

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON  
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**Childhood in Anglo-Saxon and Frankish  
Hagiography  
c. AD 400 - 1000**

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**ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF ARTS

HISTORY

Master of Philosophy

**CHILDHOOD IN ANGLO-SAXON AND FRANKISH HAGIOGRAPHY  
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**by Emma Sarah Tytel**

This thesis investigates childhood between c. AD 400 and AD 1000 as seen in Anglo-Saxon and Frankish hagiography. To date, very little specific research has been attempted concerning childhood in the early medieval period; existing monographs on ‘medieval childhood’ focus on the twelfth century and later, and this is presumably due to a perceived lack of source material for the early period. This work attempts to address both these points by examining ideas about childhood and the experience of childhood during this under-represented time-frame, and, in the process, by demonstrating the wealth of material about early medieval childhood which is to be found within hagiographic texts composed in these subsections of western Europe before AD 1000.

The *vitae* I have used are of East and West Frankish and Anglo-Saxon origins, selected on the criteria that they were composed before the year AD 1000 and that they contain details of the saint’s childhood. This thesis aims to identify and discuss the images of childhood provided by these sources, their theological and historical roots and aspects of the consequent construct of early medieval childhood sanctity. It also considers issues of gender as seen in the childhood sections of this sample of *vitae*. While I began my research thinking that I would discover some kind of common ecclesiastical or monastic template of an ‘ideal child’, there has proved to be enough diversity between *vitae* to enable me to make comparisons between geographical regions and the products of varying dates of composition.

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## Preface

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My greatest debt, however, is to my family, without whose love, encouragement and practical help this thesis could never have been completed. I would particularly like to thank my husband Mischa for his unwavering and unstinting support. This completed thesis also stands as testament to the memory of my mother, who said I could.

# Abbreviations

AASS	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i>
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
SSRM	<i>Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum</i>
SS	<i>Scriptores</i>
SSRG	<i>Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum</i> <i>Scolarum</i>
Epist.	<i>Epistolae</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>

For full references see Bibliography

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

# Introduction

## A brief historiography of medieval childhood

Childhood is not the easiest of studies for the early medievalist, as the work of several historians bears witness: Shulamith Shahar's survey, while purporting to cover 'Childhood in the Middle Ages', actually begins around the twelfth century; Nicholas Orme's recently-published 'Medieval Children' only rarely employs material from earlier than the thirteenth and Barbara Hanawalt's work on Coroners' rolls can speak with authority only of the fourteenth.<sup>1</sup> The work of Philippe Ariès has been so widely discredited that it need only briefly be mentioned: the central thesis of *Centuries of Childhood*, that there was no medieval recognition of the child as something other than a small adult, largely evidenced by works of art, has been roundly disproved by any number of subsequent works, which focus their efforts on texts rather than images.<sup>2</sup> Mayke De Jong's examination of the Hildemar commentary, for one, reveals a ninth century text displaying a great deal of concern for the upbringing of children and prescribing their practical care in a manner which clearly indicates the author's perception of a variety of stages in the physical, emotional and intellectual development of children.<sup>3</sup> It must also be noted, in relation to De Jong's work, that the majority of the existing research regarding early medieval childhood has not explored the potential of hagiographic literature. In addition, John Boswell's

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<sup>1</sup> S. Shahar *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990); B. Hanawalt *Growing up in Medieval London: the Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford, 1993); N. Orme *Medieval Children* (London, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> P. Ariès *Centuries of Childhood* (London, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> M. De Jong *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996). For further discussion, see Chapter Five pp. 162-6.

examination of child abandonment, *The Kindness of Strangers*, discusses the phenomenon of oblation at length, utilising a great range of western European ecclesiastical and monastic texts, yet omits *vitae*, which show both the ideology of oblation and its varying practical aspects in action.<sup>4</sup>

### **The purpose of this thesis**

When considering the source material available for the largely untackled early period, the vast body of hagiography comes naturally to mind. Hagiography comprises the vast bulk of surviving textual material from the Merovingian world and a significant proportion of Carolingian texts, and has in recent years appealed to a great deal of historians seeking fresh perspectives on a poorly-evidenced age. On closer inspection, *vitae* frequently mention the childhood of their subjects, and this prompted my examination of hagiography in order to investigate aspects of childhood. There have been a smattering of articles which have adopted a similar approach. Istvan Bejczy concerned himself with the notion of the *sacra infanta* in hagiographic texts, and his findings are most interesting in comparison with my own, Shulamith Shahar sought images of infancy and Patricia Wasyliw discussed the early lives of Italian girls saints, as well as the circumstances under which a child might be constructed as a model of piety.<sup>5</sup> However, as in the cases of the childhood studies detailed above, these authors have tended to concentrate on post twelfth century hagiography (even when the saints concerned actually lived many centuries

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<sup>4</sup> J. Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers: the Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> I. Bejczy 'The *sacra infanta* in medieval hagiography' *Studies in Church History* 31 (1994) pp. 143-151; S. Shahar 'Infants, Infant Care and Attitudes towards infancy in the Medieval Lives of Saints' *Journal of Psychohistory* 10 (1983) pp. 281-309; P. H. Wasyliw 'The Pious Infant: Developments in Popular Piety During the High Middle Ages' *Lay Sanctity, Medieval and Modern: A Search for Models* (Paris, 2000) pp. 105-115.

beforehand), and have therefore made little attempt to fill the gap in knowledge about childhood, its practical or ideological aspects, in the early medieval period.

This research began, then, with two questions: firstly, what details can we learn of the everyday experience of early medieval childhood from *vitae*; secondly, what can we learn of contemporary notions of the nature of childhood, and attitudes towards it. The first question requires that we can extract some degree of historical truth from *vitae*: a rather traditional approach which is rife with problems but not impossible; the second corresponds more closely to the train of more recent work on *vitae* which acknowledges rather than combats their unique viewpoint, and utilises this very fact in order to gain fresh understanding of the period. Geary notes that ‘As historians turn increasingly from the history of events to that of perceptions and values, hagiography appears a kind of source superior to almost any other, because it seems to offer images of society’s ideal types.’<sup>6</sup>

My second question inevitably raises another: what can we learn about the nature of sanctity through the portrayal of the child divine? This thesis is concerned with all of these questions in varying degrees, although the exploration of what it actually meant to be a saintly child seems often to be the route by which other questions may be tentatively answered. My research therefore initially adopts this approach: investigating the nature of the holy infant, and the attitudes of his or her hagiographer toward him or her, in the hope that these *vitae* might illuminate other, more ordinary, lives.

Much research attention has been paid to issues of gender, with which any study of childhood is naturally concerned. It is not possible to cite all the relevant works here, but among the most useful for this thesis have been Hadley’s *Masculinity*

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<sup>6</sup> P. J. Geary *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1994) p. 11.

in *Medieval Europe*, Julia Smith's discussion of the problematization of female sanctity in Carolingian *vitae* and Janet Nelson's novel and helpful approach to that most thorny of problems: the determination of the gender of anonymous hagiographers.<sup>7</sup> Research specifically investigating gender expectations and constructions in childhood has not been attempted. Regarding the hagiographic gendering of individuals, the work of Simon Coates and more recently John Kitchen's masterly consideration of the two *vitae* of Radegund cannot be ignored.<sup>8</sup> John Boswell's extremely thorough investigation of homosexual relationships in the middle ages has also proved useful when considering some of the nuances of early medieval *vitae*.<sup>9</sup> In addition, not only the monastic upbringing but also the education of children has received the attention of several authors, most usefully Rosamond McKitterick and the collection of essays edited by George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig.<sup>10</sup>

### Approaches to Hagiography

The study of hagiography has come a long way from its roots in the work of the Bollandists and of the various editors of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, although their efforts, which may well be described as 'monumental', certainly underpin all subsequent research. Both these groups of editors engaged themselves with arriving at reliable 'historical' versions of the texts from the sources they

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<sup>7</sup> D. M. Hadley (ed) *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999); Julia Smith 'The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780-920' *Past and Present* 146 (Feb. 1995) pp. 3-37; J. Nelson 'Gender and Genre in Woman Historians of the Early Middle Ages' *The Frankish World 750-900* (London, 1996) pp. 183-198.

<sup>8</sup> S. Coates 'Regendering Radegund? Fortunatus, Baudonivia and the Problem of Female Sanctity in Merovingian Gaul' *Studies in Church History 34: Gender and Christian Religion* (1998) pp. 37-52; J. Kitchen *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> J. Boswell *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> R. McKitterick *Books, Scribes and Learning in the Frankish Kingdoms 6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Aldershot, 1994); G. Ferzoco & C. Muessig (eds.) *Medieval Monastic Education* (New York, 2000). For details of individual essays which have been particularly useful, see later footnotes and Bibliography.

discovered, and discussing as far as possible their origin, sources and style. It is not the purpose of this thesis to trace in detail the progression and variety of methodological approaches to this body of material, but to identify key ideas concerning the possible interpretations of hagiography which relate directly to the purpose of this piece of research, and here we find a starting point: Hippolyte Delehaye perceived the medieval hagiographer as an individual concerned with style over content, opining that the notion of collecting and evaluating source material regarding his or her subject, in order to make the account as accurate as possible, did not even occur to the majority of authors.<sup>11</sup> We might well disagree with his comments, but we must recognise that his disapprobation stemmed from his understanding of the historical usefulness of hagiographic texts. In the main, he plundered the texts looking for dates, places and verifiable progressions of events. While he recognised that sanctity was indeed a literary construct, the fact that *vitae* might offer some insight into how that construct changed over time, and that this might betray contemporary perceptions of the society in which the texts were written, evaded him.

The tide turned against Delehaye in the late sixties, when historians such as Peter Brown did much to encourage interest in hagiography as a tool for investigating social and political history. Brown's article, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', connected the saint's role as a religious *exemplum* to his function as a political individual at the heart of his community.<sup>12</sup> Michael Goodich, speaking

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<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive historiography of hagiographic research up to the 1980's, see Stephen Wilson's introduction to *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (Cambridge, 1985). H. Delehaye *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* translated by V. M. Crawford (London, 1907) p. 67. He notably excluded from criticism 'the last representatives of classic antiquity' such as Sulpicius Severus and Hilary of Poitiers, as well as some of their 'true' imitators. (pp. 60-1).

<sup>12</sup> P. Brown 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity' *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971) pp. 80-101. Frantisek Graus prepared the way for Brown in *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger: Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague, 1965) in which he

about the thirteenth century in terms which seem equally applicable across all the centuries of hagiographic production, promoted the idea that the study of saints' *vitae* could provide insight into society's ideals of behaviour: 'While his character was presented to youth as an object worthy of emulation, whose life embodies the noblest ideals of his age, at the same time the saint's development reflects the social and political conflicts which engaged his contemporaries.'<sup>13</sup>

Not all of Delehaye's opinions have been challenged by more recent research. Geary adds a modern twist to his arguments: while historians, according to the suggestions of Delehaye, exhibit 'a growing recognition that these texts are not transparent windows into the saints' lives, their society, or even the spirituality of their age', they consequently need to go beyond Delehaye's work in considering 'the critical problems of genre, of rhetoric, and especially of intertextuality.'<sup>14</sup> It is true that hagiography is rife with such problems, yet stripping away Scriptural quotation and textual borrowings is not a profitable exercise. Developing his work in the early seventies, Brown later recognised that: 'the heavy silt of Biblical citations, the stale, interchangeable *topoi* and conventional pieties, that I had learned ... to avoid if I were ever to seize the "real" historical content of such texts, were of as high a carat content as were the solid nuggets that I had loved to pan from Byzantine hagiography.'<sup>15</sup> It is not appropriate or useful to this study to attempt to extract only verifiable facts from this sample of *vitae*; gaining some insight into contemporary notions of childhood involves recognising Scriptural allusion and Biblical precedent, identifying *topoi* and

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emphasises the importance of hagiography not simply for the study of religion, but for the study of society.

<sup>13</sup> M. Goodich *Vita Perfecta: The Ideal of Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (Stuttgart, 1982) p. 65.3.

Joseph-Claude Poulin applied the same point to the period discussed here in *L'idéal de sainteté dans l'Aquitaine carolingienne d'après les sources hagiographiques 750-950* (Laval, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> See H. Delehaye *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* translated by V. M. Crawford (London, 1907) pp. 60-70; Geary *Living with the Dead* p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> P. Brown 'The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity' *Representations* 2 (1983) p. 15.



investigating the thought and practice behind conventionalities. It is for the most part an investigation of the construction of sanctity, involving all these details which Delehaye so despised, which will yield results.

### **The selection of *vitae***

My criteria for selecting *vitae* for inclusion in this exercise were twofold: that they should have been composed within a certain period of time, and that they should contain details of the childhood of their subjects. Initially, to maintain the focus on the early medieval arena, a rather artificial cut-off year of AD 1000 was introduced. Naturally, this date applies to the composition of the *vita* rather than the death of the saint in question. Due to the great variety of temporal interludes between the death of the saint and the writing of the *vita*, using the latter marker would introduce high medieval and even later authors into the sample, rather skewing the intended result, which is to discern aspects of the mind-set of exclusively early medieval individuals or groups. Using this cut-off year also partly determined my selection of editions of *vitae*, many of which were rewritten and 'improved' by later authors, and which survive in several forms. Where a choice still remained the earliest *vita* (and therefore the one composed closest to the saint's actual lifetime) was selected. It is important to recognise that the accurate dating of hagiographic texts is by no means a straightforward task. When Bruno Krusch edited the *vitae* published in the MGH volumes known as *Scriptores rerum merovingicarum* he famously condemned a good deal of *vitae* claiming to be of Merovingian origin as later forgeries. While his claims, if correct, do not necessarily exclude certain *vitae* from my scrutiny, as he was of the opinion that most were forged in the ninth century, it has been important to reconsider their dating. This study is engaged with the opinions of hagiographers and their

possible reflection of societal ideals, past and present: it is essential to know, as far as is possible, the time in which those individuals were writing. These issues will be discussed in Chapter One, which examines the sources in more detail.

It became apparent from my initial consideration of material which met my two criteria, that I would need to introduce a third if the task was to remain at all manageable. The *vitae* discussed here are all products of either the Frankish realm, including Frisia, or Anglo-Saxon England. This is not to imply any real sense of unity, in the production of hagiography or in any other sense, across Frankish or Anglo-Saxon territory before AD 1000, but to recognise that a study such as this has limitations, and that examination of additional material, particularly hagiography adhering to the distinct Irish tradition, would introduce so many variables that I could not hope to come to any meaningful conclusions.<sup>16</sup>

Having established criteria for the selection of source material, it is necessary to understand how this collection of individual *vitae* correspond to the wider body of hagiography. According to Schulenberg, 14.1% of saints living between AD 500 and AD 1200 were female.<sup>17</sup> Her source for this information was the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* which includes some 2,600 saints from across the world, but her results may be adapted to provide a figure more relevant to this study, and, eliminating those saints occurring after AD 1000, the resulting percentage of female *vitae* is 17.9.<sup>18</sup> An analysis of the entries in the Oxford Dictionary of Saints provides a total of 112 *vitae*

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<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to Irish hagiography, see R. Sharpe *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to the Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991). For an introduction to Visigothic *vitae*, which seem to show considerable similarities to the *vitae* discussed here, see A. T. Fear *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers* (Liverpool, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> J. T. Schulenberg 'Sexism and the Celestial Gynaceum – from 500 to 1200' *Journal of Medieval History* 4 (1978) p. 117. See also her more recent monograph *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca 500 – 1100* (Chicago, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Schulenberg urges caution with her figures, citing the problems of accurate dating. In addition, it must be noted that her figures included saints who would not fit within my geographical remit. It is, perhaps, indicative of the focus of hagiographic activity that the proportion of female to male *vitae* within my regions is identical.

corresponding to my time-frame and regional bias, and 17.9% of these concern female saints, which would seem to confirm Schulenberg's statistics. Of the *vitae* mentioned in the Oxford Dictionary of Saints, I am using 25 which I have found to contain childhood detail, representing some 22% of the total available sample. It would seem from this rough calculation that around one fifth of suitable *vitae* contain information concerning the early lives of their subjects. Farmer's selection process excluded many saints relevant to this study, and consequently I have utilised here another thirteen *vitae* which correspond to all my criteria, taking the total to thirty-eight.<sup>19</sup> More than 37% of this resulting collection of *vitae* feature females; significantly higher than one might expect considering the male/female ratio suggested by Schulenberg and the limited scope of the ODS. It would seem that the *vitae* of female saints are more likely to contain childhood detail than those of males.<sup>20</sup>

### **Approaches to Sainly Childhood**

The structure of this thesis seems predetermined by the nature of its subject: the following chapters will chart a course through a child's stages of development, as perceived by early medieval eyes. Chapter One places my sample of *vitae* in their historical context, considering issues of dating, authorship, the hagiographic inheritance and a variety of connections between individual manuscripts. Chapter Two concerns itself with an initial definition of the early medieval conception of childhood, and then examines hagiographical comments which precede the actual birth of the saint, as a prelude to considering the very earliest years of a saint's life. Hagiographical treatments of *infantia*, treated thematically, are the subject of Chapter

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<sup>19</sup> David Hugh Farmer focussed on English saints, as well as important saints from the British Isles and those continental individuals who inspired notable cults. These criteria naturally exclude many *vitae* of interest, considering my geographical scope.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter One pp. 14-15 for more discussion of this discovery.

Three, Chapter Four concentrates similarly on text relating to *pueritia* and Chapter Five deals specifically with education and the daily life of an oblate.

# Chapter One

## Texts and Contexts

It is always tempting, especially when dealing with such a vibrant collection of sources, to immediately immerse oneself in the comparison and discussion of textual detail, but in order to facilitate that discussion it is first essential to ask the fundamental questions: why were these texts written, which sources did they draw upon and what considerations influenced them? When were they composed and who wrote them? After considering the foundation stones which formed the basis of the construction of this collection of hagiography, it is necessary to discuss dating and authorship, both the dates of composition and of the saint concerned, as far as these can be established. No text is created in a vacuum, and hagiography is by its very nature concerned with *auctoritas*, precedents for its claims and most likely the construction of saintly life as one long, glorious procession leading back to the Apostles.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will also attempt to contextualise this group of sources, identifying where possible their common traditions, ideas and centres of influence, and discussing their possible relationships to one another.

### **The Roots of Early Medieval Hagiography**

As Christian teaching advanced across Europe, there began a frenzy of hagiographic writing. ‘More new saints were created in the sixth and seventh centuries than in any other comparable period in the history of the post-Constantinian

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 12, for further discussion regarding this claim.

church'<sup>2</sup>, as new monastic foundations sought new models of holiness, looking to the recent past for heroes they could write up as their own. The genre developed as a fusion of historic models; hagiographers made use of the wealth of pre-Constantinian martyr literature as well as the later Roman style of episcopal eulogy. In addition, they turned to Scripture and the Fathers of the church for their 'concepts of ideal behaviour'<sup>3</sup> They also copied extensively from earlier hagiographic texts, particularly the *vitae* of St Martin and St Columbanus; such imitation reflects a desire on the part of the hagiographer to authenticate his or her work by quoting as many past *auctoritates* as possible.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Gregory of Tours presented the lives of the saints not as separate entities, but as episodes in the continuous story of the faithful. He explains in his preface to *Vita Patrum* why he uses both singular and plural in its title. 'It is clear it is better to speak of the life of the fathers rather than lives, because, although there is a diversity of merit and value, in the world one life nourishes all bodies.'<sup>5</sup> Heffernan notes that Gregory's ideas in this regard owe much to Augustinian teaching, and allies them to 'the developing Christian idea that the saints share collectively in the luminous life of the incarnate Christ.'<sup>6</sup>

Feminine models of holiness were more problematic: classical traditions of biography praised women only for their roles as wives and mothers; we cannot trace female hagiography back to here as many of its subjects, taking the veil at an early age, never experienced those two states. Biblical heroines were more useful, with

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<sup>2</sup> P. Fouracre and R. A. Gerberding *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720* (Manchester, 1996) p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Other instances of textual borrowing will be mentioned when the relevant texts are quoted.

<sup>5</sup> 'manifestum est, melius dici vitam patrum quam vitas, quia, cum sit diversitas meritorum virtumque, una tamen omnes vita corporis alit in mundo.' MGH SSRM I Vol. II pp. 662-3, translated by E. James *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Liverpool, 1991) p. xiv. While James refers always to Gregory's work as *Vita Patrum*, Krusch's edition uses the plural, *Vitae Patrum*. I have attempted to follow Gregory's intention by using the singular form here.

<sup>6</sup> T. Heffernan *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1988) p. 7. See Edward James' introduction to *Life of the Fathers* p. xiv and T. Heffernan *Sacred Biography* pp. 7-10 for a full discussion.

Mary the virgin mother, God-bearer, reigning supreme. Formidable characters such as Judith and Deborah provided a precedent for spiritually and physically powerful women, although Eve's shadow loomed long. The martyr literature of the early church is unique in that women, and children, appear in roughly equal number to men, there apparently being no discrimination in the meting out of violent death, but this genre does not generally deal with the life works of its subjects, and provides no model for the type of sanctity generally promoted in early medieval Europe. However, it is worth noting that some of the themes which are clearly identifiable in early medieval women's *vitae* can be traced back to this period. Vibia Perpetua, martyred around the year 200, experienced a vision before being led into the arena, in which she was transformed into a male gladiator.<sup>7</sup> This achievement of masculinity, or male attributes, is a fairly common feature of early medieval *vitae*, which will be discussed later.<sup>8</sup> In addition, it has been observed that in these texts more women than men experience torture, and women alone suffer sexual mutilation.<sup>9</sup> Another recurrent motif in the martyrologies of women is their virginity, which sometimes seems even more important than their death for the faith. The importance of chastity, preferably virginity, was expanded upon by the Fathers of the church, particularly St. Jerome, whose correspondence with a group of pious women demonstrated his desire to form

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<sup>7</sup> Rachel Moriarty translates and discusses her visions in 'Playing the Man: the Courage of Christian Martyrs, Translated and Transposed' *Studies in Church History* 34 (1998) pp. 1-11.

<sup>8</sup> See below, Chapter Four, pp. 118-120. As far as I am aware, Perpetua's vision is the earliest explicit use of this theme.

<sup>9</sup> B. Abou-el-Haj *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations* (New York, 1993) p. 27. There are no examples of mutilation and torture in the childhood sections of this sample of *vitae*, which is hardly surprising considering the largely evangelized age in which they were composed, but the *Vita Radegundi* does detail the saint's extraordinary asceticism as an adult, which is prefigured in her childhood by her outspoken desire to be a martyr. Radegund's efforts to be 'a martyr of the new age' lead her to inflict gruesome punishments on her body, focussed on her chest, the most visible mark of her femininity. It is certain that her hagiographer, Venantius Fortunatus, knew of Jerome's version of the martyrdom of Agatha, who notably had her breasts cut off and miraculously restored by a vision of St Peter before her eventual death. Fortunatus included the saint in his *Carmina*. It is also extremely likely that Radegund herself knew of the specifics of Agatha's suffering; she exchanged letters and poetry with her hagiographer throughout her life. See below, Chapter Three pp. 102-4 for further discussion of Radegund's asceticism.

their spiritual characters with sexual abstinence as a central theme. However, his account of Paula's life is his only work which resembles in any way a female *vita* such as we see in later centuries.<sup>10</sup> Merovingian hagiographers, despite a variety of models of femininity, drawn from Scripture or martyrological sources, lacked clear examples of feminine *vitae* on which to base their work.

Could a saintly woman's life simply be treated in the same way as a man's? The evidence of hagiography would suggest both positive and negative answers to this question. It is true that male *vitae* generally follow the careers of their subjects in a more or less chronological manner; a boy grows up under the care of his parents, he commits himself to the church, rises in its ranks to become a bishop or the like and is involved in a great deal of politics along the way. Women's careers were much less clearly defined. Their opportunities within the church were more limited; as members of noble families they played only subordinate political roles, generally relying on the wiles of persuasion; as nuns they were often subject to far stricter enclosure than their brother monks. A man might express his spirituality (and indeed his personal ambition) by rising in the church hierarchy, or by undertaking missionary activity, both of which gained him increased prominence in both the secular and the ecclesiastical worlds. A woman, however, was more frequently required to withdraw into a convent in order to lead a holy life, and to relinquish her outside interests and usually any political power she might have. Schulenberg refers to this difference between the genders as one of 'visibility', and identifies it as a reason for the paucity of female saints before the sixth century.<sup>11</sup> In the quest for sanctity, reputation is all important. Not only must one *be* a saint, one must be *seen* to be one, and female opportunities for being seen were far more limited than those of men. Perhaps as a

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<sup>10</sup> Jerome's epitaph letter is Epistola 108 *PL* 22 col. 878.

<sup>11</sup> J. T. Schulenberg 'Sexism and the Celestial Gynaceum – from 500 to 1200' *Journal of Medieval History* 4 (1978) p. 118.



response to this fact, Julia Smith has noted a general difference in narrative between male and female *vitae*. Women's *vitae*, 'more akin to portraits than narrated careers'<sup>12</sup>, seem to operate outside time, with their deeds recorded as episodes rather than as the benchmarks of increasing authority.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that this quality of feminine hagiography relates to the unusually high percentage of such *vitae* which contain childhood detail. It might be argued that a man's childhood is hardly an important stage in his ecclesiastical career, whereas a woman's life was more closely centred on the monastic family in which the development of character, a much more timeless phenomenon, was perhaps more important than the acquisition of power.

There can be no doubt that the volume of hagiography concerning males far exceeds that concerning females, or that men and women occupied different roles within the church, yet the hagiography of women constitutes an increasing percentage of the corpus of *vitae* from the sixth to the late ninth centuries, reaching a peak of production in the eighth. Schulenberg's work on the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* forms a useful basis for the comparison of numbers of male and female *vitae* composed between the year 500 and the end of the twelfth century, and suggests reasons for fluctuations in the numbers of male *vitae* as compared to female which are useful in contextualising this sample. In the years between AD 700 and AD 799, Schulenberg's statistics record that 21.3% of all newly-composed *vitae* concerned the lives of women.<sup>14</sup> She explains this steady rise by examining individual *vitae* and characterizing their subjects. High-ranking women, often from old Gallo-Roman families, initially achieved increased visibility as domestic evangelists, converting

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<sup>12</sup> J. Smith 'The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c780-920' *Past and Present* 146 (February 1995) p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, this study is not concerned with the entirety of a saint's life, but merely with the part which precedes their 'visible' career. The problems, and problematization, of female sanctity are discussed in detail below, Chapter Four pp. 116-120.

<sup>14</sup> Schulenberg printed a table of her findings in 'Sexism and the celestial gynaceum' p. 133.

their barbarian husbands before retiring into nunneries of their own foundation upon widowhood.<sup>15</sup> Such foundations frequently also received their daughters, as families sought an honourable alternative to pressure from unwanted suitors, and such financial generosity almost guaranteed their candidacy for sainthood: Fouracre and Gerberding see the growing influence of the Frankish elite upon the church as a kind of ‘aristocratic self-sanctification’.<sup>16</sup> Monastic life, particularly for noble women who achieved the rank of abbess, might provide an opportunity to pursue an interest in learning or education, as hinted by the *Vita Balthildis*, and, often through familial connections, some eighth-century women travelled across the Continent as missionaries, establishing double houses ruled by women.<sup>17</sup> The ninth century disintegration of the Carolingian Empire heralded a decrease in the number of new female saints as foundations that were threatened by invaders and independence gave way to a need, real or perceived, for masculine protection, both physical and spiritual.<sup>18</sup> The Cluniac reforms attempted to redefine the position of women within monastic society, subjecting old foundations to the rule of priors, and their campaign for clerical celibacy seemed based on ‘a hysterical aversion towards women as the corrupting influence’ which was leading good men astray.<sup>19</sup> The growing popularity of the cult of the Virgin from the late tenth century increasingly monopolised feminine sanctity: once again, women retreated into the shadows and slipped from the pages of hagiography.

When comparing the differing roles and activities of men and women in the early medieval period, it is necessary to consider how many of the *vitae* in question

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<sup>15</sup> An example of such a text is the *Vita Clothildis*, not used here due to its paucity of childhood detail. See MGH SSRM II pp. 341-348.

<sup>16</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 48. See below, p. 29 for a discussion of the *Vita Geretrudis*.

<sup>17</sup> See the *Vita Leobae*, below p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> See the *Vita Rictrudis* p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> Schulenberg ‘Sexism and the Celestial Gynaceum’ p. 125

were composed by female hagiographers. Only one can certainly be attributed to a feminine hand: Huneberc signed herself, albeit cryptically, as the author of Willibald's *Hodoeporicon*.<sup>20</sup> In addition, there exists a second version of the *Vita Radegundi* by the nun Baudonivia, although the author's own aims prevent her *vita* from being included in this study as, in her efforts not to repeat the work of Venantius Fortunatus, she fails to provide any childhood detail whatsoever. It will be argued concerning seven of the *vitae* used in this sample that they may have been written by female hands.<sup>21</sup> Six are texts concerning female saints, but one relates to a male: we must remember that Huneberc's work also concerns a male saint. Janet Nelson argues that the conjunction of certain textual characteristics may help us identify feminine authorship: an incorporation of oral traditions as well as, or instead of, written sources, a 'sharp-eyed preoccupation with the play of power within royal families', and a 'marked interest in the political roles of royal women.'<sup>22</sup> It is certainly not easy to relate her criteria to the childhood sections of this sample of *vitae*. The importance of *auctoritas* and also, in many cases, of detailing the saint's progenitors will be seen in the vast majority of the sample studied here, and these two hagiographic phenomena would seem to muddy the waters a great deal when it comes to applying Nelson's ideas.<sup>23</sup> In each of the seven *vitae* tentatively suggested to have female authors, the parentage of the saint is detailed, which might be interpreted as conveying interest in families noble and royal, but it is not possible to say that the remainder of my sample are different in this regard, or if they are, it will be argued that this is for

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<sup>20</sup> See below, p. 27-8.

<sup>21</sup> See below, pp. 16-17. The *vitae* in question are those of Bertilla, Geretrud, Anstrude, Praejectus, Balthild, Austreberta and Sadalberga.

<sup>22</sup> J. Nelson 'Gender and Genre in Woman Historians of the Early Middle Ages' *The Frankish World 750-950* (London, 1996) p. 196.

<sup>23</sup> See above pp. 11-14 for examples of *auctorites* cited by hagiographers. See Chapter Two, pp. 73-6 for a discussion of saintly pedigree and its function in these *vitae*.

reasons other than male authorship.<sup>24</sup> The determination of which aspects of these *vitae* stem from oral tradition seems virtually impossible unless the author highlights whose testimony he or she is relying on at certain points in the narrative. In relation to childhood, we might well argue that all the detail provided stems from oral tradition, considering the fact that even those authors who were contemporary to their subjects could only have access to stories of their earliest years through either the account of the saint themselves, or through the recollections of other eye-witnesses. It will later be argued that the work of Gregory of Tours may well exhibit the use of familial oral tradition in the *vitae* of his relatives.<sup>25</sup> It seems that Nelson's criteria can scarcely be applied to the early sections of these *vitae*, and that the identification of female hagiographers must for the purposes of this study rest on evidence other than hagiographic focus on political powerplay, or the inclusion of oral tradition.<sup>26</sup> Detailed comparison of the entire texts of this sample, which might well yield results, is not the task of this thesis, although this is not to argue that it should not be attempted elsewhere in an effort to more certainly claim certain *vitae* as the work of female authors. However, it is possible that attempting to discover feminine authors may not be a very profitable exercise, if our only motivation is a comparison of the hagiography of both genders. In his study of the two contemporary *vitae* of Radegund, one composed by Venantius Fortunatus, and the other by the nun Baudonivia, John Kitchen concludes that the portrayal of female sanctity seems remarkably congruent across the work of both authors. He also questions the importance of the gender of anonymous authors: 'the existence of a large body of texts circulating anonymously

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of East Frankish *vitae* in this regard, see Chapter Two pp. 75-6.

<sup>25</sup> See below, Chapter Two p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Aside from the examination of each of these *vitae* in Chapter One, textual or other features which might indicate feminine authorship will be discussed as they arise throughout this study.

might be more profitably considered as evidence of a collective understanding of sanctity rather than as the individual expressions of female authors.<sup>27</sup>

In what manner did hagiographers approach their subjects, male and female? Fouracre and Gerberding note that, in contrast to classical literature, the choice of the disparate elements of genre which became combined in hagiography was largely determined by function rather than aesthetics, the form of this new genre being imposed by religious requirements rather than design.<sup>28</sup> However, this is not to argue that it was not cleverly and expertly crafted, often by individuals of significant accomplishment. Talbot describes the medieval ‘historian’, heir of the classical tradition, as ‘something between a rhetorician and a poet’, concerned not so much with the sifting of evidence as with the taste of their readers and the production of ‘elegant literary compositions’<sup>29</sup> Talbot presents his translated collection of eighth century Anglo-Saxon *vitae* as ‘biographies’: ‘Bishops, priests, monks, nuns and simple clerics flit through these pages and tell us their unvarnished tale’<sup>30</sup> His faith in the candour of hagiographers is touching, if a little misplaced and more than a little patronising. The truth concerning an individual’s holiness was always revealed from the grave, as divine approval was demonstrated through miraculous power bestowed upon the dead. ‘Authors were thus given a certain degree of freedom to be candid about the earthly careers of their subjects’<sup>31</sup>; that they had any need to be candid at all was due to the fact that they were often writing within living memory of their subjects.<sup>32</sup> Talbot claims that ‘the sympathetic eye will discern the honest attempts of

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<sup>27</sup> J. Kitchen *Saints’ Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York, 1998) p. 158

<sup>28</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> C. H. Talbot *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954) p. xv.

<sup>30</sup> Talbot *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* p. vii.

<sup>31</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 45. See also James *Life of the Fathers* pp. xvi-xvii and P. Geary *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (London, 1994) pp. 168 – 171.

<sup>32</sup> A good example of this is the *Passio Praejecti*: see below, p. 25. Fouracre and Gerberding suggest an ‘agreed version of events to maintain the public peace’ (for full argument see Fouracre and Gerberding

the authors in this book to record historical facts and to base their accounts on the testimony of eye-witnesses or on the notes of those who came into close contact with their heroes.<sup>33</sup> To describe such attempts as ‘honest’ is akin to believing that early medieval hagiographers are all persons of limited education when they claim their unfitness to produce works worthy of their subjects: he would be as well to recall his own comment regarding hagiographers as masters of rhetoric.

### **Texts and Transmission**

Determining, as far as was possible, the date of composition of each of the texts which might have been included in this study was naturally crucial, considering not only the AD 1000 cut-off date, but the fact that the *vitae* of early medieval saints were constantly recopied and rewritten, and that consequently the saint’s date of death, even when we know it with some certainty, cannot be taken as indicative of the date of the hagiographic text concerning him or her. As a result of this, the sample of *vitae* chosen for inclusion in this study will initially be discussed in their order of composition, as far as is possible considering the amount of speculation involved in the dating of several.

