchanalia* by critics of Christianity, was a religious rite that welcomed the poor, who were at first fed and then invited to participate in prayers and psalms.¹⁹¹

As McNeill has pointed out, something as basic as providing the ill with food and water can have an enormous positive impact, particularly when, as is the case with epidemics of measles or smallpox, secondary infections (pneumonia, streptococci) often contribute substantially to disease mortality.¹⁹² The Christian concern with, and indeed, ritual duty, to care for the sick undoubtedly served to increase Christian conversions during late antiquity, when the imperial government was collapsing.¹⁹³ In a fragment of a letter written to a priest of the Roman state religion, the emperor Julian, who also was supreme pontiff, admonished the priest to, in effect, be more like the Christians, attending to the needs of the poor and those in prison. Toward the end of his letter Julian noted that the Christians (Galatians) had won many converts because of their philanthropy:

For when it came about the poor were neglected and overlooked by the priests [of the Roman state religion], then I think the impious Galatians observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. And they have gained ascendancy in the worst of their deeds through the credit they win for such practices.¹⁹⁴

It has been suggested that nothing was more important to the spread of Christianity than the charities that were offered to so many without regard for class, condition, or status.¹⁹⁵ Compassion for others is a prominent theme of the Gospels as well as early Church records

¹⁹¹ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 10.

¹⁹² James V. Neel et al. “Notes on the Effects of Measles and Measles Vaccine in a Virgin Soil Population of South American Indians.” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 91 (1970): 418–429.

¹⁹³ Harnack, *Militia Christi*, 171.

¹⁹⁴ Wilmer C. Wright, trans., *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, Vol. 2 (London: William Heinemann, 1913), 337.

¹⁹⁵ Robin L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 335; Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 51; Schaferdick, “Christian Mission and Expansion,” 68.

and liturgy, which repeatedly emphasize the importance of supporting widows and orphans and caring for the sick.¹⁹⁶ Influential theologians such as Origen (c. 185–253), who is credited with the most successful synthesis of pagan Hellenism and Christianity, saw works of charity as the vehicle to perfection.¹⁹⁷ That Origen’s views were shared by many others is suggested by the fact that the purpose of the catechumenate (the time leading up to baptism) was to judge whether a would-be Christian knew how to behave – “. . . whether they honored the widows, whether they visited the sick, whether they did every sort of good thing” – rather than simply a period in which to master the rudiments of Christian theology or rid one’s soul of evil spirits.¹⁹⁸

Christians did indeed put their trust in a pastorate (a priesthood) whose principal function was to ensure “the provision of subsistence for the flock.”¹⁹⁹ And why not? In the mid-third century, the Christian community in Rome supported over fifteen hundred widows and poor persons.²⁰⁰ Many Christian communities established a “community chest” from which funds were drawn to support the clergy, the needy, and those who gave up a profession (e.g., prostitutes, idol makers) because of conversion.²⁰¹ In his *Apologeticus*, Tertullian clarified how these community chests functioned:

Even if there is a chest of a sort, it is not made up of money paid in entrance-fees, as if religion were a matter of a contract. Every man once a month brings some modest coin – or whenever he wishes, and

¹⁹⁶ Harnack, *Militia Christi*, I, 159.

¹⁹⁷ Thomas M. Gannon, S.J., and George W. Traub, S.J., *The Desert and the City, an Interpretation of the History of Christian Spirituality* (London: Macmillan Company, 1969), 40.

¹⁹⁸ This would change in the fourth century when a flood of people seeking conversion made baptism more of a ritual than the culmination of moral testing. Also, during the fourth and fifth century, many delayed baptism until old age or impending death to limit their sins at death. See Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship*, 94. Such changes do not necessarily imply, however, that charity was no longer valued by Christians.

¹⁹⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 123.

²⁰⁰ Dods, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 27.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 137; Hall, “Ministry, Worship and Christian Life,” 105; Harnack, *Militia Christi*, I, 147–198.

only if he does wish, and if he can; for nobody is compelled; it is a voluntary offering. You might call them the trust funds of piety. For they are not spent upon banquets nor drinking-parties nor thankless eating-houses; but to feed the poor and to bury them, for boys and girls who lack property and parents, and then for slaves grown old and ship-wrecked mariners; and any who may be in mines, islands or prisons, provided that it is for the sake of God's school, become the pensioners of their confession.²⁰²

Christianity was very much an alternative society in the sense of independent, self-sufficient, and self-reproducing communities.²⁰³ In this regard, Christianity had a decided advantage over competing “mystery cults,” which lacked the formal organization of *ekklésia*, which was so effectively mobilized to alleviate real-life suffering. The fact that Christianity accepted all comers also distinguished itself from competing mysteries. The emperor Julian offered this sarcasm:

And if it be requisite to speak the truth, you have ambitiously endeavored to extend your confusion. This, however, I think happens very properly, that you have conceived your doctrines ought to be adapted to all nations and lives of other men, such as inn-keepers, publicans, dancers, and others of the like kind!²⁰⁴

Early Christian communities emulated and often supplanted the sociobiological relationships of the family unit and the larger ethnic community.²⁰⁵ Although the eschatological orientation of early Christianity

²⁰² T. R. Glover and Gerald H. Rendall, trans., *Tertullian [Apologeticus and De Spectaculis] Minucius Felix [Octavius]* (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1931), 175–176.

²⁰³ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 51.

²⁰⁴ Taylor, *The Arguments of the Emperor Julian*, 72–73.

²⁰⁵ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 31; James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 81. Brown perceptively suggested that these communities may have resembled Shaker “families” from nineteenth-century America. Curiously, Brown further suggested they sprang from “. . . a tendency built into the Near Eastern landscape itself.” Brown, *The Body and Society*, 101. For a discussion of

(e.g., Paul's exhortation to celibacy) undoubtedly moved many individuals to abandon their biological families,²⁰⁶ there obviously were large numbers of people during the second and third centuries whose families were taken from them during epidemics. This inference is suggested by not only early Christian literature, but also texts like Porphyry's *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Works*. In his biographical introduction, Porphyry noted that Plotinus, who lived from 205 to 269 C.E., turned his house into an orphanage of sorts.²⁰⁷ The fragmentation and destruction of families clearly was an issue of concern for the author of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which enjoined Christians (including bishops) to adopt and care for orphans.²⁰⁸

In late antiquity no less than today, gender was a social construction defined through performative acts prescribed by society.²⁰⁹ In Roman society the gender "performed" by women entailed far fewer rights and opportunities, relative to men; legally, women were dependent on fathers and husbands. As Weber suggested, religious movements often are sustained by "out-groups" seeking social status, or by in-groups aiming to retain their social dominance. Interestingly, many Christian converts were independent women with moderate wealth who were effectively "in and out," to quote Weber.²¹⁰ Christian assemblies mentioned in *Acts* and the *Epistles* of Saint Paul were said to be in the houses of women; these women were not simply "hosts" but apparently deacons and overseers of Christian communities.²¹¹

how the individualism of the Christian message can give rise, in the context of socio-cultural upheaval, to new forms of social organization, see David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

²⁰⁶ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 31–32; Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 29–30.

²⁰⁷ Richard Valantasis, "Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books." In *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. R. Valantasis, pp. 50–61 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 56.

²⁰⁸ John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 178, f. 132; Irah Chase, trans., *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (New York: Appleton & Company, 1848), 94–95.

²⁰⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

²¹⁰ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 191.

²¹¹ Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), 1. Kee has pointed out that the "authentic letters" of Paul (e.g., *Romans* 16:1),

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (c. 195 C.E.) and the account of Perpetua's martyrdom in Carthage in circa 202 C.E.²¹² tell of aristocratic women who defied their patriarchal families for a "new family" centered around Christ. What do these narratives signify? Whereas the rejection of fathers and the procreative family in favor of Christ bespeaks a theological truth (e.g., even women who are so dependent on men find material existence irrelevant once blessed with Holy Spirit), the narratives also hold out the possibility of Christian families and communities on earth where women transcend gender and have expansive leadership roles.²¹³ Interestingly, Gnostic texts from late antiquity went so far as to cast God as feminine, and they did so using Christian language and imagery, rather than invoking a pagan tradition of mother goddess.²¹⁴

One of the first laws enacted by Constantine in the fourth century abrogated Augustan marriage laws, allowing celibate women to raise children without the guidance of husbands or fathers.²¹⁵ Although as early as the second century Christian women found their own *ekklésiae* reverting back to Roman and earlier Jewish paternalism,²¹⁶ Christian prohibitions on infanticide and abortion and the condemnation of divorce, incest, marital infidelity, and polygamy empowered Christian women relative to their pagan counterparts.²¹⁷ Previously, in Roman society, women as well as slaves were essentially prisoners of their

which probably date to around the mid-first-century C.E., speak of women as deacons, whereas the later, pseudonymous letters of Paul, which date after the first century, speak only of men who were deacons. Howard Clark Kee, "From the Jesus Movement toward Institutional Church." In *Conversion to Christianity*, ed. R. Hefner, pp. 47–63 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 62.

²¹² Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

²¹³ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Elizabeth A. Petroff, "Women in the Early Church, St. Perpetua and St. Macrina." In *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. E. A. Petroff, pp. 60–69 (New York: Oxford, 1986), 63–64.

²¹⁴ Elaine Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity." In *Gnosticism in the Early Church*, ed. with an introduction by David M. Scholer, pp. 295–307 (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1993).

²¹⁵ Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (New York: The Institute for Research and in History, 1983), 127.

²¹⁶ Kee, "From the Jesus Movement toward Institutional Church," 61.

²¹⁷ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 195–128.

bodies.²¹⁸ Aline Rousselle²¹⁹ has noted that asceticism in Christianity began with women who vowed to live as virgins; it was not until the end of the third century that men vowed to remain continent. The appeal of renunciation, virginity, and asceticism was as much, if not more, a matter of rebelling against societal forms of domination than a rejection of the body.²²⁰

Virgins and later monks opted for social disengagement and membership in new communities where mutual service replaced social necessity. Again, if we ask why this disengagement and these new communities appeared in late antiquity, the answer should include disease and its consequences, particularly the disruption of social and familial bonds that kept women and slaves captive.

The Persecution of Christians

Acknowledging disease and its consequences helps explain the spread of Christianity as well as the hostility with which it was greeted by Roman emperors and citizens. In 177 C.E., the city of Lyon witnessed one of the most celebrated martyrdoms of the early Church. Lyon ostensibly was the Roman capital of Gaul and an important center of Roman wealth and power (see Figure 2).²²¹ The brutal murder of its Christian citizens was described in a letter written by the survivors of the tragedy, which Eusebius included in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

For reasons that are unclear,²²² the mostly Greek-speaking Christian community in Lyon, which had emigrated from Asia Minor, was first banned from appearing in public and then subsequently arrested, tried, and sentenced to death in gladiatorial games (“sacrifices” to the

²¹⁸ The situation changed little for slaves after Constantine. MacMullen, “What Difference Did Christianity Make?,” 325.

²¹⁹ Cited in Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, 97. See also Susanna Elm, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

²²⁰ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 47; McNamara, *A New Song*, “An Unresolved Syllogism”; Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 82.

²²¹ Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 21.

²²² See Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, xx–xxi.

