

HAGIOGRAPHY AND ITS IMPACT ON MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN THOUGHT

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I. HAGIOGRAPHY: ITS DAWN AND ITS FEATURES

1. Non Christian biographical traditions

1.1. Philo of Alexandria, *Lives of the Patriarchs*

Life of Moses

X. I will describe an action of his at this time, which, though it may seem a petty matter, argues a spirit of no petty kind. The Arabs are breeders of cattle, and they employ for tending them not only men but women, youths and maidens alike, and not only those of insignificant and humble families but those of the highest position. Seven maidens, daughters of the priest, had come to a well, and, after attaching the buckets to the ropes, drew water, taking turns with each to share the labour equally. They had with great industry filled the troughs which lay near, when some other shepherds appeared on the spot who, disdainful of the weakness of the girls, tried to drive them and their flock away, and proceeded to bring their own animals to the place where the water lay ready, and thus appropriate the labours of others. But Moses, who was not far off, seeing what had happened, quickly ran up and, standing near by, said : "Stop this injustice. You think you can take advantage of the loneliness of the place. Are you not ashamed to let your arms and elbows live an idle life ? You are masses of long hair and lumps of flesh, not men. The girls are working like youths, and shirk none of their duties, while you young men go daintily like girls. Away with you: give place to those who were here before you, to whom the water belongs. Properly, you should have drawn for them, to make the supply more abundant; instead, you are all agog to take from them what they have provided. Nay, by the heavenly eye of justice, you shall not take it; for that eye sees even what is done in the greatest solitude.

(ed. London, Heinemann, 1935, with English translation by F.H. Colson – vol. VI)

1.2. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*

Socrates (Book II.5)

(...). His strength of will and attachment to the democracy are evident from his refusal to yield to Critias and his colleagues when they ordered him to bring the wealthy Leon of Salamis before them for execution, and further from the fact that he alone voted for the acquittal of the ten generals; and again from the facts that when he had the opportunity to escape from prison he declined to do so, and that he rebuked his friends for weeping over his fate, and addressed to them his most memorable discourses in the prison.

He was a man of great independence and dignity of character. Pamphila in the seventh book of her *Commentaries* tells how Alcibiades once offered him a large site on which to build a house ; but he replied, "Suppose, then, I wanted shoes and you offered me a whole hide to make a pair with, would it not be ridiculous in me to take it ?" Often, when he looked at the multitude of wares exposed for sale, he would say to himself, " How many things I can do without !", And he would continually recite the lines :

*The purple robe and silver's shine
More fits an actor's need than mine*

(...)

(ed. London, Heinemann, 1925, with English translation by R.D. Hicks)

2.3. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*

Divus Claudius

(...) He was eager for food and drink at all times and in all places. Once when he was holding court in the forum of Augustus and had caught savour of a meal which was preparing for the Salii in the temple of Mars hard by, he left the tribunal, went up where the priests were, and took his place at their table. He hardly ever left the dining-room until he was stuffed and soaked; then he went to sleep at once, lying on his back with his mouth open and a feather was put down his throat to relieve his stomach. He slept but little at a time, for he was usually awake before midnight; but he would

sometimes drop off in the daytime while holding court and could hardly be roused when the advocates raised their voices for the purpose. He was immoderate in his passion for women, but wholly free from unnatural vice. He was greatly devoted to gaming, even publishing a book on the art, and he actually used to play while driving, having the board so fitted to his carriage as to prevent his game from being disturbed.

(ed. London, Heinemann, 1914 Suetonius, with English translation by J. C Rolfe)

2. Christian biographical traditions

2.1. (Apocryphal) Acts of the apostles

The History of Philip, the apostle and evangelist (apocryphal)

§2 And our Lord Jesus the Messiah spake with Philip the Apostle in a vision of the night at Jerusalem, and said to him: "Rise, go to the city of Carthage, which is in Azotus, and drive out thence the ruler of Satan, for lo, he rejoices there like a destroying wolf, which rejoices in the flock that has no shepherd; and after thou hast driven him out, preach there the kingdom of Heaven." And Philip said to our Lord: "I beseech Thee, the Raiser of life of all souls, - Thou knowest me, that I am a man of Palestine, and I do not know Latin or Greek, and the people of Carthage are not acquainted with Aramaic, - and how shall I go (and) preach to them the Gospel of Thy kingdom?" Our Lord said to Philip: "Who made Adam in His image and His likeness? Who formed for him a mouth, and eyes, and a tongue to speak? Was it not I the Lord?" And Philip said to our Lord: "Thou art the chosen Son, who didst make Heaven by Thy might, and didst establish the world by Thy wisdom." And our Lord said to him: "Now go in my name, and doubt not. I shall be with thy mouth, and thou shalt speak every tongue that thou wilt." And Philip said to our Lord: "I go, Lord; but let not Thy grace be far from me."

