

Saints and Hagiography: The View from Constantinople

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ROBERT Bartlett's book is devoted to one question that, at first glance, is deceptively simple: *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?* The question, it turns out, requires an extensive answer in the course of just under 800 pages. They are supported by forty-four pages of bibliography of primary sources, which are quoted with preference in the relatively minimal footnotes (something the general readership will note with gratitude), and fifty-five pages that list the secondary literature (whose existence will gladden the hearts of the scholarly readers) that constitute the foundation of this scholarly edifice, although—very reasonably—only sparingly quoted.

The book is both narrative and reference work. The first part, entitled 'Developments,' answers the question: How did it come about that Christians believed in saints and their powers? The second, much more extensive part, addresses the question: What are the different manifestations of this belief? In nine chapters, it deals with all the relevant issues, from calendars and the patterns of liturgical commemoration, to pilgrimage and paper icons—often with encyclopedic scope.

The work is clearly the product of many years of scholarly engagement in the seclusion of libraries, amidst the dust of manuscript reading rooms (to judge from the unpublished manuscript materials that are cited) and at the lectern in front of students. The expert and experienced hand is also visible in that it is well-paced, subdivided in short chapters and subsections, with various central issues reappearing in different historical contexts.

This is very much a book of the 21st century, reflecting current trends in historical studies. Five salient features are especially worthy of note:

1. It takes a global view of Christendom, from Ireland and Scandinavia to Constantinople.
2. It includes, wherever possible, statistics, tables, and graphs, to demonstrate larger trends—a helpful tool for meaningful comparisons across time periods and/or geographical regions.
3. It draws attention to material culture, in the form of objects or images (some of them depicted in the illustrations). It is commendable that these are not only described, but also that their dimensions are indicated.

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4. It includes female saints and female worshippers as a matter of fact (without any of the self-conscious declarations that often reveal that the author prides himself on doing something unusual).
5. It puts the people who engage with the saints at the center of inquiry. The subtitle of the book announces its intent: *Saints and their Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. This is a subtle, but significant, shift. Instead of the more common 'saints and their cult' (which would imply organized religion as guided by the institutional church), Bartlett's focus is on the individual faithful, men and women, and their interaction with the saints, whether in private or in public.

It is particularly in this last regard that the book is breaking the mold. It constitutes a substantial addition to our understanding of the role of saints in the religious life of men, women, and children across medieval society—sometimes within the framework of ecclesiastical structures, but more often far removed from it.

In many ways, the book breaks with the established master narratives that have become common to trace the rise of the cult of saints:⁴

Hagiography: The systematic treatment of the written sources that document the saints' cults (lives, miracle collections, sermons) forms the very last chapter of the book. This is a conscious choice. Bartlett is less interested in what people said or wrote, that is literary constructions, representations, or 'discourse' (a word that, if I am not mistaken, he has managed to avoid altogether), than in what people *did*.

The origins of the cult of relics: Past scholars have made a great deal of Gregory the Great's comment (circa 540–604) that 'we' leave dead bodies intact, while 'they,' that is the Greeks, are willing to fragment them into relics, interpreting this as one element in the 'parting of ways' between East and West. Bartlett clearly states that the first relic that is a fragment of a body part is attested around the year 300 in Carthage—rendering this piece of East-West distinction moot once and for all.⁵

The models for saints, especially those who had lived as ascetics, but also for martyrs: Scholarly or popularizing studies have tended to emphasize the *imitatio Christi* as essential for sanctity from the outset, an aspect that Bartlett plays down. This is a wise move. At least in the formative phase of Christian asceticism and monasticism, the emulation of Christ was not a prominent issue and rarely articulated by practitioners or theorists. The models they invoked were John the Baptist and the Prophets, especially

⁴Arnold Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien. Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997).

⁵Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 240.

Elijah or Elisha. It is good to see Bartlett take a clear stance by insisting that Christocentric piety was a phenomenon that arose in the later Middle Ages.