Roman gods). At the time of the persecution, Christians were a much maligned minority throughout the Roman Empire. Christians were seen as religious fanatics and were accused of worshipping a donkey-God and practicing infanticide, cannibalism, and incestuous orgies.²²³ This demonization was correlated with Christian refusal to participate in prescribed rituals and sacrifices of Roman state religion.²²⁴ Many Romans, as voiced by Celsus and later Porphyry, believed that the empire had suffered from epidemics and other calamities because of Christian elevation of Jesus to “true God” at the expense of Roman deities.²²⁵ As early as the first century C.E., Luke sought in *Acts* to counter such beliefs by showing that Christianity was not in and of itself disloyal to Rome.²²⁶ Peter and Paul also encouraged Christians to accept and obey Roman authorities.²²⁷ Pagan distrust of Christians, however, not only persisted but also grew. Minucius Felix’s dramatic work, *Octavius*, which dates to around 200 C.E., features a pagan protagonist (Caecilius) who articulates quite well the main complaint against Christians:

Therefore, since all nations unhesitatingly agree as to the existence of the immortal gods, however uncertain may be our account of them or of their origin, it is intolerable that any man [Christians] should be so puffed up with pride and impious conceit of wisdom, as to strive to abolish or undermine [Roman] religion, so ancient, so useful, and so salutary.²²⁸

²²³ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 63.

²²⁴ Burkert, *Homo Necans*; G. Hall, “Ministry, Worship and Christian Life.” In *Early Christianity Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, ed. Ian Hazlett, pp. 101–112 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 103.

²²⁵ Glover and Rendall, *Tertullian*, 183; James H. and Robert E. A. Palmer, “Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate.” *Hesperia* 24 (1955): 320–349; Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 156.

²²⁶ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1970), 212.

²²⁷ Robert Doran, *Birth of a Worldview: Early Christianity in Its Jewish and Pagan Context* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 10.

²²⁸ Glover and Rendall, *Tertullian*, 333–335.

It has been suggested²²⁹ that Gallo-Roman priests and officials in Lyon, who were responsible at the time for providing a human sacrifice to the gods, took advantage of popular resentment and accused the Christians of godlessness. As Oliver and Palmer²³⁰ noted almost a half-century ago, the Antonine Plague, which began around 165 C.E., certainly was proof that somebody had seriously offended the Roman gods. Shortly after the pandemic began, in 167 C.E., the second-century Christian apologist, Justin “the martyr,” was executed for godlessness and immorality.²³¹ As noted in the previous chapter,²³² various sources indicate or suggest that Gaul was affected by the Antonine Plague, presumably during the years preceding the holocaust at Lyon. Interestingly, Eusebius’s account of the martyrdom makes note of the immigrant, merchant character of the Christian community of Lyon.²³³ Did Christian merchants unknowingly bring disease to Lyon? Although no one at the time understood precisely how disease spread, it was understood that human beings could somehow carry and spread disease. It is interesting in this regard that Christians in Lyon initially were banned from appearing in public: “. . . we were not only shut out of our houses, the baths, and the public square, but they forbade any of us to be seen in any place whatsoever.”²³⁴ Moreover, Christians who apostatized were sacrificed along with Christians who acknowledged and remained true to their faith.²³⁵ This execution of apostatizers largely was unprecedented and suggests that the Christians of Lyon were feared for reasons other than their beliefs; their very bodies seemingly needed to be destroyed. All the bodies were in fact burned and thrown in the Rhone River. Klingshirn²³⁶

²²⁹ See, for instance, Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 1–12; W. H. C. Frend, “Town and Countryside in Early Christianity.” In *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. Derek Baker, pp. 25–42 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979); Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, xx–xxi.

²³⁰ “Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate,” 327.

²³¹ Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 74.

²³² See also Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 75.

²³³ Frend, “Town and Countryside in Early Christianity,” 35, f. 37.

²³⁴ Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 63.

²³⁵ Barnes, “Pagan Perceptions of Christianity,” 234.

²³⁶ *Caesarius of Arles*, 46.

has pointed out that communities such as Lyon exhibited a strong sense of common self-interest and were quite prepared to defend those interests.

Monasticism and the “Conversion” of Pagan Europe, 315–800 C.E.

Despite tragedies such as occurred in Lyon in 177 C.E., Christianity experienced impressive growth during the late second and third century, particularly in the cities and towns of the Roman Empire. By 300 C.E., about 10 percent of the Roman world was Christian.²³⁷ Pagans continued to be drawn to the Church in significant part by its charity. Because of the threat of persecution, Christian hospitality prior to the third century occurred mostly in private homes. After Constantine’s conversion in circa 313 C.E., public hostels were erected with private, church, and public funds.²³⁸ Although the fourth century is known for the large cathedrals and basilicas that were built at this time, the most common foundation was neither cathedral nor basilica; it was a small church or chapel that was part of a monastery or charitable institution for the poor and destitute.²³⁹ Caseau notes that textual evidence suggests that Christians of the fourth century viewed churches more like synagogues, that is, as places to meet, rather than as temples or sacred spaces.²⁴⁰ It has been suggested that the “Rule of St. Augustine,” which was derived from a letter that Augustine wrote in circa 411 C.E. to a group of women seeking guidance, reflects the ubiquity of female religious communities that cared for the sick, aged, and others who required charity.²⁴¹ Other sources such as the *vita* of Caesarius of Arles (470–543 C.E.) imply that

²³⁷ K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity. Seven Volumes* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1938–1945), I, 163; Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 7.

²³⁸ Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 52.

²³⁹ Bryan Ward-Perkins, *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy AD 300–850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 56–57.

²⁴⁰ Béatrice Caseau, “Sacred Landscapes.” In *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowerstock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, pp. 21–60 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 41.

²⁴¹ Lucas, *Landmarking*, 62.

the Church devoted considerable resources to infirmaries that cared for the sick.²⁴²

Although anyone could be a Christian as a matter of accepting the incarnation and a life of charitable giving, the argument that God made himself known through a veil that could only be penetrated by hermeneutics presupposed a select group who could read and interpret scripture.²⁴³ After Constantine embraced Christianity, the Church attracted aristocrats and urban elites who saw the office of bishop as an opportunity to preserve or realize privilege and power as “interpreters.”²⁴⁴ Thus, at the same moment that bishops like John Chrysostom celebrated and implemented works of charity, other bishops squandered their incomes in conspicuous consumption and works of aggrandizement.²⁴⁵ This abuse of power occurred at a time of continued sociocultural upheaval, coincident with more epidemics and invasions by the Goths and Vandals. Indeed, by the turn of the fifth century many were convinced that the kingdom of God was at hand:

God made life short, then, so that its troubles might be ended in a brief span of time, since they could not be ended by good fortune. (Maximus of Turin, c. 400 C.E.)²⁴⁶

The final age of the world is full of evils just as old age is full of death. These things have been seen for a long time and continue to be seen

²⁴² J. N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 35.

²⁴³ Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 65.

²⁴⁴ Under Constantine churches could legally acquire property and bishops were given extensive judicial powers with secular sanctions. The fact that barbarian kings, who became effective military rulers of the empire after the death of Theodosius in 395 C.E., eschewed harming ranking ecclesiastics provided additional reason for Roman nobility to pursue bishoprics. Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul*, 144; Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 66; Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 265–66.

²⁴⁵ A. B. E. Hood, trans. and ed., *St. Patrick, His Writings and Muirchu's Life* (London: Phillimore, 1978), 2–3; Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul*, 95–97. The homilies of John Chrysostom (d. 407), repeatedly emphasized how care of the needy, particularly by the wealthy, was the essence of Christianity. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 176.

²⁴⁶ Boniface Ramsey, O.P., trans., *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin* (New York: Newman Press, 1989), 176.

in this white-haired age: famine, pestilence, destruction, wars, terrors.
(Eucherius, c. 430 C.E.)²⁴⁷

Eucherius and Maximus of Turin were not alone.²⁴⁸ As the Roman world spiralled out of control, all the while many bishops flourished,²⁴⁹ more and more Christians as well as pagans looked for alternative guides to salvation.²⁵⁰ This search contributed to what Jonathan Smith²⁵¹ has described as a “utopian, diasporic or rebellious worldview,” manifested in the rise to fame of the rootless holy man at the expense of the cleric and church/temple. Ascetics such as Antony, Hilarion, and Paul the Hermit took to living alone and in small communities in the deserts of Syria and Egypt.²⁵² Here, as elsewhere, Roman institutions that once seemed ordained by God had declined and men had only each other to turn to.²⁵³

Part of the holy man’s attraction stemmed from his demonstration of God’s enduring presence. Although many Christians in 400 C.E. may have believed that Christ’s return was imminent, the fact remained that Christ had not been seen for several centuries.²⁵⁴ The apostles and martyrs also

²⁴⁷ Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul*, 44.

²⁴⁸ Ramsey, *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, 203–204, 212.

²⁴⁹ MacMullen, “What Difference Did Christianity Make?,” 340–341.

²⁵⁰ Significant popular disdain for bishops and deacons is evident from the “Apocalypse of Peter,” from circa 350 C.E., wherein bishops and deacons are referred to as “waterless canals.” See Michael A. Williams, “The Life of Antony and the Domestication of Charismatic Wisdom.” *Journal of American Academy of Religion Thematic Studies* 48 (1982): 23–45, 26. See also Michael P. McHugh, trans., *The Carmen de Providentia Dei Attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 293.

²⁵¹ *Map is Not Territory* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 186–187. See also Phillip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁵² Holy women also emerged in this period but are not represented in the same proactive roles as men. For instance, Mary the Egyptian was a penitent prostitute and Paula was a patroness of holy men. It is not known how representative Mary and Paula were of “holy women” and the extent to which women played a more dynamic role in the early Church. Averil Cameron, “On Defining the Holy Man.” In *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward, pp. 27–45 (UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40–41.

²⁵³ Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 148–149.

²⁵⁴ Norman Cohn, “Biblical Origins of the Apocalyptic Tradition.” In *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*, ed. Francis Carey, pp. 28–42 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 35. Arianism, which challenged Christ’s divinity, brought forth

had become historical figures.²⁵⁵ Theologians such as Eusebius tried to address this absence by writing a history of the Church that demonstrated continuity with the past.²⁵⁶ But many Christians were illiterate; regardless, Christians required something more tangible than an intellectual argument, particularly in a world whose outward signs suggested that God had lost interest in his creation. The desert saints and their miracles provided just such a proof that God had *not* abandoned his creation.

Details of the ascetic communities organized by Pachomius in Egypt were brought to the West by John Cassian (c. 360–435 C.E.), who became a leading proponent of what was to become western monasticism. Following Cassian's lead, a small but significant number of aristocrats (e.g., Honoratus, Paulinus of Nola) and influential bishops and theologians such as Augustine and the "Cappadocian Fathers" (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus) established ascetic communities or monasteries in various Mediterranean cities as well as in rural areas (often near sanctuaries to local saints). Cassian, among others, imagined these communities as producing preachers; certainly some (e.g., Lerins) if not most trained clergy to staff the bishoprics of Gaul and elsewhere.²⁵⁷

As noted earlier, during the fourth century the Church attracted large numbers of aristocrats who, as bishops, were little concerned with the state of the clergy or the large numbers of Gallo-Roman peasants and "barbarians" who remained ignorant of Christianity. What was largely a Roman and Gallo-Roman episcopacy retained notions that went back to writers such as Strabo and Tacitus, who derided the barbarians or Germanic peoples as primitive.²⁵⁸ This lack of regard for "rustics" and

a strenuous reaction that further obscured Christ's humanity. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 86.

²⁵⁵ Martyrs perhaps less so, owing to an "explosion" of martyr cults around the mid-fourth century (MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism*, 120).

²⁵⁶ Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 91.

²⁵⁷ Hood, *St. Patrick*, 2–3.

²⁵⁸ I. M. Ferris, *Enemies of Rome: Barbarians Through Roman Eyes* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2000); Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul*, 27; Nico Roymans, "The Sword or the Plough. Regional Dynamics in the Romanization of Belgic Gaul and the Rhineland Area." In *From the Sword to the Plough: Three Studies on the Earliest Romanisation of Northern Gaul*, ed. N. Roymans, pp. 9–126 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 101; Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 196.

barbarians was ameliorated at the end of the fourth century with the appearance of bishops who were inspired by the monastic movement or who were themselves monks.²⁵⁹ Perhaps the best examples of these influential men were Martin of Tours (336–397 C.E.), Caesarius of Arles (470–543 C.E.), and the monk Columbanus (543–615 C.E.). All three distinguished themselves in different ways by facilitating the expansion of Christianity.