(ed. *Apocryphal acts of the Apostles*, edited from Syriac manuscripts in the British Museum by W. Wright, Williams & Norgate, 1871)

2.2. Acts of the Christian martyrs

Acts of Polycarp

§11 The governor said: "I have wild animals, and I shall expose you to them if you do not change your mind." And he answered: "Go and call for them! Repentance from a better state to one that is worse is impossible for us. But it is good to change from what is wicked to righteousness?"

And he said again to him: "Since you are not afraid of the animals, then I shall have you consumed by fire - unless you change your mind." But Polycarp answered: "The fire you threaten me with burns merely for a time and is soon extinguished. It is clear you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgement that is to come, which awaits the impious. Why then do you hesitate? Come, do what you will."

(ed. *The Acts of the Christians martyrs*, Introduction, texts and translations by Herbert Musurillo, Oxford, Clarendon press, 1972)

3. Hagiographical tradition

3.1. Sulpicius Severus, *Life of saint Martinus* (4th c.)

§3.1. Quodam itaque tempore, cum iam nihil praeter arme et simplicem militiae uestem haberet, media hieme quae solito asperior inhorruerat, adeo ut plerosque uis algoris extingueret, obuium habet in porta Ambianensium ciuitatis pauperem nudum. Qui cum praetereuntes ut sui misererentur oraret omnesque miserum praetereuntes, intellexit uir Deo plenus sibi illum, aliis misericordiam non praestantibus, reseruari. Quid tamen ageret? Nihil praeter chlamydem, qua indutus erat, habebat: iam enim reliqua in opus simile consumpserat. Arrepto itaque ferro quo accinctus erat, mediam diuidit partemque eius pauperi tribuit, reliqua rursus induitur. Interea de circumstantibus ridere nonnulli, quia deformis esse truncatus habitu uideretur; multi tamen, quibus erat mens sanior, altius gemere, quod nihil simile fecissent, cum utique plus habentes uestire pauperem sine sua nuditate potuissent.

C'est ainsi qu'un jour où il n'avait sur lui que ses armes et un simple manteau de soldat, au milieu d'un hiver qui sévissait plus rigoureusement que de coutume, à tel point que bien des gens succombaient à

la violence du gel, il rencontre à la porte de la cité d'Amiens un pauvre nu : ce misérable avait beau supplier les passants d'avoir pitié de sa misère, ils passaient tous leur chemin. L'homme rempli de Dieu comprit donc que ce pauvre lui était réservé, puisque les autres ne lui accordaient aucune pitié. Mais que faire ? Il n'avait rien, que la chlamyde dont il était habillé: il avait en effet déjà sacrifié tout le reste pour une bonne oeuvre semblable. Aussi, saisissant l'arme qu'il portait à la ceinture, il partage sa chlamyde en deux, en donne un morceau au pauvre et se rhabille avec le reste. Sur ces entrefaites, quelques-uns des assistants se mirent à rire, car on lui trouvait piètre allure avec son habit mutilé. Mais beaucoup, qui raisonnaient plus sainement, regrettèrent très profondément de n'avoir rien fait de tel, alors que justement, plus riches que lui, ils auraient pu habiller le pauvre sans se réduire eux-mêmes à la nudité.

(ed. *Vie de saint Martin* de Sulpice Sévère, Introduction, texte, traduction, commentaire et index par Jacques Fontaine, Paris, Cerf, 1967-9).

3.2. Life of saint Pardulfus (8th c. Limoges)

A certain Aunarius, who had a toothache, came to find saint Pardulfus. And with his hands, he touched the place where Aunarius suffered, then spit into his hand and told him to dip his finger in it and to rub the painful place with it. But Aunarius, who was puffed up with pride, haughtily threw away the spit behind the saint's back. And when he left the monastery, his horse fell on the ground and threw him violently in such manner that his hip was shattered by the horse. He needed to be transported to the hospice, was ill for a year and could scarcely be cured.

(ed. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Series rerum merovingicarum, vol. VII, 1920 - my translation)

3.3. Life of saint Leodegarius (Léger) (7th c. Poitiers)

And when the saint body was transported, two poor people came to him on the road, that is, a man with his wife. The man had lost sight on one eye, and his wife on both her eyes. When they both arrived at the stretcher, the women received the light in her eyes thanks to her faith, her man, however, who hesitated, stayed blind on one eye. And before they arrived, the man pulled his blind wife with a rope, but when they returned, the women, who received the light, did now as he had done ; she pulled her blind husband.