The role of bishops in promoting and controlling the cult of saints: In Late Antique scholarship on the rise of the institutional church (as opposed to Christianity as religious practice), episcopal control of saints' cults has been emphasized over and over again, largely—I suspect—based on the example of Ambrose's *inventio* of Gervasius and Protasius (circa 339–397) and on Gregory of Tours's attempts to position himself as the caretaker of the cult of Saint Martin (538–593/594). Bartlett addresses this in summary fashion, in a chapter with the apt title 'Policing the saints.' He quietly chips away at the issue of episcopal control of saints' cults, for example by pointing out that the first *translatio* was not instigated by a bishop, but by a zealous Christian ruler, when Gallus (351–354), the nephew of Emperor Constantine, moved the body of the martyr Babylas from its original resting place in a cemetery outside of Antioch to the leafy suburb of Daphne with the aim to suppress the local oracle of Apollo.

The importance of papal canonization: Referring to detailed documentation and earlier studies, Bartlett makes abundantly clear that (1) canonization through the papacy only occurred very late in the development of the cult of saints, around the year 1200, and that (2) it affected only about 10% of newly generated saints in the Middle Ages. The most prolific time for the canonization of saints, as Bartlett points out with palpable delight, was the papacy of John Paul II who died in 2005: "The 'age of canonization' is not to be sought in the Middle Ages at all, but in the late twentieth century."⁶

In some other ways, the book follows established master narratives, and this, too, deserves comment.

The origins of the cult of saints in the cultural and religious bedrock of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean: This leads to questions of continuity—questions that were asked in the early 20th century by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in Germany, with Hermann Usener⁷ (not mentioned by Bartlett, but greatly admired by the influential Roman historian Arnaldo Momigliano) as its strongest proponent, next to Ernst Lucius (who is cited extensively). Bartlett wisely distinguishes between "actual continuity" and "functional similarity" in the approach to the saints by pious worshippers.⁸ He insists on significant differences between the cult of Greco-Roman deities and that of Christian saints: animal sacrifice, institutional divination, sacred sites in nature are

⁶Ibid., 60.

⁷Arnaldo Momigliano, preface to *Aspetti di Hermann Usener, filologo della religione*, ed. Graziano Arrighetti (Pisa: Giardini, 1982). A good example of Hermann Usener's method is his *Legenden der heiligen Pelagia* (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1879).

⁸Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 612.

prominent and distinctive features in the traditional cults, but (mostly) absent in the Christian system.

The cult of the heroes and the cult of the saints: One step below the gods in the ancient hierarchy of divinity, there are the heroes, mortals who have been elevated to divine status. There are isolated reports, mostly from the classical period and the Roman Empire, of their tombs as special places for cultic practices. But did heroes act as intercessors? Were they, in Bartlett's useful wording, prayed *to*? Most recent discussions of the rise of the cult of saints in Late Antiquity refrain from mentioning any supposed continuity with the cult of heroes—and, in my view, rightly so. The tombs of heroes were very few, and by the time of the age of martyrs, they had ceased to be cult sites for many centuries. How far back should we go in our search for 'functional similarities'?

The cult of the dead and the cult of the saints: The Roman cult of the dead included the Christian martyrs who had been executed during the persecutions of the first three centuries C.E. This was later extended to Christian saints who had died of natural causes. Bartlett takes this evolution for granted and builds much of his argument on it. But it is possible to push the agenda further. One of the most interesting questions in current scholarship, and an issue that would repay detailed further study, is the degree to which the saints, or rather, living holy men and women, are the actual successors of the martyrs. The key to unlock this issue is the significance of intercession, which Bartlett acknowledges as the defining feature of a saint. Intercession did not have to be posthumous. The popularity of living holy men, especially ascetics who acted as spiritual fathers, rested on their function as intercessors. Intercessory powers were also associated with martyrs-to-be and confessors who were ready for martyrdom but did not suffer death. Seen from this angle, being dead and buried at a potential cult site was not a prerequisite for sanctity—although it certainly helped.