Monastic Exemplars

Martin of Tours was an ascetic monk in Gaul who was acclaimed bishop of Tours in circa 372 C.E.²⁶⁰ We know a great deal about Martin, relatively speaking, thanks to his disciple, Sulpicius Severus,²⁶¹ and Gregory of Tours. Severus's *Life of Saint Martin*, which became perhaps the most influential of all Western hagiographies, detailed Martin's career as bishop, including his choice of a primitive shelter over the bishops' residence, and how Martin traveled about the countryside, winning converts to Christianity among the pagan population of Tours. In highlighting Martin's ascetic life and activism, Severus was neither subtle nor brief in his condemnation of Martin's ecclesiastical peers,²⁶² many of whom apparently preferred a life of comfort over one of engagement.²⁶³ Importantly, during his quarter-century in office as bishop, Martin established at least two monasteries and trained over one hundred monks who carried on his "missionary agenda" both within and without Tours.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁹ Victricius and Patrick were apparently the first bishops in the western empire to propagate the Gospel among barbarians. Chrysostom was unusual among eastern bishops in organizing missionary work among the nomadic Goths along the Danube. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops*, 170–171; Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 202; Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians*, 231.

²⁶⁰ Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*.

²⁶¹ It is important to keep in mind that Severus "overstated" Martin's uniqueness or singular contribution to the evangelization of Gaul. *Ibid.*, 339–340.

²⁶² Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, 43.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6; Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 126–127.

²⁶⁴ Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 47; Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 333.

Martin of Tours died in 397 C.E. Although he and his followers greatly accelerated the conversion of rural pagans, a century after Martin's death most Christians still could be found in urban parishes or parishes on the outskirts of cities and towns.²⁶⁵ These parishes were directly administered by bishops who retained exclusive control of incomes and the right to preach or expound on scripture. In theory, and often in fact, bishops were expected to dispense justice and redistribute wealth by supporting the poor, health care, education, public works, public spectacles, and other "social services."²⁶⁶ In 527 C.E. and 529 C.E., the former monk Caesarius, who was now the head bishop or metropolitan of Arles, convinced his fellow bishops to relinquish some of their power. Parish priests and deacons for the first time were able to preach and were given control of parish finances.²⁶⁷ These rights enabled large numbers of priests and deacons in suburban areas to essentially assume the role of missionaries, proactively disseminating and explaining the word of God to their still largely pagan parishioners. Equally important, priests and deacons were now empowered for the first time to use local financial resources in the war against paganism.²⁶⁸ Caesarius was not only instrumental in empowering priests and deacons, but he armed them with over two hundred sermons (many focused on paganism) that were copied and used by priests in not only Gaul but throughout Europe.²⁶⁹

During the fourth and fifth centuries, urban and, to a lesser extent, rural parishes were the chief battleground of monks and clerics. Yet another battleground was large estates or villas under the control of aristocratic

²⁶⁵ During the fourth century, the number of bishoprics in Gaul went from around 26 to almost 100; in northern Italy, the increase was more dramatic: from 5 to 50. Baus et al., *The Imperial Church*, 207; Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 38.

²⁶⁶ Baus et al., *The Imperial Church*, 213–217; Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, 51; Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, x–xv. Many of these responsibilities were spelled out in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which date to the late fourth century. Chase, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, 12–78.

²⁶⁷ Previously priests and deacons only were allowed to read scripture at Mass; they were not allowed to explain or expound on the Bible. Bishops also retained control of tithes and endowments of land or property made to a parish church. In Spain, this was the case until the seventh century.

²⁶⁸ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 227–230.

²⁶⁹ A. Ferreiro, "Early Medieval Missionary Tactics: The Example of Martin and Caesarius." *Studia Historica* (1988): 225–238, 228.

landlords who often built oratories or churches for themselves and their peasant following. Although the clerics who serviced these congregations generally were ordained by bishops, the resident clergy served at the behest of the landlord, who decided whether the priest could preach and otherwise evangelize peasants.²⁷⁰ Not surprisingly, bishops such as Caesarius and Martin of Tours focused considerable effort converting and retaining the faith of these landlords. This much is apparent from a sermon by Maximus of Turin (c. 400 C.E.), where he scolded landlords for looking the other way while their serfs worshipped false gods:

A few days ago I admonished your charity, brethren, that as devout and holy people you should remove every idolatrous pollution from your possessions and wipe out the entire Gentile error from your fields, for it is not lawful for you who have Christ in your hearts to have the antichrist in your houses or for your servants to worship the devil in shrines while you adore God in church. Nor should anyone consider himself excused, saying: “I didn’t order this to take place, I didn’t command it,” for whoever realizes that a sacrilege is being committed on his property and does not forbid it from taking place has himself ordered it in a certain way.²⁷¹

Perhaps more important than this scolding was the proliferation of monasteries during the fifth and sixth centuries – monasteries that provided trained clergy who staffed villa churches and helped ensure the faith of both aristocrats and their serfs.²⁷²

At the close of the sixth century, the landowning aristocracy among the northern Franks proactively recruited the Irish monk, Columbanus, and his followers to establish a network of monasteries on their estates.²⁷³ Because the Irish did not share the Gallo-Roman tradition of cities and provincial organization, Columbanus and his fellow monks created a federation of monastic communities, each corresponding to a

²⁷⁰ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 232.

²⁷¹ Ramsey, *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, 236.

²⁷² Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 335.

²⁷³ Before coming to the continent, from around 530–590 C.E., Celtic-speaking monks had distinguished themselves by leading a religious revival and winning large numbers of converts to Christianity in what is today Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England.

kin-group and each under the jurisdiction of the “heir” of the founding monk or saint of the region.²⁷⁴ This Irish “model” appears to have been particularly well suited to the equally nonurban traditions of Germanic peoples.²⁷⁵ Although the existing Gallo-Roman episcopacy – the heirs of Martin and Caesarius – were suspicious of the Irish interlopers, Columbanus and his monastic following served the interests of northern Frankish aristocrats who embraced Christianity along with their peasants.²⁷⁶

The Missionary Challenge: Paganism

Martin, Caesarius, and Columbanus inspired and made possible the work of innumerable other monks and clerics who were the front-line soldiers in the war against paganism. Caesarius empowered priests to preach and provided them with sermons with which to evangelize; Martin and Columbanus established numerous monasteries where hundreds of monks were trained who continued the work of evangelization. Although the three men exemplify the role that religious played in the spread of Christianity, the dynamics of the process are not altogether apparent.²⁷⁷ This is especially true with respect to the Franks and other Germanic peoples who left little in the way of commentary on how and why they embraced alternative behaviors and beliefs.²⁷⁸ Even the hagiography of “missionary saints”, such as Saint Martin, incorporate only a few chapters that deal with pagan acceptance of Christianity. The lives of the saints, although informative and clearly

²⁷⁴ Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 174.

²⁷⁵ Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 158.

²⁷⁶ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 177.

²⁷⁷ Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe 300–1000* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 235, 249–250; Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire*, 16; Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, 37; Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular*, 9–10; Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul*, 7; Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 38, 277–279; LeGoff, *Medieval Civilization*, 120; James Muldoon, “Introduction: The Conversion of Europe.” In *Varieties of Religion Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon, pp. 1–10 (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997).

²⁷⁸ Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians*, 230; Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*.

intended as normative, nevertheless represent a small sample of what were thousands of clerics and monks who effected the Christianization of Europe.²⁷⁹

As detailed later, the spread of Christianity entailed accommodation with paganism. Thus, paganism never was entirely “defeated.”²⁸⁰ Still, the fact remains that by the seventh century the majority of Europeans understood themselves as Christians, even if they kept a statue of Ceres or Cybele in their fields.²⁸¹ How did Christian monks and clerics realize this partial yet significant victory over paganism? The question is not easily answered, inasmuch as we know relatively little about the religious beliefs and practices of Celtic and Germanic peoples.²⁸² “Paganism” obscures what undoubtedly were diverse and complex systems of ritual and belief, which are known largely from Christian rather than pagan sources. Medieval hagiography, which is the most abundant literature from the Middle Ages, often incorporates narrative scenes that allude to paganism and its proponents (e.g., “the devil’s familiars”). When paganism was discussed in some detail, as in the sermons of Martin of Braga, Caesarius of Arles, or Maximus of Turin, or in the works of Augustine or Isidore, pagan beliefs and ritual invariably were described in derogatory terms. Because most Christians, theologians included, believed that the *malefici* were in fact powerful, Christian writers were hesitant to go into detail with respect to pagan rituals, for fear that some might employ this knowledge for evil ends.²⁸³

As early as 341 C.E., the emperor Constantius outlawed sacrifice and in other ways curtailed the right of pagans to worship their gods. In 382 C.E., the emperor Gratian all but made Christianity the only imperial religion. Neither decrees nor the proclamations of lesser kings such as Clovis (c. 466–511 C.E.) destroyed paganism, particularly in the

²⁷⁹ Ian Wood, “The Missionary Life.” In *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward, pp. 167–183 (Oxford University Press, 1999), 180–181; *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400–1050* (London: Longman, 2001), 7–17, 247–250.

²⁸⁰ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*.

²⁸¹ Amundsen, “The Medieval Catholic Tradition,” 66; Brown, *Religion and Society*, 140–141.

²⁸² Flint, *The Rise of Magic*; Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 254–256.

²⁸³ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 69.

countryside.²⁸⁴ Well into the Middle Ages, pagans retained a belief in what might be described as “the immediate reality of an invisible world.”²⁸⁵ Reality was not simply what could be seen or felt; invisible forces or “spirits” were just as real and often more important, particularly as they were implicated in natural and other calamities. The challenge for pagans was to anticipate, or even better, harness the power of supernatural forces. Mountains and notably springs, unusual trees, and groves were understood by Celtic and Germanic peoples as places to engage the supernatural.²⁸⁶ During late antiquity, the Celts often constructed simple enclosures and more formal shrines and temples near or at these otherwise sacred places. There votive offerings were made and propitiatory rites were conducted before local and regional Celtic deities (e.g., Lugh, an apparent sun god), who were depicted in various ways, including shape-shifters who assumed animal guises. Germanic peoples shared many aspects of Celtic religion, although they appear not to have had temples and a formal priesthood.²⁸⁷

By the fifth century – in the wake of a population collapse and the abandonment or decline of many towns and cities – most Celtic sanctuaries or temples seem to have disappeared or devolved into less formal centers of devotion and pilgrimage (e.g., open-air sites with wooden altars and stone images). As Halsall²⁸⁸ has pointed out, Gregory of Tours’s reference to a temple in the region of Trier is perhaps unique in all the literature from early medieval Gaul. Correspondingly, the Druids and whatever other formal priesthood once existed among the Celts seem to have disappeared by the sixth century. Secular as well as ecclesiastical texts, including penitential literature (manuscript guides used by clergy to mete out penance), imply that pagans had come to rely on diverse religious specialists. Early Christian literature mentions or describes *harioli*,

²⁸⁴ Caseau, “Sacred Landscapes”; Ferreiro, “Early Medieval Missionary Tactics,” 232; Stephen McKenna, *Paganism and Pagan Survivals in Spain up to the Fall of the Visigothic Kingdom* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1938), 42.

²⁸⁵ I borrow this term from James T. Moore, *Indian and Jesuit* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1982).

²⁸⁶ Pierre Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, trans. B.A. Archer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²⁸⁷ Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 254–255.