(ed. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Series rerum merovingicarum, vol. V, 1910 - my translation)

3.4. Jacobus of Varagine, *The Golden legend (Legenda aurea)*

41. Saint Vaast

Vaast was ordained bishop of Arras by Saint Remy. When he came to the city gate, he found two beggars there, the one blind, the other lame. They asked for an alms and he said to them: "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you"; whereupon he prayed, and both of them were made whole. Then there was an abandoned church, covered with thorns and brambles, in which a wolf had made his lair. Saint Vaast ordered the wolf to go away and not to dare come back, and the wolf obeyed.

After he had labored as bishop for forty years and by word and work had converted many to the faith, he saw a column of fire descending from heaven upon his house. He realized that his end was at hand, and a short while later he fell asleep in the Lord, about A.D. 550.

As the corpse was being transferred for burial, Audumatus, an old man who was blind, lamented that he could not see the bishop's body, and instantly his sight was restored. Later, however, at his prayer, he became blind again.

120. Saint Bernard

(...) The ancient Enemy, seeing the boy's salutary resolution, attacked his determination to live a chaste life and set many tempting traps in his path. Once, for instance, Bernard was gazing rather fixedly at a women until suddenly, blushing at what he was doing, he rose as a stern avenger against himself and jumped into a pool of ice-cold water. There he lay until he was almost frozen, but by God's grace the heat of fleshly lust was wholly cooled in him. About that same time a girl egged on by the devil, jumped into the bed where he was sleeping. When he became aware of her presence, he moved over calmly and silently, leaving to her side of the bed he had been occupying, and, turning to the other side, went back to sleep. The woman put up with this expectantly for some time, then began touching

and teasing him, but he remained motionless. Finally, impudent though she was, she blushed with shame, felt a flood of horror mixed with admiration, got out of bed, and hurried away.
(ed. *Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, Readings on the saints*, translated by William Granger Ryan, Princeton University Press, 1993).

II. Hagiography and the perception of the world

1. Chronological Survey of Christian life descriptions of Muhammad

1.1. 9th century

Eulogius of Cordoba (° Cordoba - Spain ; † 859), *Istoria de Machumete* [=Story of Muhammad] in *Liber apologeticus martyrum* [=Apology of the martyrs]
Apologetic treatise.

Anastasius Bibliothecarius [= Anastasius the Librarian] (° Rome - Italy ; † 879), *Historia ecclesiastica ex Theophane* [= Ecclesiastic History out of Theophanes] († 817)
Chronicle (translation of Theophanes' *Chronographia*)

1.2. 11th century

Embrico of Mainz (° Mainz – Holy Roman Empire [Germany]), *Vita Mahumeti* [= Life of Muhammad](about 1064)
Literary text in verse form.

1.3. 12th century

Guibert of Nogent (° near Beauvais - France ; † ± 1124), *Gesta Dei per Francos* [Gods deeds through the Franks], I, 3
Chronicle on the first crusade.

[**Adelphus**], *Vita Machometi* [= Life of Muhammad] (author and provenance not well established)
Literary text in rhymed prose.

Walter of Compiègne (° near Compiègne - France ; † after 1155), *Otia de Machomete* [= Poem on Muhammad]
Literary poem.

Petrus Venerabilis [= Peter the Venerable] (°Auvergne region – France ; † 1156), *Summula quaedam brevis* [= A short and small survey]
Introduction to a corpus of translated Muslim texts (in order to refute Islam).

Willem of Tyr (° Jerusalem – Palestine – of French or Italian origin ; † 1185), *Belli sacri Historia* [= History of the religious war]
Chronicle on the crusades.

Godfrey of Viterbo (° Viterbo – Italy ; of Italian or Germanic origin ; † 1192), *Pantheon*
Chronicle.

1.4. 13th century

Vincent of Beauvais (° Picardie region – France ; † 1264), *Speculum historiale* [= Mirror of history], XXIV, 39
Encyclopedical work.

Matheus Parisiensis [= Mathieu Pâris] (° England ; † 1259), *Chronica maiora* [= Great Chronicle]
Historical work (history of the world).

Jacobus of Vitry (° Reims – France ; † 1240), *Historia Orientalis* [= Eastern History]
Historical work (on the crusades).