This raises a further question, the relation between sanctity and asceticism, especially in its institutionalized form, monasticism. In late antiquity, at least, the boundaries between them were opaque. Future studies, picking up on Bartlett's monumental achievement, may well develop further questions: Did monks have a particular affinity for certain cults, beyond those of their founders? How did monastic practices relating to the saints differ from those of laypeople?

Since I was invited to contribute to this forum from the perspective I know best, let me also add a few thoughts concerning Byzantium. The inclusion of Byzantium is noteworthy and welcome. I could quibble why this or that item is not featured in the bibliography, but that is beside the point.⁹ By integrating medieval Greek Christianity as a matter of fact, the book shows

⁹Particularly important, and well-known to Bartlett, is Stephanos Efthymiadis, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

the interconnectedness of Christendom across the Mediterranean and beyond. At the same time, Bartlett is acutely aware of regional specificities, drawing attention to different developments in different regions throughout Christendom. This is commendable. Yet, if different developments occur in Greek Christendom, as compared to Latin Christendom, this is sometimes represented as an indication of a 'parting of ways' between East and West. The Western tradition is thus assumed to be normative (which is to be expected, given the focus and approach of the book), and divergence not merely diagnosed, but also depicted as deviation.

By the eighth century, there was in Greek and in Latin Christendom considerable discussion about the value of pictorial representations in the cult of the saints. In Byzantium, this took the violent form of iconoclasm. Bartlett treats this in detail in the second, thematic part of the book, but not in the historical narrative in the first part. Byzantine iconoclasm is a historical phenomenon on which the amount of spilt ink is inversely proportional to the actual number of reliable sources. For Bartlett's book, it would have been helpful to make a clear distinction between images of Christ and images of the saints, as did the theologians engaged in the iconoclastic debate. Any attempt to depict Christ raises the theological issue of the divine and human natures of Christ and whether a human hand can (or should) represent him. Beginning with the council of Nicaea in 325, the question of the divinity and humanity of Christ was much debated at the ecumenical councils and thus was always present in the memory of Greek theologians in subsequent centuries. The representability of Christ was the core concern of the iconoclasts. The depiction of saints was only of secondary importance. For the discussion of the value of images of saints, it would also have been helpful to make a clearer distinction between portraits, on the one hand, and pictorial narratives consisting of several scenes, on the other. These may have been intended to serve different functions: portraits served as a reminder of the saint's entire life, death, and achievements, operating like relics, *pars pro toto*, and were, on occasion, believed to be imbued with miraculous qualities, while pictorial narratives worked as a record of individual events that may resonate with the faithful viewer. Iconoclast critique was aimed only at the portraits.

Throughout the book, Bartlett shows how there was a flow of saints, cults, relics, and texts from East to West, a flow that was more like suction, largely determined by Western needs and interests. This began with the request for relics from Constantinople at the time of Gregory of Tours, and continued with the import of cults. Among the most colorful are the virgin martyr Barbara, who offered interesting pictorial possibilities as she was walled up in a tower and later had her breasts cut off; Nicholas of Myra in Asia Minor who became Nicholas of Bari and later, in his Dutch adaptation that was

eventually brought to the New World, the original Santa Claus; George, the warrior saint and later patron of England; and the large-scale movement of relics from Byzantium to the West after the capture of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade in 1204, and again after the Ottoman conquest in 1453.

The move of relics was accompanied by the creation of new texts in Latin on Greek saints. In early eighth-century Northumbria, Bede had access to a Latin version of the miracles of Anastasius, a Christian martyr of the Sasanian invasions in the Levant in the early decades of the seventh century, whose relics had been brought to Rome by refugees from the subsequent Arab invasions and continued to work miracles in the monastery *Ad Aquas Salvias*.¹⁰ In the ninth century, as Bartlett notes, the papal secretary Anastasius Bibliothecarius produced translations of numerous Greek hagiographical texts into Latin. This trend resumes in the 11th and 12th centuries, when Greek-into-Latin translations of hagiographical texts were created in the Greek-speaking regions of southern Italy, especially Amalfi.