²⁸⁸ “Social Identities and Social Relationships,” 157.

auspices, sortilegi, incantores, and other *malefici* who were accused of practicing witchcraft and sorcery, augury and divination, and astrology.²⁸⁹ Some of these *malefici* also oversaw cults to the dead and nature, and supervised festivals and rites of the pagan calendar. In a sermon against soothsayers (*aruspex*), Bishop Maximus of Turin described one such group of *malefici* as ascetics who mortified their bodies:

Let us briefly describe the appearance of a soothsayer of this kind. His head is unkempt, with long hair, his breast is bare, his legs are half hidden by a mantle, and, like a gladiator, he carries a sword in his hands and is prepared to fight. Indeed, he is worse than a gladiator because, while the one is obliged to struggle with someone else, he is compelled to fight with himself; . . . Judge whether this man, wearing this garb and bloodied with this carnage, is a gladiator or a priest.²⁹⁰

Gallic and Germanic communities were in fact well supplied with influential shamans and other mediators of the supernatural who dealt with weather, matters of the heart, prognostication of future events, and perhaps of greatest significance, sickness.²⁹¹

Missionaries and Their Strategies

Where once barbarian strangers or native brigands dwelt in deserted, equally hazardous areas of forests and shore, now cities, towns, islands and woods with churches and monasteries crowded with people and harmonious in peace, are thronged by revered, angelic choruses of saintly men.²⁹²

The above quote is from a letter that Paulinus of Nola (355–431 C.E.) wrote in circa 398 C.E. to Victricius, bishop of Rouen, praising Victricius for his missionary work. The quote is suggestive of the vagueness of early medieval sources with respect to how monks supplanted pagan *malefici*

²⁸⁹ Amundsen, “The Medieval Catholic Tradition,” 74.

²⁹⁰ Ramsey, *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, 237.

²⁹¹ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 69.

²⁹² P. G. Walsh, trans., *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, Vol. I, Letters 1–22 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966), 170.

and effected the spread of Christianity.²⁹³ Victricius founded the first monasteries among barbarians in what is today Belgium and apparently encouraged Patrick to return to Ireland to convert the heathen Irish.²⁹⁴ Not much more is known about Victricius other than the fact that he was a disciple of Martin of Tours.

In Sulpicius Severus's life of Saint Martin,²⁹⁵ Martin is described as unabashedly toppling pagan shrines and temples and replacing them with churches. This aggressive approach, which was followed by later missionaries,²⁹⁶ appears to be corroborated by archaeological evidence from Tours as well as other parts of Gaul.²⁹⁷ Arguably in a "disease environment," among communities with a recent history of unprecedented calamity, missionaries who toppled idols were administering the *coup de grace* to rituals and beliefs that previously had been called into question by virtue of the failure of pagan religious to prevent, halt, and explain calamity. Medieval "missionaries" often, in fact, followed in the wake of disease, taking advantage of pagan interest in alternative "magic." During the sixth century, for instance, the Sueve king, Charraric, sent pilgrims to the shrine of Martin of Tours hoping to secure a cure for the king's ill son. The pilgrims apparently were successful and afterward the king welcomed a monk named Martin, who went on to become a highly successful missionary and bishop of Braga.²⁹⁸ In 591 C.E., Pope Gregory sent missionaries to vigorously convert the Lombards, who were dying from the plague. Five years later, the plague prompted Gregory to "at once" organize another mission, this time to Kent, where a small group of monks reportedly baptized ten thousand.²⁹⁹ According to Bede, "Almost at the same time that this kingdom had accepted the name of

²⁹³ Richard M. Price, "The Holy Man and Christianization from the Apocryphal Apostles to St. Stephen of Perm." In *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward, pp. 215–240 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 236–238.

²⁹⁴ R. P. C. Hanson, trans., *The Life and Writings of the Historical St. Patrick* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 23; Hood, *St. Patrick*, 4.

²⁹⁵ Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, 26–29.

²⁹⁶ Price, "The Holy Man and Christianization," 221.

²⁹⁷ Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 335; see also Caseau, "Sacred Landscapes," 32–36.

²⁹⁸ Ferreiro, "Early Medieval Missionary Tactics," 230.

²⁹⁹ Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular*, 18. On the negative side of the ledger, so to speak, during the Hun invasion of A.D. 451 the "barbarians" beheaded the Bishop

Christ, many of the kingdoms of Britian were attacked by a virulent plague.”³⁰⁰

The aggressive approach employed by medieval missionaries, be they bishops or monks, often was made possible by pagan elites or kings who were won over with gifts and promises of access to trade.³⁰¹ Winning over a king or chief was an effective way for a missionary to ensure his personal success and safety,³⁰² particularly when the missionary aggressively waged a war on paganism.³⁰³ However, rebuking pagans and destroying their sacred places and things was in any case risky, particularly when monks challenged what were long-established traditions such as the “worship” of trees.³⁰⁴ Martin of Tours risked his life (he was miraculously saved) when he tried to cut down a pine tree that was considered sacred by a group of pagans.³⁰⁵ During the early fourth century, some sixty Christians were massacred in reprisal for toppling a statue of Hercules in Sufes, Byzacena.³⁰⁶ In Maximus of Turin’s sermon on the Feast of Saint Alexander, he recounted how the deacon Alexander³⁰⁷ and two clerics were killed in 397 C.E. when they attempted to build

of Rheims because he apparently failed to halt an epidemic of smallpox among the invaders. Hopkins, *Princes and Peasants*, 23.

³⁰⁰ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 377.

³⁰¹ James Thayer Addison, *The Medieval Missionary, A Study of the Conversion of Northern Europe A.D. 500–1300* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1976); Ferreiro, “Early Medieval Missionary Tactics,” 229; Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, 50–54.

³⁰² Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 335.

³⁰³ Lawrence G. Duggan, “For Force Is Not of God? Compulsion and Conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne.” In *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon, pp. 51–62 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Richard E. Sullivan, “Early Medieval Missionary Activity: A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Methods.” *Church History* 23 (1954): 17–35; Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians*, 246–247. Wood has pointed out that scholars perhaps have been unduly influenced by Bede in emphasizing the role of kings in conversion, particularly to the exclusion of lesser political figures such as Frankish priests or monks who clearly were present in Britain before the Saxon invasion. Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 44–45.

³⁰⁴ Stephen McKenna, *Paganism and Pagan Survivals in Spain up to the Fall of the Visigothic Kingdom* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1938), 150–151. Sacred trees were a common feature of Celtic religion, whereas temples with idols were of secondary importance, perhaps because of their Roman origins. Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 337–338.

³⁰⁵ Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, 28–29.

³⁰⁶ Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 64–65.

³⁰⁷ At this time, rural churches often were administered by deacons. McKenna, *Paganism and Pagan Survivals*, 26–27.

a church in the Val di Non in the Tyrol (“among whom the Christian name had not been known before”).³⁰⁸

Destroying pagan sacred places or things did not necessarily induce respect for their Christian replacements.³⁰⁹ Indeed, the missionary who brashly toppled an idol and, in the process, challenged the religious caretakers of the idol, established a precedent by which the missionary and his own “idols” might subsequently be judged and replaced. It was apparently for these reasons that bishops at the Council of Elvira in 306 C.E. issued a canon instructing wealthy Christians *not* to destroy the pagan idols of their slaves when doing so was likely to arouse the slaves to violence. The same council concluded that individuals killed in the act of destroying pagan images were *not* entitled to the honors usually paid to martyrs of the faith.³¹⁰

Rather than wage an aggressive war on paganism, hagiographic and other sources suggest that many Christian monks and clerics challenged yet tolerated competing magical practices.³¹¹ Martin of Tours toppled pagan shrines but “more often” subdued pagans with his preaching.³¹² This more strategic approach was followed by other would-be missionaries,³¹³ including Martin of Braga, who was instrumental during the sixth century in the spread of Christianity among the Sueves of northwestern Spain.³¹⁴ In response to a request from one of his bishops, Polemius from Astorga, who wanted to know how best to reform pagan practices, Martin wrote an influential and much-copied sermon “reforming

³⁰⁸ The three were killed after they rebuked the people for conducting a purification rite (“lustrum”) that entailed a procession of sacred objects around a field or village. Ramsey, *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, 232–234.

³⁰⁹ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 94; see also Price, “The Holy Man and Christianization,” 219–225.

³¹⁰ McKenna, *Paganism and Pagan Survivals*, 34.

³¹¹ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 222.

³¹² Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, 29.

³¹³ Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 256–258.

³¹⁴ In circa 550 C.E. Martin founded a monastery at Dumium, not far from the capital of Braga, where he was elected bishop in 556 C.E. By 572 C.E. Martin had been chosen metropolitan and had twelve bishops from the region under him. He is perhaps best known for his sermon on converting the rustics; he also is credited with establishing several monasteries in Galicia, including one near Braga at Dumium. McKenna, *Paganism and Pagan Survivals*, 104–105; Claude W. Barlow, trans., *Iberian Fathers, Volume I: Martin of Braga, Paschasius of Dumium, Leander of Seville* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1969), 3.

the rustics,” which reflected both insight into paganism and a noncoercive strategy to combat it.³¹⁵ Rather than view pagans as co-conspirators with Satan, Martin saw them as victims:

Then the devil or his ministers, the demons who had been cast out of heaven, seeing that ignorant men had dismissed God their Creator and were mistaking the creatures, began to appear to them in various forms and speak with them and demand of them that they offer sacrifices to them on lofty mountains and in leafy forests and worship them as God, assuming the names of wicked men who had spent their whole lives in crime and sin, so that one claimed to be Jupiter, . . . Another demon called himself Mars, . . . Then another demon chose to name himself Mercury.³¹⁶

By tolerating what were powerful shamans, the missionaries retained for difficult times a theological foil (the devil’s “familiar”) and scapegoat for calamities.³¹⁷ It was in fact common during epidemics in the Middle Ages for Christians to vacillate between Christian and pagan claimants to divine power.³¹⁸ Missionaries on the frontier met such challenges by shifting the blame for epidemics to the *malefici* and by inventing and re-inventing, if necessary, Christian responses to disease and other calamities. Along these lines, whereas Church theologians focused on eternity and represented the sacraments as aids to the next life, missionaries strategically interpreted the liturgy, sacraments, and especially the cult of saints and relics as a means of addressing real-world problems, particularly sickness.³¹⁹ Some of the earliest prayer books (*Libri ordinum*) that preserve the rituals of the Visigothic Spanish Church indicate, for instance, that blessings and prayers for the sick were directed primarily toward the health of the body.³²⁰ In the sixth century, in the wake of the plague,

³¹⁵ Barlow, *Iberian Fathers*, 71–85.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹⁷ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 80–82.

³¹⁸ Dalton, *History of the Franks*, II, 461–463.

³¹⁹ Amundsen, “The Medieval Catholic Tradition,” 73; Flint, *The Rise of Magic*; Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 189; Stancliffe, “From Town to Country,” 58–59; Sullivan, “Early Medieval Missionary Activity,” 28–30.

³²⁰ Paxton has pointed out that Gallican and Irish prayers differ in that they appear to focus on purifying the soul and ensuring the “health” of eternal salvation. Yet Paxton also notes that there are more surviving witnesses to rites for the sick than to any other ritual of the early Irish church. Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 70–71, 78–79, 202.

Caesarius of Arles preached that anointing the sick should be offered as an alternative to magical, non-Christian healing practices.³²¹ It also has been suggested that apocalyptic and millenarian ideas (the impending last judgment) that became popular during the early Middle Ages helped many pagans accept the reality of recurrent disease, particularly the plague.³²²

Flint has persuasively argued that the great popularity during the early medieval period of treatises on the “nature of things” (*De Natura Rerum*), which intertwined scientific and theological explanations for eclipses, earthquakes, and other natural phenomena, were written primarily to provide monks and clerics with insights to counter those of pagan magi (e.g., disease was not the result of elf shot but carried by the wind or clouds and sent by God as chastisement).³²³

Arguably, it was through the cult of the saints and their relics, particularly the complete skeletons of widely known saints,³²⁴ that Christian missionaries gained the upper hand with pagan *malefici*. By moving or “translating” relics to a local church or shrine, which often were built over pagan shrines, the missionaries effectively recouped or appropriated pagan traditions.³²⁵ This transference of emotion apparently was facilitated in part by the Celts’ prior personification of supernaturals and the construction of altars and formal shrines under the Romans. Aboriginally, the Celts and other pagan peoples built ossuaries for their revered dead, from whom they apparently sought help when dealing

³²¹ In another of his sermons, Caesarius complained that clerics employed pagan along with Christian practices to deal with “. . . every kind of infirmity.” Sister Mary Magdeleine Mueller, O.S.F., *Saint Caesarius of Arles: Sermons*, Vol. I (1–80) (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1956), 254.