Honoratus’ *vita* was composed by Hilary, Bishop of Arles, concerning whom little is known other than the details he provides in his text. A member of Honoratus’ own family, he was compelled as a young man, by the saint himself, to follow Honoratus to Arles and eventually to succeed him as Bishop there in 429. His discourse was explicitly presented on the first anniversary of his ‘funeral’, and must therefore have been composed close to that same year, although the text confusingly then claims ‘this is the day on which [Honoratus] was divested of his body’,

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*Late Merovingian France* pp. 45-47) Later recensions of the same *vita* strip details which may be meaningless to a later audience and become more formulaic.

<sup>33</sup> Talbot *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* pp. xv-xvi.

suggesting that the actual day of the saint's death was being celebrated, according to custom.<sup>34</sup> The version used is that printed in *Patrologia Latina*, which in turn follows the work of the Bollandists.<sup>35</sup>

The *Vita Genovefa* has been the subject of much debate. The edition which Krusch prepared for MGH he roundly condemned as worthless in terms of historical detail, and that its claim that it was written by a contemporary, albeit anonymous, monk was false.<sup>36</sup> However, the version used here is that printed in *Acta Sanctorum*, and it has been argued that not only is this an older version, but that it lacks many of the inaccuracies which prompted Krusch's claims.<sup>37</sup> Heinzelmann and Poulin suggest that the anonymous author was a clerk or monk at Tours and believe his claim that he decided to write the *vita* eighteen years after Genovefa's death in 502, giving us a date of composition of 520. Adding weight to the Tours connection is the hagiographer's apparent modelling of his text on the Life of Martin, and Heinzelman also suggested that the *vita* may have been commissioned by Clothild, who retired to Tours after the death of her husband Clovis. He goes so far as to speculate that he may have derived some of his information from the saint herself.<sup>38</sup> Relating this to the author's depiction of Genovefa's childhood, at the very beginning of the *vita*, his language seems to indicate that he is a little unsure of his material, making the rather generalised comment; 'I believe that in her earliest years the faithful noticed first her religious

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<sup>34</sup> *Vita Honorati* PL 50 col. 1249-72. F. R. Hoare *The Western Fathers* (London, 1954) p. 248.

<sup>35</sup> PL vol 50, cols 1249-1272.

<sup>36</sup> B. Krusch 'Die Fälschung der Vita Genovefa' *Die Heiliger der Merovinger* (Hanover, 1896) pp. 190-6.

<sup>37</sup> AASS Ianuarii 3 pp. 137-53. For a summary of the arguments claiming that the AASS version is earliest and authentic, see J. A. McNamara and J. E. Halberg *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, 1992) p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Poulin notes that the text frames Genovefa's life according to the model of St. Martin in his half of *Les Vie Anciennes*. For Heinzelman's arguments regarding Clothild and the Tours connection, see *Les Vie Anciennes des Sainte Geneviève de Paris: Etudes Critiques* (Paris, 1986) p. 53

devotion and then, in due course, the grace that God conferred upon her'.<sup>39</sup> His choice of the term 'believe' might indicate that he is either extrapolating from inexact source material, or that he is simply allying his text to hagiographic tradition via the use of conventionalities.<sup>40</sup> However, he later recounts in a great deal of detail and with considerable assurance the tale of Genovefa's detection as a child by Bishop Germanus, indicating perhaps that he has heard this story either from a source he considered most reliable, or from the protagonist herself.

The *Vita Radegundi* was written by Venantius Fortunatus, contemporary and correspondent of the saint and the author of a large volume of Merovingian hagiography.<sup>41</sup> Radegund died in 587 and Fortunatus around 610, providing a temporal window within which the text must have been composed. There is another contemporary *vita* of the saint composed by Baudonivia, a nun whose personal knowledge of Radegund stemmed from the fact that she, too, was a nun at Poitiers. While it certainly postdated Fortunatus' effort, and would consequently have been excluded from consideration here, it is also regrettable for the purposes of this study that one of the very few Merovingian *vitae* which we know incontrovertibly to have been written by a female author contains no childhood detail. This is a deliberate exclusion on Baudonivia's part: she explicitly states that her intention is to

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<sup>39</sup> 'sed primum ab ineunte aetate eius devotionem, tum demum gratiam Dei, quae in ipsa collata est, fidelibus censui innocentescere' AASS Ianuarii 3 p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Sulpicius Severus uses an apparently equivalent phrase in his description of the young Martin: 'from almost the earliest years of his hallowed childhood, this remarkable boy aspired to the service of God'. Jacques Fontaine (ed. and trans.) 'Sulpicée Sévère - Vie de Saint Martin' *Sources Chrétiennes* Vol 133 (Paris, 1967) p. 162.

<sup>41</sup> MGH SSRM II pp. 358-405. For details of the relationship between Radegund and Fortunatus, see Kitchen *Saint's Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender* pp. 115-20. Kitchen notes on page 58 that around three quarters of all surviving Merovingian literature was composed either by Venantius Fortunatus, or by Gregory of Tours.



supplement Fortunatus' earlier work, and that the two texts are to be regarded as together comprising a complete account of their subject.<sup>42</sup>

Eleven of the *vitae* examined here are from the *Vita Patrum*, composed by Gregory of Tours in the last decades of the sixth century.<sup>43</sup> According to my preference for using the earliest version available, I have again looked to a scholar who shared that preference; I have used Krusch's edition which he composed for the Monumenta series, and which remains the standard Latin version.<sup>44</sup> Individual *vitae* received his close attention regarding their dating. The *Vita Monegundis* must have been composed before 587, yet the *vitae* of Leobardus and Nicetius could not have been written until 591 or 592. The result is rather a vague date for the composition of the entire work, but as Raymond Van Dam notes in his commentary on the *Liber Gloriarum Martyrum*, Gregory was not a man who finished one book before starting another, but kept his unfinished manuscripts up-to-date by 'constantly revising his writings over the years'.<sup>45</sup>

Yet again, regarding the *Vita Rusticulae* in this instance, Bruno Krusch decided that the text utilised here was a Carolingian forgery, essentially arguing that the style was rather too polished for the period in which it claimed to have been written.<sup>46</sup> However, Riché's response, concerning the sophisticated nature of the literary tradition in the Rhone region and in particular its Roman heritage, has more recently reinstated this text in the minds of most as an authentic seventh-century composition. Rusticula, Abbess of Arles, died in 632. Her *vita* is addressed to her

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<sup>42</sup> John Kitchen has most profitably considered the two *vitae* of Radegund according to the gender of their authors in *Saint's Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender*.

<sup>43</sup> MGH SSRM I Part II (1969). The *vitae* in question are those of Monegund, Leobardus, Nicetius, Patroclus, Gallus, Lupicinus and Romanus, Venantius, Nicetius of the Treveri, Leudegar and Martius.

<sup>44</sup> The earliest manuscript he had to hand dated from the ninth century; the latest he used was from the tenth, and he constructed a scheme which included four hypothesised lost manuscripts, including Gregory's original, in order to explain their relationship to one another. For Krusch's discussion, see his introduction to the edition in MGH SSRM I Part II (1969).

<sup>45</sup> R. Van Dam *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool, 1988) p. 4

<sup>46</sup> MGH SSRM IV pp. 337-51. See pp. 337-9 for Krusch's comments.

immediate successor, Abbess Celsa, and was written by Florentius, who identifies himself as ‘a priest of the church of Tricastina,’ and certainly purports to have been written shortly after its subject’s death.<sup>47</sup>

Embedded within the *Vita sancti Columbani*, Burgundofara’s life was composed by Jonas of Bobbio in the context of that former saint’s journey across the Alps in later life.<sup>48</sup> Jonas began his work while Columbanus was still alive, but added the information regarding his final travels, and the discovery of Burgundofara, after the saint’s death. Burgundofara lived until 645, shortly after which Jonas completed his work.

Krusch’s forgery allegations extend to the *Vita Sadalbergae* which he edited and published for the MGH.<sup>49</sup> He was convinced that the text was the product of a ninth-century pen, and as yet there has been no real challenge to his position, unlike in the cases of Genovefa and Rusticula, as we have seen. However, McNamara was prepared to give credence the anonymous author’s claims that the text had been commissioned by Sadalberga’s spiritual as well as carnal daughter, her successor Anstrude.<sup>50</sup> Although there exists no cult at Laon to commemorate the saint, which McNamara accepts may well be evidence that, for once, Krusch’s suspicions were well-founded, she notes that the author, whom she refers to as ‘he’, ‘conveys a vivid impression of being a near contemporary.’<sup>51</sup> The account of her detection by Columbanus was copied with some amendments from the *Vita sancti Columbani*; the changes made by the anonymous author could well reinforce Krusch’s forgery claims, although the fact that ‘he’ was evidently most familiar with Jonas’ text, and generally

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<sup>47</sup> ‘presbyter ecclesiae civitatis Tricestrinae’ MGH SSRM IV p. 339. Riché suggested that Florentius may have been brought up within the convent at Arles in the *Vita Rusticulae* MGH SSRM IV p. 376.

<sup>48</sup> MGH SSRM IV pp. 130-43.

<sup>49</sup> MGH SSRM IV pp. 40-66.

<sup>50</sup> McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 176.

<sup>51</sup> McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 176.

follows it regarding the actions of Columbanus and Eustasius, seem to me to suggest that whoever wrote this text considered themselves to be improving upon an account which might otherwise have gone largely unnoticed within the *Vita Columbani*. It is possible that Sadalberga was being written up as a local saint by a local person, as in the aforementioned case of Rusticula, and if so, was that individual a nun at Laon?

Concerning Praejectus, Krusch proposed a date for the death of the saint from information found in another hagiographic text, the *Vita Boniti Episcopi Arverni*, in which is detailed the length of Praejectus' successor's rule. From this he determined that Praejectus died in January 676.<sup>52</sup> In 1893, Krusch discovered a manuscript of the *Passio Praejecti* which could be dated earlier than any others previously known, from the tenth or eleventh centuries.<sup>53</sup> This he published in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historicae*, and is the version used here. Despite the relatively late date of this manuscript, the *Passio Praejecti* purports to be a work nearly contemporary with the events it describes. Krusch certainly believed this to be true, and more recent work suggests that among the *Passio*'s functions might be included 'some sort of public reconciliation between Praejectus' family and his killers'.<sup>54</sup> The text's candour regarding Praejectus' various struggles and political manoeuvres can certainly be seen as the result of its temporal proximity to those events; necessity, here, being the mother of historical accuracy. The nature of the piece's author has also received some attention. Krusch's opinion was that the individual concerned was not local, which he substantiated by pointing out various idiosyncratic spellings of local names, as well as an apparent misrepresentation regarding the proximity of the Loire to Clermont.<sup>55</sup> The

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<sup>52</sup> MGH SSRM VI p. 121 Praejectus' successor ruled a little over fifteen years, dying while Theuderic was alive, so before April 691. Praejectus died after Easter 675, so the January in question must be that of 676.

<sup>53</sup> MGH SSRM VI p. 121.

<sup>54</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 255.

<sup>55</sup> MGH SSRM VI p. 121.

hint of criticism towards the secular clergy which may be found in the work also indicated that he was likely to be a monk. In countering his argument, Fouracre and Gerberding later came up with a variety of beguiling suggestions: they first dealt with a point that Krusch had elected to ignore, the rather odd structure of the *Passio*, which, as they pointed out, could suggest that the author in question was not one individual, but two. This possibility they eventually discounted due to the consistency of the internal referencing, and they noted instead that the peculiarities of structure might have resulted from the author's rather poor synthesis of the sources that were available to him, complicated by his efforts to create a piece which corresponded to a standard of Roman literature which he lacked the skill to emulate.<sup>56</sup> As to his identity, they rather unravelled Krusch's arguments for a non-local monk by emphasising the author's degree of local knowledge, as well as the impression that he had known Praejectus personally. The vagaries of his spelling were perhaps no greater than those of any other contemporary author, and even his geography might be excusable if he was speaking in rather general terms about his region.<sup>57</sup> Their final undermining of Krusch's position is perhaps the most interesting. While they agreed that the *Passio* did indeed convey an impression of hostility towards the secular clergy, suggesting a monastic author, this author may not necessarily have been a man. Although, having reinstated him as a local, he might have been a monk at Volvic, where Praejectus' relics were housed, she could just as well have been a nun at Chamalières, the convent founded by Praejectus' sponsor at his urging. The abbess of Chamalières, Gundilana, seems likely to have been related to Praejectus due to the similarity of her name to that of his father, Gundolenus. She is explicitly praised in the *Passio*, and it is noted that she washed the saint's body after his death. Was this a family task given out of

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<sup>56</sup> For the full argument, see Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 257.

<sup>57</sup> Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 258.

respect to a family member?<sup>58</sup> Significantly for this study, Fouracre and Gerberding note the unusual proliferation of stories from Praejectus' childhood, suggesting that this relative must have supplied much of the information recorded in the *Passio*.<sup>59</sup> It seems unlikely that she wrote the piece herself only due to her position within it - she could hardly praise herself in such glowing terms – but that a nun under her command composed this *vita* seems a strong possibility.

The *Vita Balthildis* exists in the MGH as two parallel versions, 'A' and 'B', of which 'B' is a reworked text from the end of the eighth century, or possibly the beginning of the ninth.<sup>60</sup> The saint's dates are not certain: her husband Clovis II was born in 633 which may set her birth as some time after this, and Krusch assumed from the account of her reception into heaven by Genesisius that she died shortly after him, at the end of 679.<sup>61</sup> The authors of both 'A' and 'B' claim to have been contemporaries of the saint, both cannot have been telling the truth, and Fouracre notes: 'this is a powerful reminder that we should be wary of believing any hagiographical source's claim to be contemporary unless we see reasons beyond the simple claim'.<sup>62</sup> Preferring, then, the older version 'A', we must consider its author. Nelson suggested a nun of Chelles, Balthild's own monastery, but Fouracre disagrees, citing the preface's dedication to '*dilectissimi fratres*' and construing from this that the author 'was probably male'.<sup>63</sup> However, we read in the Prologue to the *Vita Willibaldi*, incontrovertibly written by Huneberc, nun of Heidenheim, 'Here begins the life of the brothers Willibald and Wynnebald, addressed to all priests,

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<sup>58</sup> Patrick Geary notes the 'relationship of mutual dependence' between the living and the dead, and how this might have been an aspect of the kin relationship in *Living with the Dead* p. 77-92.

<sup>59</sup> For the full argument, see Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* pp. 259-60.

<sup>60</sup> MGH SRM II pp. 475-508. Fouracre & Gerberding note that text 'B' does not include an account of Balthild's translation in March 833, so was apparently written before then. *Late Merovingian France* p. 115 note 122.

<sup>61</sup> MGH SRM II p. 476.

<sup>62</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 116.

<sup>63</sup> J. Nelson 'Queens As Jezebels' *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, 1992) p. 46 note 83; Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 115.

deacons and princes of the ecclesiastical order'. She adds that she heard much of Willibald's story from his own mouth 'with two deacons as witnesses'.<sup>64</sup> Rudolf of Fulda wrote the *Vita Leoba* for the virgin Hadamout and Eigil wrote the life of Sturm for the virgin Angildruth. We see here a nun writing the *vita* of a male saint explicitly for men, and two monks writing both male and female *vitae* explicitly for women. In this context the phrase '*dilectissime fratres*' seems to take on less significance, and in the absence of any other evidence to the contrary, the author of the *Vita Balthildis* may have been a nun at Chelles after all. Nelson certainly trusted the author of the 'A' text's claim that he or she was a contemporary of Balthild's, and raises the possibility that the saint herself deliberately influenced her portrayal during her lifetime. She draws a parallel between the relics of the saint, discovered at Chelles in 1983, clothed in a simply embroidered tabard, and the constant emphasis on Balthild's humility within the *vita*: 'the tabard story was also the life story, the story that Balthild chose for herself.'<sup>65</sup>

When Wilhelm Levison prepared the *Vita Aldegundi* for MGH, he used the oldest available version but removed the visions which make it so remarkable. For the purposes of this discussion, his edition is acceptable because it otherwise left the *vita* intact, and Aldegund was unfortunately not a visionary in childhood.<sup>66</sup> The text was composed shortly after Aldegund's death in around 684. The *vita* also contains information about Aldegund's sister, Waldetrude, and there exists another version of the text, reprinted in the *Acta Sanctorum*, which seems to be a later rewrite, possibly under the instruction of Waldetrude herself as McNamara notes the inclusion of more

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<sup>64</sup> 'duobus deaconibus testibus' MGH SS XV Vol I p. 80.

<sup>65</sup> J. Nelson 'Badehildis – Balthild' unpublished paper given at the one day conference *Balthild: Slave, Queen, Sinner and Saint*, largely concerning the discovery of a seventh century gold signet ring bearing her name in a Norfolk field, (Norwich Castle Museum, Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2002). For further reference to Balthild's origins, see Chapter Four p. 115.

<sup>66</sup> MGH SSRM VI pp. 79-90. The oldest version with visionary material intact was edited by Smet for *Acta Sanctorum Belgae* IV pp. 291-326.

detailed family information within the later text.<sup>67</sup> While my criteria strictly prevent use of this later text, it was still composed within living memory of the saint, before c. 688 if it was indeed influenced by her sister, who died then.

The *Vita Cuthberti* utilised here is the anonymous version which Bede used to compose his Prose Life in 716.<sup>68</sup> Colgrave dates its composition between 699 and 705 based on textual references and notes that the author was a monk of Lindisfarne, as indicated by Bede in his introduction to the Ecclesiastical History.<sup>69</sup> There is evidence of a medieval preference for Bede's version (It exists in 38 manuscripts compared to 7 extant editions of the anonymous hagiographer's work), which is essentially a rewriting of the earlier material though with the addition of ten new chapters. The version utilised here is naturally the oldest, although Bede's words will be discussed for comparative purposes whenever this *vita* is considered. The anonymous version is notably simpler in style than Bede's effort, and Farmer points out that had the initial version been considered adequate, then the monks of Lindisfarne would not have commissioned Bede to write another.<sup>70</sup>

The MGH version of the *Vita Geretrudis* was largely taken from an eighth century manuscript found in Montpellier, belonging to a set of manuscripts which Krusch classed as 'A'. He also included an edition composed from manuscripts he collectively referred to as 'B', despite stating his preference for the older 'A' version, although the contents of both groups display little variety. Krusch believed the original to be nearly contemporary, partly due to the style of its Latin, partly due to its convincing eye-witness claims, and dated it around 670, noting that it must have been

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<sup>67</sup> AASS Ianuarii 30 pp. 649-62.

<sup>68</sup> B. Colgrave *Two Lives of St Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940) pp. 60 – 141.

<sup>69</sup> Colgrave *St Cuthbert* pp. 11-13.

<sup>70</sup> J. F. Webb and D. H. Farmer *The Age of Bede* (London, 1983) p. 17.

composed after 663 in order to mention the death of Abbess Wulfetrud.<sup>71</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding note that the author is definitely male (he confirms this early in the *vita* when he refers to ‘I and another brother’) and discuss his possible ethnicity.<sup>72</sup> He may have been a Frank – Fouracre notes that the name of the ‘other brother’ was of Frankish origin, but he may indeed have been Irish, connected with the nunnery at Nivelles where Geretrud was abbess. Arguments against his Irishness include his failure to detail important contemporary information regarding the progress of the Irish influence at Nivelles and beyond: he does not record Foilan’s arrival, nor his foundation of Fosses with Geretrud’s mother, Itta. However, he does mention an apparition of St. Patrick, whose cult Foilan introduced.<sup>73</sup> There may be another suggestion that the monk in question was not of Irish origin, or at least not loyal to his background, connected with his remarks concerning Itta’s treatment of Geretrud’s hair: ‘In order that profaners of souls should not carry off her daughter by force to the seductive pleasures of this world, she took shears and cut the hair of the holy girl into the form of a crown’.<sup>74</sup> The symbolism seems clear: Geretrud received a tonsure to protect her from worldliness, thus securing her place in a convent as surely as the tonsure of any of her male counterparts committed them to the monastic life. Tonsure, along with the reckoning of the date of Easter, was of vital importance in the struggle between Irish and Roman Christian practice in the seventh century – a battle which Rome was to win, certainly among the Franks. The ‘crown’, representing Christ’s crown of thorns, was promoted as the preferred form of monastic tonsure over the Irish method, which left a fringe at the front. However, the ‘Irishness’ of the

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<sup>71</sup> MGH SSRM II pp. 447-74, with additions and corrections in MGH SSRM VII pp. 791-7.

<sup>72</sup> See Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* pp. 303-9.

<sup>73</sup> MGH SSRM II pp. 463.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Ut non violatores animarum filiam suam ad inlecebras huius mundi voluptates per vim raperent, ferrum tonsoris[sic] arripuit at capillos sanctae puellae ad instar coronae abscisit’. MGH SSRM II p. 456, translated in Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 321.



monasteries founded by Itta (Fosses is called ‘monasterium Scottorum’ and certainly calculated Easter by the Irish method) would seem to suggest that they also preferred the Irish form of the tonsure. How, then, are we to interpret Geretrud’s ‘*corona*’? Considering that the 664 Synod of Whitby ‘settled’ the matter in favour of the Roman method, and this *vita* is likely to have been composed very shortly afterwards, are we to read Geretrud’s apparently ‘Roman’ tonsure as the hagiographer’s ‘correction’ of their actual monastic practice? Fouracre notes that this *vita* ‘is very much in the main stream of the Frankish hagiographic tradition... quite different from the writing about saints by seventh-century Irish authors in Ireland’<sup>75</sup> We may in fact have here a text composed by a Frankish author, or at least an Irishman with Roman preferences. In this context his later comment that ‘with God’s inspiration she deservedly obtained...relics of the saints and holy books from Rome, and from the regions across the sea’ may be relevant; he notes her reliance on both traditions, but places Rome first.<sup>76</sup>

The editor of the *Vita Austrebertae* in the *Acta Sanctorum* believed that the text was composed shortly after the saint’s death in 703, by a contemporary nun or monk of Pavilly where Austreberta was abbess, or its brother house, Jumieges.<sup>77</sup> McNamara notes that the text makes several references to people and places as though they will be known to those receiving the *vita*,<sup>78</sup> and in addition he or she claims that ‘we shall undertake with true and faithful pen to produce a truthful narrative from

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<sup>75</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 318.

<sup>76</sup> ‘persuos nuntios, boni testimonii viros sanctorum patrocina vel sancta volumina de urbe Roma et de transmarinis regionibus gignaros homines ad docendum divinilegis carmina, sibi et suis meditando, Deo inspirante, meruissent habere.’ MGH SRM II p. 457, translated in Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 322. Fouracre and Gerberding note that ‘regions across the sea’ may mean Britain or Ireland, and also emphasise ‘the religious importance of Rome to the Franks in the pre-Bonifatian period’ Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 322 note 101.

<sup>77</sup> AASS Februarii 10 pp. 417-429.

<sup>78</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 304.

what we have learned from her followers.<sup>79</sup> It is interesting that within the author's conventional rhetorical protestations of inability to perform the task in hand, we are given an example of the hagiographer of Abbot Philibert of Jumièges, whose work was apparently not up to scratch, at least in the opinion of his patron. 'And when it came to the patron's hand to be read, he despised it and mocked it and finally changed it into quite a different sort of text.'<sup>80</sup> As to the gender of Austreberta's hagiographer, the text leaves both possibilities open. It refers to the unfortunate other author whose work came to be rewritten always as 'he', although the text in that instance was originating from Jumièges, and we cannot dismiss the possibility that while a monk of Jumièges would compose the *vita* of a former abbot of that house, a nun at Pavilly would be enjoined to do the same for a former abbess.

As we have seen, Bruno Krusch condemned the *Vita Sadalbergae* as a ninth century forgery, and he similarly cast aspersions as to the *vita* of her daughter, Anstrude, successor as Abbess of Laon. However, in his edition for the MGH, Wilhelm Levison does not challenge its essential authenticity, arguing instead that it is a rewrite of an older, vanished version penned by a member of the convent.<sup>81</sup> His assumption that the text is not entirely original centres on the style of the introduction and the last miracle story, but, significantly for this study, he does not claim that the rest of the text has necessarily been much altered. It is surely possible that either the author of the original text, or the ninth-century rewriter, supposing there was such a person, was female, as Levison suggests. At one point in the narrative, the author uses terms which convey that he or she is imagining an exclusively female audience, as

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<sup>79</sup> 'conemur fideli et veraci stylo depromere, quae de eam multorum veridicam fidelium comperimus relatione' AASS Februarii X p. 419, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 307.

<sup>80</sup> 'vereor enim, ne mihi contingat, quod cuidam contigisse audidi ... Cumque ad manus cuiusdam legendi gratiam pervenisset, despexit et irristit, et longe aliter textum et ordinem multo melius dissimiliter immutavit.' AASS Februarii X p. 419, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 306-7.

<sup>81</sup> MGH SSRM VI pp. 64-78.

indeed she would be if she were a member of the convent at Laon: ‘So, dearest sisters, the lamp of the glorious Anstrude was never extinguished because, as you have heard, she was remote from worldly pomp.’<sup>82</sup>

The *Vita Bertilae*, Abbess of Chelles, was edited by Levison who claimed that it primarily derived from the *Vita Balthildis*.<sup>83</sup> Mabillon thought that it had been compiled at Chelles shortly after Bertilla’s death, although the date of that event is contested, with suggestions ranging from 692 to 708.<sup>84</sup> It is safe only to say that it was composed at the turn of the eighth century, and the author makes no reference to his or herself in the text, although it may be asserted that he or she was familiar not only with Balthild’s *vita*, but with some of the hagiographic works of Gregory of Tours. The hagiographer’s reference to ‘the religious life of holy virgins’ has been compared to Gregory’s insistence on the singular ‘*Life of the Fathers*’, emphasising the unified and continuous tradition of the sacred life.<sup>85</sup> Although it seems hardly sufficient evidence to argue that the author of this piece was male, the hagiographer repeatedly refers to ‘holy women’ when one might expect the term ‘sisters.’<sup>86</sup> In addition, he or she recalls how Bertilla sought ‘a suitable consortium of holy women or one of their communities.’<sup>87</sup> We are dealing in the subtlest shades of meaning, but it is worth mentioning that this phrase seems rather remote from the world of feminine devotion it is describing, unusually so if the author was a nun at Chelles herself, or indeed an inhabitant of that same world.

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<sup>82</sup> ‘propterea, sorores carissime, non extinguuntur lampades huius gloriosae Anstrudis, qui remota fuit, sicut audistis, a secularis pompis’ MGH DDRM VI p. 67, translated in McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 293.

<sup>83</sup> MGH SSRM VI pp. 95-109.

<sup>84</sup> Mabillon ‘Acta Sanctorum Ordinis Sancti Benedicti’ *Saeculum* 3 pp. 1-25.

<sup>85</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 280 note 8 and see above p. 11.

<sup>86</sup> ‘sanctis feminis’ MGH SSRM VI p. 102.

<sup>87</sup> ‘congrue ad sanctorum feminarum consortium’ MGH SSRM VI p. 101, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 281.

Eustadiola's *vita*, similar to that of Burgundofara, survived embedded within that of Sulpicius of Bourges, who died in 647, and probably dates from the early eighth century, considering the fact that Eustadiola herself survived until 684.<sup>88</sup>

Colgrave's edition of the Life of Guthlac, published in 1956, utilises a multiplicity of manuscripts dating from the late eighth century to the fourteenth to arrive at a reliable text of what is essentially an eighth century *vita*. Written, as the prologue tells us, by Felix at the request of King Aelfwald of the East Angles, it can be dated at least by the rule of that king (713-749). Colgrave reckons Felix to be an East Angle, or at least resident in the region at the time of writing, as he refers to another king 'without mentioning the fact that he was king of the East Angles'.<sup>89</sup> Felix was certainly a monk, and his text betrays a little of his politics: Guthlac's tonsure is that 'of St Peter', the Roman rather than the Irish version as discussed above.<sup>90</sup> He was particularly familiar with Bede's life of Cuthbert, and used it extensively, which allows a closer dating of this text as the Prose Life was not complete before 721. In addition, Bede pushes the date of composition further forward still as he does not mention Felix's work in his Ecclesiastical History, finished in 731, resulting in a rough ten-year window between 730 and 740 during which Felix must have written the text in question.<sup>91</sup> Guthlac died in 714 and while Felix does not claim to have known the saint, he cites 'credible witnesses', including a certain Abbot Wilfrid, the priest Cissa and 'others who for any length of time had dealings with the man of God.'<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> AASS Juni 8 pp. 131-33.

<sup>89</sup> B. Colgrave *Vita Sancti Guthlaci Auctore Felice* Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac (Cambridge, 1956) p. 16.

<sup>90</sup> 'misticam sancti Petri apostolorum proceris tonsuram' B. Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 84. For further discussion of the form of the tonsure, see above, p. 28-9.

<sup>91</sup> Colgrave notes that Bede's interest in East Anglian and Mercian affairs would surely have led to the text's inclusion had it been available: *Saint Guthlac* p. 19.

<sup>92</sup> 'indubitorum testium ... vel etiam ab aliis, qui diutius cum viro Dei conversati vitam illius' Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 64, translated on p. 65. Colgrave notes that this sentence, and indeed much of the

The *Passio Leudegarii* used here is again the version edited by Krusch for the Monumenta series. In order to arrive at the ‘earliest version’, he utilised three manuscripts, one barely more than a large fragment of the *Passio*, but after analysis of the texts actually preferred not the oldest, dating from the mid eighth century and composed at Poitiers, the centre of Leudegar’s cult, but a longer version from the ninth century written at Autun. This, he considered, was based on an earlier version than the Poitier manuscript, which Fouracre later noted essentially comprised the Autun version with the addition of some local detail.<sup>93</sup> The lost *Passio*, on which the Autun manuscript (eventually chosen to be printed in MGH, with the Poitiers text also included as an alternate version) was based, was evidently composed during the episcopate of Hermenar, to whom the piece is dedicated, dating it before 693. In addition, it was written before Leudegar’s cult was moved to Poitiers (probably in the early 680’s) as it seems to have been provoked by Autun’s eventually unsuccessful bid for the saint’s relics. Fouracre notes that, similar to the *Passio Praejecti*, the *Passio Leudegarii* seems to be a near-contemporary work, judging by the level of local detail as well as its several explicit eye-witness claims.<sup>94</sup> He also suggests that the Autun version’s strongest claim to being a copy of a text earlier than the Poitiers version is the ‘whiff of controversy’ regarding many of Leudegar’s deeds, particularly those which are suspiciously absent in the Poitiers manuscript.<sup>95</sup> It seems hardly likely that such elements would have been added later – hagiographers did not tend to create problems for themselves. The controversial element also argues for the text being contemporary to the events it details, as discussed regarding the *Passio Praejecti*.

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*vita*’s prologue, is copied from Bede’s version of the *Vita Cuthberti*. We are reminded never to trust an author’s claims of authenticity: he or she may have borrowed even these claims from another source.

<sup>93</sup> See MGH SSRM V pp. 243-259 for Krusch’s analysis of the *Passio Leudegarii*. Also Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* pp. 194-6.

<sup>94</sup> MGH SSRM V pp. 249-322.

<sup>95</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 203.

Wilhelm Levison prepared the *Vita Bonifatii Auctore Willibaldo* for *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*.<sup>96</sup> The *vita* was written by Willibald, a different individual from the Bishop of Eichstatt whose Life is also examined here, but an English missionary nevertheless, as can be judged from his anglicization of Germanic and Frisian place names.<sup>97</sup> Commissioned by Boniface's successor in Mainz, Bishop Lull, he did not ever meet his subject, and based his account on stories provided by Boniface's disciples, certainly completing his text within thirteen years of his subject's death in 754 as both Lull and Bishop Meginzog of Wurzburg, to whom the work is partly dedicated, died in 768.<sup>98</sup>

Written around 796, Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi* was requested by Beornrad, abbot of Echternach, the monastery which the saint had founded and where his remains resided. Alcuin was in addition a kinsman of Willibrord, although the saint had died in 739 when Alcuin was a small child, and the two are hardly likely to have ever met. He acknowledges that he based his work on a lost earlier *vita*. Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi* was prepared for *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* by Wilhelm Levison.<sup>99</sup>

The best edition of the *Hodoeporicon Sancti Willibaldi* is that by Holder-Egger in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores*.<sup>100</sup> The author of the *vita* was not discovered until 1931, when Bernhard Bischoff's work on a cryptogram found in a Munich manuscript of the text arrives at the name Huneberc – sometimes written as Hugeberc. 'She appears to have been the only woman author of a saint's life from

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<sup>96</sup> MGH SRG pp. 1-57.

<sup>97</sup> C. H. Talbot *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954) p. 24.

<sup>98</sup> Due to the fact that he never met Boniface, Thomas Head argues that Willibald did not arrive on the Continent until after the saint's death. T. Noble and T. Head *Soldiers of Christ* (London, 1995) p. 107.

<sup>99</sup> MGH SSRM VII pp. 81-141.

<sup>100</sup> MGH SS XV Vol. I pp. 80-117.

before the Carolingian period'.<sup>101</sup> Willibald supported his brother Wynnebald when in 752 he founded the double house at Heidenheim, and after Wynnebald's death their sister Walburge took over as abbess. It was under her rule that another relative, Huneberc, left England and joined her around 761. Much of her information was gleaned from the saint himself and the work must have been completed shortly after his death in 786.

Eigil, abbot of Fulda, wrote the *vita* of his mentor and predecessor, Sturm, who died in 779. Eigil was elected to the abbacy in 818 after the banishment of the controversial Abbot Ratgar, and died in 822, fixing the date before which the *vita* must have been written. The edition of Sturm's *vita* used here is that prepared for *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores*.<sup>102</sup>

The *Vita Leobae* was composed by Rudolf, generally assumed to be the same individual as Rudolf of Fulda, who became master of the school at that house when Hrabanus Maurus became abbot in 822. The text used here was completed by 836, and edited by Georg Waitz for the MGH.<sup>103</sup> It is most interesting to read in his prologue that he obtained much information regarding Leoba's life from 'four of her disciples', whom he names as 'Agatha, Thecla, Nana and Eoloba.'<sup>104</sup> Thomas Head notes that these women cannot be identified, although we may speculate with some certainty that they were nuns at Bischofsheim where Leoba was abbess.<sup>105</sup> In addition, the *vita* is dedicated to the virgin Hadamout and addressed to 'all the nuns who unceasingly invoke the name of the Lord.'<sup>106</sup> His comments seem less remarkable

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<sup>101</sup> Noble and Head *Soldiers of Christ* p. 141. It is quite possible that this is not the case. See discussion above pp. 16-7.

<sup>102</sup> MGH SS II pp. 365-77.