But influence in the development of cults also went the other way, from West to East. The cult of Saint Catherine, the learned woman who stood her ground in a disputation in Alexandria and was subsequently martyred by being put on a wheel, seems to have been popular in the West in the 12th century slightly before it reached the Eastern shores.¹¹ The Monastery in the Southern Sinai that is now known as Saint Catherine's Monastery was originally dedicated to the Transfiguration of Christ (as depicted in the sixth-century apse mosaic of Justinian's basilica) and the encounter of Moses with God in the Burning Bush.

The audience of hagiographical texts and their preferences are difficult to access beyond the information provided by the texts themselves. One way to do so is to consult the manuscripts that preserve them. Byzantium has some interesting evidence to offer in this regard. Six manuscripts of the 14th to 16th centuries contain exclusively the lives of holy women. Two of them indicate their target audience: one was used in a nunnery, but another was written for the men in the sick bay of a monastery on Mount Athos. Bartlett is surely right when he insists that modern scholarship tends to overrate gender-specificity in the hagiographical tastes of medieval women and men. In Byzantium, it can even be shown that when women themselves had a choice of saintly models, they chose men and women saints alike. It was their male spiritual advisers who suggested to them that they should prefer female models as inspiration.¹²

¹⁰Carmela Viricillo-Franklin and Paul Meyvaert, "Has Bede's Version of the 'Passio S. Anastasii' come down to us in BHL 408?," *Analecta Bollandiana* 100 (1982), 373–400.

¹¹David Jacoby, "Christian Pilgrimage to Sinai until the Late Fifteenth Century," in *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground*, ed. Robert S. Nelson, Kristen M. Collins (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), 80.

¹²Claudia Rapp, "Figures of Female Sanctity: Byzantine Edifying Manuscripts and their Audience," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996), 313–344.

Covering a timespan of well over a millennium, this book is a historical exercise *par excellence*. It is a truism that historians are always in search of continuities and changes. Where better to look than cultic and cultural phenomena, or indeed ritual practices? At first glance, they may look static, but they involve changing contexts and different participants over time. Bartlett's approach is to show the immense breadth and variety of practices associated with the saints across regions and time, as certain patterns seem to emerge:

The history of sanctity and the history of religious life are not synonyms. Yet it is clear that something about Christian history is revealed by these chronological and geographical patterns. Saints were generated in high numbers in the centuries of persecution under the Roman Empire, in the sixth and seventh centuries, both in Merovingian Europe and the British Isles, at a time of missionary activity and monastic foundations, and in late medieval Italy. There were ages of saints, even if the saints in each of those ages were very different.¹³

This observation leaves the historian wanting for more synchronic and diachronic analysis and comparison: Would a visitor from Ireland in around the year 1000 recognize the religious practices associated with saints in Prague? What similarities or differences in the veneration of saints would a crusading knight from Norway have perceived when he came to Constantinople in 1204? For the diachronic analysis, we would like to assume the stance of a time traveller (something that historians often do, although usually unawares): What would Gregory of Tours, coming from sixth-century Merovingian Francia, make of what went on at the cathedral of Saint Denis in around 1150? Would he even recognize these practices as associated with the cult of a saint?

Bartlett's book is a major achievement as it strikes a balance between local focus and birds' eye perspective. It offers a 'grand view' of medieval history and its ramifications to the present day: the different developments in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, the Christian mission to northern and eastern Europe, the separation between Catholic and Protestant countries—all of these can be explained, or at least unlocked, with reference to the cult of saints. It is Bartlett's merit to have shown us how.

¹³Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 145.