³²² Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages,” 60–61.

³²³ Valerie I. J. Flint, “Thoughts About the Context of Some Early Medieval Treatises *De Natura Rerum*.” In *Ideas in the Medieval West: Texts and Their Contexts*, ed. Valerie I. J. Flint, pp. 1–31 (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988), 28.

³²⁴ Although the skeleton generally was translated in its entirety to a local shrine (usually in the saint’s home country), it was not uncommon for the bones to be disarticulated and used to establish subsidiary shrines or churches. Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 28–29.

³²⁵ Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 37–76; Howe, “The Conversion of the Physical World,” 66.

with life's uncertainties.³²⁶ Although Teutonic traditions are poorly understood, there is some evidence that among the Franks and other Germanic “tribes,” cults to Odin and Thor and their shrines and amulets were reimagined in terms of Christ, his loyal saints, and their shrines and relics.³²⁷

The cult of the saints built upon pagan traditions³²⁸ yet provided pagans with what were touted as new supernatural advocates and protectors, particularly against disease. People were healed of all sorts of ailments at saints' shrines, or so we are told by Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours, Sulpicus Severus, and other sacred biographers.³²⁹ By the sixth century, a network of shrines with tombs or fragments of dead bodies was established throughout much of the western Roman Empire.³³⁰ The extension of this network continued throughout the Middle Ages and was instrumental in the spread of Christianity to northern Europe.³³¹

Alongside the cult of the saints, the monks introduced Christian festivals and a calendar that were consistent with aboriginal experience,

³²⁶ James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*; Bruce W. Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 12.

³²⁷ Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 189.

³²⁸ Frantisek Graus (cited in Pizarro) points out that one of the most characteristic qualities of relics during the Middle Ages was that they functioned “automatically”; relics exercised their power whether they were in the possession of a thief or a priest, and whether one invoked them with prayer or touched them by accident. This automatism contradicts the doctrine of grace and reflects the extent to which Christianity accommodated pagan thought and practices. Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, *A Rhetoric of the Scene: Dramatic Narrative in the Early Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 202. See also Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 76; Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, 64–65.

³²⁹ The analysis of surviving miracle reports from English and European shrines between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries indicates that over nine-tenths of the miracles involved cures of human illnesses. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*: 59.

³³⁰ Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 6.

³³¹ Amundsen, “The Medieval Catholic Tradition,” 71; Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 20; Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 79; Brown has gone so far as to argue that the cult of the saints is central to explaining the different histories of the Church in the West and Byzantium. *Society and the Holy*, 139–140.

particularly the agricultural cycle.³³² The most important half of the Christian liturgical year corresponded with the time between the winter and summer solstices. The church's emphasis during this period on Christ's cosmic suffering and eventual victory paralleled the day-to-day experiences of pagans, who endured cold and meager food until early summer. The annual Christian feast of Rogation (celebrated for three days before Ascension, the sixth Thursday after Easter) also bespeaks accommodation with the Roman feast of Robigalia and a still earlier Celtic tradition of removing or placating evil spirits. Much like Robigalia, Rogation entailed a procession around the parish perimeter, purifying and blessing the parish and its fields.³³³

The Monastery as Mission: The "Plan of St. Gall"

The monks who effected the spread of Christianity were not "islands unto themselves."³³⁴ They were uniformly associated with monasteries that came to dot the European countryside during the early Middle Ages. Relatively little is known about the size, layout, or functioning of monasteries prior to the ninth century or Carolingian times.³³⁵ In circa 830 C.E., what were probably several monks and scribes drew up a highly detailed architectural plan known as the "Plan of St. Gall." It is not known if this plan was the blueprint for an actual monastery of the same name, which was constructed in the ninth century in what is today Switzerland. Not enough of St. Gall has survived to determine precisely what the monastery looked like and the relationship it bore to the plan.

³³² John D. Cox, "Drama, the Devil, and Social Conflict in Late Medieval England." *The American Benedictine Review* 45 (1994): 341–362; Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 187–188; Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, 181.

³³³ Cox, "Drama, The Devil and Social Conflict," 348. See also Edward James, ed., *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1991), 26; John Howe, "The Conversion of the Physical World." In *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon, pp. 63–78 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

³³⁴ Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, 46. ³³⁵ Pickles, *Texts and Monuments*.

Some years ago, Sullivan³³⁶ suggested that the very breadth of the plan, which covered some 3.5 hectares and included forty separate buildings as well as open spaces for gardens and a cemetery/orchard, implied that it served encyclopedic purposes, providing abbots and their patrons with a schematic “menu of options” to choose from when designing or renovating a monastery. Braunfels³³⁷ likewise considered the plan an “ideal model,” meant to inspire reflection on monasticism. However, not all agree with Sullivan and Braunfels that the Plan of St. Gall was a “theoretical model.” Price has noted that the street pattern and alignment of houses clustering around the present-day church of St. Gall “reflect with amazing accuracy” the boundaries of the monastery as sketched out in the Plan of St. Gall.³³⁸ Riché also has pointed out that the extent and complexity of St. Gall is entirely consistent with what we know of other Carolingian monasteries such as Saint Riquier.³³⁹

The Plan of St. Gall is striking in that it imagined the monastery as fully engaged with secular society, rather than a world unto itself. The Plan features an integrated set of buildings, courtyards, and gardens where the monks could pursue a communal religious life (Figure 5). This more “contemplative space” articulated with and was intruded upon by courtyards, structures, and use areas that essentially hosted the outside world. Significantly, almost 10 percent of St. Gall was dedicated to health facilities, which were clustered in one quarter of the monastery (infirmary; physicians house with pharmacy and sick ward; house for bleeding; two bath houses; a medicinal herb garden).³⁴⁰ The fact that the novitiate and infirmary were in identical, adjoining quarters³⁴¹ suggests that novices spent a good deal of time caring for the

³³⁶ Richard E. Sullivan, “What Was Carolingian Monasticism?” In *After Rome’s Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History, Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. A. Callander Murray, pp. 251–289 (University of Toronto Press, 1998).

³³⁷ Wolfgang Braunfels, *Monasteries of Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 37.

³³⁸ Lorna Price, *The Plan of St. Gall* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 87.

³³⁹ Pierre Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, [1973]1978), 38.

³⁴⁰ Lorna Price, *The Plan of St. Gall*, 32. ³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

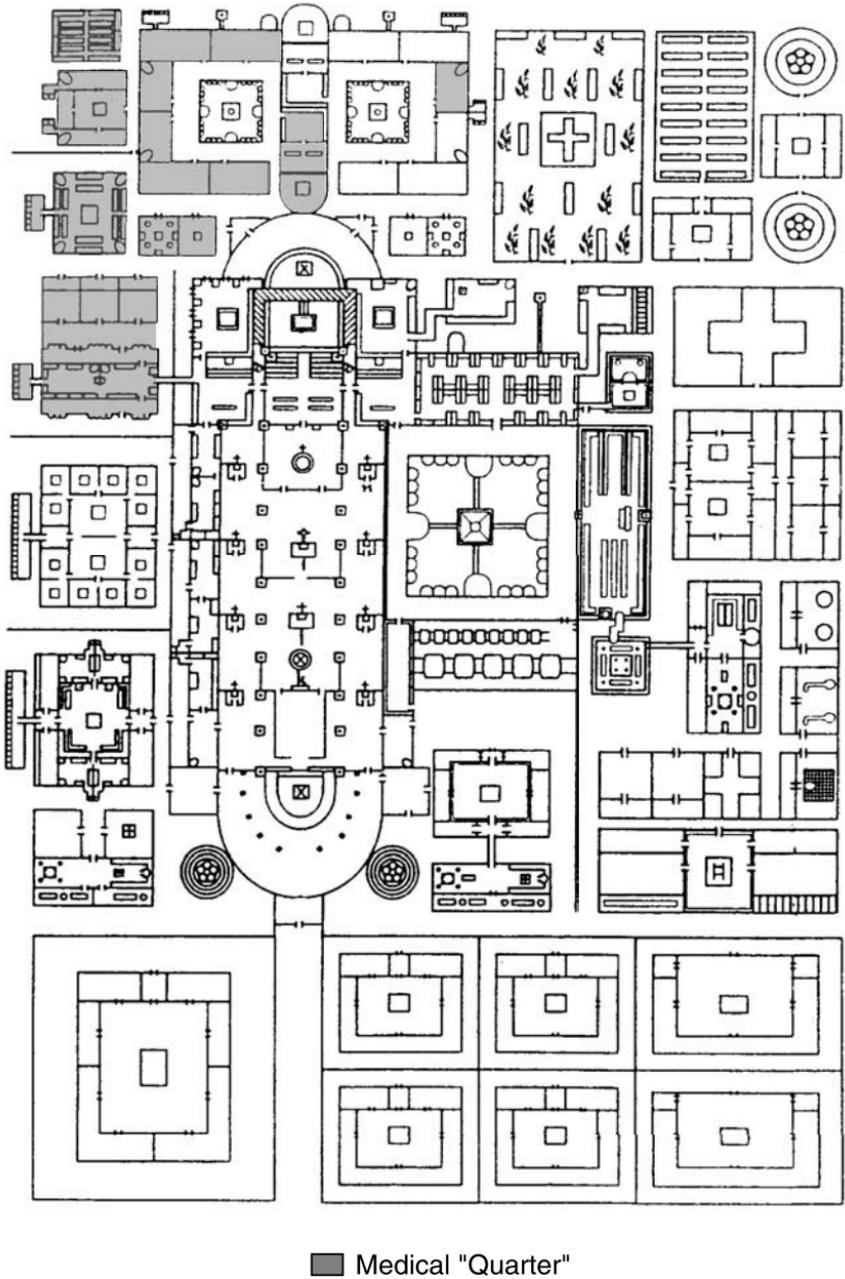


Figure 5. Plan of St. Gall (After Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, 19).

sick. The Plan of St. Gall also includes an external school to educate the laity (apparently the children of nobility), and still other structures and facilities to feed and care for pilgrims, paupers, serfs, visiting dignitaries, and people from almost all walks of life, women perhaps excluded.³⁴² Significantly, rather than being a technological backwater – what one might assume characterizes a “retreat from the world” – the Plan of St. Gall casts the monastery as a repository of cutting-edge knowledge with respect to architecture, horticulture, the use of mechanical devices, milling, metalworking, pottery production, and, again, health care.

What are we to make of the Plan of St. Gall? Was it a new and perhaps radical conception of monastic life, or was it an idealized summation of all that had come before? Monastic historical studies have tended to cast the monastic experience as an exercise in withdrawal, foreign to the mainstream of human endeavor.³⁴³ Scholars often have described early medieval monasticism in terms of isolated communities little concerned with the lives and souls of pagans or fellow Christians. Addison,³⁴⁴ for instance, stated that it was not until Boniface in the early eighth century that medieval missionaries made conversion of pagans central rather than incidental to their lives. In describing “Bede’s monasticism,” his exegetes emphasize Bede’s concern with the church, the library, and the scriptoria.³⁴⁵

The study of monasticism has long focused on the normative writings of its founders,³⁴⁶ who often extolled the virtues of asceticism and world renunciation.³⁴⁷ Yet the beginnings of monasticism were surrounded by

³⁴² Sullivan, “What Was Carolingian Monasticism?,” 274.