<sup>103</sup> MGH SS XV pp. 118-31. This dating depends on the fact that Rudolf makes no mention of the translation of her relics which occurred in 837.

<sup>104</sup> 'quatuor discipularum eius' MGH SS XV pp. 118.

<sup>105</sup> Noble and Head *Soldiers of Christ* p. 257 note 2.

<sup>106</sup> 'omnibus sanctis virginibus, quae tecum assidue invocant nomen Domini' MGH SS XV pp. 118.

considering how many of these *vitae* may be suggested to be the work of feminine hands.

The *Vita Sanctae Rictrudis* was composed by Hucbald around 907, who explains in the prologue to the *vita* that he has used as his sources various earlier texts which seem no longer to exist.<sup>107</sup> Rictrude died around 688: this *vita* represents the largest time-gap between subject and author of any in this sample, by some margin. It contains only a little information regarding the childhood of Rictrude herself, but includes more detail about the infant Amand and also one of Rictrude's daughters, Eusebia, hence its inclusion here. Hucbald was a monk of Saint-Amand and borrows the story regarding his founding father from that saint's own *vita*.<sup>108</sup> Rictrude's monastery at Marchiennes, by Hucbald's day, had been burned by Viking invaders, and it seems from this *vita* that the struggling nuns were already being pressed to vacate the territory. Hucbald notes that 'Blessed Amand had intended to install an order of monks there: but the abbot gathered nuns instead as had been shown to him.'<sup>109</sup> He may have been emphasising the glory of Rictrude's time to cast even longer shadows over the floundering foundation in his own.

To Odo's clear disappointment he never met the subject of the *Vita Geraldi*, although he was a rough contemporary of Gerald who died in 909, and he spends some time in the preface to his work detailing his sources: not only 'four of those whom he had brought up' but also his patron Abbot Aymo, who he reassures that he has 'set down those things only which were made known to me by sure authorities and when you also were present.'<sup>110</sup> The *vita* appears in *Patrologia Latina*, utilising

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<sup>107</sup> AASS Maii 12 pp. 78-98.

<sup>108</sup> MGH SSRM V pp. 395-449.

<sup>109</sup> AASS Maii 12 pp. 78-98, translated in McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 208.

<sup>110</sup> 'quatuor ex his, quos ipse nutrierat'; 'sola illa qui mihi sunt vulgata, cum et to corem adesses certis auctoribus contexens.' PL 133 col. 640, translated by G. Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* (New York, 1958) p. 91.



Marrier's 1614 edition along with notes by Duchesne.<sup>111</sup> Odo's death in 942 sets the last possible date that this *vita* can have been written.

Odo's own *vita* also appears in this sample: John of Salerno by his own admission spent less than two years actually in the saints company, but nevertheless heard Odo's stories from his own mouth, and certainly took part in some of the scenes he relates from the saint's later years. We can assume that the text was composed, therefore, around the middle of the tenth century, not long after Odo's death. The version used here is that reprinted in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, composed by Mabillon in 1865 from an earlier version by Dom Martin Marrier and an additional manuscript original.<sup>112</sup>

The *Vita Aethelwoldi* composed by Aelfric has been edited by J. Stevenson as part of the *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*.<sup>113</sup> Another version, which Migne believed to be earlier and therefore printed in *Patrologia Latina*, was subsequently claimed to be a post-Conquest elaboration of Aelfric's work.<sup>114</sup> This view has recently been challenged and the second *vita* attributed to Wulfstan, precentor of Worcester, amid claims that it in fact predates Aelfric's work.<sup>115</sup> The preface to Aelfric's version was written between 1005 and 1006, roughly twenty years after Aethelwold died in 984, although it has been argued that the *vita* was written before this approximate

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<sup>111</sup> PL 133 col. 639-704. A much shorter recension was published by Bouange in 1870, giving rise to some debate over which text could truly be attributed to Odo. Poncelet argues for the present version, suggesting that the shorter version might be a contemporary abbreviation made by a monk of Aurillac. See G. Sitwell *Odo of Cluny* (New York, 1958) p. xxiv.

<sup>112</sup> PL 133 col. 705-854. Marrier and Mabillon both also printed a twelfth century text of Odo's life written by a Cluniac monk named Nalgodus, which claims only to be a rewriting of John's original. In 1889, Sackur discovered two further editions: an anonymous life from the second half of the eleventh century addressed to Abbot Hugh of Cluny, and the recension of John's life on which this manuscript was based. Neither are published, although their discoverer comments on his findings in *Neues Archiv für Deutsche Geschichte* (XV, pp. 103-116). Sitwell notes that 'from internal evidence it seems that John himself was responsible for this recension and that it was made after the longer version'. Sitwell *Odo of Cluny* p. xxiv.

<sup>113</sup> J. Stevenson *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon* (London, 1858) pp. 253-266.

<sup>114</sup> J. Armitage Robinson *The Times of St. Dunstan* (Oxford, 1923) pp. 106-8.

<sup>115</sup> D. J. V. Fisher 'The Early Biographers of St. Ethelwold' *English Historical Review* lxxvii (1952) pp. 381-391.

date, in order to correspond to the fact that the author of the *Vita Oswaldi* was aware of a biography of Aethelwold before 1005. It seems perfectly likely that Aelfric wrote his text over the course of several years, and there is no reason to assume that he began at the beginning, so to speak. I am regarding Aelfric's work as the earliest *vita* available, for the purposes of this study at least; he begins his preface 'Considering it fitting, now that twenty years have passed since his death, to commend to memory some things concerning the acts of ... Aethelwold.'<sup>116</sup> It seems that he would hardly have couched his preface in these terms if an earlier *vita* of the saint was readily available.

Dunstan died in 988, and his first *vita* must have been written between 996 and 1004, based on its dedication to Aelfric, Archbishop of Canterbury 996-1005 (a different Aelfric to the author of the *Vita Aethelwoldi*), and the fact that it was copied in 1004.<sup>117</sup> It thus barely but adequately conforms to the time restrictions of this study, and is certainly useful to compare to the nearly contemporary *Vita Aethelwoldi*. The author offers some description of himself, claiming to be a priest, a Saxon ('*vilis Saxonum indigena*'), and giving us the first letter of his name ('B').<sup>118</sup> He claims personal knowledge of his subject, and also that he received information from Dunstan's circle of disciples. The version used here is the earliest of those edited by William Stubbs, who notes that the author's non-monastic origins seem clear from the fact that he says 'scarcely anything' regarding Dunstan's monastic reforms, discusses the evidence for his precise Saxon origins and speculates that the author was in fact

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<sup>116</sup> 'dignum ducens denique aliqua de gestis patris nostri et magnifici doctoris Atheluuoldi memoriae modo commendare, transactis videlicet viginti annis post eius migrationem' Stevenson *Chronicon Monasterii* pp. 255. Barbara Yorke notes in her introduction to *Bishop Aethelwold: His Career and Influence* her concurrence with the opinion of Michael Lapidge that Wulfstan's work is the earlier of the two texts. (Woodbridge, 1988) p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> See W. Stubbs *Memorials of St. Dunstan* (London, 1857).

<sup>118</sup> Stubbs *Memorials* p. xx.

Byrhtferth, the scholarly pupil of Abbo of Fleury, known to have connections with Dunstan.<sup>119</sup>

### **Contextualising the Sources**

Having discussed the dating and authorship of these texts, and put them into an order of composition, it is necessary to consider their relationships to one another. As Geary notes, disconnecting individual texts from their collective roots would render the research attempted in this thesis impossible: ‘we cannot understand the “ideal of sanctity” purportedly espoused by such texts if we separate them from these specific contexts.’<sup>120</sup> The hagiography examined here is the product of five hundred years or slightly more; while on one hand the evidence sometimes seems far too slight to be able to trace the progression of ideas over time, on the other we cannot expect to be able to make too many generalisations regarding content and function. In addition, there is often a geographical bias to the surviving texts: for example, nearly all sixth-century *vitae* concern saints from southern regions of modern France, with northern examples appearing in the seventh century. This is not to say that the *vitae* utilised here should be treated as isolated texts by any means. The complex web of connections between them is vital to our understanding of the period and its many strands of hagiographic influence.

### **Women outside the cloister**

When Clothild, queen of Clovis, commissioned the Life of Genovefa, she was in part embracing the local tradition of Paris, her husband’s capital, where she built a church. Clothild’s own tenth-century *vita*, not used in this study due to its paucity of

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<sup>119</sup> Stubbs *Memorials* pp. 3-17. For Stubbs’ detailed and convincing discourse on the nature of the Saxon priest, see pp. xi – xxx.

<sup>120</sup> Geary *Living with the Dead* p. 20.

childhood detail, offers some clues as to its author's purpose ('For God who knows the future, foresaw that the seed of kings would spring from Clothild, and that her progeny would hold imperium over Roman and Frank together'<sup>121</sup>), but perhaps incidentally points us towards Clothild's own preoccupations. The notion of 'Roman and Frank together' was not a tenth-century issue, but one which greatly concerned the conquering Frankish kings. In Clothild's lifetime Tours and the rest of Aquitaine was newly part of the Frankish kingdom, and Clothild's residence there, and her patronage of Martin, is seen by McNamara as 'part of an ongoing Frankish policy of reaching a solid settlement with the old Gallo-Roman population'.<sup>122</sup> One can only see her commissioning of the *Vita Genovefae* in the same light. Genovefa's life mirrored that of her patron in that neither retired into monastic life, presumably for the same reasons: monasticism for women in the mid-sixth century was restricted to communities along the Mediterranean: Marseilles, Lérins and Burgundy. Caesarius had established his Rule at Arles c510; new foundations were on their way, but not in Genovefa's lifetime. By the end of the sixth century the ascetic life was a popular alternative for women of means. Salic law stated that property must be shared between both male and female children, safeguarding feminine inheritance, and in addition, marital custom required a man to settle part of the bride-price on his daughter. A wife would also receive a monetary 'morning-gift' from her husband after the wedding. Widows, then, might find themselves financially independent and able to retire to religious life, as might surplus daughters.<sup>123</sup> The lives of Genovefa and Eustadiola represent a kind of uncloistered female asceticism which the seventh-century spread of Irish influence was to end. For Genovefa at the end of the fifth

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<sup>121</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 41.

<sup>122</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 40.

<sup>123</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 106; see K. F. Drew *Laws of the Salian Franks* (Philadelphia, 1991) pp. 108-9 for Salic Law pertaining to widows.

century, all monasteries accepting women were, as yet, geographically inaccessible; she'd probably never even heard of such, and McNamara notes that she doesn't seem to have known much about ascetic traditions, either.<sup>124</sup> Consecrated as a virgin but not cloistered, Genovefa lived as a solitary ascetic in her cell, apparently regarded with some suspicion by her contemporaries. Her previously proud parents turned upon her, as did her neighbours, and later 'the people of Paris', yet she is consistently affirmed by the episcopate: Bishop Germanus detects her as a child amid a crowd, Bishop Vilicius consecrates her before her elders, St Germanus returns to dispel malicious gossip about her and after his death, his companion Lupus reiterates her virtues, using the authority of Germanus' name.<sup>125</sup> The text's emphasis on the authority of several Gallo-Roman bishops would seem to further relations between the new Frankish rulers and the pre-existing episcopate, and corresponds to Clothild's interests in this regard. The attitudes of her contemporaries may be seen as hagiographic convention: the necessary opposition which provides the saint with earthly forces against which to struggle.

Eustadiola's eighth-century *vita* provides us with a similar portrait some two hundred years later: urbanized asceticism, entered into upon widowhood. While she made no formal vows, she did 'live according to the norms of the Rule' along with her followers. Which Rule is unclear: presumably not that of Caesarius (advocating strict enclosure for women) because she habitually left the city and prayed at the basilica

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<sup>124</sup> Possibly enhancing its author's claims of a date of composition of 520, as discussed above pp. 20-1, it seems to me unlikely that such a *vita*, exhibiting the virtues of an uncloistered woman, would have been written after Caesarius' Rule had gained prominence, and particularly after the ascendancy of Benedict's Rule and pronouncements of Gregory I (c540-604) against such unstructured lives for religious women. However, considering that the Life of Eustadiola was apparently written in the early eighth century, such an argument seems to lose its weight. Monasteries known to have accepted women during this period were at Marseille, Lérins and in Burgundy: McNamara notes that these were rather inaccessible for a Parisian girl. McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 18.

<sup>125</sup> AASS III Ianuarii pp. 138-9.

just outside the gate.<sup>126</sup> She must have been among the last women to live in this way; Columbanus' influence was spreading in her lifetime and would become the dominant model for female religious life, and she was not geographically far from Poitiers where Radegund was already employing Caesarius' Rule of strict enclosure. Her *vita* survived embedded in that of Bishop Sulpicius of Bourges, a much more conventional candidate for sanctity, and although this may well be the reason it has endured, the question of why was it ever written is much more difficult to answer. With the expression of their religious devotion falling outside the pattern of later examples, the *vitae* of Genovefa and Eustadiola are certainly unique among their genre.

### **Lérins and its offshoots**

Founded by St Honoratus as a haven for Gallo-Roman aristocrats fleeing barbarian invasions, the monastery at Lérins pioneered one of the many threads of monastic practice which connect these *vitae*. Its most influential product, aside from Honoratus himself, was Caesarius Bishop of Arles, author of two Rules, the first of which was expressly for female monasteries and was characterized by strict cloister and asceticism, and the reading of the liturgy every day. His physical austerities inspired his followers, most notably Radegund, and his sixth century *vita* shares many similarities with those of Honoratus, perhaps unsurprisingly, and Martin.<sup>127</sup>

The customs of Arles, and the influence of Caesarius, can be clearly seen in the seventh-century life of Rusticula, who was chosen in a dream by the recently dead Caesarius to become an adherent to his Rule, apparently against her mother's wishes. This story seems to mark her as a bishop's choice along the same lines as Genovefa,

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<sup>126</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 109.

<sup>127</sup> Caesarius actually left Lérins because the severity of his asceticism had almost killed him. See W. E. Klingshirn 'Caesarius' Monastery for Women in Arles and the Composition and Function of the "Vita Caesarii"' *Revue Bénédictine* 100 (1990) pp. 441-481 for more information about the man, the *vita* and the Rule.

albeit in a very different geographical location, and also finds echoes in the lives of Burgundofara and Sadalberga. In addition, the story of her kidnap aged 5 seems vaguely similar to the abduction of Rusticula at a similar age.<sup>128</sup>

The process by which the very young Rusticula enters Arles demonstrates some of the power relationships of the time: Liliola, abbess at Arles, miraculously divines Rusticula's existence, and asks Bishop Siagrus to prevail upon king Guntram. The King approaches the child's abductor, Ceraonius, who pleads his case, but seems bound to capitulate as the child is passed into the hands of an unnamed abbot, who conveys her to Liliola. Rusticula is called a 'Roman'; Siagrus is presumably a Gallo-Roman bishop considering the date of the story, yet the Frankish king is the key to the whole process, whom Ceraonius obeys and whose power the bishop has to invoke. Liliola could presumably not approach the king herself but needed a Gallo-Roman bishop, with whom the Frankish kings were keen to ally, in order to get the job done. However, the voice of the bishop alone would not suffice to convince the nobleman.<sup>129</sup>

Glodesind may have been among the last to follow the customs of Arles, due to the influence of Columbanian monasticism within her own lifetime. Her ninth century *vita* may demonstrate how far north Caesarius' Rule had travelled, as the Rule mentioned in her life is not specifically attributed, and it is known that Benedictine missionaries as well as Caesarian adherents stopped at Metz during her short life. Most notable in her early life is how she claimed sanctuary at the Basilica of St Stephen, fearing the reaction of her kin when she refused a second marriage. She was beyond the years of her childhood, but the miracle is interesting in comparison with

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<sup>128</sup> McNamara notes that both tales also parallel the *Vita Radegundi*, which describes how Radegund became a spoil of war at a similar age. McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 125 note 15.

<sup>129</sup> See J. M. Wallace-Hadrill *The Long Haired Kings and other Frankish history* (London, 1962) for more details regarding the reciprocal relationships between church and court.

other flights from wedlock. She ‘had stationed herself before the altar from fear of violence’, was fed with heavenly dough for six days and was then finally rescued when an angel adorned her with a veil, showing her family that she had been consecrated by God.<sup>130</sup> Veiling can also be seen in the *Vita Austrebertae*; it seems a logical kind of miracle which confirms a saint’s destiny despite earthly pressures for her to follow another path.<sup>131</sup>

### **Columbanus, Luxeuil and Irish Monasticism**

The thread of Columbanian monasticism can be picked up at Luxeuil, founded by Columbanus around 590, the most important of all his Burgundian institutions. The increase in monasticism it inspired can be traced through a variety of north and north-eastern Frankish *vitae* of the period. Living according to the Irish tradition and keeping the Irish-calculated date of Easter, these monasteries also promoted the ideal of bishop as subordinate to abbot. At odds in these ways with the rest of the Frankish church, tension was inevitable and the attempts of the Frankish kings to return him and his followers to Ireland indirectly resulted in the foundation of Bobbio in 613, where Columbanus died two years later. Of this group of *vitae*, all those relevant to this study concern female saints. To Columbanus is attributed the ‘finding’ of the child Burgundofara; her *vita* is incorporated into his and she founds Faremoutier along the lines of his Rule, and Columbanus’ successor at Luxeuil, Eustasius, similarly detects Sadalberga, abbess of Laon. Both women are healed of blindness by the two abbots before beginning their holy careers – a rather logical miracle if one is seeking conversion metaphors, but a link between the *vitae*

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<sup>130</sup> AASS Julii 25 pp. 198-210, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* pp. 144-5.

<sup>131</sup> It can be compared to the instance of Nicetius of the Treveri who is born tonsured, denoting his future career. See below, Chapter Three pp. 88-9.



nonetheless.<sup>132</sup> That both women need rescuing from unwanted marriages can be seen both as a hagiographic convention and as an indicator of their social position. Related to one of the most powerful families in Francia, Burgundofara might have secured a variety of alliances had she not chosen the veil, and McNamara notes that the story of the girl's frantic seeking of sanctuary from her kin might just as well be interpreted in a more political way, as it 'provided her father with an iron-clad excuse if the king were pressing a candidate [for marriage] upon him.'<sup>133</sup> Sadalberga numbered Geretrud and Pippin among her relatives; Abbot Eustasius could not protect her from a politically advantageous match, although her husband died after two months, and her daughter, Anstrude, took over from her as abbess of Laon, having avoided matrimony in largely the same way as Burgundofara, and no doubt for substantially the same reasons.

Another product of Irish influence was Bertilla, who trained at Jouarre near Faremoutiers, a double house following Columbanus' Rule, and became abbess at Chelles, a house sponsored by Queen Balthild and strongly connected with Britain due both to her influence and the Irish origins of the Rule. Chelles was a training ground for mission, a centre for the evangelisation of the countryside, and concerned with the utilization of *vitae* as examples of holy living, as can be seen in her *vita*, which translates the abstract Rule into concrete monastic practice, always founded upon humility.

While it seems logical to seek Irish influence in the lives of these women, it is not necessarily apparent. Concerning the supremacy of abbot over bishop, we see Burgundofara and Sadalberga 'found' by abbots (although it is through the power of Bishop Gundoald that Sadalberga eventually takes the veil), and Bertilla detected by a

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<sup>132</sup> That the two are similar should not surprise us: Sadalberga's *vita* is self-consciously dependent on Jonas of Bobbio's *Vita Columbani*; Burgundofara's is embedded within that same model.

<sup>133</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 163.

bishop. Born of a family involved in Irish-inspired evangelism, one might expect to find references to missionary activity in Sadalberga's *vita*, as indeed we might in the *Vita Bertilae*, but there are none which relate to childhood, although the *vita* certainly functions as a transmitter of correct teaching against the adoptianism heresy.<sup>134</sup> The exception may be the *Vita Gertrudis*.

The story of how this daughter of Pippin refused to enter a marriage deal with an Austrasian duke is more detailed than is usual among this set of Frankish *vitae*, although her hagiographer claims in the preface not to need to specify her family connections: 'For who living in Europe does not know the loftiness, the names, and the localities of her lineage?'.<sup>135</sup> Although this is the princess to whom the later Carolingian kings claim to be related, her family were yet to gain power when her *vita* was composed. 'The fact that Geretrud's powerful family had been dislodged politically may have been one of the reasons why the author is so coy here'<sup>136</sup> After Pippin's death, Geretrud's mother, Itta, built on Bishop Amand's request a double monastery at Nivelles and made Geretrud abbess while she became a nun beneath her daughter. The family had already been influenced by Columbanian monasticism, and then came into contact with Fursey's brother Foilan, who introduced the cult of Patrick. Itta also founded the notably Irish monastery of Fosses, known for its devotion to Patrick's cult. One particular Irish tradition, the form of tonsure leaving a fringe of hair at the front only, has been seen to be rejected in Geretrud's *vita*, in a rather unexpected fashion considering the roots of her devotion.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Krusch identifies the heresy in question as such in Geretrud's *vita* MGH SSRM II p. 449.

<sup>135</sup> Translated in Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 320.

<sup>136</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 309.

<sup>137</sup> See above pp. 30-31 for further discussion of Geretrud's tonsure.

## East Frankish Missionaries

Between the sixth and the eighth centuries, missionary activity across the Frankish territories resulted in the production of a significant body of hagiographic writing. It was certainly politically expedient for local rulers to sponsor the activities of the missionary bishops, and bequeath land to the monasteries they founded, as they played a vital role in extending and stabilizing the Christian frontiers. The broad purpose of such *vitae*, early examples of which included Gregory of Tours' *Vita Patrum*, was to engender, through the use of miracle stories and an emphasis on the power of relics, stability in regions which had only recently experienced conversion.<sup>138</sup> Into this context can be placed the *vitae* of the Anglo-Saxon missionaries: Boniface, Willibald, Willibrord and Leoba. Of Norican origin but certainly a member of this group is Sturm, who joined Boniface as he moved across Europe.

The *Vita Bonifatii*, concerning the most famous of the Anglo-Saxons, can be seen to provide at least one of the models utilised by other hagiographers when relating the lives of his contemporaries. Itself modelled on Aldhelm, we can find some of its passages echoed in Rudolf's *Vita Leobae*, Huneberc's *Vita Willibaldi* and Eigil's *Vita Sturm*.<sup>139</sup> Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii* was the first *vita* written in Germany, and it pulls together several hagiographic traditions, emphasising Boniface's ecclesiastical career but deliberately slighting his political manoeuvres. It also notably does not include a miraculous element.

In writing the *Vita Willibrordi*, Alcuin composed both prose and poetic versions, as had Bede with the *Vita Cuthberti*. 'Alcuin now brought this

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<sup>138</sup> B. Abou-el-Haj *The Medieval Cult of Saints; Formations and Transformations* (New York, 1993) p. 10.

<sup>139</sup> Talbot *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* p. 24.

Northumbrian tradition to the Carolingian court'<sup>140</sup> It seems that the prose version was meant for liturgical reading at Echternach, and the poem for private devotion. 'Alcuin was subtly moving the emphasis away from Boniface and his circle'<sup>141</sup> Alcuin emphasises missionary zeal over politics, in contrast to the *Vita Bonifatii*, and emphasises the role of the Carolingian family in his work.<sup>142</sup>

### Anglo-Saxon Monks

There remain to be mentioned those Anglo-Saxon saints whose *vitae* were composed in their land of origin. Felix' local knowledge places him in East Anglia, at least when his text was written; his textual borrowings confirm him as a scholar familiar with Bede (most importantly the *Vita Cuthberti*), Aldhelm, Virgil and the collection of *vitae* in common circulation at the time; his emphasis on the nature of Guthlac's tonsure marks him as a follower of the Roman tradition.<sup>143</sup> Almost all of what is known about the saint comes from his *vita*, which presents him as being of 'distinguished Mercian stock', moreover of royal blood, and living during King Aethelred's reign.<sup>144</sup> In the north of England, Cuthbert's provenance was recorded neither by his earliest, anonymous hagiographer, nor by Bede, although he is enjoined to recall his 'rank' when rebuked for his childish games.<sup>145</sup> It would seem that the texts might be connected by their portrayal of proper Roman methods of monasticism, as decided at the synod of Whitby in 663-4. Guthlac receives 'the mystic tonsure of

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<sup>140</sup> Noble and Head *Soldiers of Christ* p. 190.

<sup>141</sup> Noble and Head *Soldiers of Christ* p. 190.

<sup>142</sup> Pippin II gave Willibrord land in order that he could found Echternach. It is ironic that Boniface's letters consistently emphasise missionary zeal over political maneuver, yet his hagiographer chose not to do the same, presumably due to Boniface's vital success in forming close associations with both the papacy and the imperial court. For details of Boniface's adult career see Timothy Reuter (ed.) *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St Boniface and the Church at Crediton* (Exeter, 1980).

<sup>143</sup> Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 16. *Vitae* from which Felix borrows include Sulpicius Severus' Life of Martin, Jerome's Life of Paul, Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* in Evagrius' edition, Gregory the Great's *Vita Benedicti*.

<sup>144</sup> 'de egeria stirpe Merciorum' Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 72. Aethelred ruled Mercia AD 674-704.

<sup>145</sup> 'gradui tuo' Bede's *Vita Cuthberti* in Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 158.

St. Peter', incontrovertibly connecting him to Roman practice.<sup>146</sup> Cuthbert did not initially conform to Roman practice, preferring the Irish tradition which Whitby ruled against, although he successfully persuaded the monks of Linsdisfarne to adopt the Roman way after Whitby's ruling in its favour.<sup>147</sup> This in fact may have been the reason why Bede was commissioned to write another *vita* of the saint, if his later position regarding Petrine tradition had been insufficiently emphasised in the earlier effort. If the texts of the *Vita Guthlaci* and Bede's *Vita Cuthberti* are connected by intertextual borrowing and possibly by notions of doctrine, are they also linked by their authors' portrayals of holy childhood?<sup>148</sup>

The last two Anglo-Saxons in this sample, and the subjects of the latest *vitae* among this collection, are Aethelwold and Dunstan, the two great church reformers of the tenth century who not only knew one another intimately, but were ordained on the same day. Their *vitae* should certainly be connected by the demands of Benedict's Rule due to their efforts in reviving English monasticism under its precepts. Aethelwold established at Winchester the most celebrated school of vernacular writing of its time, of which Aelfric, his hagiographer, is the best known scholar.<sup>149</sup> He also probably wrote the *Regularis Concordia*, promoted in 970 as an all-embracing statement of the purpose of the monastic revival, as well as a version of the Rule of Benedict in the vernacular.<sup>150</sup> One of Dunstan's principal achievements was the restoration and enlargement of Glastonbury along Benedictine lines, a vision of

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<sup>146</sup> 'misticam sancti Petri apostolorum proceris tonsoram' B. Colgrave *Vita Sancti Guthlaci Auctore Felice Felix's Life of St. Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956) p. 84, translated p. 85.

<sup>147</sup> See above, pp. 30-31 for further discussion of the two traditions and the two forms of tonsure.

<sup>148</sup> See Chapter Three pp. 80-83 for a tentative answer to this question.

<sup>149</sup> There are very many studies of Aethelwold, his literary achievements, political career and long-term influence on English monasticism. See for example B. Yorke (ed.) *Bishop Aethelwold: His Career and Influence* (Woodbridge, 1988) for further information.

<sup>150</sup> See M. Gretsch 'Aethelwold's translation of the Regula Sancti Benedicti and its Latin Exemplar' *Anglo-Saxon England* 3 (1974) pp. 125-52.

which, according to his hagiographer, he had while still a boy.<sup>151</sup> Born in the vicinity, and of a noble family, he profitted greatly from his royal connections despite two brief falls from grace. He was most notably promoted by King Edgar, who in 960 made him Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>152</sup>

Having established or made suggestions as to the essential details of these texts, their authors, dates and relationships to one another, it is now possible, with this information always in mind, to explore what they have to say regarding the childhood of saints. It is important to first consider what an early medieval author might understand about childhood, and the terms they might use to refer to it. We will then examine the events leading up to the birth of a holy individual, and then focus on the very earliest years of a child's life.

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<sup>151</sup> See below, Chapter Three p. 96 for a discussion of this miracle.

<sup>152</sup> See Stubbs *St. Dunstan* for the early *vita* and some of Dunstan's letters, and also N. Ramsey & M. Sparks (eds.) *St. Dunstan: His Life, Times and Cult* (Woodbridge, 1992).

## Chapter Two

### ***Sanctity in and ex utero: the beginnings of a holy Life***

Having identified a body of source material, and specified aims concerning its interpretation, this chapter begins to investigate one of the questions central to this research: what, in the minds of early medieval hagiographers at least, constituted childhood? A variety of answers to that question will be suggested in the chapters to come, but here it is necessary to explore the most fundamental aspect of that question: *when* was childhood in relation to the entirety of an individual's life, and was it recognised simply as a single entity, or as a series of developmental stages as a child journeyed along the path to adulthood? In addition, this chapter explores the initial hagiographic construction of a holy Life: narrative which precedes the actual birth of the saint and sets the scene before the protagonist appears.

#### **What is a Child?**

In order to know when a hagiographer is writing about childhood one requires an understanding of the vocabulary he or she uses to describe a child and his or her perception of when the childhood of the saint is over and an adult career has begun. This thesis is partly investigating the early medieval notion(s) of what exactly it meant to be a child: we cannot describe those ideas here, but in order to lay the foundations for the work which follows, we can examine how childhood fits into the medieval time-line of human life, and, correspondingly, how the different ages of an individual's life might be described.

John Burrow's thorough examination of the philosophical idea of the 'Ages of Man' introduces a bewildering array of classical and medieval schemes which divide the human lifetime into a series of stages, each with its own characteristics and expectations. In common with many of his Christian and secular forbears, Augustine sought to divide both the history of the world and the course of an individual's life into six corresponding stages, with each allied to figures or events of Biblical record. *Infantia* lasts from Adam to Noah, *pueritia* from Noah to Abraham, *adolescencia* from Abraham to David, *iuentus* from David until captivity in Babylon, *gravitas* from captivity until the birth of Christ and *senectus*, which is the present time, and which will last until Jesus' second coming and the end of time.<sup>1</sup> 'Thence comes that sempiternal rest which is signified by the Sabbath': thus, the world was created in seven days, and in seven days will it come to an end.<sup>2</sup> Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* crystallised Augustine's ideas on the *aetates hominis*, detailing how each stage of the world's history is paralleled in the lives of men in sets of years: *infantia* is the period of human life between birth and the age of seven; *pueritia* lasts until fourteen, *adolescencia* until twenty-eight.<sup>3</sup> To each 'age' was ascribed certain defining characteristics. Isidore's etymology of *infantia* describes how in children of that age, their teeth are not yet sufficiently set in order to enable them to speak properly (*fari*

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<sup>1</sup> 'Prima itaque generis humani aetas est ab Adam usque ad Noe. Secunda, a Noe ad Abraham: qui articuli sunt evidentissimi et notissimi. Tertia, ab Abraham usque ad David: sic enim Matthaueus evangelista partitur. Quarta, a David usque ad transmirationem in Babyloniam. Quinta, a transmiratione in Babyloniam usque ad adventum Domini. Sexta, ab adventu Domini usque in finem saeculi speranda est' Augustine 'De Diversis Quaestionibus LXXXIII' *Book I, Question LVIII*, PL 40 col. 43.

<sup>2</sup> 'Inde requies sempiterna est, quae significatur sabbato.' Augustine 'De Diversis Quaestionibus LXXXIII' *Book I, Question LVIII*, PL 40 col. 43.

<sup>3</sup> 'Prima aetas infantia est pueri nascentis ad lucem, quae porrigitur in septem annis. Secunda aetas pueritia, id est pura et necdum ad generandum apta, tendens usque ad quartumdecimum annum. Tertia adolescencia ad gignendum adulta, quae porrigitur usque ad viginti octo annos.' W. M. Lindsay (ed.) *Etymologiarum sive Originum*, Book XI, Chapter 2 (Oxford, 1911) p. 115-6. For the full discussion of a variety of classical and medieval schemes of the Ages of Man, see J. Burrows *The Ages of Man: a Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986) pp. 79-94.



*non potest*).<sup>4</sup> *Pueritia* is an age of ‘purity’, in which the child has not yet reached sexual maturity.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the fourth age is termed ‘*iuventus*’ which may be translated as ‘youth’.<sup>6</sup> For the sake of clarity I have refrained from the tendency of many writers, most notably Talbot, to translate ‘*adolescencia*’ as ‘youth’, rendering it always as ‘adolescence’, despite the fact that a modern reckoning of adolescence would certainly not last until an individual’s twenty-eighth year.

We might expect, then, any early medieval author with a modicum of classical training, or an acquaintance with the writings of St. Augustine, to use the terms *infans*, *puer/puella* and the rest in order to give an accurate picture of the stage of life his subject had attained, and sometimes, mercifully, this does seem to be the case. However, there are far more occasions on which the vocabulary employed by the hagiographer is imprecise or even contradictory, and cannot be relied upon to give any clear indication as to the subject’s age.<sup>7</sup> It is very difficult to know, for example, when a hagiographer uses the term ‘*iuventus*’, whether he or she is specifically referring to the stage of life beyond *adolescencia*, which would put the subject well beyond the reaches of childhood, or whether the term is being employed to suggest immaturity, which would bring the individual’s actions at that point back within the remit of this discussion. What occurs with some regularity is an indication that the author knew of a scheme of the Ages of Man, and has deliberately included phrases which make this clear to his or her readership, possibly for the purpose of demonstrating a good classical education. This suspicion may well be entertained

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<sup>4</sup> ‘*Infans dicitur homo primae aetatis; dictus autem infans quia adhuc fari nescit, id est loqui non potest. Nondum enim bene ordinates dentibus minus est sermonis expressio*’ Lindsay *Etymologiarum sive Originum* p. 135. While we might expect Isidore to use ‘*loqui non potest*’ to describe one who cannot speak, he uses ‘*fari*’ to provide an quasi-etymological connection with ‘*infantia*’.

<sup>5</sup> See above, note 3.