William of Tripoli (° Tripoli – Northern Africa [Libya]), *Tractatus de statu Saracenorum et de Mahomete pseudo-propheta et eorum lege et fide* (1273) [Treatise on the state of the Muslims and the false prophet Muhammad and on their law and faith] (in French translation by Sinner, *Catalogus codicum Mss bibliothecae Bernensis*, T.II, p. 282)
Treatise on Islam.

Jacobus of Varagine (° Varazze – Italy ; † 1298), *De sancto Pelagio papa* [= On the pope Pelagius] in *Legenda Aurea* [= Golden legend] (before 1267)
Compilation of saints' lives.

Alexandre Du Pont, *Li Romans de Mahon* [= Novel on Muhammad] (Laon - France, 1258)
Literary poem

1.5. 15th century

Alphonsus of Spina (° Spain), *Fortalitium Fidei* [= the stronghold of faith], IV, (about 1458)
Methodological and ideological bases to Inquisition.

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2. Distorted information transfer : Muhammad and his master

Johannes Damascenus [= John of Damascus], *De Haeresibus Liber* [= The Book of heresies] *cum in libros Veteris Novique Testamenti incidisset [Mamed], habitis cum Ariano quodam monacho colloquiis, propriam sectam condidit.*

After he [Mamed] had discovered the Books of the Old and the New Testament, and had discussed with some Arian monk, he founded his own sect.

Bartholomeus of Edessa, *Confutatio Agareni* [=Refutation of the Muslims] *morabatur ibi quidam monachus otiosus Nestorianae doctrinae addictus, Cui Pachurae nomen erat. Juxta conclave quod occupabat puteus erat excavatus. Cum vero singulis diebus accederet et discederet Muhammed, ad aquationem et puteum semper ascendebat. Cum autem ibi vidisset otiosum monachum, cum illo sermones miscuit, et varia de fide Christianorum rogavit.*

An idle monk stayed there, who was a defendor of the doctrine of Nestorius. His name was Pachura. Next to the place where he lived, an artesian well had been digged. And when Muhammad came there day after day, he always climbed to this well to draw water. And when he saw there the idle monk, he started to talk with him, and asked him different things about the Christian faith.

3. Antihagiography

Hagiography	Lifes of Muhammad
origins	-situation in time and space -genealogy
-birth -childhood	childhood
education	trade and education
piety	impiety : mariage, sexuality, violence

-death -Inventio -Translatio	death of Muhammed
miracles	trickery and false miracles

3.1. False miracles

Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* :

Tunc eo sermocinante ad populum columba quae in vicino erat ad hoc ipsem fallaciter edocta super humerum eius advolans stetit et in eius aure iuxta morem solitum grana inibi reposita comedens, quasi verba legit ei suggerere

And while he was talking to the people, a dove that was nearby and which had secretly been trained for this, came to sit on his shoulder and ate the seed that had been place there as usual, and this way it suggested it talked to him

Jacobus of Varagine, *Legenda Aurea* :

praedictus igitur vir populum convocans dixit, se illum sibi velle praeficere, quem spiritus sanctus in specie columbae monstraret, statimque columbam secreta emisit et illa super humeros Magumeth, qui cum aliis adstabat, evolans rostrum in ejus aure apposuit. Quod populus videns spiritum sanctum esse credidit, qui super eum descenderet ac in ejus aure verba Dei inferret (...)

the man we have been talking about gathered the people and said that he wanted to choose as a chief the one which the Holy Spirit, in the shape of a dove, would indicate. And immediately, he secretly released a dove, which came to sit on the shoulder of Muhammad, who stand there among the others, and this dove put its head into his ear. When the people saw this, it believed it was the Holy Spirit, who came down onto him and spoke Gods words into his ear.

Guibert of Nogent, *Gesta Dei per Francos* :

Cumque multis sermonibus ille diem protraheret, nonnullis ambagibus turbam detineret, ecce sole jam a centro ad nonam vergente vitulam a Nestorio emissam procul accurrentem adeo sitibundam - noverat enim ibi fontem -, aspexere (...) iam super fontem venerat vitula et siti, cuius impetu ferebatur, satisfaciens ripe genibus incumbibat ...

When he (Muhammad) had been talking a lot that day, and had been captivating the masses with his obscure talking, the sun having already passed its peak and declining towards the ninth hour, they suddenly saw a calf that had been released by Nestorius not far from there, and which came running onto them. It was thirsty and knew there was a well in that place ... so it came to the well and kneeled on its shore in order to still the thirst by which it was tortured.