³⁴³ Richard E. Sullivan, *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages* (Brookfield, VT: Variorum [1979]1994), 26, 41–42, f. 5.

³⁴⁴ “The Medieval Missionary,” 6–7, 12–13.

³⁴⁵ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, xxv.

³⁴⁶ Susanna Elm, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 8.

³⁴⁷ Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 160–161. Walter Daniel’s *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx* (circa 1167 C.E.) offers a particularly good example of what arguably was a long tradition of brevity or silence about how the outside world reached into and articulated with the monastery. See Marsha Dutton, “Introduction to Walter Daniel’s *Vita Aelredi*.” In *Walter Daniel: The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, trans. F. M. Powicke, pp. 7–89 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1994), 80–81.

debate over Christian perfection.³⁴⁸ Origen (c. 185–253 C.E.) had argued that contemplation was an important yet preliminary step toward perfection; it helped the individual overcome evil inclinations and then ascend to God through a life of charity. In the fourth century, Evagrius (346–399 C.E.) essentially stood Origen on his head, arguing that Christian perfection presupposed becoming “insensitive” to the world; only then could one concentrate solely on God and love of God.³⁴⁹

Evagrius’s teachings were brought to the West along with knowledge of Pachomian monasticism by John Cassian and was embraced by later theologians such as Gregory the Great. Although known for uniting action and contemplation, Gregory the Great more frequently celebrated the quiet life:³⁵⁰

For my unhappy soul wounded with worldly business does now call to mind in what state it was, when I lived in my Abbey, and how then it was superior to all earthly matters, far above all transitory and corruptible self, how it did visually think upon nothing but heavenly things.³⁵¹

Sacred biography does indeed emphasize how farmers like Antony and aristocrats like Paulinus of Nola or Benedict of Nursia found God by becoming “dead to the world.” Yet these same biographies indicate or suggest that withdrawal from society, while an avenue of *gnosis*, infrequently served the ends of divine providence. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Paul the Hermit), the desert fathers and saints reunited with the secular world.³⁵² Many rejoined society or were overwhelmed

³⁴⁸ Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14–33. Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 30–31; Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 102; Williams, “The Life of Antony,” 32.

³⁴⁹ Thomas M. Gannon, S.J., and George W. Traub, S.J., *The Desert and the City: An Interpretation of the History of Christian Spirituality* (London: Macmillan, 1969).

³⁵⁰ Jean Leclercq, O.S.B. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 28.

³⁵¹ D. M. Rogers, ed., *The Dialogues of S. Gregorie: English Recusant Literature 1558–1640*, Vol. 240 (UK: Scholar Press, 1975 [1608]).

³⁵² Cameron, “On Defining the Holy Man,” 38; Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise, Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987), 178; Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, 56.

by a society seeking them. Antony and his monastic heirs invariably emulated Christ's Galilean ministry – caring for the sick, exorcising demons, and in other ways translating supernatural power into *social* power. The fourth-century historian Sozomen noted that the Syrian monk Hilarion, distinguished himself by fighting demons, curing diseases, bringing relief to the poor and oppressed, chastising tax collectors, and conversing with the emperor.³⁵³ Similarly, Paulinus of Nola (355–431 C.E.), one of the most passionate advocates of “flight,” remained committed to the poor and works of charity.³⁵⁴

The Evagrian idea that *gnosis* presupposed world renunciation necessarily elicited a rejoinder,³⁵⁵ inasmuch as the previous history of the Church and indeed Christ's own life were characterized by engagement. In his life of Antony, which presents the earliest and perhaps most celebrated model of ascetic life, Athanasius seemingly went out of his way to point out that one need not be an ascetic or live in the desert to draw close to God.³⁵⁶ Another of Evagrius's contemporaries, Augustine, also was critical of those who equated world-renunciation with Christian perfection. For Augustine what was critical or essential to monastic life was unspoiled human relationships.³⁵⁷ In his *City of God*, Augustine

³⁵³ Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, trans., “Life of St. Hilarion by St. Jerome.” In *The Fathers of the Church, Volume 15: Early Christian Biographies*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, pp. 241–280 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952), 241; Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular*, 15.

³⁵⁴ P. G. Walsh, trans., *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, Vol. I, Letters 1–22 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966), 13.

³⁵⁵ Charles F. Keyes, “Charisma: From Social Life to Sacred Biography.” *Journal of American Academy of Religion Thematic Studies* 48 (1982): 1–45.

³⁵⁶ Michael A. Williams, “The Life of Antony and the Domestication of Charismatic Wisdom.” *Journal of American Academy of Religion Thematic Studies* 48 (1982): 23–45. See also Henry Chadwick, “Pachomios and the Idea of Sanctity.” In *The Byzantine Saint: University of Birmingham Fourteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (San Bernardino, CA: The Borgo Press, 1980), 63–64. McNary-Zak has suggested that this valuing of coenobitic over semi-eremitic practice was not solely because of Athanasius but also disciples of Antony who may have produced a version of the Life of Antony, which Athanasius edited or otherwise revised. Bernadette McNary-Zak, *Letters and Asceticism in Fourth-Century Egypt* (New York: University Press of America, 2000), 97.

³⁵⁷ It was not that Augustine emphasized engagement with the world through charity but, rather, that life in a brotherhood governed by humility and charity rather than a life of isolation and asceticism mattered most in terms of Christian perfection. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 80.

noted such relationships reflected a balance of contemplation and action:

No man must be so committed to contemplation as, in his contemplation, to give no thought to his neighbor's needs, nor so absorbed in action as to dispense with the contemplation of God.³⁵⁸

In his *Conferences*, Cassian essentially imagined the monastery as a brotherhood of love that embraced both contemplative and active lives, with the former emphasizing the study of scripture and the latter preaching. Cassian never implied that monasticism should entail a separation from the rest of society, particularly as he imagined the monastery as producing preachers.³⁵⁹ In the *Thebaid*, Pachomius established monasteries that were tied economically, socially, and spiritually to nonreligious communities and individuals.³⁶⁰ As Goehring³⁶¹ has noted, Egyptian monasticism – contrary to the literary sources – was neither in its origins nor its subsequent expansion a flight from the inhabited world.

The Monastery as Hospital

In this utter seclusion he [Abbot Salvius d. 584] lived in greater abstinence than ever; but was careful, in obedience to the law of charity, to give all guests from without his prayers, and with readiest kindness to offer them bread of oblation, by which many a time sick men were made whole.³⁶²

The Plan of St. Gall certainly implies a worldly embrace, particularly of the sick. Many early medieval monasteries in the West embraced

³⁵⁸ Vernon J. Bourke, ed., *Saint Augustine: The City of God* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1958), 467.

³⁵⁹ See Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 188, 192; Boniface Ramsey, O.P., trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 22–23.

³⁶⁰ Phillip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 149–173.

³⁶¹ James E. Goehring, “Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt.” *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996): 267–285, 272.

³⁶² Dalton, *History of the Franks*, II, 285.

the spirit if not the “Rule” of Basil of Caesara, who was perhaps the greatest proponent of linking asceticism and charity and who made care of the sick and poor an imperative for monks.³⁶³ As noted, the “Rule of St. Augustine” (c. 423 C.E.) likewise emphasized a common life of charity devoted to the sick, aged, and others requiring charity.³⁶⁴ Still later, the much followed, sixth-century Rule of Benedict admonished monks to “take the greatest care of the sick, of children, of guests, and of the poor.”³⁶⁵

Monk-physicians were common during the early Middle Ages and generally extended care out of charity.³⁶⁶ As Amundsen³⁶⁷ has noted, early Christian literature often relates how miraculous healing followed medical failures. This theological emphasis often has been misunderstood and the Church has been seen as hostile to science, especially medicine.³⁶⁸ However, medicine was a standard part of medieval curriculum and often was pursued by clerics.³⁶⁹ Monastic *scriptoria* produced more than “religious texts”; they were the major source of medical manuscripts during the Middle Ages. Like Christianity itself, texts such as the Anglo-Saxon *Lacnunga* bespeak accommodation with pagan culture, inasmuch as they are composite medical texts, incorporating knowledge and practices from various traditions (e.g., Greek, Roman, Celtic, Teutonic, Byzantine). Significantly, manuscripts such as the *Lacnunga* speak of “monastic rites” targeted specifically to acute infectious diseases such as smallpox (“*variola*,” “the deadly pox”).³⁷⁰

Peasants who showed up at the monastery were comforted with medicines as well as rituals such as anointing, confession, and even

³⁶³ Roberta Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action: The Other Monasticism* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995); Patricia A. Quinn, *Better Than the Sons of Kings* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 17–19.

³⁶⁴ Lucas, *Landmarking*, 62.

³⁶⁵ Amundsen, “The Medieval Catholic Tradition,” 83.

³⁶⁶ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*; Paxton, *Christianizing Death*.

³⁶⁷ “The Medieval Catholic Tradition,” 82. ³⁶⁸ See also Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 151.

³⁶⁹ C. H. Talbot and E. A. Hammond, *The Medical Practitioners in Medieval England: A Biographical Register* (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1965), vi.

³⁷⁰ J. H. G. Grattan and Charles Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 25, 201–203.

self-flagellation, which became a prescribed means of public penance and provided an immediate, albeit violent, release from guilt, enabling the participants to identify with the suffering of Christ.³⁷¹ Whereas the public penance of the early Church often was harsh and humiliating,³⁷² it appears to have been particularly so for elites, who were made an example of by bishops; the vast majority of Christians atoned for their sins on their deathbed. As the trend toward private as opposed to public penance suggests, early medieval monks and clerics were more likely to have consoled penitents (again, particularly peasants as opposed to elites), reminding them of an omnipotent, inscrutable, and yet beneficent god, who held out the promise of relief in an afterlife. Note that Augustine's rather severe view on predestination was quickly (in 426 C.E.) moderated by monks in Gaul, led by Cassian, and within a decade or so, by Prosper of Aquitaine and Pope Leo the Great. Leo, in particular, argued that God's salvic will was truly universal and responded to human free will.³⁷³ Augustine also found an adversary in Pelagius and his disciple Celestius, who argued in favor of humankind's innate goodness and capacity to emulate a simple and virtuous life.³⁷⁴ The "guilt trip" laid on everyone by Augustine also was ameliorated by a finely articulated penitential system that emerged during the sixth century and the belief that punishment could be avoided or deflected through prayer and sacrifice.³⁷⁵

As previously noted, many monks were champions of the cult of the saints – saints like their own Martin of Tours. By the end of the fifth century, monks throughout Europe had become stewards of monastic

³⁷¹ Amundsen, "The Medieval Catholic Tradition," 96; M. L. Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³⁷² Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, 138–139.

³⁷³ Philip L. Barclift, "Predestination and Divine Foreknowledge in the Sermons of Pope Leo the Great." In *History, Hope, Human Language, and Christian Reality*, ed. Everett Ferguson, pp. 165–182 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999).

³⁷⁴ B. R. Rees, ed., *Pelagius, Life and Letters* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell Press, 1998), I, 3, 19; II, 7.