<sup>6</sup> ‘*Quarta iuventus firmissima aetatem omnium, finiens in quinquagesimo anno.*’ Lindsay *Etymologiarum sive Originum* p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Specific instances when this occurs will be examined in later chapters according to the stage of life which is in question.

when reading the *Vita Willibaldi*, in which the hagiographer, Huneberc, spends some time enumerating the boy's holy qualities, then says rather incongruously: 'when he had outgrown his infantile delight in pranks, and his boyhood mischief, and the immodest enticements of that self-indulgent age... he at length came to adolescence'.<sup>8</sup> The author of the *Passio Leudegarii* sees no need to elaborate, recording the boy's progress to manhood in a single, all-encompassing phrase: 'as he passed through all the various stages and orders, upright, he always stood out from the others.'<sup>9</sup> When Willibald describes Boniface's attainment of 'the bloom of youth', he has the dangers inherent within that age in mind: the 'enticements and diabolical suggestions which beset young men in the flower of their youth' find no purchase in a boy who focuses his mind on Scripture.<sup>10</sup> Hilary bestows the best rather than the worst characteristics of the different *aetates* on his subject when he recalls 'his sweetness as a child, his modesty as a boy, his seriousness as an adolescent'.<sup>11</sup> While the author of Cuthbert's earliest *Vita* records that he was eight years old when he received a prophecy foretelling his future office, Bede in his later version feels the need to expand on this point: 'For up to the eighth year of his age, which is the end of infancy and the beginning of boyhood, he could devote his mind to nothing but the games and wantonness of children'.<sup>12</sup> Bede's meaning is clear: while an infant might be expected to play, a boy must begin to think on more serious matters, as is appropriate to his

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<sup>8</sup> 'Cumque aliquanti temporis intercapedine transacta, post illa infantilis eius oblectationis ludicra, et pueriles incentivorum lascivias, et illecebrosas luxuriosae aetatis petulantias ... ad lanuginem, et pubertatis adolescentiam pervenisset.' MGH SS XV vol I p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> 'in quodcumque gradu vel ordine provehebatur, exstitit prae ceteris erectus.' MGH SSRM V p. 283, translated in P. Fouracre and R. A. Gerberding *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720* (Manchester, 1996) pp. 216-7.

<sup>10</sup> 'infestas diabolicae suggestionis persecutions, quae tenerum sepe apud mortals iuventutis florem' MGH SSRG p. 17. It must be noted that the use of the term 'iuventus' casts doubt on whether it is Boniface's childhood which is being referred to here.

<sup>11</sup> 'quam dulcis ei infantia; quam modesta pueritia; quam gravis adolescentia' PL 50 col 1251.

<sup>12</sup> 'Siquidem usque ad octauum aetatis annum, qui post infantiam puericae primus est, solis paruulorum ludis et lasciuiae mentem dare noverat' Bede's *Vita Cuthberti* in B. Colgrave *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940) p. 154, translated p. 155.

age. It is, however, all too easy for historians to second-guess their sources and attribute meanings where none were intended: Talbot made this mistake in his translation of the *Vita Willibrordi* when he rendered the phrase ‘when he was weaned’ as ‘as soon as the child had reached the age of reason’. The text refers to Willibrord’s oblation and the commencement of his education, something which, as we have seen, occurred upon the attainment of *pueritia*, known sometimes as the age of reason. However, Talbot would have done well to trust the Latin text, which is in fact a direct parallel of the Scriptural oblation of Samuel, who was indeed donated to the church immediately after weaning, rather before the age of seven or eight which Talbot’s translation implies.<sup>13</sup>

The stage of life which we might call childhood, then, was separated in the medieval mind into distinct sub-stages, to which different characteristics might be assigned and which might trigger different experiences in a child’s life. Childhood begins at birth, or even slightly before that event as can be seen in several *vitae* in which the saint makes his or her presence felt while still in the womb<sup>14</sup>, but when does it end? At what point can we say with confidence that further details of the saint’s career are not relevant to this exercise and should not be taken as indicative of attitudes to childhood? I have attempted in this regard to correspond to the point in the narrative at which the hagiographer no longer considers his or her subject to be a child, although this is by no means easy to ascertain and frequently does not correspond to our contemporary notions of when someone attains adulthood. The modern western world places great emphasis on the attainment of certain ages, at which privileges and responsibilities are bestowed in equal measure. According to early medieval secular and canon law, age was equally held to determine a person’s

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<sup>13</sup> See below p. 84 for a discussion of the age at which oblation might occur and further reference to Talbot’s mistake.

<sup>14</sup> See below p. 67 for details.

rights, his or her ability to choose and what he or she could be held responsible for. In addition to more or less awareness of the notion of the Ages of Man, hagiographers would surely have had some knowledge of the law codes in their regions, which further complicate the issue by ascribing definite (if variable between codes) ages of legal majority, for example. The largely Gallic early sixth-century *Pactus Legis Salicae* says that men and women came of age at twelve years. Boys under this age were given a wergild of 600 solidi (three times more than an adult free man) although girls only acquired a wergild of the same amount when they began to bear children.<sup>15</sup> Before the age of twelve, it seems that neither sex were held responsible for committing crimes. Compiled around 518, the Burgundian Book of Constitutions states the age of legal majority as fourteen or fifteen, and fifteen is also the age quoted in the early seventh-century Austrasian *Lex Ribvaria*. Parents were free to give their children as oblates up until the age of ten, but after this point the child was entitled to make up his or her own mind whether he or she wished to be disposed of in this way. Nicholas Orme notes a tendency for age thresholds to rise in successive codes.<sup>16</sup>

It is hardly surprising that there seems little congruence between the ages ascribed here and those detailed in the Ages of Man schemes: we are witnessing the intersection of two very different cultures, that of the civilised and urbanised Roman world invaded and overtaken by 'barbarian' tribesmen of several flavours, who brought their own laws and traditions with them despite their recent Christianization. Hagiographers of this period frequently portray, more or less explicitly, a bridge

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<sup>15</sup> See K. F. Drew *The Laws of the Salian Franks* (Philadelphia, 1991) p. 86 (Title XXIV: Concerning the Killing of little children and women) & pp. 104-6 (Title XLI: Concerning the Murder of Free Men). The wergild for a free man increases to 600 solidi, the same amount due for the killing of a boy under ten, if his death is concealed (presumably indicating that it may have been murder rather than an accident), and the maximum payable for a man in the king's service is 1800 solidi.

<sup>16</sup> N. Orme *Medieval Children* (London, 2001) p. 322.

between the old ways and the new and exhibit the influence of both, which may well contribute to terminological confusion. It would certainly seem logical that certain events, rather than certain ages, appeared more significant in the lives of early medieval children: their possible oblation and later profession are two, and in the secular world, the times of their betrothal and marriage are important.<sup>17</sup> We have seen that hagiographers very infrequently make mention of the actual age of their subject, and we are often forced to extrapolate from the circumstances in which the ‘child’ finds him or herself in order to understand his or her approximate age at that point. Some events may be taken to be broad indicators of the hagiographer’s change in attitude towards his subject, when it comes to the question of when a child becomes an adult. Certain of these are obvious: a girl would not have socially been considered a child after her marriage, for example. In the case of an oblate, some of whom seem to have been extremely young when they entered monastic life, I have reckoned their childhood to end when they were accepted as full members of the community.<sup>18</sup> However, there are several *vitae* in which it remains extremely hard to discern exactly when the subject has left childish things behind, and it may well be the case, especially for hagiographers who did not know their subjects or who were working from the recollections of others, that the continuity of a particular life was uncertain even to the author of the piece, that it remained a mystery exactly how old the saint was at the point of death and that the generalisations in his or her early career are actually intended to mask this deficiency in the writer’s information, rather than to confuse the struggling modern historian, as it is so tempting to conclude! In addition, although writers such as Gregory of Tours knew their own ages, and the ages of their families, fairly precisely, they may well have been in the minority. When authors use

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter Four for a discussion on betrothal and marriage. See Chapter Five for an overview of the oblate’s world, which may or may not have included profession.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter Five for a discussion on when and how this might occur.

round figures to age their subjects, their intentions may well be more generic than specific: a child at five is a ‘young boy’; at 20 is a ‘young man’, for example.<sup>19</sup> Subsequent chapters will further investigate the question of age as it arises in connection with the childhood experiences found in these *vitae*.

### **Presaging a holy Life**

That a small but significant portion of many *vitae* is dedicated to a time before the subject was born should not unduly surprise us, considering the Biblical precedent. The miracles of conception and childbirth are continually associated with miracles of other kinds, particularly prophetic dreams, in the stories of some of the most prominent Old and New Testament characters, including Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist and, of course, Christ himself. The notion that God dispenses prophecy by means of dreams and visions was well established long before these *vitae* were written; it was not new or even specifically Jewish when the Old Testament Joseph was languishing in Pharaoh’s prison, and passed easily into Christian tradition. Such occurrences remain an immensely useful and recurrent plot device across the geographical and temporal breadth of my sample, finding expression in saints young and old, but chiefly in the parents of holy offspring, setting the scene for a life of extraordinary religious achievement. It is commonplace that the receivers of dreams and visions require others to explain them; this is convenient for the hagiographer in plot terms as it allows him or her to include the explanation within the narrative where it remains simple for the reader to digest. Nothing teaches more easily than a good story.

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<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to Guy Halsall for this point, derived from his unpublished paper *Growing up in Merovingian Gaul* given in York in February 1995 which he kindly allowed me to see. See also the discussion in Chapter Three regarding the repeated aging of young children as ‘five’, regarding which I have made some suggestions which seem allied to his opinions.

Among my West Frankish *vitae*, there are three examples of visions presaging the birth of a saint. Nicetius of Lyon's mother knew before her child was born that she was carrying a bishop (although as a member of the illustrious family of Gregory of Tours, the hagiographer in this case, no-one would have been surprised that she was correct) and his father gave up his own episcopal ambitions accordingly. His father's actions in this regard seem strange: his son could, after all, have succeeded him, and Nicetius' candidacy may in fact have been privileged had he been related to his predecessor. This was certainly true of Gregory's family at Tours.<sup>20</sup> Another saint whose route to a bishopric was contested was Praejectus, whose death as a martyr is prefigured in his mother's gory vision before his birth: 'she heartily desired that it would turn out thus for her son'.<sup>21</sup> His mother's vision, however, seems to constitute an important justification for his holiness when we see by just how tortuous a route he came to be a bishop, defying the popularly preferred candidates and apparently scheming his way into the position. Gerald's father does not immediately understand what is required of him when he sees in a vision a great rod sprouting from his toe, having been instructed to conceive his son.<sup>22</sup>

East Francia boasts another two examples: Willibrord, whose mother has an interesting moon-vision on the night he is conceived, and Leoba, whose old and previously barren mother dreams that she will now bear a child. Willibrord's mother

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<sup>20</sup> R. Mathisen 'The Family of Georgius Florentius Gregorius and the Bishops of Tours' *Medievalia et Humanistica* New Series 12 (1984) p. 84. Mathisen notes that at Tours, Gregory seems to regard the members of his family who have held the bishopric as *reason* for his holding it rather than otherwise. However, the possibility remains that this reality was exactly the reason why the pious father of a pious son would be shown surrendering his own ambition. Gregory and his family were certainly criticised on receiving many of their religious posts for being 'outsiders' in the districts in which they held influence, and Gregory spends much time claiming that they were in fact locals by tradition. In the often murky world of episcopal nomination, there were frequent jealous accusations of abuse made by the supporters of unsuccessful candidates; Nicetius' father was possibly allowing his son freedom from one such claim.

<sup>21</sup> 'optat, ut fieret erga puerum' MGH SSRM V p. 227, translated in Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 273.

<sup>22</sup> 'Dehinc iterum soporatus videbatur illi, ut de pollice pedis eius dextri quaedam virgule nasceretur, quae paulatim in magnam arborem succrescebat, ac subinde frondibus diffuses universim [sensim] spatiabatur' PL 133 col. 643.

seeks a man, moreover a priest, to interpret her strange experience, and Leoba's mother also cannot interpret her vision herself, but this time it is another woman who interprets it for her. The nature of the visions is often obscure; one could hardly blame Willibrord's mother for failing to associate the rising and swelling moon which enters her mouth quite so specifically as does the helpful priest with the future of the holy child inside her, although she may well have associated the moon with aspects of femininity, particularly the monthly cycle and perhaps conception.<sup>23</sup>

One might be tempted in the case of Willibrord's *Vita* to assert that the vision is an example of a female experience requiring the validation of a male interpreter. In the *Vita Willibaldi* we may see a somewhat similar circumstance, in which the female hagiographer Huneberc finds it necessary to cite male witnesses to the story she is about to relate. However, while this interpretation of the roles of male and female may have some degree of accuracy it remains highly contextual; Leoba's mother does not seek out a man to explain her vision and her male hagiographer makes no apology for the fact. I would tend towards the argument that the interpreter's occupation – priest – is more important than his gender in this case. It parallels the Biblical account of Samuel's mother, who is comforted by the priest Eli.<sup>24</sup> What might be dismissed as a bad dream is lent religious significance by a member of the established church.

Yet the nature of the female chosen by Leoba's mother is interesting in itself. The character of an old nurse retains a slightly magical, pagan aura, particularly where the mysteries of conception and childbirth are concerned, and what the hagiographer

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<sup>23</sup> Diana, goddess of the moon (alternatively known as Artemis, Hecate, Lucina, Luna, Phoebe and Proserpina), might represent virginity, chastity, and childbirth, her aspects as changeable as those of the moon itself. H. David Brumble *Classical Myths and Legends in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Connecticut, 1998) pp. 98-99. The moon goddess combines the Greek Artemis – traditionally protective of mothers in childbirth – and the Roman Diana, who became associated with virginity largely because her light, unlike that of the sun, is cold. From the root 'me', meaning measure, come the Latin 'mensis' and, more importantly here, 'menstruus', and although moon is rendered 'lunus', we might note that this is a feminine noun. M. Ferber *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 127-129.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Samuel 1:9-18.



does seem to be demonstrating is that despite any expectations to the contrary, the nurse in question is a good Christian. That the nurse's role needs to be justified suggests some level of reality in the tale; hagiographers were not in the business of constructing problems for themselves. Perhaps an older woman would believe that she was to bear a child more readily from another woman, especially 'her old nurse', than she would from a man.<sup>25</sup>

There remain two Anglo-Saxon examples. Guthlac's birth was attended by a miracle which many people seem to have experienced: 'a human hand was seen shining with gold-red splendour, and reaching from the clouds of the heavenly Olympus as far as the arms of a certain cross, which stood in front of the house in which the holy woman, now in labour, was bearing an infant son destined to greatness.'<sup>26</sup> Moreover, while those who had seen this were pondering its significance, Guthlac's birth was announced: 'a woman came rushing at great speed out of the house nearby in which the said child was being born, and cried out: "Stand still, for a man child who is destined to future glory has been born into this world."<sup>27</sup> While it is tempting to identify another female herald of saintly power, as in the case of Leoba and the old nurse, there may be a more mundane explanation here. Childbirth was certainly not a spectator sport for men in the early middle ages: Guthlac's mother would have been attended by her kin and possibly a midwife, and it is hardly remarkable that it would be one of these women who announced to the waiting male relatives, particularly the father, that a child had been born safely and

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<sup>25</sup> 'nutricem suam vetulam' MGH SS XV pp. 121.

<sup>26</sup> 'ecce humana manus croceo rubri nitoris splendore fulgescens ab aetheris Olympi nubibus ad patibulum cuiusdam crucis ante ostium domus, qua sancta puerpera futurae indolis infantulum enixa est, porrecta videbatur.' B. Colgrave *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956) p. 74, translated p.75.

<sup>27</sup> 'ecce ex aula propiante, qua supradictus infans nascebatur, mulier immensa velocitate currens clamabat: "Stabilitote, quia futurae gloriae huic mundo natus est homo."<sup>27</sup> Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 76, translated p.77.

the gender of that child.<sup>28</sup> It seems that it is most likely that this is the reason behind Guthlac's female herald: we might well argue that this incident paints a most vivid picture of a childbirth scene in the early eighth century. While anxious relatives wait outside the house (possibly at either dawn or dusk considering the colour of the hand which appears to reach down from the heavens), praying for the child's safe arrival, the real drama is taking place within its walls. That we are presented with an outsider's perspective on the miracle of birth reminds us that the author of this piece is male, although it remains the most detailed account of birth in this sample of *vitae*.

The second Anglo-Saxon example is that of Aethelwold, whose *Vita* is one of the most recent in this sample, written at the very beginning of the eleventh century. His mother is lucky enough to receive two dreams, one of a 'lofty standard... bowing reverently' to her, and a second of an immense 'golden eagle', which flies from her mouth and overshadows the city with its wings. While the translator notes that the verse quoted is Luke 17:37, 'Wheresoever the body shall be, thither will the eagles also be gathered together', this does seem unusual as the passage is referring to God's swift judgement, coming to anyone who deserves it; the NIV renders the eagles as vultures gathering around a corpse.<sup>29</sup> I would suggest that that Aelfric was not referring to Luke but to Matthew 24:28, where the exact same saying is used but in a rather different context. Here it is asserting that Christ's second coming will be as obvious to all as a dead body surrounded by birds of prey, still a rather macabre image but at least one allied with the hope of redemption. One wonders why Aelfric was so desperate to quote from the New Testament when both dreams use essentially Old Testament imagery; where eagles are concerned, Isaiah 41:31 might have been a

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<sup>28</sup> See Orme *Medieval Children* pp. 17-8 for more details regarding early medieval birth practices.

<sup>29</sup> Although the Vulgate reads 'aquilae' it is certainly the eagles' nature as bird of prey which is implied here: the NIV translation simply makes this clear.

much surer choice for a saint whose life was spent striving to advance the kingdom of God.<sup>30</sup>

When the explanations given by hagiographers seem obscure, we are left wondering what is *not* being said; what would the early medieval reader or listener glean from the imagery of these visions? Any suggestions we might make are tentative and based on our knowledge of the *auctoritates* beloved of hagiographers, which include not only Christian texts but also the Greek and Roman inheritance. Willibrord's light, shining from his mother's bosom, is perhaps the light that Isaiah promises will rise upon the people of God. That it is the light of the moon and not of the sun is perhaps in deference to Christ, the true light of the world, against which even his saints look dim, although we have seen that it might also represent the various Classical goddesses of the moon. The vision attributed to Gerald's father brings to mind the 'Jesse Tree' so often seen in illuminated manuscripts and stained glass, although the position of the sprouting is rather different. This exceptionally chaste man needed *two* visions before he would go and sleep with his wife; perhaps if the rod had been sprouting from the customary place he might have got the idea more quickly.

It is interesting that in Leoba's case, her mother receives a vision before the child has even been conceived; it is her appropriate response to divine stimulus which secures the birth of the saint. The closest Biblical parallel to this is of course the story of Anna, Samuel's mother, who conceives as a result of her promise to God, but Leoba's mother also brings to mind the Old Testament Sarah and the New Testament Elizabeth, who were both getting on in years when they bore their remarkable children. Elizabeth may well be the model here as Rudolf's text seems to parallel the

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<sup>30</sup> 'But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.'

Vulgate description of her and her husband Zachariah's situation. In a similar manner 'the onset of old age' had deprived Leoba's parents 'of all hope of offspring'.<sup>31</sup> Apparently reluctant fathers, such as those of Gerald and Odo, respond similarly to heavenly suggestion, underlining a point which will be explored further – that of heredity. A saint's parentage in this instance is vital to their very existence: if a less pious parent had ignored the signs given to them, the holy child would never have come into being. While Gerald's father 'was so careful to conduct himself chastely in his marriage, that he frequently slept alone far from the marriage bed, as though for a time giving himself to prayer...he is said to have been warned in sleep on a certain night to know his wife, because he was to beget a son'.<sup>32</sup> Odo's father 'was accustomed to celebrate the vigils of the saints throughout the night...it came into his mind that he should ask God, in the name of the Virgin birth, to give him a son'.<sup>33</sup> While it is amusing that this pious man, so unwilling to exercise his conjugal rights, invokes the Virgin birth in his prayer, we are given an insight into some kind of an 'ideal' marriage of virtual chastity outside the necessity of procreation.<sup>34</sup> Willibrord's father, similarly, only married in order to conceive him, 'a child who should benefit many peoples'.<sup>35</sup> It is evidently males who dictate sexual relations in these marriages; females are merely glad to conceive as a result.

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<sup>31</sup> Regarding Elizabeth and Zachariah: 'et non erat illis filius eo quod esset Elisabeth sterilis et ambo processissent in diebus suis' Luke 1:7. Regarding Dynno and Aebba, parents of Leoba: 'Sed cum essent steriles et infoecundi, absque liberis diu manserunt ... pertransissent dies plurimi, et eis iam senibus atque aetate provecitae spes generandae prolis abesset' MGH SS XV p. 123.

<sup>32</sup> 'Pater quippe ipsius in ipso conjugio sese castificare tantopere studebat, ut semoto frequenter a conjuge toro, solus accubitaret, velut ad tempus, juxta Apostolum, orationi vacens.' PL 133 col. 643, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> PL 133 col. 705-854, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> One wonders how the strict sexual abstinence of these two fathers affected their offspring, considering the homosexual undertones of the two *Vitae*, and the young saints' constant wrestling with issues of sexuality.

<sup>35</sup> 'Nam vir venerabilis Wilgils, de quo nobis Paulo ante sermo fuit, ad hoc tantum, Deo praedestinante, matrimonio iunctus est, ut talis ad profectum multorum populorum ex eo ederetur prolis.' MGH SSRM VII p. 117.

It is not only the parents of saints whose voices are heard before their holy child is born. An *in utero* speaking role is attributed to Gerald, who was heard to cry out of his mother's womb three times on the ninth day before his birth. Such miracles are hard to explain; we might equate Gerald's tiny voice crying from the womb with the *vox clamantis* of Isaiah, who declares the impermanence of man and the everlasting nature of God, or perhaps of John the Baptist, the voice calling in the desert, preparing the way for the Lord.<sup>36</sup> In addition, we might also recall a verse used very frequently in hagiography, often concerning childhood but usually in the pious preface to a *vita*, when the hagiographer employs the rhetorical device of his or her inadequacy for the task in hand: 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.'<sup>37</sup> Odo makes a fair attempt at explanation, although he fails to entirely nail his argument together. Beginning 'assuredly this is a strange thing which certainly happened against the course of nature', and allying the child in the womb, alive yet restricted in sensation and movement, with the Christian idea that mankind is trapped in sin, he concludes that Gerald's supernatural behaviour represented a transcendence of nature similar to that of saints who perform miracles 'after this life'. He concludes: 'perhaps that voice presaged that his actions in the prison of his mortality were to be of great moment.'<sup>38</sup> It is a pity that he did not see fit to elaborate on such an important theological point: that the course of nature, divinely ordered, can be disrupted by that same divine power in order to signify someone of something of great importance. While Odo skirts around the issue with his focus on man's use of

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<sup>36</sup> Isaiah 40: 3, 6-8. See also Matthew 3: 3, Mark 1: 3 and John 1: 23.

<sup>37</sup> 'ex ore infantium et lactantium perfecisti laudem' Psalms 8: 2 & Matthew 21:16.

<sup>38</sup> 'Geraldus igitur in matris utero bene sonuit, quoniam ultra communem aliorum vigorem in fide sanctae Trinitatis exercens, felicem famam, qua erat orbem repleturus, per illam voculam significavit.' PL 133 col. 644, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Chury* p. 96.

The comedy of the preceding scene, in which a maid with a lamp is called in order to locate the source of the voice, is reminiscent of the Biblical story of Samuel, who repeatedly misunderstands that it is the voice of God which he is hearing.

his 'senses' (which, incidentally, do not include speech), what I would argue to be central to these *Vitae* is the parallel between the saint who performs miracles as a tiny child, even as a foetus, and the saint who continues to display miraculous power after death through his or her remains.<sup>39</sup> In this way the prison of mortality is truly transcended at both extremes of human life. As Odo says, all men live 'in the hope of the glory of the sons of God', but some display it here on earth, and their extraordinary lives bear witness to the promise of redemption.<sup>40</sup>

### **The limits of *imitatio***

The Bible asserts that is God's power which creates new life: 'For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb'.<sup>41</sup> Through the voice of Jeremiah we hear the Lord's promise: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart'<sup>42</sup>; the Psalmist confirms: 'your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be'.<sup>43</sup> Paul raises interesting theological questions when he asserts: 'For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.'<sup>44</sup> Conception, or indeed the lack of it, is no accident of biology but an aspect of the Divine plan, and all are not conceived equal. For those who would assert that early medieval *vitae* were written for the purpose of imitation, the doctrine of predestination

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<sup>39</sup> While only one of the saints in my sample performs a miracle while still in the womb, and miracles in early childhood are few, as will be seen in the next chapter, it may be the case that baby power was on the rise, considering Istvan Bejczy's article 'The sacra infanta in medieval hagiography' *Studies in Church History* 31 (1994) pp. 143-151. He gives details of a rash of *Vitae* composed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and later in which child saints will only take the breast on certain days of the week.

<sup>40</sup> This theme will be enlarged upon in Chapter Three, when the miracles performed by child saints are examined.

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 139:13.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremiah 1:5.

<sup>43</sup> Psalm 139:16.

<sup>44</sup> 'Quos praescivit et praedestinavit conformes fieri imaginis Filii sui.' Romans 8:29.

is problematic.<sup>45</sup> If some are chosen, then others are not. One may devote one's life to chastity and pious works, according to the pattern of a saintly life, but one cannot conjure prophetic dreams and visions from a time before one was even born. There are distinct limits, then, to *imitatio*, and aspects of sanctity which are simply to be marvelled at, since they cannot be copied.<sup>46</sup>

The earliest example of such theology in my sample of *vitae* is found in Gregory of Tours' Life of Nicetius of Lyons, his great uncle. Quoting Jeremiah amongst others, Gregory compares Nicetius to Isaac and John the Baptist, in that as God predicted 'how they should be born, how they would act, their name, their works, their merits' so 'that ancient compassion of piety which enriches the one who does not merit it, which sanctifies the one who is not born, which disposes and ordains all things before they have even appeared, decided to reveal first to his mother the priestly insignia of grace by which he would be adorned in this world'.<sup>47</sup> Edward James' footnote to the above suggests that some of Gregory's information about Nicetius' childhood came from family tradition, as the earlier *vita* contains no details of the young saint. This seems a logical premise, especially since Gregory later utilises his own personal recollection of his great uncle as an adult. Nicetius' mother, the visionary in this case, was maternal great-grandmother to Gregory; he may have heard stories about his illustrious relative on his own mother's knee. In any case, Nicetius of Lyons is presented without doubt as having been sanctified before he was

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<sup>45</sup> See for example T. Heffernan's views in *Sacred Biography* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>46</sup> This, of course, also applies to miraculous acts on the part of a saint, which are seen as special gifts of God's grace not available to all. Miracles performed in early childhood will be explored in the next chapter.

<sup>47</sup> 'Nam et de Isaac Iohanneque, qualiter nascerentur vel quid agerent, et nomen et opus praedixit et meritum. Sic nunc et de beato Nicetio ipsa illa prisca miseratio pietatis, quae inmerita ditat, non nata sanctificat et omnia priusquam gignantur et disponit et ordinat, qualibus sacerdotalis gratiae insulis floreat in terries, prius generici [eius] voluit revelare.' MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 241, translated in E. James *Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, 1991) p. 49.

born, indeed chosen before he was even conceived: ‘before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee’.<sup>48</sup>

Austreberta’s hagiographer, some fifty years later, heralds his subject in a similar way: ‘for she was chosen by God before she was conceived in her mother’s belly, she was known to the assembly of angels before she was born into the world.’<sup>49</sup> Like Nicetius of Lyons, ‘her deeds were foretold’, her mother knew specifically that she would be ‘a mother in the Lord’s house’, in other words an abbess.<sup>50</sup> Felix writes of Guthlac, considering the miraculous sign which attended the child’s birth, ‘this child was, by divine dispensation, predestined to enjoy the reward of everlasting bliss.’<sup>51</sup> A century later, Alcuin writes of his ancestor Willibrord that ‘even whilst he was in his mother’s womb he was chosen by God’, just like John the Baptist before him.<sup>52</sup> The explicit reference to John the Baptist is important: he uniquely provides New Testament precedent for a child sanctified before he or she is born. An angel tells John’s father that ‘he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth’<sup>53</sup> Willibrord would not grow up to be the abbot of an Anglo-Saxon monastery but a missionary, which it might be argued is similarly reflected in the interpretation of his mother’s prenatal vision: ‘he will disperse the murky darkness of error with the light

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Priusquam te formarem in utero, novi te, et antequam exires de vulva, sanctificavi te.’ MGH SSRM I Vol. II (1969) p. 240 (Jeremiah 1:15) Gregory also quotes Romans 8:29 concerning Nicetius of Lyons: see footnote 216 above. Translated by James *Life of the Fathers* p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> ‘prius a Deo praelecta, quam in matris aluo concepta: prius Angelorum coetibus cognita, quam mundo nata’ AASS Februarii II p. 420, translated in J. A. McNamara and J. E. Halberg *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, 1992) p. 306.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Necdum eius videbantur membra, et iam in populis eius praeconabantur gesta.’ & ‘in domo Domini et mater efficeretur’ AASS Februarii II p. 420, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 308.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Alii vero sagacioris sententiae coniecturis promere coeperunt hunc ex divina dispensatione in perpetuae beatitudinis praemia praedestinatum fore.’ Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 76, translated p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> ‘mox in utero matris divinae electionis repetam presagia ... sicut sanctissimus praecursor ... beatus Iohannes Baptista’ MGH SSRM VII p. 117.

<sup>53</sup> Luke 1: 15. The NIV notes that ‘from birth’ might also be translated ‘from his mother’s womb’ and the Vulgate follows this version: ‘Spiritu Sancto replebitur adhuc ex utero matris suae’.



of truth...he will attract to himself the eyes of multitudes'.<sup>54</sup> The path that these children would follow was mapped in the heavens before they were born; they were already sanctified as an act of God's grace, not through their own merits. Their later deeds, particularly for the purposes of this study their unusual childhoods, are not to be seen as human precocity but as manifestations of divine grace, proving them to be channels of God's power in the same way as did the miracles performed by them after their earthly life was over. Parental visions and dreams can be understood as a kind of spiritual overflow of grace surrounding a saintly birth, just as the rejoicing angels spilled out of heaven on the night that Jesus was born. St Germanus explicitly allies the birth of Genovefa to that of her Lord: 'You should know that on the day of her birth the angels in heaven celebrated a mystery of great joy and exultation.'<sup>55</sup>

However, it has been argued that not all saints were sanctified in the womb, or even holy from the moment of birth.<sup>56</sup> It is true that such specific Biblical quotation as detailed above is found in few *vitae*; more commonly the young saint is said to have been 'dedicated to the Lord from his cradle' or some variation on the same. I would argue that in some cases the theological point remains implicit, as indeed are many of the allusions to Scriptural precedents found within these *vitae*. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, teaching children to read in the early medieval period involved rote-learning large chunks of Scripture, particularly the Psalter and the Gospels. If hagiography was read either silently or aloud as part of an individual's or group's private devotions, or if it was heard by a larger audience as part of the festal round,

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<sup>54</sup> 'luce veritatis caliginosos tenebrarum errors discutit ... multorum in se adlicit' MGH SSRM VII p.117.

<sup>55</sup> 'In huius nativitate, magni gaudii et exultationis celebratum mysterium in caelo noveritis ab Angelis.' AASS Ianuarii III p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> I. Bejczy 'The sacra infanta in medieval hagiography' p. 145. Bejczy cites Weinstein and Bell, asserting that while some saints are holy from birth, others live as normal children until they are around seven years old, then subject themselves to severe discipline. Bejczy's article notably deals with *vitae* written much later than those in my sample, but his assertion will be tested on pre AD 1000 *vitae* in the following chapter. He makes no mention of the important precedent of John the Baptist for children who are born holy.

key Biblical texts would have been immediately familiar to any literate person. In this way the reader or listener could identify Scriptural borrowings and allusions without them being explicit within the text. In many cases where sanctification from or before birth is not made plain, it is borne out by miracles and extraordinary achievements once the life of the saint in question had truly begun.<sup>57</sup> However, there seem to be some cases when a rather different theological point is being made.<sup>58</sup> The example of Leobardus will be discussed in the next chapter, suffice here to say that he is an example of a saint who explicitly does not turn to religion until his childhood is long past. In this case, Leobardus *is* being held up for the purposes of *imitatio*: the message is that the door to heaven stands open even for those who come to faith late in life.<sup>59</sup> Augustine states in *De Civitate Dei* that one must first live in sin before repenting, something which a child born holy could not do.<sup>60</sup> To complicate the matter further, Bejczy states that ‘the view that grace did not enfold man until the moment of his baptism was generally accepted’.<sup>61</sup> He is certainly right, the doctrine of purgatory struck fear into the heart of every new parent until the deed was done, but we cannot escape from the fact that it is birth to which hagiographers refer when making their claims of infant sanctity, not baptism, which is mentioned only rarely. The fear that a child might die before receiving their first Christian rite necessitated swift baptism, especially considering the contemporary rate of infant mortality, and it may be the case that birth was so closely followed by baptism that no significant time elapsed between the two. In Aethelwold’s *Vita* we read, ‘When the child was born, his parents

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<sup>57</sup> We will be returning to this point in the next chapter.

<sup>58</sup> Saints who definitely seem not to have been holy from birth will be detailed in the following chapter.

<sup>59</sup> See Chapter Three, p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Aquinas asserted that it was not necessary to sin in order to activate God’s redemptive grace, a view which informed the much later *vitae* with which Bejczy is concerned; he cites both.

<sup>61</sup> Bejczy ‘The sacra infanta in medieval hagiography’ p. 150.

called him Aethelwold when he was washed with the sacred baptism.’<sup>62</sup> Baptism here is an addendum to birth, apparently performed almost immediately, which would seem to account for hagiographers’ more poetic but less theologically accurate use of the moment of birth when describing the holiness of their subjects.<sup>63</sup> However, the *Vita Guthlaci* is most problematic in this regard. We have seen how the infant was predestined to heavenly glory from the moment of birth, yet his baptism ‘in the mystical waters of the sacred font’ is mentioned as occurring eight days after his birth.<sup>64</sup> This child was already sanctified when he was cleansed ‘from the sins of his parents’: it raises the question whether in fact all young saints presented in this way were indeed seen as emerging holy from the womb, rather than requiring the, after all, human sacrament of baptism.<sup>65</sup> At any rate, whether hagiographers chose to follow Augustine or the Scriptural precedent of John the Baptist, the majority of *vitae* in this sample view their subjects as sanctified at least from the moment of their birth.

## Parentage

Many of the *Vitae* in my sample begin with details of the parentage of the saint. The names of the mother and father are often given, as is their social status to a

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Nato vero infante vocaverunt eum parentes eius Atheluuoldum, cum sacrosancto baptisate ablueretur.’ J. Stevenson *Vita Sancti Aethelwoldi Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon* (London, 1858) p. 256.

<sup>63</sup> Augustine’s view that all must live in sin before repenting did not prevent him from advocating as brief a sinful life as possible. He recommended infant baptism as soon as possible after birth, lest the child die eternally separated from God. Anglo-Saxon practice varied until the late twelfth century: the 787 church council at Chelsea confined the ceremony to celebration only at Easter and Whitsuntide (A.W. Haddan and W. Stubbs (eds.) *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland* iii (Oxford, 1869-73) pp. 448-9), although the 690 law code of King Ine of Wessex ordered every child to be baptised within thirty days of birth. The importance placed on such a ruling can be measured by the penalties required: if a guardian failed to keep to the law he or she was to be fined 30 shillings, but if the child died unbaptised, the fine comprised all that the guardian possessed (F. L. Attenborough (ed.) *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge, 1922) pp. 38-7). It is impossible to tell from the *Vita Aethelwoldi* exactly which baptismal practice was being adhered to in his case, although he was born in Winchester, and it seems likely that his parents would have been influenced by local law, in this case that of King Ine or subsequent pronouncements.