Walter of Compiègne, *Otia de Machomete*, v. 665-670:

*Sed vitulum niveum Machomes absconderat intus
cuius erat potus Bachus et esca Ceres,
qui sic doctus erat studio Machometis, ut eius
se genibus flexis sterneret ante pedes
et persistebat in terra sicut adorans,
donec surgendi signa daret Machomes.*

But Muhammad had hidden there a white calf
which he fed with wine and wheat
who was trained in such way by Muhammad
that it came to kneel at his feet
and stayed in this position as if it was adoring him
until Muhammad would make a sign as to get up.

3.2. Sexual impiety

In his *Vita Mahumeti*, **Embrico of Mainz** explains that it was an idea of Muhammads tutor to grant the people more sexual pleasure, in order to have a better control over them. Several verses describe then all the sexual perversions :

(...) mox contra morem frater premit ipse sororem, nupta soror fratri fit baratri; incestat matrem sua proles, filia patrem, (...)

And soon brothers took their sisters, and sisters became wives to their brothers ; mothers polluted their progenies and daughters their fathers ...

Walter of Compiègne, Otia de Mahomete :

lex nova, sacra fides te tribulante ruet,

conjugium solves, corrumpes virginitatem

judicioque tuo castus adulter erit

under your pression, a new law will ruin the saint faith,
you will undo the marriage, and corrupt virginity
by your judgment, the chaste ones will become adulterous

3.3. Death and after-death

Guibert of Nogent, Geste Dei per Francos :

Cum subitaneo ictu epilepseos saepe corrueret, quo eum superius diximus laborare, accidit semel, dum solus obambulat, ut morbo elisus eodem caderet, et inventus, dum ipsa passione torquetur, a porcis in tantum discerpitur ut nullae ejus praeter talos reliquiae invenirentur

And since epileptics often suddenly collapse, and we already told that he suffered from this disease, it once happened that he was walking alone, when a fit came up and made him collapse. While he was squirming on the ground, he was found by pigs and was teard in pieces in such a way by them, that nothing of him could be found, except for his heels.

4. Facts and their interpretation

Beda Venerabilis (1st half 8th c., England), Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum

Sive enim historia de bonis bona referat, ad imitandum bonum auditor sollicitus instigatur, seu mala commemoret de pravis, nihilominus religiosus ac pius auditor sive lector devitando quod noxium est ac perversum, ipse sollertius ad exsequenda ea quae bona ac Deo digna esse cognoverit, accenditur.

Indeed, history can tell us good things about the good, and this incites the eager listener to imitate what is good. But it can also commemorate bad things about the bad. In this case, the religious and pious listener or reader will even be more eager to tend to follow the things that he will recognize to be good and Worthy of God, evitating what is perverse and bad.

Guibert of Nogent († ±1124), Gesta Dei per Francos

Frustra plane ab aliquo, si falsa an vera sint discutiatur (...). Securus enim quis de eo male cantat cujus malignitas quidquid pravi dicitur transcendit et superat.

It would clearly be futile to debate whether these things are false or true. (...) Indeed, one can safely blacken the reputation of someone whose malice exceeds and surpasses whatever bad there can be said about him.

5. Lasting impact

N. Daniel, *The Arabs in medieval Europe*, p. 237 :

As they (= serious writers) turned up more and more genuine information about islam, they regretted the legendary, or 'christian' or 'true' version of events, which seemed less and less probable. However, the 'christian' version was however remotely, a reflection of distortion of the actual facts, and it was therefore just possible logically to suppose that the actual facts were distortion, and the 'christian' version the true one after all

In the 16th century, Guillaume Postel, an erudite Arabist, fights against christian beliefs on the biography of Muhammad :

Quant est de ceus qui disent que les porceaux l'ont mangé, et que c'est pour cela que les Muhamediques ne mangent point de porc, c'est une fable, car ils ont le corps ensevely, non pas à la Meche, comme l'homme pense, mais à Medinat alnebi.

(*Des histoires orientales*, p. 193).

6. Change

Victor Hugo describes Muhammad in *La légende des siècles*, chap. IX. l'Islam :

Il semblait avoir vu l'Eden, l'âge d'amour,

Les temps antérieurs, l'ère immémoriale.

Il avait le front haut, la joue impériale,

le sourcil chauve, l'oeil profond et diligent,

Le cou pareil au col d'une amphore d'argent,

L'air d'un Noé qui sait le secret du déluge.

...

Sa bouche était toujours en train d'une prière;

Il mangeait peu, serrant sur son ventre une pierre;

Il s'occupait lui-même à traire ses brebis;

Il s'asseyait à terre et cousait ses habits.

Il jeûnait plus longtemps qu'autrui les jours de jeûne,

Quoiqu'il perdît sa force et qu'il ne fût plus jeune.

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