³⁷⁵ Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, 135; Peter Brown, "The Decline of the Empire of God." In *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypses in the Middle Ages*, eds. C. W. Bynum and P. Freedman, pp. 41–59 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials, The Development of a Sexual Code 550–1150* (University of Toronto Press, 1984).

chapels and churches that housed the relics of local martyrs who purportedly cured disease.³⁷⁶

The important role played by monks during epidemics is evident in Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks*, which dates to the end of the sixth century. During an epidemic of plague in 571 C.E., Gregory noted:

It was at this time that the priest Cato died. Many had fled from this pestilence; but he never left that place, burying the people, and courageously saying his masses. This priest was a man of great humanity and devoted to the poor; and if his character inclined somewhat to pride, this charity tempered it. Bishop Cautinus, after going from place to place in his fear of the pest, died upon Good Friday, the very hour that Tetradius his cousin perished. Lyons, Bourges, Chalon, and Dijon lost much people through this sickness.³⁷⁷

A striking aspect of the above quote is the suggestion that bishops like Cautinus fled the plague, rather than tending to the sick and needy, as did the monk, Cato. Gregory went on to discuss another cleric-monk named Julian in the monastery of Radan (in Clermont) who also sacrificed his life caring for the sick.³⁷⁸ Again, by contrast, Gregory noted how during a devastating epidemic in Marseilles, around 590 C.E., bishop Theodore withdrew to his church "...there throughout the whole calamity he gave himself up to prayers and vigils, imploring God's mercy, that at last the destruction might have end, and peace and quiet be granted to the people."³⁷⁹

Although today we might read Gregory's comments on the different responses of monks and bishops as an implied critique of the latter, such a reading would be anachronistic. As de Nie³⁸⁰ has pointed out, many Christians at the time were convinced that prayer was the most effective way to deal with a crisis, including epidemics.³⁸¹ Such reasoning

³⁷⁶ MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism*, 121.

³⁷⁷ Dalton, *History of the Franks*, II, 142.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 141–142.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 396.

³⁸⁰ Giselle de Nie, *Views From a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 51.

³⁸¹ Gregory, who was bishop of Tours, actually imitated Theodore when the epidemic reached his own diocese (as did the new Pope Gregory, who busied himself with prayer when the epidemic reached Rome).

is not difficult to understand, when we keep in mind that this was an age that celebrated God's enduring presence. God was always listening and attentive, and, whereas he may have given the demons license to inflict pain and suffering on sinners, he was not unforgiving or unreceptive toward those who would seek his forgiveness. Although this view was shared by monks and bishops alike, it is significant that monks like Cato and Julian not only prayed but also cared for the sick and needy.

The Monastery as Center of Economic Life

As noted, the Plan of St. Gall includes dormitories, kitchens, storage facilities, and other structures and use areas to feed and accommodate the poor. This aspect of the plan was anticipated by Athanasius in his life of Antony, where Antony recounted how he first depended on others for bread and then with a hoe, axe, and some grain, he became self-sufficient and then refreshed others.³⁸² Monasticism as it was developed in the east by Pachomios (d. 346) required monks to care for each other as well as the less fortunate. During the tumultuous third and fourth centuries, large numbers of peasants flocked to the Pachomian colonies that sprang up in the Egyptian desert.³⁸³ Here they were fed, housed, and integrated into socioreligious communities where monks "engaged in every sort of handicraft" (including shipbuilding) as well as agriculture,³⁸⁴ generating enormous surpluses of grain. At times these surpluses were even sent to Libya and Alexandria to feed the needy.³⁸⁵ Similarly, in the region about Constantinople, there are numerous remains of monasteries from the fifth century that appear to have functioned as centers of Christian charity as well as asceticism.

³⁸² Sister Mary Emily Keenan, S.C.N, trans., "Life of St. Antony by St. Athanasius." In *The Fathers of the Church, Volume 15: Early Christian Biographies*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, pp. 127–121 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952), 180–181.

³⁸³ Chadwick, "Pachomios and the Idea of Sanctity," 20–22.

³⁸⁴ Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert," 273; Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community*, 82–86.

³⁸⁵ Rene Fulop-Miller, *The Saints that Moved the World* (Salem, NH: Ayer Company, 1945), 75.

Many of these monasteries apparently owed their origins in part to John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople. Chrysostom, like Evagrius, first believed that salvation presupposed the life of an ascetic. Later, he abandoned this notion and privileged charity as the essential duty and means of salvation.³⁸⁶

Many monasteries in the West came into being during the fifth and sixth centuries when wealthy nobles made gifts of estates to groups of monks. These land grants usually included slaves and nominal freemen³⁸⁷ who paid “rents” in kind to the monks.³⁸⁸ Whereas Roman and Gallic nobles commonly exploited and overburdened their slaves and serfs (*coloni*) – channeling surpluses into civic monuments and conspicuous consumption – monastics were encouraged to redistribute their “wealth.” Such encouragement was implicit in a communal, nonproprietary existence focused on charity and asceticism. For those abbots who lost sight of these principles, there were often explicit reminders from respected theologians. Thus, Cassiodorus, writing about the mid-sixth century, reminded abbots and monks that:

The very rustics who belong to your monastery you must instruct in good behaviour, and not increase the load of their legal obligations. . . . Let a second order of monasticity (*conuersationis*) of the present character be imposed upon them; let them frequently assemble at the holy monasteries; and let them blush to be yours, if they are not recognized to be of your own institute. Let them know that God graciously grants fertility to their lands, if they are in the habit of invoking Him with faith.³⁸⁹

Note that, during the early Middle Ages, there were large numbers of “rustics” or laypeople who pursued “a second order of monasticity,”

³⁸⁶ J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 180.

³⁸⁷ These freemen were bound to the land by the Justinian Code and the law of Constantius.

³⁸⁸ Dom John Chapman, *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), 154.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

serving and partaking of life in religious communities, yet continuing to act in a worldly manner.³⁹⁰

The earliest monastic communities (Tabennese and Pbow), which were founded by Pachomius in circa 330 C.E., who himself died from plague in 346 C.E., entailed the resettlement of villages that appear to have been depopulated by epidemics.³⁹¹ Some if not many monastic communities in the West also owed their existence to small cadres of pioneer monks who homesteaded previously abandoned villas and farms and previously unworked tracts of marsh and forest. Frankly, we do not know a great deal about these monastic foundations. Works like Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and ruins from Ireland (e.g., Inishmurray) and Scotland suggest a small collection of buildings, generally enclosed by a compound wall, and including a dormitory, refectory, and storage facilities (Figure 6).³⁹² From what were humble beginnings,³⁹³ the earliest monasteries became sources of stability in what Paxton has described as "a sea of poverty, famine, plague, disorder, and commercial atrophy."³⁹⁴ This stability was due in part to the "rules" that ordered daily life, which helped ensure regular food surpluses.³⁹⁵ By the eighth century, many monasteries in the west followed the Rule of St. Benedict. Although Chapters 40 and 50 indicate that monks might harvest crops and do other agricultural work when necessary, Chapter 48 is quite explicit that monks were not expected to engage in agricultural work on a regular basis.³⁹⁶ It may well be that many monastic communities, particularly after 650 C.E., were successful because the monks stimulated and reorganized local agricultural production, receiving surpluses as income, which were then redistributed or channeled into craft production and

³⁹⁰ Harry Neff Waldron, "Expressions of Religious Conversion Among Laymen Remaining Within Secular Society In Gaul, 400–800 A.D." Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1976.

³⁹¹ Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert," 277.

³⁹² Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, xxv; Pickles, *Texts and Monuments*, 132–133.

³⁹³ Addison, *The Medieval Missionary*, 78.

³⁹⁴ Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 67. See McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, for a more in-depth picture of Europe in the early Middle Ages.

³⁹⁵ Boswell, *Kindness of Strangers*, 251; Quinn, *Better than the Sons of Kings*, 28–31; Wood, *The Missionary Life*, 259.

³⁹⁶ Chapman, *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century*, 170–172.

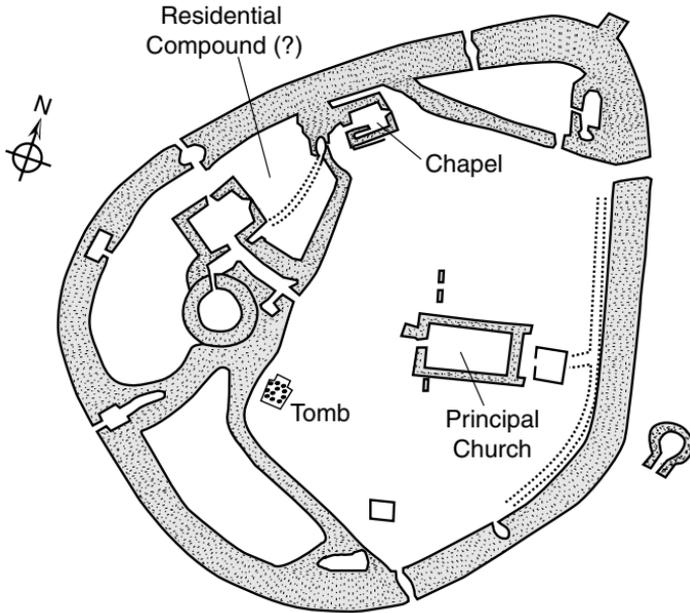


Figure 6. Plan of the Monastic Ruins of Inishmurray (After Heraughty, *Inishmurray, Ancient Monastic Island*, 20).

trade. Although Benedict did not apparently imagine his monks spending their “free time” farming, he did expect them to devote six hours a day working at what were at the time important trades such as carving in wood and stone and working in iron, brass, and ceramics.³⁹⁷

With Cassiodorus’s example, Benedictine monasteries became sanctuaries of ancient wisdom and centers of new learning. Because many monastic communities could not depend or rely wholly on external sources of labor (slaves or freemen), some of this new learning was channeled into labor-saving devices such as water mills, plows, and other technology, contributing to what Lynn White has called the agricultural revolution of the early Middle Ages. In places like Gaul, the

³⁹⁷ Chapman, *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century*, 170–172; see also Constable, *Three Studies*, 28; Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, 12–24; Richard Kieckhefer, “Imitators of Christ: Sainthood in the Christian Tradition.” In *Sainthood, Its Manifestations in World Religions*, ed. Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, pp. 1–42 (Berkeley: University of California Press), 17–19.

decline of Gallo-Roman civil administration during the fifth century meant the demise of municipal schools; monks and clerics became the new “teachers” in society at large.³⁹⁸ Although speaking particularly of the eighth-century monastic foundations of Benedict, Addison’s³⁹⁹ comment that they served the surrounding areas as ecclesiastical, educational, agricultural, and industrial centers may well apply to monastic foundations more generally.⁴⁰⁰ It was presumably for this reason that Daniel of Winchester advised Boniface to point out to pagans how much better off Christians were in terms of worldly possessions.⁴⁰¹

The Monastery and the [Re]Ordering of Social Life

Addison⁴⁰² has aptly noted that Celtic monasteries were in a sense tribal institutions – centers of family relation that served as a school and asylum for all who were related by blood to the monastic founder or patron. What was true of Celtic monasteries was probably true of monasteries elsewhere in western Europe, inasmuch as kinship also was a key to social life among Germanic peoples.⁴⁰³ In this regard, the Plan for St. Gall reflects a centuries-old tradition of providing for the well-being of children. Children were a part of monastic life in many of the earliest cenobitic settlements of Syria and Egypt. They were subsequently welcomed in the monasteries founded and organized under Basil’s “rule.”⁴⁰⁴ Children also were commonplace in the early monastic communities of the West, although it is not clear that this was oblation as opposed to education or fostering.⁴⁰⁵ It appears that many if not most children who were reared in monasteries were given to the Church under informal

³⁹⁸ Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 133.

³⁹⁹ *The Medieval Missionary*, 92–93.

⁴⁰⁰ See also Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 33–34; Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action*.

⁴⁰¹ Sullivan, *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages*, 717.

⁴⁰² *The Medieval Missionary*, 76.