<sup>64</sup> ‘sacra fontis limphis spiritualibus’ Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 78.

<sup>65</sup> ‘abluit parentum delicta’ Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 78.

greater or lesser degree of precision. There is a distinct echo of the Biblical detailing of the lineage of Jesus, necessary to connect him incontrovertibly to the line of David, in the recording of a saint's kin. Matter from both the father and the mother was held to be involved in the process of procreation, and hence proof of lineage on both sides was important to demonstrate the quality and potential of the offspring.<sup>66</sup> Early medieval royal genealogies are wont to utilise both maternal and paternal lines, always favouring the most illustrious, and the more politically motivated of the *vitae* in my sample can be seen to do the same, particularly when the saint in question was herself royal.<sup>67</sup> Geretrud of Nivelles, daughter of Pippin I, is a case in point. The story of how she refused to enter a marriage deal with an Austrasian duke is more detailed than we might expect, perhaps because although her hagiographer has claimed in the preface not to need to specify her family connections: 'For who living in Europe does not know the loftiness, the names, and the localities of her lineage?'<sup>68</sup> he is actually required to ensure that everyone *does* know that here is the princess to whom the Carolingian kings claim to be related. In fact, Geretrud was Charles Martel's great aunt. The *Vita*, written after 693 when the Carolingians had temporarily lost their footing, seems a little coy about Geretrud's relations but may have had the longer view in mind: justifying the attempts of the Carolingian family to seize power by means of noble earthly connections and divine favour. The distinct emphasis on the nobility of many West Frankish saints can be attributed to the rather tense political

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<sup>66</sup> Early medieval writers followed Aristotle, who maintained that conception resulted from a mingling of a man's seed with matter from a woman. The resulting child's characteristics were dependant on the relative virtue of the matter provided by each parent.

<sup>67</sup> The account of the early years of Pippin II, Geretrud's nephew, in the *Annals of Metz*, forms a kind of bridge between secular genealogy and hagiography. Mentioned among Pippin's illustrious ancestors are Geretrud and her mother Itta on the maternal side, as well as Arnulf, bishop of Metz, to whom he is related through his father. His virtues come 'not only from natural instillation (because he has possessed them from the unconquerable lineage of his parents) but also from divine inspiration.' pp. 352.

<sup>68</sup> 'Quisnam in Euruppa habitans, huius progenie altitudinem, nomina ignorat et loca?' MGH SSRM II p. 454, translated in Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 319-320.

situation in which they were written, in which genealogy was all and the right to rule was inherited rather than earned.

We have already seen how the piety of one's parents might determine whether or not one was born at all, and we are surely meant to recall God's careful selection of Mary to be the mother of Christ, when Gabriel tells her, 'do not be afraid...you have found favour with God'.<sup>69</sup> Holy parents deserve the divine favour of holy offspring. That the holy parents found in these *vitae* tend to be praised as much for their nobility as their piety is an interesting insight into contemporary ideas on the link between birth and worth. It has already been mentioned that the right to rule was hereditary; it was also seen as God-given. Thus the nobility represented the pinnacle of favour, both profane and divine. None were more worthy to receive the gift of saintly children.

The East Frankish *vitae* in my sample provide something of a contrast to this preoccupation with pedigree. While Sturm is 'a member of a noble Christian family'<sup>70</sup>, the details of saintly status are often less clear. Willibald is brought to the foot of the Cross 'on the estates of the nobles and great men of the Saxons'.<sup>71</sup> It does not necessarily follow that his parents were numbered among those nobles; they were simply on the estate and could have been anybody. However, when the decision is made to make the child an oblate, they do consult with their 'noble friends', which would seem to confirm their high social status. That we have to hunt for and extrapolate the details of his social standing demonstrates the contrast to West Frankish *vitae* in itself! Boniface's nobility is not mentioned at all, although we may assume he is well-born from the similarity of the account of his oblation to that of Willibald's, with the family members being called together in order to decide the child's future. It is worth noting that oblation was often accompanied by a gift from

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<sup>69</sup> Luke 1:30

<sup>70</sup> MGH SS II pp. 365-77.

<sup>71</sup> 'Saxonicae gentis ... in nonnullis nobilium, bonorumque hominum praediis' MGH SSRG p. 15.

the family to the house which took their offspring in.<sup>72</sup> Sometimes the gift was essential and sometimes it was strictly optional; at any rate, these were the sons of families who could afford to pay their way. Willibrord's status is similarly not described, although his father is said to have been held in high esteem 'by the king and the nobles of that nation', and he clearly possesses a small monastery. That Sturm seems to constitute an exception to this pattern should not unduly trouble us; he is also the only saint in this subset who is not Anglo-Saxon, having been picked up by Boniface on his travels through Norica. The hagiographer describes how the boy Sturm came to join Boniface: 'certain nobles came to him vying with each other to offer their sons to be brought up in the service of God. Among those whom he accepted at the insistence of his parents was Sturm'.<sup>73</sup> The nobles in the tale are not presented in a very flattering light, but are responding to the arrival of a great man by seeking to further the careers of their offspring, in exactly the same way that boys were offered to kings and princes, and sent to live in the houses of greater noblemen.<sup>74</sup> This, then, is what the story is describing; that we discover that Sturm is of a good family is somewhat incidental.

Sturm aside, the contrast is generally clear between the West Frankish emphasis on nobility and the East Frankish carelessness in delineating a saint's heritage. In reaching some conclusions about why this might be, it is important to recall dates of composition; the earliest of the East Frankish *vitae*, that of Willibrord, was composed some time after 778, closely followed by the *Vita Bonifacii* and the

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<sup>72</sup> Oblation was traditionally accompanied by a gift from the child's parents; Boswell notes that it was their 'last material obligation' to their child. J. Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* (New York, 1988) p. 240. Benedict's Rule regards this gift as strictly optional, and allows it to be waived in the case of poorer families ('Qui vero ex toto nihil habent, simpliciter petitionem faciant et cum oblatione offerant filium suum coram testibus', PL 66, col. 215), and the 794 Council of Frankfurt explicitly prohibited the practice of demanding an offering of money or land as part of the oblation process, demanding that Benedict's Rule be observed in this regard.

<sup>73</sup> MGH SS II pp. 365-77.

<sup>74</sup> The sponsorship of boys, and indeed girls, is a feature of a great deal of *vitae* and will be examined in Chapter Four.

Hodoeporicon of Willibald. Sturm's *vita* can be dated between 818 and 822, and Leoba's was completed before 836, as we have seen in Chapter One. This later cluster of *Vitae* belong to a period of mission driven and largely undertaken by Anglo-Saxons. By the time their successes had become imprinted on the East Frankish consciousness, their houses famous and their converts legion, their pedigrees did not matter. They were not related to either of the families struggling for control in the west, but were enterprising foreigners whose bloodlines meant less to the hagiographers who immortalised them than the Romanized Christianity they brought with them. It is an interesting paradox that it was Boniface's pedigree as a man of God, and particularly one in league with Rome, rather than as a noble, which meant so much to the pedigree-obsessed Carolingian Pippin III when Boniface anointed him king in 751.<sup>75</sup> While the West Franks, Merovingians and Carolingians alike, were engaged in a power struggle in which *vitae* were important tools, the East Frankish *vitae* were written with a different struggle in mind: that of Christ's truth against the unbeliever, and at a time when the Carolingians had attained the positions they sought and were settling into a time of consolidation, in which the support of the church was to be crucial.

The images and ideas presented by hagiographers in their opening remarks serve to lay the foundations for the holy Lives which follow, and correspond not only to notions of childhood, but to concepts of sanctity in general. The next chapter commences a tour through the years of early medieval childhood, following for convenience a loose scheme of the *aetates hominis*, in accordance with several hagiographers as we have seen, and consequently beginning with *infantia*. Justified by the prophets, heralded by visions and dreams and conceived in piety of illustrious

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<sup>75</sup> It must be noted that it is not certain that it was Boniface who performed this act. See R. Collins *Early Medieval Europe* (Basingstoke, 1991) p. 243 and accompanying notes.

parents, infant saints, once born, proceeded to fulfil the divine promise concerning their lives in a variety of fascinating ways.



## Chapter Three

### Early Childhood: From *Infantia* to *Pueritia*

As has been discussed in Chapter Two, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* crystallised Augustine's ideas on the *aetates hominis*, and, most crucially for us, ascribed to the six ages a maximum length of years. *Infantia* lasts up to age seven, *pueritia* to fourteen, *adolescentia* up to twenty-eight. *Infantia*, then, is the stage of life with which this chapter is concerned, although the problems posed by terminology, and the general lack of specific ages being attributed to specific actions of young saints, remain to muddy the waters. What, then, might be expected of an *infans*? St Augustine of Hippo describes the earliest years of his life thus:

'I would fling my arms and legs about and cry, making the few weak gestures that I could... and when I was not satisfied... I grew indignant that my elders were not subject to me... and I took revenge on them by crying. That infants are like this, I have been able to learn by watching them myself; and they, though they did not know me, have shown me better what I was like than my own nurses.'<sup>1</sup>

The infant saints portrayed in early medieval *vitae* have nothing in common with such an assessment; this chapter will explore both expected and unexpected features of holy infancy including miraculous acts, precognition of future roles, the process of *oblatio* and the literary topos of *puer senex*. That hagiographers choose to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Itaque iactabam et membra et voces, signa similia voluntantibus meis pauca quae poteram, qualia poteram ... et cum mihi non obtemperabatur ... indignabar non subditis maioribus ... et me de illis flendo vindicabam. Tales esse infants didici, quos discere potui, et me talem fuisse magis mihi ipsi indicaverunt nescientes quam scientes nutrices mei.' J. Gibb & W. Montgomery (eds.) *The Confessions of Augustine* (New York, 1979) Liber I:VI p. 8.

ignore Augustine's assessment of childhood is a deliberate act on their part: many or indeed all of them would have been familiar with his *Confessions*. The reasons why they ignore his and other contemporary notions about childhood might be allied to previous comments regarding the limits of *imitatio*. If it can be argued that the children depicted in this sample of hagiography are on the whole not designed to be emulated, then they need not demonstrate the characteristics of ordinary boys and girls, and can be instead portrayed as something so other that from their earliest years they transcend nature's laws.

The question of whether a saint is holy, and indeed sanctified, from the moment of his or her birth, is one to which we must return. Bejczy asserts, concerning his collection of later *vitae*, that while some saints are holy from birth, others live as normal children until they are around seven years old, then subject themselves to severe discipline.<sup>2</sup> Of the *vitae* in this sample, only one conforms fully to such a pattern. Cuthbert, 'up to the eighth year of his age, which is the end of infancy and the beginning of boyhood, ...could devote his mind to nothing but the games and the wantonness of children'.<sup>3</sup> Bede's version justifies his subject's somewhat ordinary childhood with words from 1Corinthians: 'For when he was a child he understood as a child, he thought as a child; but after he became a man, he put away childish things entirely'.<sup>4</sup> This instance would seem to perfectly correspond to Bejczy's proposed alternative pattern of a saintly life. It is certainly not the case that Bede was unfamiliar with the *puer senex* topos; indeed, it is by means of a child, 'hardly three years old',

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<sup>2</sup> See above, note 228. Patricia Wasyliv, discussing the *vitae* of Italian girls, similarly argues that during her period children became saints either due to pious behavior, or to the fact that they were murdered in youth. Saints who were born such do not figure in her sample. P. H. Wasyliv 'The Pious Infant: Developments in Popular Piety During the High Middle Ages' *Lay Sanctity, Medieval and Modern: A Search for Models* (Paris, 2000) pp. 105- 115 .

<sup>3</sup> 'Siquidem usque ad octavum aetatis annum, qui post in fantiam puericiae primus est, solis parvulorum ludis et lasiviae mentem dare noverat' Bede's *Vita Cuthberti* in B. Colgrave *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (1940) p. 154, translated p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> 'Cum esset parvulus, ut parvulus sapiebat, ut parvulus cogitabat, factus vir, quae parvuli errant deposuit.' Ibid. p. 156; (1Corinthians 13:11).

yet ‘with the gravity of an old man’ that Cuthbert is turned from his juvenile pursuit of pleasure.<sup>5</sup> The anonymous writer of the earlier text confirms that Cuthbert was eight when the miracle occurred which turned him towards a religious life, but his use of the language of the *aetatis hominis* is less precise, presumably indicating that he was less familiar with the the work of Augustine or Isidore.<sup>6</sup> The question remains as to why both authors did not portray his subject as saintly from birth, although it could be the case that both Bede’s and his predecessor’s attitude towards earliest childhood was more akin to that of St. Augustine, and that they composed the *Vita Cuthberti* accordingly. Having been turned from his former ways, the young Cuthbert seems no more or less holy than children who were, according to their hagiographers, sanctified from birth.

There remains one other example which might just fit Bejczy’s brief: even though Leobardus is said to have ‘had God in his heart from his childhood’<sup>7</sup>, Gregory’s preface to the *vita* notes that ‘although the greatest joy is felt with those who have led a religious life from their childhood...one should also rejoice, as God ordains, in those who turn from the world and have had the strength to complete the pious enterprise with the help of divine mercy’.<sup>8</sup> Leobardus is clearly meant to represent the latter category: those who have come to faith later in life. It must be noted that his young life does not differ materially from many of the other *vitae* written by Gregory of Tours, although his educational achievements are minor and he

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<sup>5</sup> ‘unus de parvulis triennis ferme ut videbatur accurrat’ Bede’s *Vita Cuthberti* in Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Dum ergo puer esset annorum octo ... quidam infans erat cum eis ferma trium annorum ...’ anonymous *Vita Cuthberti* in Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> ‘qui an initio Deum in pectore tenens’ MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 291, translated in E. James Gregory of Tours: *Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, 1991) p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> ‘et licet de his teneat maximum gaudium, quod hi qui ab initio aetatis religiosam vitam ducentes pervenire meruerunt perfectionis ad portum, tamen et de his, Domino iubente, laetatur, quod conversi a saeculo opus inchoatum valuerunt perducere, divina opitulante misericordia, ad effectum.’ MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 291, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 126.

is compliant to his parents' wishes regarding betrothal. This text must be seen in the context of Gregory's plan for his collection of *vitae*, *Liber Vita Patrum*. Each *vita* is designed to make a separate point regarding the diversity of the Christian experience; it is that diversity which lies at the root of Gregory's presentation of Leobardus, rather than any theological point about the varying nature of sanctity. We have already seen how the *Vita Guthlaci* confuses our ideas on the moment at which sanctity descended on the subjects of these *vitae*. This text also, uniquely among this sample, demonstrates how a child might be presented as holy from birth despite his subsequent actions. Guthlac as a boy shone with 'the brightness of spiritual light', yet as a young adult he 'changed his disposition' and spent nine years in the pursuits of earthly glory and plunder.<sup>9</sup> When, due to God's prompting, he rededicates himself to the Lord's service, Felix heralds this change in terms which remind us of other *vitae*. Guthlac, now twenty-four, 'spurned his parents, his fatherland, and the comrades of his adolescence'.<sup>10</sup> Willibald similarly forsook 'not only the temporal riches of his earthly inheritance, but his country, parents and relatives' and Boniface 'renounced all worldly and transitory possessions for the sake of acquiring the eternal inheritance, in order that, to quote the words of the Gospel, by forsaking father and mother and lands and other things of this world he might receive a hundredfold hereafter and possess everlasting life.'<sup>11</sup> This reference to the 'Gospel' brings the Scriptural writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke in mind, which all detail Jesus' advice to the rich young

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<sup>9</sup> 'Erat enim in ipso nitor spiritalis luminis radescens, ut per omnia omnibus, quid venturus esset, monstraretur.' & 'mutata mente' B. Colgrave *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956) p. 80, translated p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> 'Ita enim in illo divinae gratiae inflammatio flagrabat, ut non solum regalis indolentiae reverentiam despiceret, sed et parentes et patriam comitesque adolescentiae suae contempsit.' Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 82, translated p. 83. The full quote makes its similarity to the *Vita Willibaldi*, quoted in note 11 below, even clearer.

<sup>11</sup> 'non solum temporales terrenarum rerum divitias, sed et patriam atque parentes, ac propinquos defere' & 'ut iuxta veridicam veritatis vocem patrem relinquendo aut matrem aut agros aut alia, quae huius mundi sunt, centuplum acciperet et vitam aeternam possideret.' MGH SS XV Vol. I p. 83 & MGH SRG p. 5 respectively.

ruler (a most fitting parallel to the earthly situation of Guthlac, in particular): ‘no-one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.’<sup>12</sup> While all three *vitae* are certainly thinking of this Scriptural precedent, their actual words bear more relation to each other than to the Vulgate text concerned. While Guthlac’s is the earliest *vita* here, those of Boniface and then Willibald were composed within fifty years or so. Willibald, hagiographer of Boniface, and Huneberc were both writing in the Germanic territories at the edges of the Frankish territory, while Felix seems to have composed the *Vita Guthlaci* in East Anglia. Such similarities would certainly seem to suggest a continued exchange of texts as well as persons between the Anglo-Saxon missionaries and the land of their birth, as has been suggested between East Anglia and Balthild’s sphere of influence, particularly Chelles.<sup>13</sup> What is clear is that in the case of the *Vita Guthlaci*, an individual whose actions in early manhood could not be described as saintly is written up as a child sanctified by the womb, yet requiring another time of commitment before he begins to achieve his holy potential. That he could be presented in this way suggests even more strongly that the notion of sanctity from or before birth is, broadly speaking, an early medieval characteristic of sainthood, which authors might choose to include in the text even when the later actions of their subject might be questionable. The remainder of saints in this sample correspond more or less explicitly to the notion detailed in Chapter Two, that saints are born such and their infancy reflects this fact.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘qui dixit eis amen dico vobis nemo est qui reliquit domum aut parentes aut fratres aut uxorem aut filios propter regnum Dei et non recipiat multo plura in hoc tempore et in saeculo venturo vitam aeternam’ Luke 18: 29-30. See also Matthew 19: 16-30 and Mark 10: 17-31.

<sup>13</sup> Specific attention was paid to possible interface between Francia and East Anglia in Paul Fouracre’s unpublished paper ‘Political and Cultural Relations between Merovingian Francia and eastern England’ given at the one day conference *Balthild: Slave, Queen, Sinner and Saint* (Norwich Castle Museum, Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2002).

## Oblation

Oblation – the donation of a child to a monastery ostensibly for their spiritual gain – is found in one form or another in a significant minority of the *vitae* used in this study, and seems from these texts always to have occurred in *infantia*. Beginning with those *vitae* composed in East Francia, the connection between oblation and infancy soon becomes clear.

Willibrord's oblation is carried out when he 'had reached the age of reason' or 'when he was weaned', according to Talbot's translation, in which he chooses the former but footnotes the latter as the exact translation of the Latin text.<sup>14</sup> The age of reason, according to most classical sources, would be as we have seen around the age of seven, and would suggest that Willibrord's oblation took place in his *pueritia* rather than in his *infantia*. Weaning would of course take place somewhat before the age of seven, although not as early as in the modern world, especially for a boy, who seems to have been breast-fed longer than his sisters, up until the age of two or three according to Hanawalt.<sup>15</sup> However, the key to this discrepancy lies in the Biblical story which Willibrord's hagiographer is copying. The child is presented explicitly as 'another Samuel'<sup>16</sup>, and the hagiographer, Alcuin, later quotes directly from the

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<sup>14</sup> 'et statim ablactatum infantulum tadidit eum pater Hrypensis ecclesiae' MGH SSRM VII p. 117-8; C. H. Talbot *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954) p. 5. The same reference is made in T. Noble and T. Head *Soldiers of Christ* (London, 1995) which utilises Talbot's translation.

<sup>15</sup> B. Hanawalt *The Ties that Bound* (New York, 1986) p. 178. She reckons that girls might be weaned at one year. Her study concerns the late medieval peasantry and there is a variety of evidence for weaning practices from the twelfth century onwards, including a *vita* of the Virgin Mary which records that she was weaned at the age of three (R. E. Parker (ed.) *The Middle English Stanzaic Versions of the Life of Saint Anne* Early English Text Society original series 174 (1928) p. 8). For the early medieval period, while it seems clear that well-to-do families employed wet nurses, from the many '*nutrice*' found within these texts alone (although the term might also refer to the actual parents of the child concerned), I have found no information regarding the age at which a child of either sex might be weaned and have consequently been forced to extrapolate backwards in time.

<sup>16</sup> 'novum Samuhel' MGH SSRM VII p. 118.

Vulgate: 'The boy grew up and advanced in favour both with God and with men'.<sup>17</sup> If we check the vocabulary used earlier in the story we read that 'after he was weaned [Hannah] took the boy...to the house of the Lord'<sup>18</sup> Reading the Vulgate account causes the apparent problem to evaporate: Alcuin is engaged in drawing a simple parallel between Willibrord and Samuel, using words from the Biblical account which would have been familiar to his audience in order to fix the idea of Willibrord as a new Samuel firmly in their minds. We should not, therefore, pay inordinate attention to this extremely early oblation; Alcuin has sacrificed Willibrord's 'true' age of oblation, which we shall never know, in order to connect him incontrovertibly to a holy predecessor.

In the case of Boniface, what is presented as a tale of the young saint overcoming parental opposition in order to achieve his desire to enter a monastery would seem actually to be a veiled case of oblation, considering again the age of the child in question.<sup>19</sup> His presentation, however, is as a remarkably spiritually-aware lad who by the age of five has 'already subdued the flesh to the spirit'! He is not afraid to address the abbot himself despite his tender years. This precocious fearlessness fits well with the man who later destroyed the Oak of Thor in the face of angry pagans, and whose bravery for the Gospel cost him his life, but in no way does it correspond to what might be expected of an *infans*.

Willibald is the same age as Boniface when he is made an oblate, although the act is not disguised in the same way; we see instead his spiritually aware and dutiful parents responding to their unusual offspring's early 'signs of spiritual

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<sup>17</sup> 'puer autem Samuhel proficiebat atque crescebat et placebat tam Deo quam hominibus' MGH SSRM VII p. 118 (1Samuel 2:26).

<sup>18</sup> 1Samuel 1:24 'et adduxit eum secum postquam ablactaverat in vitulis tribus et tribus modiis farinae et amphora vini et adduxit eum ad domum Domini in Silo puer autem erat adhuc infantulus'.

<sup>19</sup> M. DeJong *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996) p. 48.

understanding'.<sup>20</sup> He is implicitly another Samuel, a baby promised to the Lord in return for his healing from a 'severe illness'. It is unusual that hagiographers provide specific ages at which their subjects performed specific actions, but here we have two children who aged five begin to control their spiritual destinies. Both Boniface and Willibald trigger the events which lead to their oblation. It is true that Willibald was already promised to the Lord, but it is not until he begins to display his precocity that the pledge is realised.

As has been suggested in Chapter Two, it is certainly possible that hagiographers used representative rather than real ages for their subjects, assuming they were aware roughly at what point in the saint's life certain events occurred, but not the specific age of the child at that point. Thus the age of 'five' might be used to convey the idea of a 'very young child', rather than an individual who had actually lived in excess of five years. Even if this is the case, the question remains as to why these particular hagiographers felt the need to ascribe ages to their subjects at all: we have already seen how rarely this occurs in other *vitae*. Whether Boniface and Willibald were actually five years old or not, in the minds of their hagiographers neither of these children had yet achieved *pueritia*, the age of reason, and I would argue therefore that the inclusion of their exact ages in the text is a deliberate act intended to highlight the point that by no stretch of the imagination would an ordinary child be acting in this way. They are in fact transcending the barrier of their age, and behaving in a way which would scarcely be expected of a *puer*, let alone an *infans*. We are meant to understand that they can achieve this supersedence of the laws of nature only through the power of God's grace which has settled upon them. The

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<sup>20</sup> 'in eo iam tunc temporis germinabat sapientiae virgultum.' MGH SRG p 7.



author of those laws allows his servants to break them as a demonstration of his absolute rule.

The debatable issue of the age at which children could be made oblates is raised by all three of these *vitae*. The Rule of Caesarius recommends that children are not accepted before the age of six or seven, and that profession (the monastic vow of poverty, chastity and obedience) should not be required until a child has reached the much-quoted age of reason.<sup>21</sup> Influential though this text was, it is merely one of the several Rules influencing Western monastic practice at the time, and the Rule of Benedict made explicit provision for oblation without any indication of a minimum acceptable age for the children donated.<sup>22</sup> The Rule attributed to Isidore of Seville quotes the same Biblical text as does Willibrord's hagiographer when speaking of oblation: 'Hannah, through love of God, donated her newborn son as soon as he was weaned'.<sup>23</sup> As Boswell notes, his words are cited not only by contemporary monastic commentators, but also in canon law.<sup>24</sup> The clear implication is that parents who donate their children as oblates are directly imitating Hannah's example. If this is true, there can be no objection to children being offered, just as Samuel was, as soon as they are taking solid food.<sup>25</sup> Of course, individual monastic houses might choose to adhere to one particular Rule. In some cases we are lucky enough to know which Rules were preferred by certain monastic houses; in others we may detect from

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<sup>21</sup> Rule of Caesarius Canons 4 and 5: see W. Klingshirn 'Caesarius' Monastery for Women in Arles and the Composition and Function of the *Vita Caesarii*' *Revue Benedictine* 100 (1990) pp. 441-481.

Profession was not always necessary for oblates: see Chapter Five for more details.

<sup>22</sup> *Regula Sancti Benedicti* Caput LIX 'De filiis nobilium vel pauperum qui offeruntur' PL 66 col. 634.

<sup>23</sup> Isidore is in fact asserting that oblation is irreversible; that an oblate once made can never return to secular life: *Regula Monachorum* 4 PL 103 cols. 558-9.

<sup>24</sup> J. Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* (New York, 1988) p. 233-4 note 22.

<sup>25</sup> Boswell suggests that the absence of provision of wet nurses in documents pertaining to oblation indicates that children were not donated until they had been weaned. Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* p. 234 note 26.

passages of the *vitae* themselves which were holding sway.<sup>26</sup> In the case of the *vitae* detailed above, we must extrapolate the other way, and, given the very young ages of the oblates, suggest that Benedictine or Isidorian latitude allowed them to enter the religious life as *infantes*.

However, in Rusticula's *vita* we are alerted to the possibility that even in Arles where Caesarius' Rule reigned, restrictions on the age of oblates were not always strictly observed. Rusticula was kidnapped specifically at the age of five. We cannot tell how much time had elapsed before she was rescued, but when she left her abductor, Rusticula was said to be in her 'infantia', and considering that she travelled straight to Arles where the abbess 'took her with great celebration into the monastery enclosure where she brought her into the flock of Christ's virgins'<sup>27</sup>, she could scarcely have met the age requirement of six or seven years; if she had, we might expect to find her referred to as *puella* rather than *infans*, although the notorious treachery of terminology must not be overlooked. It would seem likely that some expediency was practiced in cases of oblation. Rusticula, saved from marriage, was immediately most earnestly sought by her mother, who apparently desired that her only child should inherit her property; her swift oblation may well have been perceived to be necessary to rescue her once again from a secular life.<sup>28</sup>

Rusticula is not the only West Frankish example of a very young oblate; we see in the *vita* of Nicetius of the Treveri just how small a child might be when his

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<sup>26</sup> For example, from Radegund's *vita* we know that she travelled to Arles to see Caesarius' Rule in action in the monastery there, and translated what she found into the customs at her own house at Poitiers.

<sup>27</sup> 'excepit illam cum gaudio mango intra septa sancti monasterii, et edocens illam omnem fidei sanctitatem, adgregavit virginibus Christi.' MGH SSRM IV p. 342, translated in J. A. McNamara and J. E. Halberg *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham and London, 1992) p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> The temptation of young saints with property and wealth is a well-worn theme, here attributed to Rusticula's mother. It is perfectly possible that Rusticula was in fact made oblate along with her inheritance, which would have become part of the property of the foundation at Arles. It is most unlikely that such a well-connected girl, who later became abbess, entered monastic life without some of the family wealth being bequeathed along with her.

future begins to be planned along these lines. ‘As soon as he had been born one could see that his head was completely deprived of hair, as is often the case with the newly born, but that there was a ring of down all around his head, so that one would have thought from that ring that he had been granted the clerical tonsure.’<sup>29</sup> We are intended to understand Nicetius’ hair in the same way as maternal and paternal visions before the birth of their saintly children: it prefigures what God has ordained he will become, casting his parents in the roles of good Christians responding to heavenly prompting rather than individuals who planned to give their child away as he lay in his cot.

The question of whether a child, once made oblate, could ever escape the monastic life was one perpetually debated in the early middle ages and beyond. Complaints about the misuse of the practice can be heard from the fourth century; St. Basil bemoans the fact that parents donated their children for their own financial gain, preserving their estate from being split among a multitude of children by securing the inability of one or more of their brood to inherit at all.<sup>30</sup> Jerome further states that girls consecrated by their parents to virginity tend to be deformed or defective in some way, although he is not specifically attacking oblation.<sup>31</sup> Salic Law consistently prohibits the tonsure of children without the permission of their parents, but this is perhaps more complicated than it might appear due to the Frankish tradition of long-haired kings, and Boswell notes that such a law may be of entirely secular origin.<sup>32</sup> Such an origin seems logical when we consider how it might safeguard the scalps of children who were being educated in monastic schools; the religious life could be far

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Nam cum partu fuisset effuses, omne caput eius, u test consuetude nascentium infantum, a capillis nudum cernebatur, in circuitu vero modicorum pilorum ordo apparuit, ut putares, ab eisdem coronam clerici fuisse signatam.’ MGH SSRM I vol II p. 278, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 105.

<sup>30</sup> Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* pp. 240-1.

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter Four for further comments.

<sup>32</sup> Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* p. 230.

removed from the one their parents envisaged for them.<sup>33</sup> The Fourth Council of Toledo asserted in 633 that ‘Either parental desire or personal devotion can make a monk; both are binding’.<sup>34</sup>

The punishment for attempting to re-enter the secular world is the worst that the church could hand down – that of excommunication. If, then, *oblatio* was *in perpetua*, could a child donated in this way expect to have any further contact with his or her family? The Rule of Pachomius, translated by Jerome, forbids those who gather at the gates of monastic houses from seeing or speaking to those within; it is not inconceivable that some of the crowd would be the relatives of oblates.<sup>35</sup> However, the seventh century Rule of Fructuosus makes provision for both parents and children entering a monastery at the same time, forbidding them henceforth from seeing or conversing with each other without permission, except for the very young who are allowed free access to their parents.<sup>36</sup> Sadalberga’s *vita* shows the latter Rule in action when, as a widow, she takes herself and her offspring to Laon, and another, more detailed example is that of Rictrude. Her offering of her children is used to offset the only stain on her character, the fact that she is not a virgin: ‘Therefore, that faithful woman of God who had devoted herself to Him in holy continence, Rictrude espoused her three daughters at one time, while they were still young, to Christ as husband, so they might always follow in the footsteps of the Lamb and that song which she could never make her own could be made to sound for her on her daughters’ cithars’.<sup>37</sup> When one of her daughters dies at Christmas time, clearly within the monastery, she

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<sup>33</sup> See Chapter Four page 126 for two accounts of this law in and out of practice.

<sup>34</sup> Canon 49 cited in Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* p. 233.

<sup>35</sup> Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* pp. 235-6.

<sup>36</sup> Boswell *The Kindness of Strangers* pp. 254-5. The term ‘very young’ is not further defined. It is certainly possible that the children in question were not yet weaned and therefore merited this kind of access to their mothers. While the absence of provision of wet nurses may be taken to indicate that children were generally weaned by the time they were donated (see note 25 above), it seems logical that a baby who brought his wet nurse with him in the shape of his mother would not be refused!

<sup>37</sup> ‘quod illa nequibat iam per se, per suarum citharas filiarum ei faceret personae’ AASS Mai 12 p. 85, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 209.

restrains her feelings until the Feast of the Holy Innocents, which she considers a proper time at which to grieve. The proper subordination of the role of mother to the role of nun is made clear. A later miracle story at first seems to indicate that her infant son also accompanied her into enclosure. However, it is when we learn that he was her first-born that the motivation behind her relinquishing the world suddenly becomes clear. Rictrude, widowed with several daughters, evidently made the decision to allow her son to inherit prematurely by taking herself and his siblings, should they be entitled to receive any property, out of the equation. He was certainly not made oblate; ‘her first-born, Maurontus, still did service to the king in lay habit and fought his wars with his body rather than his spirit.’<sup>38</sup> Willibald’s *vita* would seem to provide a clue at least to Anglo-Saxon practice. Willibald’s pilgrim eagerness to ‘forsake...his country, parents and relatives’ is a plot device designed to foreshadow his later missionary travels, yet raises several questions. Firstly, one may question whether a child who had been an oblate since the age of five knew much of the family he wished so dutifully to forsake; secondly, which would seem to belie both my first point and the regulations cited here, Willibald actually persuaded his father and his brother to accompany him, so he didn’t give up his family at all.<sup>39</sup>

Aside from the promptings of dreams or the witnessing of miracles performed by their offspring, we are able to discern some less spiritual motives for oblation within these *vitae*. Boniface’s father is struck down with a fatal sickness when he opposes the boy, which apparently changes his mind as to the boy becoming a monk. This of course makes no sense in relation to his previous argument that Boniface shall not be a monk as he wants him to inherit his property after he dies. However, I would

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Mauronto primodgenito suo adhuc in laicali habitu Regalibus obsequiis ac negotiis militaribus, corpore potius quam mente, deteno’ AASS Mai 12 p. 85, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 210.

<sup>39</sup> MGH SS XV Vol. I p. 85.

argue that it is the temptation of the property which is the well-worn theme here, and can perhaps be discounted. Boniface evidently had other brothers ('his father lavished upon him more affection than upon the rest of his brothers'<sup>40</sup>) and it would seem sensible if the father was indeed dying that matters would be settled regarding who was to inherit, and who was to be disposed of in other ways (such as oblation). The father's illness may well have truly precipitated Boniface's 'desire', but for rather less exalted reasons than are presented in the *vita*. It is not clear whether the father actually died, or whether, on granting Boniface's request, his health was restored. If the illness was fictitious, one might expect the latter; we read similar stories in West Frankish *vitae*, in which parents who oppose their offspring are punished in this way until they recant.<sup>41</sup> Boniface is later said to have been 'bereaved of his earthly father', but this is to emphasise that he chose instead the 'adoptive father' which is God, (or his representative the abbot) and need not mean that the man met his end. His father's words, presented as opposition to the young saint's purpose, in fact ring true in his later life: 'he promised that his active boyhood life was much more bearable in the long run than the contemplative life of monastic discipline'<sup>42</sup>. He was right: Boniface did not confine himself to a monastery but instead roamed across Europe, evangelising the heathen.

Whatever motivated their parents, oblation was certainly perceived as beneficial for the child. Willibrord's oblation is for his own spiritual good, 'so that

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<sup>40</sup> 'magna nimirum dilectione, ceterorum postposita amore filiorum, adfectatus est a patre.' MGH SRG p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Tim Reuter presents the *Vita Bonifatii* in a rather different light. He is of the opinion that the father recovered from his life-threatening ailment (which the earliest Latin text would seem not to confirm) and he also gives credence to the hagiographer's claim that Boniface was the favourite of his father, suggesting that cases of oblation such as this constituted 'real sacrifices'. It would seem equally plausible to argue that Boniface was in fact being presented as a Biblical type according to the precedent of Joseph, another favourite son. T. Reuter *The Greatest Englishman* (Exeter, 1980) p. 22-3. See Chapter Four for a more general discussion of parental roles within *vitae*.

<sup>42</sup> 'hanc suae tolerabiliorem esse infantiae activam quamque vitam monasterialis militiae contemplativam ... promittit' MGH SRG p. 6.

living in a place where he could see nothing but what was virtuous and hear nothing but what was holy his tender age should be strengthened by sound training and discipline'.<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that this marvellously optimistic view of monastic life at Ripon, where he was trained, is not merely routine praise but relates to the circumstances under which the *vita* was composed. The missionary Willibrord founded institutions along very Anglo-Saxon lines across Eastern Francia, which were then subject to English notions of reform under the ministrations of his successor Boniface: this *vita* was written for such, where English monasticism was naturally the ideal. At any rate, we might insert such a passage into the *vitae* of any one of the oblates mentioned here as justification for their donation to one house or another. Their parents' actions allow them to be groomed for their future careers.

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<sup>43</sup> 'ut fragilior aetas validioribus inualesceret disciplines, ubi nihil videret nisi honesta, nihil audiret nisi sancta.' MGH SSRM VII p. 118.

Regarding the actual process of oblation, we find the most detail provided again by the *vitae* of Boniface and Willibald, the texts of which seem to run in parallel:

*Vita Willibaldi*

‘When this remarkable boy had reached the age of five he began to show the first signs of spiritual understanding. His parents...as soon as they had taken council with their noble friends and kinsfolk...lost no time in instructing him in the sacred obligations of monastic life. Without delay they entrusted him to the care of Theodred...and begged him to be responsible for taking the child to the monastery....In accordance with the rules of monastic life the abbot immediately laid the case before the community and asked them if they would advise and allow this to be done. The response of the monks was immediate, and by their unanimous consent he was accepted and received by them all into the community to share their life.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Cumque illuster ille puer in infantia ad quinquennium usque pervenisset, ast in eo iam tunc temporis germinabat sapientiae virgultum. Itaque, parentes votiva desideriorum implere properabant promissa, atque illustrem quantocius, cum consultu amicorum, carnaliumque propinquorum consilio, ad sacrae coenobialis vitae instrumenta praepare atque perficere festinabant. Confestimque illum venerando fidelissimoque viro Theodredo commendabant, suaque providentia eum ad coenobium ducere, omniaque prudenter de sua causa dispensare, disponereque rogabant ... Statimque ille Abbas monasterii, secundum regularis vitae disciplinam, declarabat ista suae congregationi, sicque ut cum eorum consilio sive licentia hoc foret, ille flagitabat. Cui

*Vita Bonifatii*

‘When he reached the age of about four or five he conceived a desire to enter the service of God...the saint’s father...after calling together all the members of his family, sent the boy under the care of trustworthy messengers to the Monastery of Examchester...The father of the monastery thereupon took council with the rest of the brethren and, after receiving their blessing as is prescribed by the monastic rule, gave his consent.’<sup>2</sup>

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protinus omnis illa conventio Fratrum simul responsum seu licentiam dabant, suaeque voluntatis arbitrio haec omnia fas fore dicebant, acceptumque illum ocus inter coenobiale vitae eorum consortium jungendo sociabant.’ MGH SS XV Vol. I p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> ‘cum esset annorum circiter quattuor seu quinque, Dei se servitio subiugare studivit ... puerum, propinquorum facta conventionione, ad monasterium, quod priscorum nuncupatur vocabulo Ad-Escancastre ... per fideles suae legationis nuntios redditum commendavit... Cui protinus pater monasterii, inito fratrum consilio et eorum accepta, sicut regularis vitae ordo poposcit, benedictione, consensum praebuit et effectum.’ MGH SRG pp. 4-7.



The *Vita Bonifatii* was composed by 768, and the *Hodoeporicon* by 786. It seems highly likely that Huneberc would have been aware, and moreover recently aware, of the *vitae* of such an important local figure as Boniface. Her own subject, Willibald, knew Boniface personally, having been ordained first priest and then Bishop of Eichstatt by him in 742. It was at Boniface's request that Willibald began his mission to the Germans, which resulted in the double foundation at Heidenheim where Huneberc resided. The textual similarities can be explained not only by the possibility of Huneberc borrowing from Willibald's text, but from a common source: the Rule of Benedict. Chapter Three of this Rule states: 'As often as anything especial is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call together the whole congregation, and shall himself explain the question at issue. And, having heard the advice of the brethren, he shall think it over by himself, and shall do what he considers most advantageous.'<sup>1</sup> It seems clear that the Rule to which both *vitae* refer is that of Benedict, considering the similarity of the process described. Moreover, Boniface, as Bishop of Mainz, presided over the councils of 742 and 747 at which the Rule of Benedict was officially applied to all Carolingian monasteries.

### **Saintly Self-consciousness and the Puer Senex**

While saints are presented as holy from, and indeed before, birth, they can be seen to display greater or lesser understanding of their own roles at varying points in their *vitae*. Nicetius of the Treveri is a passive receptor of a miraculous sign: he had no control over the shape his hair took when he was born. However, in the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Quotiens aliqua praecipua agenda sunt in monasterio, convocet abbas omnem congregationem et dicat ipse unde agitur, et audiens consilium fratrum tractet apud se et quod utilius iudicaverit faciat. Ideo autem omnes ad consilium vocari diximus quia saepe iuniori Dominus revelat quod melius est.' PL 66 col. 215.

same way that Willibald and Boniface begin to show ‘signs of spiritual understanding’ at a certain point in their childhoods, other children begin to envisage their future saintly careers. Austreberta sees herself veiled as a nun as will be discussed below. Willibald the missionary began ‘to devise means of setting out on pilgrimage and travelling to foreign countries’.<sup>2</sup> Dunstan is passing through Glastonbury with his father when he has a miraculous dream: ‘he saw, through the wandering of his mind, to his delight, a certain old man clothed with snow-white brightness, leading him through a hall in the sacred temple, and pointing out which of the monastic buildings were to be built afterwards through his shepherding.’<sup>3</sup> Dunstan certainly fulfilled the promise of his vision, reconstructing Glastonbury into a grand example of revived Benedictine monasticism. This prefiguring of future roles is by no means a new idea, but one found in the life of Jesus, who after his miraculous birth apparently remained an ordinary child for several years until the episode in which he questions the priests in the Temple. No-one would claim that before this event he was not holy or chosen by God; the events at his birth pointed out the way in which he would go.

The particular kind of transcendence, already discussed, in which a child exceeds the limitations imposed upon him by his years, is a literary topos which can be traced back to ancient Greece. *Puer senex* is a common theme in the *vitae* of saints, male and female, absorbed into Christianity via the notion of the ages of man. ‘The virtues of each natural age might be available by grace, in a more or less spiritualised form, to the faithful regardless of their years. Thus a young person could be spiritually

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<sup>2</sup> ‘istius contempneret ... peregrinationis temptare tellurem, et ignota externorum requirere rura.’ MGH SS XV Vol. I p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> ‘viditque mentis excessu quendam senem niveo candore vestitum per amoena se sacri templi atria ducentem, ac monastica aedifica, quae post per eius pastoratum aedificanda fuerant, demonstrantem’ W. Stubbs *Memorials of St. Dunstan* (London, 1857) p. 7.

old.’<sup>4</sup> This can be seen in its fullest expression in the *Vita* of Willibrord, of whom it is said: ‘the development of his intelligence and character so outstripped his tender years that his small and delicate frame harboured the wisdom of ripe old age’<sup>5</sup> The idea of the possibility of a *puer senex* became allied to Jesus’ assertion that only those receiving his truth with the simplicity and innocence of children would be fit to enter his kingdom<sup>6</sup>, a declaration which would seem to require a *senex puer* rather than the reverse. However, this passage in the Vulgate uses both ‘*infantes*’ and ‘*puer*’ to describe the children referred to by Jesus; it remains unclear exactly how his words correspond to early medieval notions of the ages of man, and whether it is the attributes of *infans* or *puer* which are being held up for emulation. At any rate, in not one of the *vitae* in this sample do we find a child saint being praised for his or her childishness, but very many who act in ways that are far too mature for their years. The key to understanding this is, of course, the constant emphasis on the transcending power of grace, which may also explain how Boniface, aged five, can display all the signs of being a *puer senex* while he is still, according to the ages of man, *infans*. It is not extraordinary for children to behave childishly; it corresponds to nature’s laws. For a child to behave as though advanced in years, or for an old man to behave as a child: this is the kind of miracle which demonstrates the Lord’s favour.

We have already seen spiritual maturity in infants in the *vitae* of East Frankish saints, but the topos is certainly not confined to that region. Once Patroclus is prompted by his brother’s taunts to leave his flock and attend school, ‘he learnt so

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<sup>4</sup> J. A. Burrow *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986) p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> ‘sed sic cotidie boni indolis puer proficiebat, ut teneros pueritiae annos morum gravitate transcenderet, factusque est grandevus sensu, qui corpusculo fuit modicus et fragilis.’ MGH SSRM VII p. 118., translated in C.H. Talbot *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954) p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 18:15-17 ‘adferebant autem ad illum et infantes ut eos tangeret quod cum viderent discipuli increpabant illos. Iesus autem convocans illos dixit sinite pueros venire ad me et nolite eos vetare talium est enim regnum Dei amen dico vobis quicumque non acceperit regnum Dei sicut puer non intrabit in illud’.

readily, thanks to his memory, all that was thought necessary for his age, that he surpassed his brother both in learning and in quickness of thought, assisted in all this by divine power'.<sup>7</sup> Praejectus was so quickly 'brimming with the mysteries of learning that to all who were there he appeared no longer to be a youngster'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, his extraordinary abilities become truly miraculous when his jealous rivals order him to perform a song which he has not learned: 'the Lord filled His boy so that the tone which he had not memorized before now he sang with the voice of a master'.<sup>9</sup> Boniface was his father's favourite, implicitly another Joseph, who also parallels the young Jesus at the Temple when he discusses heavenly things with travelling priests at an astonishingly early age: 'the child would converse with them on spiritual matters and... would ask them to advise him on the best means of overcoming the frailties of his nature'.<sup>10</sup> That these are the actions of a *puer senex* is without doubt; we may perhaps draw a parallel between Boniface's own perception of his nature as being frail and our, as readers, impression that his body at that age would have been frail as well. He ignores the latter to focus on the former, as God's grace allows. Nor has enthusiasm for the topos diminished in the very last years of the tenth century, when Dunstan's hagiographer records: 'he skipped over the years of his studies with an easy step'.<sup>11</sup>

*Puellae* are not neglected: Rusticula was given 'such grace and capacity for memory that, within a short space of time, she had learned all the Psalms and

<sup>7</sup> 'puerorum nisu animi agile atque cursu velocissimo expetivit, traditisque elementis ac deinceps quae studio puerili necessaria erant, ita celeriter, memoria opitulante, inbutus est, ut fratrem vel in scientia praecederet vel alacritate sensus, adnuente divini Numinis auxilio, anteiret.' MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 252-3, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> 'Tam cito eius repletur archanum, ut cunctis qui aderant non minor extaret' MGH SSRM V p. 227, translated in P. Fouracre and R. A. Gerberding *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720* (Manchester, 1996) p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> 'replet Dominus puerum suum, ut sonum, quam antea non tenuisset, magistrali voce decantaret.' MGH SSRM V p. 228, translated in Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 275.

<sup>10</sup> 'coeperat, cum eis de caelestibus loquendo tractare et, quid sibi suaeque infirmitate in futurum proficeret, interrogare.' MGH SRG p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> 'suorum tempora studiorum facili cursu transiliret' Stubbs *St. Dunstan* p. 7.

memorized the entire Scripture'.<sup>12</sup> Of Anstrude it is said that 'the newborn virgin went from strength to strength, beyond the capacities of her girlish age'.<sup>13</sup> Genovefa was consecrated before two girls older than her because her 'merits were far above those of the other virgins'.<sup>14</sup> Shahar notes that the freshness of the original classical idea has been modified, and the child saint is 'old in everything but years'.<sup>15</sup> Boniface's grave presentation of his desires to his father certainly belies nothing of his young age; we can recognise none of the mitigating liveliness of childhood in this rather intimidating young lad whose most earnest desire is apparently to forego his youth entirely. Willibrord seems weighed down by the enforced 'development of his intelligence and character' and Rusticula, aged seven at most, scorns the pleading offers of her desperate mother 'as so much dung'.<sup>16</sup>

But can we find any trace of recognisable childhood in these *vitae*? The answer is most certainly yes. *Vitae* are not devoid of examples in which hagiographers make use of more recognisable images of childhood in order to enliven their text. The author of Austreberta's *vita* fixes in the minds of his readers the moment at which the child foresees her own future: 'One day, as children do, she was contemplating the shape of her face in the water. Suddenly, a veil appeared to have been placed on her head. That sign meant so much to her that from that day she burned with desire'.<sup>17</sup> The image is strikingly simple; the small girl gazing at her reflection is perfectly

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<sup>12</sup> 'Tantum autem ei gratiam Dominus et memoriae capacitatem dignatus est tribuere, ut intra pauca temporum spatia psalmos omnes disceret et omnes scripturas divinas memoriter retineret.' MGH SSRM IV p. 342, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> 'Excedit itaque annos puellares, ambulans de virtute in virtutem, virgo noviter nata' MGH SSRM VI p. 66, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 291.

<sup>14</sup> 'quae ... meritis multum esse sublimiorum' AASS Ianuarii IIII p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> S. Shahar *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990) p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> 'tamquam stercus' MGH SSRM IV p. 342.

<sup>17</sup> 'Quadam vero die, cum vultum speciei suae more infantium in aquis contemplaretur, ecce repente apparuit ei quoddam velamen capiti eius impositum. Quod signum apud eam intantum valuit, ut ex illo iam die hoc eastuaret desiderio.' AASS Februarii II p. 420, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 309.

acceptable to anyone who has watched children playing, which aids our comprehension of the miracle. Ripples of water, movements of clouds in the reflected sky; many things could account for the 'veil' which the imaginative and introspective child saw. To the medieval mind, explanations of miracles in practical terms did nothing to discredit them; God had willed that those clouds should move in precisely that way, and that Austreberta should understand the message that was being given to her. Rusticula shows how even a *puella senex* can at times revert simply to *puella*: 'it has been said that once, while the infant was learning the Psalms, she fell asleep, as children do, leaning against the knee of one of the sisters who whispered the Psalm in her ear. When she awoke, she recited it by heart as though she read it.'<sup>18</sup> While her hagiographer explains the miracle with the verse: 'I slept, but my heart was awake'<sup>19</sup>, it could just as easily be equated with Paul's words to the Corinthians: 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the miracle is not at all incompatible with the notion of the *puella senex* and does not contradict it: it is exactly the same transcending power of grace which overcomes both Rusticula's youth and her bodily weakness.

The hagiographer of St. Praejectus has a rather less romantic image of childhood in mind when he dismisses the first years of his subject: 'the boy was born, and in his cradle he squalled, and he was nourished by milk. What more should I say?'<sup>21</sup> Completely unique among the *vitae* in my sample, this disparagement of infancy has a lot in common with the train of contemporary thought which regarded

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<sup>18</sup> 'Nam fertur aliquando, dum infans psalmos pararet, et ut adsolet infantia, sompno occuparetur, recumbens in genua uni de sororibus, psalmum et ipsa in aure dicebat. Quae mox ut expergefacta fuisset, tamquam si eum legisset, ita memoriter recensebat' MGH SSRM IV p. 342, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> 'Ego dormio, et cor meum vigilat' MGH SSRM IV p. 342 (Song of Songs 5:2).

<sup>20</sup> 2Corinthians 12:9.

<sup>21</sup> 'Nascit puer, vagit in cunis, alitur lacte. Quid amplius?' MGH SSRM V p. 227, translated in Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 273.

infancy as the lowest stage of human life, and it is quite possible that it indicates the hagiographer's knowledge of Augustine's Confessions, although it is interesting that the author of this *vita* saw no need to gloss over Praejectus' babyhood without a mention. It certainly throws his later achievements as a *puer senex* into sharp relief. Indeed, the inclusion of anecdotes such as these seems always to emphasise the more extraordinary acts performed later, contrasting the mere child with the spiritual athlete he or she becomes once grace has had a hand in their development. The metaphor running through the account of Boniface's young childhood is one of exertion: he 'panted with effort' and 'continually perspired' to achieve his desire of the monastic life; he overcomes his faint-heartedness and reaches out with the whole of his being towards his vocation. While this corresponds to Christian notions of running life's race, striving towards the goal of the kingdom of heaven, it is perhaps also intended to draw the contrast between Boniface and other youngsters: while they were running races and chasing balls, his physical exertions were with a rather different goal in mind. In hagiography, such language of the arena tends also to indicate the physical struggles of asceticism or martyrdom. Boniface is eventually martyred in Frisia – hacked to death by a band of pagans, while using his copy of the gospels to shield his face. I would suggest that the imagery used to describe his boyhood struggle also prefigures his end, and would have been understood by contemporary readers in this context.

### **Infant Asceticism and Miraculous Acts**

While Boniface is characterised by the language of the arena, his deeds do not in fact conform to the rigours of asceticism. However, two of the *vitae* in this sample contain details of infants who did seek to mortify their young flesh. 'In his earliest

youth', Cuthbert was accustomed, while out watching the sheep, 'to secretly wade into the coldest part of the river, on his own initiative.'<sup>22</sup> This act is not explained, but immersing oneself in cold water is a reasonably common form of mortification in hagiography amongst adult saints. It does, however, seem unique amongst children. Radegund as an adult represents the most extreme form of self-torture, a kind of virtual martyrdom at her own hands. Her hagiographer, Venantius Fortunatus, consciously prefigures her later grisly self-punishments in her infancy, when he notes 'The maiden was taught letters and other things suitable to her sex and she would often converse with other children there about her desire to be a martyr if the chance came in her time.'<sup>23</sup> This astonishing phrase makes good use of our sense of dislocation between the lessons suitable for a little girl and the desire to die. She is by no means an ordinary child. Fortunatus' motive was to promote his saint, living in a time in which her church was not persecuted, as a new kind of martyr who attained this glorious title through physical austerities.<sup>24</sup> Peter Brown argues that the function of asceticism in Late Antique hagiography is not to provide 'consolation for the absence of opportunities for the martyr's experience of pain' but rather to emphasise, through re-enactment, Christ's victory over pain, death and the forces of evil.<sup>25</sup> I would certainly concur that, via the notion of transcendence, the portrayal of saintly childhood consistently reminds the audience of God's ultimate power over his creation, made complete through Christ's death and resurrection, and his ability to

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<sup>22</sup> 'In prima sue iuventute ... Erat autem etiam sibi mos semper intrare in frigidissimam aquam secreto, et suo solo consilio' Anonymous *Vita Cuthberti* in Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 196.

<sup>23</sup> 'Quae puella inter alia opera, quae sexui eius congruebant, litteris est erudite, frequenter loquens cum parvulis, si conferret sors temporis, martyra fieri cupiens.' MGH SSRM II p. 365, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> A similar idea can be found in Irish hagiography: see C. Stancliffe 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom' in Whitelock et al *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1982) pp. 21-46. It might be the case that Irish *vitae* contain instances of child asceticism, or allusions to the ascetic life in childhood, along these same lines.

<sup>25</sup> P. Brown 'The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity' *Representations 2* (University of California Press, 1983) p. 16.



bend or break the rules of nature via spontaneous outpourings of grace. However, while Cuthbert's hagiographer does not explain the reasons behind his ascetic acts, Radegund's *vita* specifically records her desire to be a '*martyra*'. The motivations which Brown separates would seem to me to be inextricably linked, and jointly evident particularly in Radegund's *vita*. What is the function of a martyr if not to confirm victory over suffering and death, through Christ: if there is only an end to it all, after the pain, where is the victory? In addition, the personally sacrificial life, albeit portrayed in its most extreme form by Radegund's adult self-torture, is one which all Christians are called to lead.

Whatever Fortunatus' purpose, he manages along the way, in the mind of a modern reader, to ring alarm bells as to the early life of this child who says that she would like to die.<sup>26</sup> Reading a poem, written by Radegund herself, which precedes the *vita* in Fortunatus' version, our suspicions are confirmed. Radegund experienced an early childhood of violence: at the age of five she witnessed the death of her parents and brother at the hands of invading Franks; she was taken as part of their plunder and raised in Western Francia. Fortunatus could not have imagined how modern analysis would relate her past to her preoccupation with death, and her subsequent self-mutilation, but he may have observed from her conversation how those childhood events continually permeated her consciousness, and tailored her *vita* accordingly. There are in fact two true martyrs within this sample, Boniface who has been mentioned above, and Praejectus. That neither are presented as being specifically ascetic, as children or otherwise, is presumably due to the fact that they gained the martyr's crown in the more conventional way – by actually being put to death. Their

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<sup>26</sup> Our suspicions are raised even more when remembering that Radegund and Fortunatus enjoyed a close friendship in her lifetime, and were frequent correspondents. See J. Kitchen *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York, 1998) for details of their relationship.

hagiographers did not need to engage in fancy footwork to prove their merits in this regard.

Aside from these examples of the motif in action, more cerebral self-mortification is not uncommon in this sample to a greater or lesser degree, and is consistently linked to infancy. Boniface at the age of five had explicitly ‘subdued the flesh to the spirit’<sup>27</sup>; Leoba ‘succeeded in fixing her attention on heavenly things’ via meditation<sup>28</sup>; Aldegund ‘began to think how she might give up the world for the sake of the Lord’s name’.<sup>29</sup> This feature may be linked to the topos of the *puer senex*: infant saints are demonstrating the spiritual maturity of much older Christians when they do battle with their sinful natures. That two children attempt to realise their convictions in practical ways is a startling continuation of the theme, but a simple extension nevertheless.

The characteristics of the *puer senex* and instances of infant asceticism are undoubtedly supernatural, but are not in themselves the only miracles performed by young saints. Rusticula, ‘still in her infancy’, performed a miracle for those who had rescued her from an abductor who had wished to marry her. ‘They had provided themselves with far too little food’, but the child ‘saw a huge fish near the river bank’ and caught it for the company to eat.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting that this, the child’s first wondrous act, occurs just after she has been liberated, via the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which had allowed her rescuers to discern her gifts. Having escaped matrimony ‘by concession of divine grace’, Rusticula is also liberated from the limitations of her young body by that same grace, and able to rescue her companions from hunger.

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Sed ... iam labentia cuncta animo subiecerat ... cum esset annorum circiter quattuor seu quinque’ MGH SRG p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> ‘singulos dies animum ad caelestia roboraret’ MGH SS XV pp. 119.

<sup>29</sup> ‘coepit cogitare, qualiter posit terrene relinquere propter nomen Domini et amare caelestia.’ MGH SSRM VI p. 87, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> ‘alimenta cyborum monime haberent ... comperit iuxta marginem fluminis piscem mirae magnitudinis’ MGH SSRM IV p. 341, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 124.

Amand, being made a catechumen, performs a speaking miracle similar to that of Gerald, as we have seen in Chapter Two, when he alone replies ‘Amen’ at the end of the prayer.<sup>31</sup> His hagiographer notes: ‘Everyone heard him, not like an infant but a boy, respond in a clear voice, ‘Amen’. It was stupendous enough for the people there to be silent against all habit but it was even more marvellous that, contrary to nature, this one had spoken.’<sup>32</sup> The hagiographer in this case explicitly makes the point with which we have become so familiar: the supernatural power of sanctity. While it is clear that Gerald speaking from inside the womb is more remarkable than an infant prematurely finding his voice, the transcendence of the laws of ‘nature’ applies to both incidents. Aethelwold extends the characteristic control over his own body to some level of control over the natural world when, still a baby, he miraculously transports himself and his mother inside ‘the church where the priest was celebrating Mass’<sup>33</sup> although a high wind had prevented them from going.

There can be no doubt that for the medieval reader, miracles were a vitally important aspect of hagiography. In Christian terms, a saint’s life without miracles might be compared to the Crucifixion without the Resurrection: a great story, but essentially powerless. In describing the miraculous acts of their subjects, during and after their earthly lives, hagiographers tacitly claimed that the Apostolic age had not ended, and that God was just as willing to touch the everyday, through suitable human channels, as He ever had been in New Testament times. In connecting their own time to the glorious Biblical past, hagiographers also connected their subjects to Biblical

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<sup>31</sup> Falling outside the bounds of this study due to its later date is the similar yet extraordinary Life of Rumwold, a child who lives only three days, but preaches a sermon on the nature of the Trinity before his untimely end. See R. Love *Three 11<sup>th</sup> Century Anglo-Saxon Saints Lives* (Oxford, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Details of the young Amand are given within the *Vita Rictrudis* AASS Maii 12 pp. 82-3, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 202.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Accidit namque quodam solenni die, sedente matre domi et in gremio infantem tenente, tempestuosam auram adsurgere, in tantum ut ipsa, sicuti decrevit, adire ecclesiam nequiret; sed cum gemebunda orationi se dedisset, subito inventa est in ecclesia sedens cum infantulo ubi Missam presbyter celebrabat.’ J. Stevenson *Vita Sancti Aethelwoldi* Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon (London, 1858) p. 256.

heroes, which performed the functions of both reinforcing the sense of continuity and validating the saint in question. Thus Rusticula is implicitly another Jesus when she miraculously provides food for her companions, mirroring the Feeding of the Five Thousand recounted in all four Gospels.<sup>34</sup>

Kitchen claims that ‘nearly all the miracles narrated in hagiographical literature derive directly from the Bible.’<sup>35</sup> However, not only does this not seem to be borne out by the *vitae* examined here, but purely *Scriptural* precedents were not necessarily essential in the hagiographer’s scheme. For example, while there are clear echoes of the New Testament in the case of Rusticula, who shows herself to be a ‘fisher of men’ in much the same manner as Jesus, other miracles performed by and concerning children are not so clear-cut as to their origins.

The majority of miracles occurring in childhood in this collection of *vitae* in fact derive from *puer senex*, a concept which does not derive from the Bible, and although miraculous occurrences stemming from the topos might be explained in Scriptural terms, they naturally have no direct Biblical precedent. The early medieval notion of *auctoritas* extended well beyond Scripture, encompassing the writings of the church Fathers and the Greek and Roman classical inheritance as well as other, earlier, hagiographies. It is necessary to remind ourselves of the variety of texts available to and valued by early medieval hagiographers, and indeed to many of their audience, when we seek precedents for their ideas.

It is also possible that miracles in medieval hagiography sometimes mirror those recorded in the Bible due to the continuity of human experience. The Christian God is a practical deity concerned with the everyday, and in fact, in simple terms, everyday concerns remain remarkably constant over time. We all need saving from

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew 14: 13-21; Mark 6: 30-44; Luke 9: 10-17; John 6: 1-15.

<sup>35</sup> Kitchen *Saints’ Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender* p. 33.

hunger, disease and peril, and from our own frailties. Rusticula's feeding of her hungry companions is a case in point. Might miracle stories in fact be revealing contemporary anxieties, wrapped in a cloak of Scripture?

Of the 38 *vitae* examined here, 13 contain details which can be related to *infantia*: roughly one third of my sample. This would certainly seem to indicate that infancy played a clear part in the scheme of many hagiographers, even if details of the very earliest lives of saints were only used to set the scene for the action to come. Broadly characteristic of this stage in the lives of saints seem to be assertions or demonstrations of the child's special sanctified status, along with indications as to their future career. We should also note that it was in infancy that all the oblates in this sample were dedicated to the monastic life. Discerning the moment of transition from *infantia* to *pueritia* is problematic considering the paucity of *vitae* which ascribe specific ages to their subject's actions, as we have seen. However, it may be argued that the majority of childhood detail found in hagiography pertains, as far as we can tell, to this stage of life between the ages of seven and fourteen. For this reason, *pueritia* is explored over the course of two chapters, the first of which attempts to construct the details of saintly *pueritia* more relevant to the secular world: the physical appearance of the young saint, the activities he or she might be expected to participate in and the problem of marriage. The second of this pair of chapters concerns more religious aspects of daily life: the commencement, purpose and content of education, and the everyday experiences of children removed entirely from the secular world.

## Chapter Four

### *Pueritia*

This chapter attempts to investigate a variety of themes which are common to many of the *vitae* studied here, concerning the characterisation of the holy child during the stage of life known as *pueritia*. To this age (roughly between seven and fourteen years as we have seen) can be assigned a large proportion of the childhood material found in *vitae*: it is possible to discuss the physical attributes and activities of young saints, with reference to the gender stereotypes which their hagiographers chose to adhere to, dispense with or modify according to their purpose. By the end of *pueritia* we might expect a saintly child's career to be well under way, the process of which includes the commencement of their education, their acceptance or refusal of marriage and their potential fostering or sponsorship within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The discussion of a saintly education will be postponed until the next chapter in order that it does not overshadow this variety of more subtle themes.

#### **Form and Function in the *vitae* of males**

To begin with apparently superficial aspects of a saintly identity, it is true that the inner spiritual beauty of young saints is often expressed as outer perfection of face and form. While the *vitae* of females commonly praise their subject's good looks, as will be explored later in this chapter, male physical beauty is explicitly praised in only two of the *vitae* studied here, and interestingly these are connected by a man who appears as both hagiographer and subject in this study. Odo of Cluny, in his own

words recorded by his hagiographer, ‘was proclaimed a vigorous and good-looking young man’<sup>1</sup>, and in his *Life of Gerald* we are treated to a most rapturous description of the youth’s attractiveness: ‘and while beauty encompassed all his members, his neck was of such shining white and so adorned to suit the eye, that you would think you had hardly seen another so beautiful... his vassals delighted to kiss his neck’<sup>2</sup> One might suspect that Odo wished to as well! Such a description remains unique amongst both male and female *vitae* in the sample I have collected, and it remains to be investigated why Odo felt compelled to record these details, especially since, as he notes in the same passage, ‘beauty is a deceiving grace, because it is often the cause of lust and pride’.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, there are two instances of distinct physical unattractiveness being attributed to young saints: Gregory’s Nicetius of Lyons retains on his face a scar from a childhood sore, evidently a severe one as it threatened to kill him.<sup>4</sup> Nicetius was Gregory’s great uncle, and he records in the hagiography personal memories of his aging relative. Nicetius’ scarred face was an unassailable identifying feature of the saint; Gregory and his contemporaries would have seen it for themselves and it would have been ludicrous and damaging to his credibility for Gregory to have described Nicetius as a handsome lad. Instead, the cause of his disfigurement is reported as a miracle story; Nicetius is spared from death by a vision of St. Martin, who makes the sign of the cross over his bed. The horrible scar has become a mark of Martin’s

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<sup>1</sup> PL 133 col. 707, translated in G. Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* (New York, 1958) p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> PL 133 col. 650, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> ‘licet fallax gratis sit pulchritudo, tamen quia libidinis atque superbiae fomes esse quibusdam solet’ PL 133 col. 650, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* p. 106. Odo notes that Gerald was free from lust: ‘laudandum est in hoc viro quod et venustus fuit, et se nec libidinis coeno foedavit’ (an assertion which might well be challenged considering other events in the *vita* – see below p. 131) and presumably this is why saintly girls can be praised as to their beauty; they are freeing themselves, and others, from lust by removing themselves from the world and the company of men, into strict enclosure.

<sup>4</sup> ‘orta est ei pusula mala in facie; quod virus invalescens ac excoquens fecit puerum disperatum.’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 241, translated in E. James *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, 1991) p. 50.

approbation, a kind of facial sign of the cross which he will bear all his days to remind others of his sanctity. Odo's *Vita Geraldi* records, as well as his beautiful neck, his fine crop of pimples, described as a gift from God in order to excuse him from outdoor pursuits: 'But lest given to useless pursuits the time suitable for learning letters should pass without profit the divine will ordained that he should be a long time sick, though with such a sickness that he should be withdrawn from worldly pursuits but not hindered in his application to learning. And for a long time he was so covered with small pimples that it was not thought that he could be cured.'<sup>5</sup> It seems easy to explain such inclusions, although they do not correspond to the norm. Distinct physical unattractiveness seems to have been included in *vitae* only when it was a well-known fact, as in both the cases mentioned here, yet capable of being treated as an aspect of the Lord's favour rather than otherwise. The *Vita Honorati* contains the fullest of all physical descriptions found within any *vita* in this sample, and is worth quoting in detail in order to unpack something of the hagiographer's intent. Hilary's eulogy shares some similarities with Odo's portrait of Gerald, although it is far more uncompromising in its picture of the young saint. On deciding to enter into the Lord's service: 'His luxuriant tresses were cut down to short hair. He exchanged his brilliant attire for a radiant mind. Stiff cloaks covered the beauty of his milk-white neck. Gaiety became serenity; vigour of mind took the place of vigour of limbs; the powers of the body made way for the power of the spirit. The handsome face grew pale with fasting; and, formerly full of youthful freshness, it now became full of dignity.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'Sed ne inani studio dedicans, tempus ad discendum litteras congruum in vacuo transiret, divino nutu dispositum est, ut diutius eagrotaret. Tali equidem infirmitatis languore, ut a saeculari exercitio retraheretur, sed ad discendi stadium non impediretur. Siquidem minutis jugiter pustules ita replebatur, ut per longum tempus protractae, iam non putarentur posse sanare.' PL 133 col. 645, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> 'Rediguntur ad breves capillos luxuriantes comae. Transfertur ad nitorem mentis vestium splendor. Cervicis lacteae decus paliis rigentibus occupator. Transit laetitia in serenitatem, membrorem vigor animi vigore mutatur. Virtus corporis in virtutem spiritus migrat. Pallescit jejunio speciosa facies, et prius succi plena, sit plena gravitatis.' PL 50 col. 1253.