⁴⁰³ Geary, “Barbarians and Ethnicity,” 111; Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, 263–268. Thompson in fact argued that a major reason why Germanic groups such as the Tervingi embraced Arianism was that the notion of a son subordinate to the Father resonated with German social structure. E. A. Thompson, *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

⁴⁰⁴ Quinn, *Better than the Sons of Kings*, 24. ⁴⁰⁵ Boswell, *Kindness of Strangers*, 230.

or individual arrangements.⁴⁰⁶ Although the Rule of St. Benedict and subsequent canonical legislation resolved, in theory, the status of oblates – donated children became irrevocable wards of the monastery – in practice, parents could reclaim their obliterated children and significant numbers left the monastery of their own free will upon reaching adulthood.⁴⁰⁷

In the past, scholars have tended to emphasize particular meanings or functions of oblation, reflecting in part their own predicament of culture.⁴⁰⁸ Thus, some have seen it as a religious act rooted in Judeo-Christian theology (e.g., *I Samuel* 1:11; *Mark* 10:4, 14); others have emphasized how it fit the material conditions of life (sociocultural upheaval); still others have emphasized how oblation was an expression of age-old social structures, particularly patron–client relationships and other dependency relationships realized through fictive kinship.

The reception of children in a variety of ways suggests that the assimilation and rearing of children in monasteries fulfilled various functions and was understood to have various meanings.⁴⁰⁹ Certainly oblation – or something like it – was rooted in “pagan” experience. In the first century B.C.E., Caesar noted with respect to the Druids:

... a great number of young men gather about them for the sake of instruction ... many are sent by parents and relatives. ... Report says that in the schools of the Druids they learn by heart a great number of verses, and therefore some persons remain twenty years under training.⁴¹⁰

Given this Celtic tradition, and the profound dislocations resulting from disease, famine, and migration, it makes sense that oblation became institutionalized in early medieval Europe.⁴¹¹ Most peasant households during this period probably had no more than two children.⁴¹² This

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴⁰⁸ In this regard, De Jong has unfairly criticized Boswell for reflecting “contemporary sensibilities,” as if she or any of us can do otherwise. Mayke De Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 5.

⁴⁰⁹ Boswell, *Kindness of Strangers*, 228, 235.

⁴¹⁰ Edwards, *Caesar: The Gallic War*, 337–339.

⁴¹¹ Boswell, *Kindness of Strangers*, 198.

⁴¹² Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, 206.

was hardly a great “surplus.” And yet, in the face of epidemics and famine, many poor parents donated or “exposed” their children, believing monasteries would provide for the children.⁴¹³ Because parents often maintained ties to the monasteries where they donated their children, the monasteries were indebted to the parents. Arguably oblation was another form of fictive kinship and coparenthood,⁴¹⁴ which provided social and economic alliances and networks to replace lineage and clan-based systems that were torn apart by epidemics. Children who might have been a drain on their parents – much like the abandoned villas taken over by monks – became productive members of the monastery, and by extension, society.⁴¹⁵ Many children grew up to become monks or clerics,⁴¹⁶ and still others who left the monastery (well disciplined and educated) took up leadership roles in society. In this regard, oblation was perhaps the greatest contributor to the “rise of Christianity” in early medieval Europe. It was always difficult for pagan adults to forgo customs and beliefs that had been passed down over generations. As Caesarius of Arles understood, the key to eradicating pagan “superstitions” was to remove the young people from the process of transmission. Thus, at the Council of Vaison in 529 C.E., Caesarius moved to have young unmarried men leave their homes in his diocese of Arles to receive a Christian upbringing in the homes of local priests. This was already a common practice in Italy⁴¹⁷ and paralleled oblation at monasteries throughout Europe.

Conclusion

Ancient society was unrelentingly brutal and precarious, and the world of Gregory of Tours was no exception. As in modern underdeveloped countries most people had to cope with squalor, misery, and grinding poverty. Senseless violence and cruelty were common. . . . Intemperate

⁴¹³ Boswell, *Kindness of Strangers*, 256–257. ⁴¹⁴ Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*.

⁴¹⁵ Boswell, *Kindness of Strangers*, 241.

⁴¹⁶ In Spain and presumably elsewhere a main reason why oblation was adopted was that it held out the promise of creating a corps of missionaries and bishops to win converts to Christianity and combat heresy. Quinn, *Better than the Sons of Kings*, 28.

⁴¹⁷ Klingshirm, *Caesarius of Arles*, 230, 241–242.

weather could easily disrupt agrarian production. An enormous swarm of locust, a late frost, a heavy hailstorm, an extended drought – any of these catastrophes caused local famines that demoted people to the level of animals, forced to eat stalks and grass. Harsh living conditions, inadequate nutrition, and the constant sicknesses and disabilities also reduced people to a subhuman existence.⁴¹⁸

Life, at a minimum, was difficult during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. As we have seen, the downturn in human fortunes began during the late second century, coincident with the appearance of new and more virulent forms of infectious disease. Over the course of the next five centuries, smallpox, measles, malaria, and the plague (to name only those of which we are reasonably sure) claimed millions of lives. We know from authors such as Galen that epidemics at times spread “throughout the Roman Empire,” affecting Gaul and Spain and presumably more distant provinces such as Britain.

Acute and chronic infectious diseases exacted an enormous toll on Greco-Roman civilization in Rome and other cities of the Mediterranean. Here Christianity won many of its first converts, principally among the underprivileged but also among merchants and aristocrats. Diseases like measles and smallpox do not respect privilege. The nascent Church also was universal, welcoming rich and poor. Although it is obviously difficult to infer what moved countless individuals to accept Christianity, the Christian “message” was conveyed in rhetoric that was highly figural and metaphoric. In keeping with the Gospels, where Christ often spoke in parables, early Christian texts presented religious truth in signs and symbols along with rational argument.⁴¹⁹ Such rhetoric had the advantage that it could be variously interpreted and tailored to different audiences and times. Significantly, during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, bishops, deacons, and later monks interpreted and popularized Christian sacraments as rituals to heal sick bodies.

Some years back, Ramsay MacMullen⁴²⁰ posed the question, “What difference did Christianity make?” His answer was, “very little,”

⁴¹⁸ Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 82.

⁴¹⁹ Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 48, 50.

⁴²⁰ “What Difference Did Christianity Make?”

particularly when it came to sexual norms, slavery, corruption, judicial violence, and gladiatorial games. Although early Christian literature exaggerates the degree to which deacons, clerics and later monks cured the sick, it does so to make a point that was otherwise valid – Christians were *more* successful than their pagan counterparts in dealing with epidemic disease and other calamities. Christian “missionaries” – those clerics and monks who established Christian communities among pagans – owed their success to what by the fourth century already was a centuries-old tradition of charity and care of the sick and homeless, including young children. The monks who fanned out over Europe during the early Middle Ages offered a whole host of beliefs and practices, everything from formal rites or sacraments to simple prayers, pilgrimages, and religious dramas, which built upon as well as transcended pagan traditions. As was the case with the ritual of Rogation, Christian practices were not simply pagan practices in “new dress,” implying that Christian meanings (conveyed through the liturgy) were lost or irrelevant. As Cox⁴²¹ has pointed out, what were traditional pagan concerns and ritual – proactively ensuring harmony and negating the power of evil daemons within a bounded area (i.e., a village) – were complemented by narratives that spoke of the life and struggle of Jesus and all Christians who were at war with the daemons of old, now “better” defined by Christian narratives.

Rather than wage a war against idolatry, most successful (and long-lived) monks attracted pagans through charity and benevolence and by living holy lives, worthy of the saints whose relics worked miracles in the here and now.⁴²² Monks like Martin of Tours, Martin of Braga, and Columbanus offered pagan communities other worldly benefits, including relief from tax collectors⁴²³ and an audience with aristocrats and emperors.⁴²⁴

To acknowledge the importance of disease and the material benefits of Christian ritual and clerics/monks is not to discount the “power

⁴²¹ “Drama, the Devil, and Social Conflict in Late Medieval England,” 347–352.

⁴²² Addison, *The Medieval Missionary*, 80; Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 25.

⁴²³ Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular*, 15.

⁴²⁴ Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, 35.

of ideas” or social constructions. Ideas presuppose living (and dying) human beings. The development of Christian theology often followed or was coincident with new realities requiring interpretation and meaning.⁴²⁵ Too often Christian “ideas” and discourse about charity, virginity, suffering, and so on, have been divorced from daily life. Historically, philosophically idealist theories and strategies – viewing the rise of Christianity in terms of great men and great ideas – has led to the marginalization of historical humans.⁴²⁶ More recent scholars like Foucault⁴²⁷ and Le Goff⁴²⁸ have been “minimalist” in their own right, casting the rise of Christianity in terms of the replacement of “cheerful other worlds” with a preoccupation with purgatory and hell, enforced by “exhaustive and permanent confession.” From such a perspective, “the Church” appears as a monolithically sinister regime of power; pagans for the most part lack agency and mimic Greco-Roman stereotypes of “rustics” and “barbarians.”⁴²⁹

Neither “the Church” nor “pagans” were monolithic. The same Church that brought pain to bear on the human body, paradoxically, showed “obsessive compassion” for the afflicted poor.⁴³⁰ The same Church that promulgated rules against marriage between close kin to apparently gain control of property used that property to feed and care for orphans, widows, and other faithful.⁴³¹ For every bishop who preached of hell and the sin of fornication, there were others such as Martin of Braga who preached of charity and warned of the devil’s snares.⁴³²

⁴²⁵ Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, 16.

⁴²⁶ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22–23.

⁴²⁷ *The History of Sexuality*, 125.

⁴²⁸ *Medieval Civilization*, 187.

⁴²⁹ Relatedly, Goldhill has noted that Foucault’s “panoptic vision” of ancient sexuality ignores the agency of ancient readers of erotic narratives. Simon Goldhill, *Foucault’s Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44–45.

⁴³⁰ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 441.

⁴³¹ Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 46–47.

⁴³² Even Augustine, who is famous for his doctrine of concupiscence and repression of sex, expected bishops to preach not on sexual sins but *sclera*, violence, fraud, and oppression. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 424–425.

People who were possessed, ill, or otherwise polluted essentially were seen as victims of Satan.⁴³³ Through participation in the sacraments and by enlisting one's guardian angel and a saint(s), the individual, and by extension, the community could negate the devil and his influence. True, the laity's guilt quotient was increased significantly by Augustine (human beings, not Satan, were to blame for sin), but this guilt was ameliorated by the idea that misfortune was a consequence of a *collective* failure to fulfill some promise or covenant with supernaturals. Guilt also was assuaged by a finely articulated penitential system to correct prior imbalances.⁴³⁴

The rise of Christianity between 150 and 800 C.E. is the story of millions of pagans who contributed as much as Augustine, Eusebius, and other well-known theologians to Christianity. The "masses" did not get to author the historical record or Christian literature. This silence should not be mistaken for a lack of agency. Lost to history are thousands of pagan converts, many of whom became clerics and monks, who interpreted Christian theology and ritual in accordance with pagan traditions. This is perhaps most apparent in the the cult of the saints, which was central to the Christianity embraced by pagan Europe. The cult of the saints shifted the focus of Christianity from a somewhat distant God to local heroes who once "dead," continued to act as protectors. In significant ways, the cult of the saints represented a continuation of pagan traditions as well as an embrace of the particularly Christian belief in the incarnation. The story of the Gospels is the story of the Holy Spirit alighting in a mere mortal, Mary, who then gives birth to the son of God. Saints are likewise "normal folk" who are filled with the Holy Spirit and who evidence the divine.

The rise of Christianity in Europe is the rise of the cult of the saints, and correspondingly, a Church that was enormously diverse. As Finucane has noted, during the early Middle Ages there was not only French, German, Spanish, and Irish "Churches," but, within each, hundreds of Christian communities that often were led by a semiliterate cleric who was related through kinship (real and fictive) to his peasant congregation – a congregation that embraced Christ's passion and the

⁴³³ Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 153–154.

⁴³⁴ Brown, *Religion and Society*, 135.

cult of the saints, all the while it “muttered charms over their ploughs and whispered magic words at crossroads.”⁴³⁵ This Church of pre-Carolingian times (prior to 800 C.E.) was quite different from the Church of the later Middle Ages, which better approximates an all-powerful “regime of power” with a [relatively speaking] totalizing discourse.

⁴³⁵ Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 10.