Hilary is, no doubt, partly invoking the notion of the *puer senex* when he details the boy's achievement of serenity, vigour of mind and dignity. The cutting of Honoratus' hair – not into a tonsure as we might anticipate, at least according to the Latin – brings to our minds the Frankish tradition of long-haired kings emphasised in the *Vita Geretrudis*, yet the little we know of Honoratus and his family tells us that he was of Gallo-Roman stock. If Gallo-Romans were in the habit of imitating the hairstyles of their Frankish rivals, his shearing might correspond to his rejection of his earthly position, as it would if he were a high-ranking Frank. However, it may be the case that if Gallo-Romans wore their hair short in the Roman fashion, the removal of Honoratus' long infant locks is a sign of his achieving premature adulthood and another aspect of the *puer senex* motif. It can be argued that his facial pallor cannot be considered as true unattractiveness, considering that the face beneath is still 'handsome', just as the neck beneath the coarse clothes he chooses to wear is still 'milk-white'. It might seem that Hilary is subverting the image of the ideal youth but on closer inspection his portrait is compromised: in the same way that Gerald's pimples seem barely to mitigate his otherwise enviable form, so Honoratus' self-induced pallor only adds mystery to his glamour.

The young Gerald's physical description extends beyond his acne. He is attributed with extreme physical fitness: 'so agile was he that he could vault over the backs of horses with ease'<sup>7</sup>, and later 'his bodily agility made him very quick in his movements, and he was very strong'.<sup>8</sup> From Gerald's *vita* we are able to build up a picture of the pursuits a young nobleman might expect to enjoy; 'to ride to hounds,

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<sup>7</sup> 'Tam velox autem factus est, ut equorum terga facili saltu transvolaret.' PL 133 col. 645, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> 'Et quia viribus corporis fortiter agiliscebat, armatam militiam assuescere quaerebatur.' PL 133 col. 645.



become an archer, learn to fly falcons and hawks'<sup>9</sup> Gerald's strength and agility presumably allowed him to excel at these, once he had emerged from his sickbed. This emphasis on Gerald's physicality seems unnecessary: hagiographers are accustomed to praising a young saint's assiduity in study as an alternative to prowess in games, as Odo initially seems to be doing when he describes them as 'useless pursuits'.<sup>10</sup> It seems, however, that he could not bear to leave Gerald be-pimpled, but instead sought to attribute to him a set of characteristics which we might expect to have been most laudable in secular youngsters. Of the young Alfred, Asser writes that 'in every hunter's art, the diligent hunter did not strive in vain', not to mention the fact that 'he was considered handsomer in form, face and speech than his other brothers, and more graceful in character'.<sup>11</sup> While Pippin I is not explicitly good at games, he seems to be lauded in almost hagiographic terms: 'For the strength of his justice, the unconquerable solidity of his bravery and the guidance of his moderation... were believed without any doubt by all the people whom he governed to lie open to him not only from natural instillation... but also from divine inspiration'.<sup>12</sup> There seems little point in many cases in trying to distinguish between which particular attributes are stereotypical of young saints, and which are regularly used to describe young noblemen. The two groups are by no means mutually exclusive: it is precisely the young men of Pippin's social standing, or if not them, then their younger brothers, who became the subjects of hagiography by means of their future careers as abbots or bishops. Their sisters, similarly, entered monasteries either to avoid

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<sup>9</sup> 'Scilicet ut Molossus ageret, arcista fieret, cappos et accipitres competenti iactu mittere consuesceret.' PL 133 col. 645, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Chuny* p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the intensely physical description of Boniface's struggle with his sinful nature, detailed in Chapter Three.

<sup>11</sup> 'forma ceteris suis fratribus decentior videbatur vultuque et verbis atque moribus gratiosior.' & 'In omni venatoria arte industrius venator incessabiliter laborat non in vanum' Stevenson W. H. (ed.) *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (Oxford, 1904) p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Earlier Annals of Metz translated in P. Fouracre & R. A. Gerberding *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720* (Manchester, 1996) p. 351-2.

marriage or to console themselves upon widowhood. It certainly seems that in some cases, such as Gerald, the only distinguishing factor between ‘ordinary’ and ‘holy’ members of the upper classes, aside from their achievements as adults which are not relevant here, is their very earliest history, as has been discussed in Chapter Two. Some saintly children are the subjects of visions and dreams which set them apart, although they grow up pretty much as any other young nobleman would. It must be noted that we have in Gerald a unique case: that of a saint who grew up to be neither monk nor cleric, but indeed a nobleman. His claims to sanctity rest on Odo’s depiction of his singular spirituality, chastity and good deeds rather than any kind of ecclesiastical career, and this might explain why some parts of his *vita* seem to be in the same vein as accounts of more secular heroes.

It is more usually the case that noble pursuits, just like wealth, are occasionally used to tempt holy youngsters from their chosen alternative path. St Honoratus’ father tried to turn him from his studies with the pleasures of hunting and games, although the saint knew that ‘the license allowed to youth was the closest kind of captivity’.<sup>13</sup> It certainly seems to have been the case that parents did not necessarily want a son who preferred reading to games: it is only when Gerald produces his pimples that his parents consider putting him to letters, ‘so that if he should prove unsuited for worldly pursuits, he might be fitted for the ecclesiastical state’.<sup>14</sup> Parental motivations for offering their children as oblates have already been discussed, but the stories of Gerald and Honoratus point us in the direction of another: Gerald’s much-discussed pimples and Honoratus’ predilection for study seem, although only initially in Gerald’s case, to have made them unsuitable candidates for the expected pursuits of

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<sup>13</sup> ‘intelligens summum esse captivitatis genus, licentium juventutis’ PL50 col. 1253. It is usually the case that girls are tempted with gifts of ‘worldly ornaments’ instead of outdoor pursuits. See the *Vita Rusticulae* ‘diversis generibus munerum, divitias atque ornamenta saeculi’ MGH SSRM IV p. 342.

<sup>14</sup> ‘si usibus saeculi minus esset aptus, ad ecclesiasticum officium redderetur accommodus.’ PL 133 col. 645, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Chuny* p. 97.

young noblemen. A family might choose to dispose of such weak or unusual specimens by offering them to religious institutions; if they couldn't hunt, then at least they could pray. Cuthbert 'could devote his mind to nothing but the games and wantonness of children' up to his eighth year, he is 'agile and quick-witted', and 'used to boast that he had beaten all who were his equals in age and even some who were older.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, he is engaged in such games when the miracle occurs which turns him from such pursuits: 'he forthwith gave up the idle games, and, returning home, he began from that time to be steadier and more mature in mind'.<sup>16</sup> He chooses spirituality over physicality; although he excels in the latter, the former is his destiny.<sup>17</sup>

To draw some tentative conclusions from these observations is difficult, but while it initially seems to be the case that the hagiographers of Gerald, Cuthbert and Honoratus consciously subvert a secular model of ideal youth in order to promote a spiritual alternative, no *vita* within this sample truly offers us a saint who has renounced worldly good looks and physical prowess for the sake of their devotion to God: holy children retain the best of both this world and the next. The spiritual alternative offered by Odo most explicitly includes some of its rival's most attractive features. Gerald reminds us of another vigorous young lad – Boniface – whose father so significantly warned him that 'his active boyhood life was much more bearable in the long run than the contemplative life of monastic discipline'<sup>18</sup>. What was true for Boniface the missionary remains true for Gerald, who does not become a monk

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<sup>15</sup> 'solis parvulorum ludis et lasciviae mentem dare noverat.'; 'agilis natura atque acutus erat ingenio'; 'ille omnes aequos, et nonnullos etiam maiores a se gloriabatur esse superatos.' Bede's *Vita Cuthberti* in B. Colgrave *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940) pp. 154-6, translated pp. 155-7.

<sup>16</sup> 'relicta continuo ludendi vanitate domum rediit, ac stabilior iam ex illo tempore animoque adolescentior existere coepit' Bede's *Vita Cuthberti* Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 158, translated p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> Cuthbert became a notable ascetic, subjecting himself as an adult to physical rigours of a different kind.

<sup>18</sup> 'hanc suae tolerabiliorem esse infantiae activam quamque vitam monasterialis militiae contemplativam ... promittit' MGH SRG p. 6.

despite his boyhood learning, remaining free-range and, most likely, able to integrate his physical pursuits into his otherwise spiritual life. In contrast to the *vitae* of Cuthbert and Honoratus, in which the physical pursuits characteristic of their earthly station are indeed permanently rejected, Odo provides in Gerald a saintly model much more suited to *imitatio*. It has already been emphasised that the pattern of Gerald's life is unique among this sample.

It is an irony of hagiography that while the stereotype of the child saint generally offers an image of physical, as well as spiritual, perfection, it was in fact children unsuited for life in the outside world, those with physical defects, lads who seemed unfit for the military and girls who were unlikely to marry, who, as we have seen, were generally first considered for a life in the church.

### **Acting Manfully: characteristics of holy girls**

Having seen some of the expectations placed on young noblemen, and how their hagiographers used these when constructing their individual images of youthful sanctity, we must consider their feminine counterparts. In female *vitae*, variants of the standard expression 'elegant of face but far more elegant in her sanctity' occur with some frequency, but these stock expressions surely reflect little on the actual physical appearance of the saint. One exception might be Balthild, allegedly an Anglo-Saxon slave: 'And although she was from the race of the Saxons, the form of her body was pleasing, very slender, and beautiful to see.'<sup>19</sup> Distinguishing between Biblical allusion, historical accuracy and local legend in this *vita*, as in so many, is an almost impossible task. The unusual level of descriptive detail might indicate that Balthild's

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<sup>19</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding note that this clause might also be translated 'Since she was from the race of the Saxons...', which alters the meaning somewhat. They suggest that if this latter translation is the correct one, the author might have 'insular inclinations.' Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 119 note 144.

appearance was well known, and that she truly possessed a beautiful figure, although her immediate comparison to the Biblical Esther, a beauty whose career depended on her looks as well as her great faith, raises our suspicions that Balthild's good looks are a convenient construct on the part of her hagiographer. It seems hardly likely that an unattractive as well as low-born woman could have caught the eye of first Erchinoald and then Clovis, although we have only the *vita*'s word that she was in fact of inferior status.<sup>20</sup> Whatever Balthild's true origins, her hagiographer seems at least to indicate that she was perceived as a foreigner, and it is possible that this was apparent in her physical appearance, hence her hagiographer's attention to detail. It is just possible that variations in the standard compliments paid to young female saints offer clues as to an individual's true appearance. Rictrude is notably described as 'good-natured'; her physical features are not mentioned and it is tempting to assume that she fell a little short of beauty's standard.

We may rightly anticipate that girls are not found taking part in outdoor pursuits, nor being tempted by them, yet their physicality is not ignored. We have seen that early martyr literature certainly provides models for religious fervour in women and children as well as men, but that the form of the genre prevents the inclusion of childhood material such as we find in this sample. However, the example of Vibia Perpetua, martyred around the year 200, is useful when tracing an aspect of feminine sanctity found in many of the *vitae* examined here. Perpetua experienced a vision before being led into the arena, in which she was transformed into a male

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<sup>20</sup> Other low-born Merovingian queens were Nanthild, Fredegard 'one of the girls of the household' and Fredegund. One clue that Balthild's purported lowly origins might be authentic is her concern in later life for slaves and issues of slavery. She notably decreed that Christians could not be enslaved, and freed many slaves, male and female. See J. Nelson 'Queens as Jezebels' *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London 1986) p. 45.

gladiator.<sup>21</sup> This achievement of masculinity, or male attributes, is a fairly common feature of later *vitae*. Pointing to the fact that female saints could not simply be treated in the same way as male, as has been discussed in Chapter One, is the problematisation of femininity in the prologues of the *vitae* in this study. In two of them, those of Radegund and Monegund, the gender of the subject is brought to the fore. Radegund's hagiographer turns it thus: 'Our Redeemer is so rich and abundantly generous that He wins mighty victories through the female sex and, despite their frail physique, He confers glory and greatness on women through strength of mind. By faith, Christ makes them strong who were born weak so that, when those who appeared to be imbeciles are crowned with their merits by Him who made them, they garner praise for their Creator.'<sup>22</sup>

There is, perhaps, nothing unfamiliar here in terms of the feminine stereotype. However, some of the *vitae* studied here would seem to suggest that God conveys bodily, as well as mental, strength on those who were 'born weak'. The infant Rusticula miraculously pulled a huge fish out of the river to feed her companions in a miracle which surely parallels Christ's feeding of the five thousand but is nonetheless remarkable in terms of sheer physical effort. In addition, Austreberta crossed a submerged bridge over a flooded river without harm; a miracle in much the same vein. Monegund's biographer strikes a similar chord:

'He gives us as models not only men, but also the lesser sex, who fight not feebly, but with a virile strength; He brings into His celestial kingdom not only

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in R. Moriarty "Playing the Man": the courage of Christian Martyrs, translated and transposed' *Studies in Church History* 34 (1998) p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> 'Redemptoris nostril tantum dives est largitas, ut in sexu muliebri celebret fortes victories et corpore fragiliores ipsas reddat feminas virtute mentis inclitae gloriosas. Quas habentes nascendo mollitiem facit Christus robustas ex fide, ut quae videntur inbecilles, dum coronantur ex meritis, a quo efficiuntur, laudem sui cumulent Creatoris' MGH SSRM II p. 364, translated in J. A. McNamara and J. E. Halberg *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham and London, 1992) p. 70.

men, who fight as they should, but also women, who exert themselves in the struggle with success.'<sup>23</sup>

We should note that males are expected to perform, whereas it is miraculous when women do the same! As Rachel Moriarty points out, the gender stereotype could be just as oppressive for men as for women in this regard.<sup>24</sup> What is clear is that both these hagiographers felt it necessary to deal with the negative connotations of femininity before beginning the story of the saint. A woman saint could not stand alone; she needed justifying to the reader, and allying to former 'models' of female sanctity, although the specifics of these are not related.

As has been mentioned, the achievement of masculinity, in a variety of forms, is a recurrent theme in the *vitae* of women. The equation of right moral action with the male and moral weakness with the female can be traced back to classical literature, and it was an idea which the church Fathers adopted to a greater or lesser extent. Their own notions of the two aspects of the world, the spiritual and the carnal, were superimposed on the two gender types in a similar way. We might recall the much-quoted St. Jerome: 'As long as woman is for birth and children, she is as different from man as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man'<sup>25</sup>

In Perpetua's vision, generally regarded to be authentic<sup>26</sup>, she sees herself rubbed down with oil and led out to fight as a gladiator. She says, 'facta sum

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<sup>23</sup> 'Qui nos exemplis sanctorum vivere incessabili praeceptionis suae munire cohortatur, nobisque non modo viros, sed etiam ipsum inferiorem sexum, non segniter, sed viriliter agonizantem, praebet exemplum. Qui non solum viris legitime decertantibus, verum etiam feminis in his proeliis favorabiliter desudantibus siderea regna participat' MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 286, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 118.

<sup>24</sup> Moriarty "Playing the Man" p. 5. One wonders in this regard whether Gerald's rather absurd horse-vaulting is rather too enthusiastic an attempt to confirm his proper masculinity, countering his rather effeminate studying habit.

<sup>25</sup> Cited and translated in J. Kitchen *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York, 1998) p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> See B. Shaw 'The passion of Perpetua' *Past and Present* 139 (1993) pp. 3-45.



masculus’; in order to face her real impending death she sees herself become male. More than this, as her vision may obviously be interpreted as representing her spiritual battle against the forces of evil her for her faith, it also follows that to gain Christian mastery and spiritual power such that she can combat these evils and emerge victorious, she must adopt some kind of masculinity. This is important not only as a hagiographic theme, but that this idea comes from a woman’s own mouth. An early medieval parallel of this can be seen in the *Vita Aldegundi*, whose visions, written down by her own hand and entrusted to her brother, who passed them to her hagiographer, include an exhortation by an angel to ‘act manfully’ in the face of the Devil’s attacks. It is in Genovefa’s *vita*, however, that the use of the male metaphor for the female saint seems most clear. Genovefa is miraculously spotted by St. Germanus as an infant in a crowd; he discerns her potential and asks if she seeks to remain a virgin, ‘consecrated as a bride of Christ’<sup>27</sup>. When she responds in the affirmative, his advice is to ‘act manfully...for the Lord will give you strength and fortitude for your adornment’.<sup>28</sup> Now, however much we would like to imply that Genovefa must somehow become male in order to fulfil her spiritual destiny, this is not what her hagiographer is saying. He is in no doubt that Germanus is talking to a little girl, who will become a holy woman. In addition, as soon as he has exhorted her to ‘act manfully’, he qualifies his words, explaining what he means. It is the qualities of ‘strength’ and ‘fortitude’ which he is endorsing to her; qualities which were part of the male stereotype. They will be her ‘adornment’, another common turn of phrase which seems specific of femininity. It is girls who are recurrently expected to be tempted by physical beauty, by jewels and pretty clothes, and in this phrase he is

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<sup>27</sup> ‘in sanctimonio consecrata Christo immaculatum et intactum corpus’ AASS Ianuarii III p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> ‘viriliter age ... Dabit enim Dominus virtutem et fortitudinem decori tuo.’ AASS Ianuarii III p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 20.

simply superimposing the admirable aspects of the masculine ideal over the more frivolous parts of its feminine counterpart. It would seem, at least from this text, that encouraging manliness in female saints is intended only to free them from the more negative aspects of their perceived gender identity; masculinity is no magic gateway to holiness (but it helps!). However, a male saint who is encouraged to adopt the more positive feminine attributes in order to attain greater spiritual heights remains to be discovered.

We have already considered the necessity of females achieving ‘visibility’ in order to become the subjects of hagiography. Aside from considerations of earthly status and familial connections, this raises questions as to what kind of woman attained early medieval sainthood, in terms of character. Exactly what were the virtues that these little girls possessed, and which singled them out against all the odds stacked against their even being noticed? Does it seem likely that the virtues lauded by their hagiographers truly helped them along the path to sanctity? The theme of the spiritual athlete stands out within these *vitae*, itself a manly attribute to which female saints aspire. In Monegund’s prologue, women ‘fight...with a virile strength’. In the *Vita Rictrudis* the metaphor is more developed: ‘Stripped of every worldly care as in the customary nudity of the palaestra, she entered the monastic gymnasium where she would run, competing in the arena of this present life, struggling in contention against the Devil. She was anointed with the oil of celestial grace...’<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> ‘cunctis exuta seculi curis, gymnasium monasteriale, ubi stadium vitae praesentis agonizando percurreret, et contra diabolum luctando decertaret, palaesticorum more sic nuda ... oleo peruncta gratiae caelestis ingreditur’ AASS Maii 12 p. 85, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 209.

The parallel between this and Perpetua's vision is striking, as is the borrowing from 1Corinthians 9:24-25, which no doubt both were doing.<sup>30</sup> This is no feeble woman, but an athlete engaged in spiritual warfare in just the same way as a male saint might combat unbelievers. Not only this, but if the hagiographer did in fact have Perpetua in mind when he wrote of Rictrude, then the struggle is essentially for eternal spiritual life, just as the martyrs embraced physical death with this goal in mind. As Europe became more and more Christianized, the opportunities for actual martyrdom became ever fewer. But for the saints, their very daily existence involved laying down their lives for their faith, becoming living sacrifices now that dead ones were no longer required. In essence, any saint who subjected him or herself to monastic discipline, to a life of chastity and poverty, was making personal sacrifices for Christ's sake. Many of the *vitae* in this sample mention how from an early age their subjects 'began to put the world aside', eschewing all things carnal in favour of all things spiritual. However, it is in the *Vita Radegundi* alone that we see the logical extreme of bodily sacrifice in the pursuit of the divine.

Radegund's hagiographer describes holy women thus: 'Mortifying themselves in the world, despising earthly consort, purified of worldly contamination, trusting not in the transitory, dwelling not in error but seeking to live with God'<sup>31</sup> Note which attribute he places first in the list! We have already seen how, when Radegund was a girl, 'she would often converse with other children... about her desire

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<sup>30</sup> 'Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.'

<sup>31</sup> 'Quae mortificantes se saeculo, despecto terrae consortio, defecato mundi contagio, non confidentes in lubrico, non stantes in lapsu, quaerentes vivere Deo' MGH SSRM II p. 364, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 70.

to be a martyr if the chance came in her time.<sup>32</sup> This is hardly normal infant chatter, embedded as it is among pleasant tales of the child conducting mini church services along with her friends. Poor Radegund, her chance did not come, and when she grew up, her desire to mortify her flesh earned her the title ‘tortrix’.<sup>33</sup>

Saintly women, then, may be praised for their vigour and determination, characteristics which might well have increased their ‘visibility’ within the monastic community. However, the attribution of manly strength to a female saint may have other implications. An extraordinary portrait of saintly motherhood can be seen in Rictrude and her treatment of her daughter Eusebia, also a saint. Rictrude gave birth to three daughters before taking the veil on her husband’s death; these girls were all consecrated to the church as we have discussed earlier. When the youngest dies at Christmas, we are treated to another display of Rictrude’s virtue: ‘the strength of the manly mind within her overcame her womanly feelings’<sup>34</sup>, and she was able to celebrate the feast as usual, only giving into her grief four days later on the wholly appropriate Feast of the Holy Innocents. The meaning of this seems clear; although she is a mother she is first and foremost a servant of God, and her maternal instinct is always subject to her spiritual responsibilities. However, what we are to draw from her treatment of Eusebia is less clear.

Having been raised by her grandmother, Eusebia has taken over as abbess of Hamay, aged twelve, on that woman’s death. Her mother is not convinced of the appropriateness of this appointment and seeks to have her daughter leave Hamay and come and live with her, so she can keep an eye on her. We might see the reason in this

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Quae puella inter alia opera, quae sexui eius congruebant, litteris est erudite, frequenter loquens cum parvulis, si conferret sors temporis, martyra fieri cupiens.’ MGH SSRM II p. 365, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> Radegund’s self-torture notably involves her chest area, the most visible mark of her femininity. No other female saint of this period behaves in such an extreme way towards her own body.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Virilis tamen, quod ei inerat, animi robur muliebrem superavit affectum’ AASS Maii 12 p. 86, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 210.

due to the girl's young age, but the language utilised by the hagiographer seems to indicate other battles taking place as Eusebia evades her mother's control. Rictrude of 'manly mind' cannot force her daughter to do as she wishes. She tries 'both soothing her with sweet blandishments and terrifying her with harsh words...knowing surely that she could contain her body but not her mind.'<sup>35</sup> It seems clear that the saint's daughter is as much of a strong character as she is herself; she recognises this and despite not having raised the girl herself, sees fit to impose her will by punishing her cruelly. Eusebia is whipped by her brother and his cronies, so severely that 'she wasted away in slow agony'<sup>36</sup>, although she did not capitulate to her mother's wishes before she died. It is interesting in Rictrude's *vita* that although she is not criticised for her treatment of Eusebia (in fact several pages are devoted to justifying her actions), neither is Eusebia treated as the evil party. When she disobeys her mother and celebrates the hours at her beloved Hamay, it is a 'truthful deception', and at the point of her death 'her soul was pleasing to God and he hurried to take her from the midst of the wicked'<sup>37</sup>. The question of who the wicked are supposed to be in this grim tale remains unanswered.

It is clear that saintly motherhood is problematic; one's children are a bind and a hindrance to the pursuit of holiness. Although they might reflect glory upon you when they take the veil, when they die they must be cried for, and this disrupts the

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<sup>35</sup> AASS Maii 12 p. 214, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 214. The phrase 'soothing with sweet blandishments and terrifying with harsh words', in varying forms, crops up very often in my entire sample of *vitae*, invariably referring to a figure of opposition's attempts to dissuade the holy individual from his or her purpose. It is extremely interesting that it is attributed to Rictrude here – *perhaps* a subtle clue as to who is really at fault. The phrase usually appears when the hagiographer is recalling *parental* opposition, as here! N.B. *Rictrude* earlier was 'equally contemptuous of his raging and his flattery' when the king was trying to persuade her to marry again (p. 205-6). It may well be recalling the temptation of Jesus by the Devil before he began his active ministry. See Matthew 4: 1-11; Mark 1: 12-13; Luke 4: 1-13.

<sup>36</sup> 'dolorum cruciatu tabescere' AASS Maii 12 p. 87, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> 'placita enim Deo erat anima illius; propter hoc properavit educere illam de medio iniquitatum' AASS Maii 12 p. 87, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 215.

sacred festal round. In addition, when they disobey they must be disciplined. However, what is perhaps more relevant to this study is the insight provided by the Life of Rictrude into just what kind of woman became a saint in this period. We have discussed how few female saints there are compared to male, and we have considered the importance of ‘visibility’ in determining not who was holy, but who was *seen* to be holy. We have seen women described, and describing themselves, time and again as ‘manly’. Strength and fortitude we have come across, the first of which was certainly displayed by Rictrude, to our minds to excess. It was her ‘manly mind’ which prompted her excessive use of force against her young daughter. The extensive justification of her behaviour suggests that is not only our modern minds which recoil from such, but that contemporaries would also have found her manly virtue hard to swallow. It is interesting to ponder how much of their censure stems from her actions, or from the fact that she is a woman, and a mother to boot.

Aside from such extremes of character, exemplified by Rictrude and Radegund, many other *vitae* correspond to feminine stereotypes in a much more predictable way. Bertilla’s ‘humility of soul’ prompted her to imitate all the gentle, womanly behaviours of the sisters in her convent until she was beloved by everyone. ‘She behaved properly with all gravity, gentleness and temperance’.<sup>38</sup> When her hagiographer recalls that ‘She soon achieved senior status in holy obedience’, I am assuming that he or she is consciously juxtaposing the apparently contradictory notions of high status and perfect obedience: only within the monastic world might an individual be praised for both.<sup>39</sup> Bertilla’s hagiographer makes much of her obedience. We are told that ‘as long as she was a child, she always yielded swiftly’ to

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Cum omni enim gravitate et mansuetudine seu temperantia admirabiliter conversabatur’ MGH SSRM VI p. 102, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 281.

<sup>39</sup> ‘ut velox esset in sancta seniorum oboedientia’ MGH SSRM VI p. 102, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 281.

her parents' desires'<sup>40</sup>, but it would seem that this paragon, as Eusebia, was forced to go against the wishes of her parents in order to enter the religious life. Obedience for a young girl clearly did not mean forgoing your heart's desire, if that desire was to take the veil, of course! When Rudolf of Fulda recounts Leoba's virtues, he manages to place humility above them all without even mentioning it: 'She learned from all and obeyed them all, and by imitating the good qualities of each one she modelled herself on the continence of one, the cheerfulness of another, copying here a sister's mildness, there a sister's patience.'<sup>41</sup> While it is clear that such virtues were perceived as eminently suitable for a holy woman, it is more difficult to understand how a woman characterized by humility became immortalized by the hagiographer's pen. It is, however, naïve to assume that any female achieved 'visibility' through force of character alone in the early medieval period. Bertilla was, in fact, detected by Ouen, Bishop of Rouen, and later sponsored by Genesius, Bishop of Lyons, as will be detailed later in this chapter. It was he who recommended the girl to Queen Balthild when she sought a first abbess for her new foundation at Chelles.<sup>42</sup> Leoba was related to Boniface and was summoned onto the Continent as a result of her kinship with the missionary pioneer. It is their connections with more famous males which allowed these females to achieve a measure of prominence.

### **Marriage and Virginit**

We have seen the noble family's expectations of their offspring in action already, in terms of what young noblemen and women might do, and what they might

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<sup>40</sup> 'ad quorum desiderium solet infantia festinanter recurrere' MGH SSRM VI p. 101, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 280-1.

<sup>41</sup> 'et ab omnibus discens, omnibusque obediens, proprias singularum gratias imitando captabat. Huius continentiam, illius jucunditatem fectabatur: istius lenitatem, illius patientiam, alterius autem mansuetudinem mirabatur.' AASS Septembris 28 p. 763.

<sup>42</sup> McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 279.

be expected to learn will be examined in Chapter Five. If the previous two proved to be stumbling blocks for young saints, who wished to forgo one for the sake of unnatural attention to the other, then marriage was to prove the insurmountable obstacle in their young lives. While a few saints in this study, notably the oblates, avoid the issue of marriage by apparently committing themselves to religion at a very young age, most are required to do battle with their families at the time when they are due to be betrothed. Lupicinus ‘was forced by his father, without his consent, into the bonds of betrothal’, his brother is spared because he is still too young, but still ‘refused to marry’.<sup>43</sup> Patroclus immediately gets himself tonsured when his mother makes suggestions as to a bride for him.<sup>44</sup> Gallus simply runs away: ‘when his father wanted him to marry the daughter of a noble senator, he went with a young slave to the monastery of Cournon... asking the abbot in all humility to shave the hair of his head’.<sup>45</sup> It is amusing to note that when low-born Patroclus approached a clergyman asking to be tonsured, his wish was granted without delay, whereas Gallus, uncle of Gregory and of ‘the first family of the city’, is at first thwarted, presumably due to the abbot’s fear of repercussions: ‘My son, you have good intentions, but it is necessary first to tell your father: if your father consents, I will do as you wish’.<sup>46</sup>

The cases of Leobardus and Venantius would seem to be somewhat different; both succumb to family pressure and enter into betrothal, and although Leobardus

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<sup>43</sup> ‘cum ad legitimam transisset aetatem, genitore cogente, cum animi non praeberet consensum, sponsali vinculo nectitur. Romanus ... nuptias refutavit.’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 214, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 4. Gregory is in fact mistaken in his consideration of Lupicinus as the elder: see James *Life of the Fathers* p. 2 note 2.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Cui cum genetrix non intellegens quaereret, quid hoc esset, prodere noluit, sed abiit ad Archadium Biturgiae urbis episcopum petiitque, sibi comam capitis tondi adscirique se in ordine clericorum.’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 253.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Cumque ei pater cuiusdam senatoris filiam quaerere velit, ille, adsumpto secum uno puerulo, abbatem exorans, ut ei comam capitis tondere dignaretur.’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 230, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Bene desideras, fili, sed primum oportet haec in patris tui deferri notitiam; et si hoc ille voluerit, faciam quae deposcis.’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 230, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 4. Naturally the tonsure, once made, could not be reversed simply by letting the hair grow back! Mayke De Jong suggests that once a boy had been seen in public tonsured, or garbed as a novice, the decision could not be undone, hence the Abbot’s reluctance here.



needs persuasion, Venantius seems perfectly accepting of the scenario: ‘as happens with those of his age, he began to love the young girl. He used to bring her presents of cups, and also shoes’.<sup>47</sup> It is only on a later visit to Tours that he becomes inspired by the example of St Martin, and seeks to be tonsured. Leobardus is at first ‘unwilling’ but cannot resist his father’s persuasive words and enters the bonds of betrothal: ‘Leobardus in the end gave a ring to his betrothed, offered her a kiss, bestowed shoes on her, and celebrated a feast on the day of his betrothal’.<sup>48</sup> However, next in the sequence of the narrative is the death of his parents, after which his betrothal is not mentioned again, and he eventually becomes a recluse. The two means of escaping betrothal are clear: tonsure or the death of your parents. It is true that parents rarely fare well in the *vitae* examined in this study, and that there lurks the suspicion that when their opposition to the holiness of the young saint has served its purpose, they are killed off by the narrator so that they do not impede the continuing story. However, it was certainly the case that many youngsters would have found themselves bereaved, and it seems possible that a monastery would have offered a welcome refuge for those without kin, or those whose kin had inherited the lion’s share of the parental estate. The death of a saint’s parents is generally presented as a liberating experience: Lupicinus and Romanus are free to ‘desire the desert’ once their parents are no more. There seem to be several attitudes in conflict here: on the one hand a child is duty-bound to obey his parents as Leobardus’ father points out: ‘The Holy Scriptures attest that children must obey the voice of their parents, and beware if

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<sup>47</sup> ‘ut aetati huic convenit, amori se puellari praestaret affabilem et cum poculis frequentibus etiam calciamenta deferret’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 274-5, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 100-101. It is interesting that ‘his age’ is emphasized, although we are not told exactly how old he is at this point: the hagiographer’s point is evidently that such considerations as women are eradicated from the mind by the sensible process of growing up.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Denique, dato sponsae anulo, porregit osculum, praebet calciamentum, caelebrat sponsaliae diem festum.’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 291, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 126-7.

you show yourself disobedient towards your parents, lest you find yourself punished by heaven!’<sup>49</sup> On the other, a Christian is duty-bound to renounce everything that might hinder him in his spiritual journey: ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.’<sup>50</sup> We have seen how Willibald’s hagiographer notes that the boy was eager ‘to forsake...his country, parents and relatives’ along these lines.

Girls also struggle to avoid matrimony in somewhat similar ways. Glodesind and Burgundofara make use of the notion of sanctuary, both fleeing to a church when their families seek to marry them off against their wishes. While it is interesting to see sanctuary being respected in the seventh century (the boys sent to kill Burgundofara linger on the threshold of the basilica, evidently unwilling to violate it), these accounts are surely presenting the girls as seeking refuge in the more general arms of the church, as they will more completely when they take the veil. Mother church receives all who are running from the cruelty of the world – in this case the prospect of legalized rape and possibly murder. The tale of how the daughter of Pippin I embarrassed her father by refusing marriage to the king’s son over dinner makes entertaining reading, but seems perhaps even further than usual from any kind of ‘truth’ about her moment of religious decision. ‘Between courses, she was asked by the king whether she would like to have that boy dressed in silks and decorated with gold as her bridegroom. But she, as if filled with rage, refused him with an oath and said she wanted to have neither him nor any other earthly man as her groom, but

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<sup>49</sup> ‘Oboedire filiis voci parentum, Scripturae testantur divinae; et tu cum inoboediens esse parentibus probaris, vide, ne te caelestibus eruere nequeas ab offensis.’ MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 291, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 126. See Ephesians 6:1: ‘filii oboedite parentibus vestris in Domino hoc enim est iustum’.

<sup>50</sup> ‘si quis venit ad me et non odit patrem suum et matrem et uxorem et filios et fratres et sorores adhuc autem et animam suam non potest esse meus discipulus’ Luke 14:26.

rather Christ the Lord.’<sup>51</sup> The level of detail given in the story is unusual, although the preface to the *vita* provides a clue, as we have already seen, when he states of his subject. His later detailed description of the main players in his unlikely tale performs the very task he deems unnecessary.

Those girls who did marry, and entered the religious life upon widowhood, are generally presented as having been married largely against their will. Eustadiola’s parents ‘pressed their daughter until she allowed herself to be matched with a lawful husband.’<sup>52</sup> Sadalberga, it seems, had remained unmarried despite being of ‘proper age’ due to her infirmities, but once healed by Bishop Eustasius of blindness and ‘a flow of blood’, her parents were keen to put her back on track: ‘Against her will, they gave the maiden to a certain mighty man of noble birth named Richramus in marriage.’<sup>53</sup> It seems clear that the majority of such women must have entered enclosure as an expedient after the death of their partners: while some may have entertained religious sensibilities as *puellae*, tales regarding their battles with their parents must be treated as hagiographic convention.

These girls did well to seek to protect their most prized possession: another recurrent motif in the martyrologies of women is their virginity, which sometimes seems even more important than their death for the faith. The importance of chastity, preferably virginity, was expanded upon by the Fathers of the church, particularly St. Jerome, whose correspondence with a group of pious women demonstrated his desire to form their spiritual characters with sexual abstinence as a central theme. However,

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<sup>51</sup> ‘interrogata inter epulas a rege, si illum puerum auro fabricatum, siricis indutum voluisset habere sponsum, at illa quasi furore replete, respuit illum cum iuramento et dixit, nec illum nec alium terrenum nisi Christum dominum volebat habere sponsum’ MGH SSRM II p. 454-5, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 223.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Cumque juxta suos natales sortita esset honorabile connubium’ AASS Iunii 8 p. 133, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 107-8.

<sup>53</sup> This would seem to confirm, yet again, that children unsuited for other careers, including marriage, were considered for the religious life. That Sadalberga’s parents were considering such a future for her would be the reason why the disabled child was presented to Bishop Eustasius at all.

not all the saints included in this study were virgins; seven were married at some point in their lives and all of those bore children. Half of my sample, then, could not claim to have achieved this ultimate goal, something which seems not to have affected their claim to sanctity. It is notable that some hagiographers borrow from St Jerome in actually highlighting this deficiency in their subjects. In the preface to Clothild's Life, we see his extension of the Parable of the Sower utilised:

‘A chorus of virgins, dearest and most pleasing to God, garnished with fruit a hundred-fold, gleams in God's presence in His heavenly palace like stars in the sky. The flock of virgins is followed by an assembly of holy widows and faithful wives who, though they cannot return fruit a hundred fold, harvest sixty and thirty fold and are numbered with all the saints justly rewarded with eternal felicity.’<sup>54</sup>

It is worth noting also that those who can legitimately claim virginity's crown are often granted it as a title. ‘St. Geretrud, virgin’, and ‘Anstrude, virgin of our Lord Jesus Christ’ demonstrate this tendency, and in fact six out of the eight virgins in this collection are named as such.<sup>55</sup> Other saints are named according to their ‘state of womanhood’, as in ‘the Widow Eustadiola’ and ‘Saint Rictrude, holy widow’, while others are simply ‘Abbess’. In addition, virginity is explicitly mentioned in all of the prologues concerning the virgin saints' *vitae*, as well as in some, like Clothild, who cannot claim it for themselves. We have seen how the author of Rictrude's *vita* sought to gain her the crown second-hand, as she dedicates her virgin daughters to Christ. He rhapsodises about the virgin chorus which we have met before, emphasising that ‘though they can hear the song, none of the saints can sing it

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<sup>54</sup> MGH SSRM II p. 40-41, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 160-191. The *Vita Clothildis* is otherwise not utilised here, due to its paucity of childhood material. According to McNamara, Jerome's application of the three kinds of soil in Matthew 13:18-23 to the three states of womanhood was common currency in Frankish times.

<sup>55</sup> Rusticula and Radegund are the two exceptions.

but the white robed throngs of the uncontaminated<sup>56</sup>. However, through Rictrude's gift of her children, 'that song which she could never make her own could be made to sound for her on her daughters' cithars'<sup>57</sup>.

Males are also praised for their chastity, particularly for their avoidance of sexual temptation, a notion which is never, ever applied to girls. Gallus 'was perfectly chaste, and when he grew older he never had any wicked thoughts'. This compliment is reiterated to avoid the suspicion that the queen of Theuderic might have held him in high esteem for reasons other than his holiness: 'He was greatly loved also by the queen, not only because of his beautiful voice, but also because of his chastity'.<sup>58</sup> Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife all too readily comes to mind. Similarly, Boniface's meditation guards his mind from 'diabolical suggestions, which are often accustomed to come upon young men in the flower of their youth, just like clouds of blindness'.<sup>59</sup> It is a more literal kind of blindness which afflicts Gerald, as he struggles to avoid 'the shipwreck of his purity' by the 'lustful thoughts' constantly besieging him. When he invites a girl to his room, by God's grace 'this same girl appeared to him so deformed that he did not believe it was she whom he saw'.<sup>60</sup> In punishment for his near-abandonment of chastity, God 'struck the offender for a year or more with blindness from cataract, so that the eyes which had looked on unlawful things should not for a time be able to see even that which was lawful. And indeed not the slightest

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<sup>56</sup> 'Quod canticum licet possit audire, nemo tamen poterit dicere Sanctorum, nisi illa candida turba incontaminatorum' AASS Maii 12 p. 85, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 208.

<sup>57</sup> 'quod illa nequibat iam per se, per suarum citharas filiarum ei faceret personae' AASS Mai 12 p. 85, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 209.

<sup>58</sup> 'Erat autem egregiae castitatis et tamquam senior nihil perversae appetens' 'a regina autem eius simili amore dilegebatur non solum pro honestate vocis, sed etiam pro castimonia corporis.' MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 231, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> 'infestas diabolicae suggestionis persecutions, quae tenerum sepe apud mortals iuventutis florem' MGH SRG p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> 'Cui tam deformis eadem puella mox visa est, ut non crederet eam esse quam viderat' PL 133 col. 648, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Chuny* p. 102.

evil could penetrate his eyelids'.<sup>61</sup> We would perhaps call Gerald's affliction hysterical, and muse that his lack of vision might seem a relief to him rather than otherwise, removing the object of his lust from his sight.<sup>62</sup> Gregory's story about his great uncle Nicetius emphasises the fact that he was 'so chaste in body and so pure in heart that he never said a dubious word',<sup>63</sup> 'I remember in my youth... that he ordered my unworthy self to come to his bed, where he took me in his arms... consider, I beg you, and note well the precaution of this man of God, who abstained thus from touching a child's body, in which he could not have had the least glimmer of concupiscence nor the least incitement to impurity'. We are reminded that while some might consider young boys as sexual objects, a saint must avoid such temptations.<sup>64</sup> These *vitae* are by no means free from sexual tension, presumably reflecting fairly accurately the men who inspired them.

### Parental Influence

We have seen how the parents of young saints might be used as foils to their holy offspring; how they might tempt, persuade and plead with their children to choose more conventional careers, and how such episodes scarcely ring true. What has yet to be examined is the differing nature of relationships between young males and young females and their parents, in the context of hagiography. While both sexes

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<sup>61</sup> 'per unum et eo amplius annum glaucomate caecicatis reum suum contrivit, ut oculi qui illicita viderant, nec licita quidem ad tempus videre possent' PL 133 col. 649, translated in Sitwell *St. Odo of Cluny* p. 104.

<sup>62</sup> The homoerotic overtones in Gerald's earlier life might suggest another reason why the supposed object of his desire appeared to him deformed when he finally confronted her. His lust had perhaps been provoked by something else entirely, and his disgust and guilt when he realized this led to his hysterical blindness.

<sup>63</sup> 'castus corpore, mundus corde, non in scurilitate verba proferens' MGH SSRM I Vol II p. 242, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 51.

<sup>64</sup> While this tale might ring alarm bells in the minds of some modern readers, it does not seem likely that it is a veiled account of sexual abuse. It highlights the fact that early medieval people shared beds, and emphasises Gregory's sensibility that some men might be tempted in this way by the close proximity of youngsters. John Boswell does not mention the incident in the context of homosexuality in his otherwise comprehensive *Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (New York, 1995).

struggle with their parents regarding their religious inclinations, girls seem to be more subject to parental authority. It is true that both Gallus and Patroclus were forced to take matters into their own hands in order to secure their tonsure, yet they do not seem to have been pursued by their kin to the same extent as Glodesind and Burgundofara, who may have been in real danger of harm. We have seen how angry kin might inflict damage on a disobedient sibling in the case of Eusebia. Hagiographers frequently make mention of the families of both sexes trying to persuade them away from their chosen course. Honoratus' father is the most detailed example on the masculine side of the coin: 'He tried to appeal to him with all manner of delights, to lure him with the enthusiasms of youth, to entangle him in various worldly vanities and to relive his own youth in a kind of comradeship with his young son.'<sup>65</sup> A feminine example is that of Eustadiola: 'Fearful lest a stranger might inherit their goods when they came to leave the world, her parents began to exhort and order her to marry in order to provide progeny for them.'<sup>66</sup> However, in terms which are never in these *vitae* applied to boys, girls are in several cases married against their wishes or in one instance expressly forbidden to carry out their desires. It has already been noted that early piety in the cases of girls who eventually marry might be regarded simply as hagiographic convention. We must continue to remind ourselves that it is the ideas presented by the hagiographer, rather than any kind of objective 'truth' with which we are largely concerned. Whether Sadalberga and Eustadiola ever truly opposed their marriages is irrelevant: it is the fact that their hagiographers presents them as doing so, and correspondingly present their parents as ignoring their wishes, which is important when considering how notions of gender affect the construction of sanctity.

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<sup>65</sup> 'et quasi in collegium cum filio adolescente juvenescere' PL 50 col. 1252.

<sup>66</sup> 'Itaque parentes eius, timentes ne forte recedentibus illis de mundo, heres succederet extraneus; coeperunt eam exhortari ac ei imperare, ut ad propagandum genus illorum nuberet' AASS Iunii 8 p. 133, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 107.

Genovefa's mother forced her to break a promise to another saint, Germanus, by not allowing her to attend church. The weeping girl made her parent so angry 'that she boxed her daughter's ears only to be struck blind herself on the spot'.<sup>67</sup> It took nearly two years, but the mother eventually repented and sent the dutiful girl off to fetch water. 'Speedily, she went to the well and there at the rim she began to cry because she had caused her mother's blindness.'<sup>68</sup> Genovefa was an emotional girl: her tears are mentioned three times in the course of her childhood alone. The water she draws and signs with the cross duly restores her mother's sight. It seems reasonable to assume that female children were kept closer to home than their male counterparts, if only to ensure that they might be brought to 'an unstained bed' when they were married off.<sup>69</sup> Concerning Eusebia we are reminded that Scripture urges 'Hast thou daughters? Have a care of their bodies.'<sup>70</sup> It is interesting that Austreberta's flight from marriage occasions a miracle: the bridge she needs to cross to get to Bishop Omer is flooded, but when the girl tries to cross 'the water became solid as wood beneath her feet.'<sup>71</sup> Gallus and Patroclus make no such spiritual exertions in order to secure their tonsure, but Austreberta's veiling requires extreme faith and an outpouring of miraculous grace. We might draw a parallel between her hazardous journey and the greater risks she took, as a girl, in disobeying her parents and running away from home.

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<sup>67</sup> 'illico mater eius, iracundia repleta, ut filiae alapam dedit, statim luminum percussa est orbitate' AASS Ianuarii III p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> 'Cumque summa festinatione ad puteum venisset, et super marginem putei fleret, eo quod propter eam mater eius lumen amiserat' AASS Ianuarii III p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> 'torum immaculatum' AASS Iunii 8 p. 133.

<sup>70</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:24 cited in Rictrude AASS Maii 12 p. 85.

<sup>71</sup> 'Iam enim naturam elementorum quodammodo inter se commutatam, facta est eis aqua sub pedibus instar ligni solida: porro lignum velut aqua liquidum' AASS Februarii 10 p. 420, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 310.



## Sickness and Healing

While Willibald was healed of a serious sickness as an *infans*, the majority of miracles of healing in these *vitae* occur during *pueritia*. We have already seen how Nicetius of Lyons was cured of his facial sore by St Martin, although the scar remained, presumably to remind him and everyone who looked at him just how powerful that saint was. Cuthbert, aged eight, was healed by an angel: ‘he became so lame that one foot was unable to touch the ground’, but he was visited by a ‘man of noble appearance and of wondrous beauty, clad in white robes’ who advised him to make a simple poultice which ‘after a few days’ solved the problem completely.<sup>72</sup> Dunstan was afflicted with ‘joint fevers’ which apparently caused delirium: ‘he would toss the most meaningless words out of his mouth.’<sup>73</sup> Just when it was thought that the boy would die, a miracle occurred in which he leapt from his bed and, in the dark, climbed the access steps to the top of the church at Glastonbury.<sup>74</sup> The miracle was that he did not fall, but came down in his right mind, although ‘he was unable to think out the way he had come down.’<sup>75</sup> In addition, both Burgundofara and Sadalberga had their sight restored, and Sadalberga was also healed of a ‘flow of blood’ which had troubled her for some time.<sup>76</sup> Van Dam notes that many of Gregory of Tours’ *vitae* mention sickness and disability, generally as a result of sin, whether on the behalf of the sufferer or their parents.<sup>77</sup> The notion that baptism cleansed babies not only of their original sin but also of the inherited sin of their progenitors can be seen in the *vita* of Guthlac, when Felix describes his baptism as a cleansing ‘from the sins of his

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<sup>72</sup> ‘pede altero terram non tangens ... vidit hominem honorabilem et mirae pulchritudinis ... ornatissimum in albis vestimentis’ anonymous *Vita Cuthberti* in B. Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 66, translated p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> ‘febribus artis ... plurima verborum vacua jactasset ab ore.’ W. Stubbs *Memorials of St. Dunstan* (London, 1857) p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> ‘et inde veniret as altos ascensus graduum, quo scandere summa solebant artifices operum’ Stubbs *St. Dunstan* p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> ‘ipse tamen nescivit qua ratione veniret excogitare modum.’ Stubbs *St. Dunstan* p. 8

<sup>76</sup> See below, p. xx, for more details of these miracles.

<sup>77</sup> R. Van Dam *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1993) p. 87.

parents'.<sup>78</sup> Physical ailments set one apart, all too visibly, from the community of those favoured by God, and healing required 'confession, judgement, forgiveness and reconciliation' to the church.<sup>79</sup> In this way, miraculous healing offered a kind of rebirth, and Van Dam notes that, in Gregory's texts in particular, it often marks a point of transition in the text.<sup>80</sup> We have only one example of Gregory's hagiography that relates to illness here, that of Nicetius of Lyons, but we can perhaps see similar ideas played out in these other *vitae*. It was Cuthbert's faith which secured his healing: Gregory would have approved of the fact that he had seen no doctor regarding his lameness, but was prepared to trust a man he perceived as an angel.<sup>81</sup> Dunstan is tonsured at Glastonbury shortly after his fever is cured. The healings of Burgundofara and Sadalberga were notably made by bishops, who discerned the girls' special potential before removing their disabilities both to mark them as God's chosen, rather than God's rejected, and also to equip them for the holy lives they were to lead. Van Dam notes that as private penitence became increasingly important, healing as a method of social exclusion and integration became unnecessary: individuals confessed their sins before God's disapprobation could make them public in the form of disease.<sup>82</sup> We might therefore expect hagiography of the eleventh century and onwards to rely less upon miracles of this nature to mark moments of decision in the lives of saints.

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<sup>78</sup> 'abluit parentum delicta' Colgrave *Saint Guthlac* p. 78.

<sup>79</sup> Van Dam *Saints and their Miracles* p. 88.

<sup>80</sup> Van Dam notes that Gregory's own, self-confessed, life followed this pattern. As a boy his fever was healed when he decided to become a cleric. He also experienced fever just before he was ordained deacon, and again prior to being made bishop. *Saints and their Miracles* p. 93.

<sup>81</sup> 'a nullius medicis ... curatum erat' anonymous *Vita Cuthberti* in Colgrave *St. Cuthbert* p. 68.

<sup>82</sup> Van Dam *Saints and their Miracles* p. 126.

## Sponsorship

One final theme in these *vitae*, perhaps most indicative of the lives of young noble men and women, is that of sponsorship by people of high ecclesiastical, or secular, rank. The theme seems to permeate all the regions studied here: an Anglo-Saxon example is that of Aethelwold, whose talents were ‘made known to King Athelstan, and he belonged to his following for a long time’.<sup>83</sup> While his missionary counterparts in Eastern Francia were all made oblates at a young age, Sturm’s boyhood seems to involve some kind of sponsorship, as he was ‘accepted at the insistence of his parents’ by Boniface as the latter passed through Norica. His hagiographer notes that Sturm’s parents were not the only ones trying to promote their offspring in this way: ‘certain nobles began vying with one another to offer their sons to be brought up in the service of God’,<sup>84</sup> and neither is Sturm the only individual who is accepted. Praejectus’ career is a more detailed case in point, as his *vita* recalls: he was ‘given by his parents into the household of Genesisius, who was then Archdeacon and who not long after was raised up to the high dignity of bishop. Genesisius took the boy with fatherly affection and he brought him up and educated him with great care and when he was made a bishop he had him as an intimate counsellor and made him as well the distributor of the money given over to the poor. He so esteemed him in his love, so tested him in his training, so educated him in all things to do with letters as his age could manage, that many people reacted to all this by filling their gullets with envy.’<sup>85</sup> It seems clear that his ambitious parents entrusted him to Genesisius

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<sup>83</sup> ‘Qui adolescens factus Aetelstano regi ... fama vulgante, notus factus est; et eius comitatu diu adhaerens’ J. Stevenson *Vita Sancti Aethelwoldi* Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon (London, 1858) p. 256.

<sup>84</sup> MGH SS II pp. 365-77.

<sup>85</sup> ‘His itaque transactis, Genesisium tunc temporis archidiaconum, qui non longe post tempore in pontificale culmine est sublimatus, a parentibus suis commendatur Praejectus in aula. Quo suscepto, paternale affectu cum omni diligentia enutrivit et, ut pontifex effectus est, ad sui auriculam habuit consiliatorem, seu et pecuniam commissam pauperum efficit dispensatorem. Quem in tantum delectionibus simul et disciplines probavit et erudivit in cunctis, ut illa capescebat aetas, de litterarum

anticipating the man's promotion, and their son's good prospects as his 'son' and confidant. Their hopes are realized: Praejectus is given a marvellous education and responsibilities at a young age, presumably securing his own rise to the bishopric. His advantages are certainly great enough to promote significant envy among his peers. Similarly, Leudegar was sent to his uncle Dido to receive 'an invigorating upbringing', and was subsequently made archdeacon, doubtless through Dido's influence. Sometimes a child's particular talents secured them preferment. Patroclus, as we have seen, was from a family ranking low among the nobility, but his learning resulted in his being 'recommended for employment to Nunnio, who was then very close to Childebert, King of Paris'.<sup>86</sup> Gallus' remarkable singing voice earned him employment with first Bishop Quintianus and then King Theuderic himself, who 'loved him more than his own son'. The *vitae* of Gallus, Leudegar, Praejectus and Patroclus repeat and emphasise that the affection between a boy and his sponsor created some kind of new bond of kinship. Nunnio loved Patroclus 'as if he were a kinsman'.<sup>87</sup> Such bonds, once forged, would presumably be played out in a relationship of enduring loyalty and counter-loyalty, possibly extending, as in a true kin relationship, to other members of both families.

There seems no doubt that noble families all across western Europe fostered out their sons in order to promote relationships with their peers and more distant kin. Itinerant kings on the 'circuit' were maintained by hospitality and food renders provided by their subjects; in turn, his procession allowed close personal contact with

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causis, ut multi ex hoc fauces invidie suas replerent.' MGH SSRM V p. 228, translated in Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 274-5.

<sup>86</sup> 'Deninc Nunnioni, qui quondam cum Childebertho Parisiorum rege magnus habebatur, ad exercendum commendatus est' MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 253, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> 'ut omnes eum tamquam proprium parentem' MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 253, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 66.

many of his more exalted subjects and their families, enabling the development of a system of patronage which secured the interests of both parties. The nobles promoted their offspring, while the ruler ensured their continued support.<sup>88</sup> Talented young boys came to court ‘up a ladder of benefit and counter-benefit.’<sup>89</sup>

*The Vita Balthildis* seems to constitute some kind of bridge between the experiences of male and female children where patronage is concerned. Her beautiful form and cheerful manner found favour with ‘prince’ Erchinoald: ‘He engaged her to serve him the goblets in his chamber, and as a most honourable cupbearer she stood quite often present in his service.’<sup>90</sup> Another saintly cupbearer is Benedict of Aniane, whose *vita*, composed within living memory of his death in 821, contains barely any other childhood detail, and consequently has not been examined here.<sup>91</sup> Benedict was sent as a boy to the court of Pippin III, where he made an all-round good impression, and ‘Later he received the office of cupbearer’.<sup>92</sup> Thomas Head notes, regarding Allen Cabaniss’ translation of the *vita*, that ‘it was normal for sons of aristocrats to be assigned largely ceremonial offices at court such as cupbearer, butler, doorkeeper and the like’<sup>93</sup>, but in addition to this there is also Scriptural precedent for the office of cupbearer. The prophet Nehemiah was engaged in this way, and appears to have chosen King Artaxerxes’ wine and possibly then tasted it to ensure it was not

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<sup>88</sup> See S. Bassett (ed) *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester, 1989) especially Chapter Two Thomas Charles-Edwards ‘Early Medieval Kingships in the British Isles’ pp. 28-39.

<sup>89</sup> Charles-Edwards ‘Early Medieval Kingships’ p. 29.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Quia eam instituit, ut sibi in cubiculo pocula porrigeret et ut pincerna honestissima sepius presens adstaret in ministerio eius.’ MGH SRM II p. 484, translated in Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 120. Erchinoald was Neustrian mayor from 641 to c. 659. The early section of this *vita* repeatedly refers to him as ‘princeps’, which may be translated in a number of ways, but might possibly be a deliberate, although inexact, reference to King Xerxes in the Old Testament book of Esther. The *vita* certainly seems to draw a parallel between Balthild and her Scriptural model, Esther. Compare the *vita*: ‘Et cum talis esset, fuit omnino grata principi et invenit gratiam in oculis eius.’ pp. 483-4 to accounts of Esther: ‘quae placuit ei et invenit gratiam in conspectu illius’ (Esther 2:9) & ‘et amavit eam rex plus quam omnes mulieres habuitque gratiam et misericordiam coram eo super omnes mulieres’ (Esther 2:17).

<sup>91</sup> MGH XV vol I pp. 200-220.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Post haec vero pincernae sortitur officium’ *Vita Benedicti* MGH SS XV Vol. I p. 201.

<sup>93</sup> T. Noble and T. Head *Soldiers of Christ* (London, 1995) p. 217 note 8.

poisoned.<sup>94</sup> King Solomon's multiplicity of cupbearers serve to enhance his majesty, and Joseph is imprisoned with King Potiphar's chief cupbearer, who is later returned to the king's favour.<sup>95</sup> It may well be the case that by the early middle ages the office of cupbearer had assumed a largely ceremonial form, and it seems logical that noble children would be honoured with this kind of role, although there are no other specific examples of ceremonial roles being ascribed to any of the other young saints in this sample. Balthild's hagiographer presents her both as an individual sponsored by secular powers, and as a Biblical model. However, her gender would seem to set her apart with regard to the former. It is implicitly the case that Erchinoald began to love her as a kinswoman, just as we have seen in the *vitae* of male saints in similar circumstances, as, when widowed, he sought to make Balthild his kin 'in the matrimonial bed'.<sup>96</sup> She remains a unique example in these *vitae* of a female apparently making her way up the court ladder, and one clue as to the character which enabled her to do this is provided when her hagiographer records why she avoided marriage with Erchinoald 'Thus for the love of humility, the prudent and astute virgin attempted to flee as best she could from vain honours.'<sup>97</sup> Nelson notes that this is the first time that the term '*astuta*' is given as a quality of a saint in Merovingian hagiography.<sup>98</sup> It is said in her *vita* that she acts in this way due to her preference of 'a

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<sup>94</sup> 'ego enim eram pincerna regis' Nehemiah 1:11 & 'factum est autem in mense nisan anno vicesimo Artaxersis regis et vinum erat ante eum et levavi vinum et dedi regi' Nehemiah 2:1. The NIV Study Bible (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985) notes 'Thus Nehemiah had to be a man who enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king.' p. 683. Note the use of the term '*pincerna*', which is common to the Biblical account, Balthild's *vita* and the *Vita Benedicti*. McNamara translates 'pincerna' as 'housekeeper', which would seem to be incorrect, considering the Biblical precedent. McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 269.

<sup>95</sup> For references to Solomon's cupbearers, see 1 Kings 10:5 & 2 Chronicles 9:4. For Joseph's encounter with the chief cupbearer of Potiphar, see Genesis 40.

<sup>96</sup> 'in thorum matronalem' MGH SRM II p. 484, translated in Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 120.

<sup>97</sup> 'Atque ut vero ut prudens et atuta virgo iam tunc honores vanos fugiens et humilitatem diligens, temptabat.' MGH SRM II pp. 484-5. The whole phrase has been quoted in order to justify the form of the translation.

<sup>98</sup> Janet Nelson 'Badehildis – Balthild' unpublished paper given at the one day conference *Balthild: Slave, Queen, Sinner and Saint* (Norwich Castle Museum, Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2002).

spiritual and heavenly spouse', but we might speculate that, contrary to her hagiographer's claims regarding her humility, she deliberately avoided Erchinoald's advances as her plan all along was to marry Clovis and become queen.<sup>99</sup> While other women had their kin to arrange their marriage contracts, the slave Balthild seems to have secured her eventual queenship through good looks, impeccable behaviour and a measure of political manoeuvring.

In the case of the majority of females, marriage worked in a similar way to the fostering of male children by other noble families, as it, too, cemented loyalties and created new bonds of kinship, but it was not secular powers who were necessarily of prime importance to the subjects of these *vitae*. The Church offered its own network of patronage and preferment. While boys are sent to live in the household of great men in order to secure their status in later life, and indeed Balthild the slave climbed up the social scale in a somewhat similar way, there seems to be a clear tradition in other female *vitae* of girls being sponsored in a rather different way by members of the episcopate. The earliest example is that of Genovefa, whose *vita*, arguably written soon after her death in 502, records how Bishop Germanus first detected the girl's presence in a miraculous way. 'A multitude of common people came to meet them seeking their blessing and, through the Holy Spirit, Saint Germanus sensed from a distance the most holy Genovefa in the midst of the rushing crowd of both sexes, men, women and children.'<sup>100</sup> He then secures from the infant a most eloquent promise of virginity, and gives her a coin as a reminder of her vow: 'Wear it always hanging about your neck as a reminder of me; never suffer your neck or fingers to be

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<sup>99</sup> 'spiritalem caelestemque ... sponsum' MGH SRM II p. 485. We have seen in Chapter One p. 27 how such claims may actually have been made by Balthild herself, consciously styling her *vita* as that of a saintly queen.

<sup>100</sup> 'Quibus cum vulgi multitudine haud procul ab ecclesiam benedictionem expetens obviam venisset, et catervatim uterque sexus virorum et mulierum ac parvulorum occurreret, in medio occurrentium coetu eminus S. Germanus intuetur in spiritu sanctissimam fore Genovefam, quam illico ad se adduci praecepit.' AASS Ianuarii III p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 20.

burdened with any other metal, neither gold nor silver, nor pearl studded ornament. For, if your mind is preoccupied with trivial worldly adornment, you will be shorn of eternal and celestial ornaments.’<sup>101</sup>

The cloister was not an option for young women such as Genovefa: as yet, all the monasteries accepting women were far distant from Paris, where she grew up, and McNamara notes that she had probably never even heard of their existence.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, she seems to have known hardly anything about the tradition of asceticism, and is presented as a true innocent, obedient to Bishop Germanus by whose assistance her religious fervour is recognized. Her later life was by no means easy: her initially proud parents turn upon her, as do her neighbours and eventually ‘the people of Paris.’ The episcopate continually affirm her way of life: she is detected, consecrated and repeatedly protected by Germanus and Vilicius; indeed, Germanus’ benevolent influence extends beyond the end of his life in the person of Bishop Lupus, who once again reminds those who would criticize the girl of Germanus’ good opinion of her. One can see why her peers frequently found her so irritating. McNamara notes that she lives among ‘excitable people easily moved to excesses of admiration and hostility’,<sup>103</sup> for whom Genovefa’s rather passive self-righteousness and continued advancement by Germanus might rankle somewhat. The parents of the older girls before whom she was baptized would surely number among her critics. This *vita* records the power of the bishop in action. Alone, Genovefa would quickly have been driven out of town, but the community’s apparent fondness for their spiritual father

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<sup>101</sup> ‘Hunc transforatum pro memoria mei a collo suspensum semper habeto; nulliusque metallic, neque auri, neque argenti, seu cuiuslibet margaritae ornamento collum saltem digitosque tuos onerari patiaris. Nam si saeculi huius vel exiguus decor tuam superaverit mentem, etiam aeternis et caelestibus carebis ornamentis.’ AASS Ianuarii III p. 138, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 21.

<sup>102</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 21.

<sup>103</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 18.



Germanus protects her time and again. It is interesting, however, that his influence soon wears off once his visit is over.

Rusticula's spirituality is detected by Caesarius after the latter's death, when he requests of her mother in a dream to give him her beloved offspring: 'I want you to give me the dove's chick which you seemed to be nursing so tenderly.'<sup>104</sup> The tale seems to ally the child to Genovefa, Burgundofara and Sadalberga, albeit in a very different geographical location, possibly indicating that Southern bishops exercised their power in the same way as their northern counterparts, at least when the detection of holy children was concerned, but it is perhaps more likely that the dream is intended to defend Rusticula's calling in the face of her poor mother's protestations: 'Give me back the fruit of my hopes! Who now will care for my old age when the only one I had is lost?'<sup>105</sup> The woman might hardly be blamed for wanting to hold onto her daughter having lost husband and son, but Rusticula is destined for higher things, and beloved of more than her mother. Yet again the maternal role becomes one of unholy opposition, necessitating the child's swift oblation, as has been discussed previously.<sup>106</sup>

The account of Burgundofara's calling is embedded within the *vita* of her sponsor, Columbanus. Visiting the house of a nobleman, Columbanus 'blessed his house and consecrated to the Lord his daughter Burgundofara, who was still a child.'<sup>107</sup> In the same way that Genovefa's call needed reaffirming by another agent after the death of Germanus, so Eustasius stepped in to reiterate Columbanus' consecration when it seemed that the girl's holy life was threatened by marriage.

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<sup>104</sup> 'pullam illum columbarum, quem to dulciter tibi videris enutrire, ut mihi concedas' MGH SSRM IV p. 340.

<sup>105</sup> 'Imple mihi spei mea fructum. Quis nunc aetatem mean fovebit, unica quam habebam amissa?' MGH SSRM IV p. 342, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 125.

<sup>106</sup> See Chapter Three p. 88.

<sup>107</sup> MGH SSRM IV p. 121.

Burgundofara's serious illness is presented as a response to her betrothal: 'But when her father betrothed her, and meant to give her in marriage against her will, she had been stricken with such an affliction of the eyes and burning fever that it was thought she could scarcely survive.'<sup>108</sup> Her blindness seems a logical kind of ailment for such a situation; it is of course either the spiritual blindness of her father or the spiritual darkness of the girl's own future, should she be forced to break her vow, which is being emphasized. This man, previously praised as being 'fortified by nobility and wisdom', all too familiarly becomes a most reprehensible figure as he lies in order to secure Burgundofara's healing and then seeks to marry her off again. In 'consigning his earlier promises to the dark pit of oblivion', he condemns his soul to the same fate! Burgundofara is forced to run away, seeking sanctuary in a basilica until Eustasius arrives, at which point she finally takes orders. McNamara suggests an alternative, and all too likely interpretation for the whole sorry tale, in that her 'calling' 'provided her father with an iron-clad excuse if the king were pressing a candidate [for marriage] upon him.'<sup>109</sup>

A connected tale seems to be that of Sadalberga, in a debatably seventh-century *vita* apparently written by a near-contemporary of the events described. Eustasius makes another appearance, on his way home from a mission against heresy when he stayed a while in the home of a nobleman. Sadalberga is another David: she is not presented to the saint for blessing along with her brothers, yet he discerns her existence and knows that she is the special child: 'But the man of God asked if there were not another child and they admitted to a maiden sister who was of a proper age

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<sup>108</sup> MGH SSRM IV p. 123, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 140..

<sup>109</sup> McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* p.163.

but who had been blind for some time'.<sup>110</sup> She is healed not only of her blindness, but also "from a flow of blood ... [which] had long constrained her body".<sup>111</sup> It is tempting to see this particular miracle as freeing her in some manner from the curse of her femininity, especially since the manner in which she was detected seems to turn not only expectations of age, but expectations of gender on their heads. Not only was she younger, but also a girl, and a disabled one at that! There could be no better recipient of an outpouring of God's grace. However, Sadalberga is not freed from the limitations of her sex, as she is subsequently forced to marry against her will, and lose her prized virginity, even though her husband dies after a mere two months of marriage. The stemming of her flow of blood can perhaps be understood as a simple parallel of the story in Matthew 9, when through faith a woman with a similar problem is cured simply by touching Jesus' cloak.<sup>112</sup> All Sadalberga had to do was to reach out to the Lord, via Eustasius, and her ailments vanished. Eustasius was not present to rescue her from matrimony as he was for Burgundofara, but her second union actually produces another saint, Anstrude, who eventually succeeds her as abbess of Laon. It must be noted that in neither the anonymous full *vita*, nor in the brief account included by Jonas of Bobbio in his *Life of Columbanus*, does Sadalberga make an explicit promise of virginity. Like Burgundofara, she commits only to 'divine service', a vow which is eventually upheld on her entering monastic life after becoming a widow for the second time. This vagueness presumably serves to acquit the former from the charge of breaking a holy vow; in the *vita* of the latter, we

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<sup>110</sup> 'Sciscitatur denuo vir Dei, si adhuc proles superesset; ad quem illi fatentur se habere puellam germanam, licet aetate praeferentem, sed dudum luminibus orbatum' MGH SSRM V p. 53, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 181.

<sup>111</sup> 'fluxum sanguinis ... hoc debilis teneretur adstricta' MGH SSRM V p. 53.

<sup>112</sup> 'Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.' Jesus turned and saw her. 'Take heart, daughter,' he said, 'your faith has healed you.' And the woman was healed from that moment. Matthew 9:20-22.

are in no doubt that the girl feels that her promise is one of virginity, and she is able to uphold it.

Latest in this group, the eighth-century *Vita Bertilae* records how she first confessed her desires to the sympathetic Bishop Ouen, in much the same manner as Genovefa: ‘She had sworn to gain Christ, the Son of God, for her spouse. But she had not dared to announce this publicly for she knew that her parents were strongly opposed.’<sup>113</sup> Ouen, by no means such an influential figure as Germanus, or Columbanus, is given no further role in the *vita*, and it is only this initial exchange with him which merits Bertilla’s inclusion among these *vitae* of sponsored girls. It might be argued that the man is acting simply as her Confessor, and he certainly seems to be a tool in the story of her life rather than her detection constituting a high point in the story of his. However it occurs, this kind of sponsorship must constitute the closest female equivalent of the fostering of young noble boys. It might certainly indicate the ties of kin and patronage in just the same way as do the tales regarding Praejectus and Leudegar: after all, two of these girls were detected and blessed while their parents offered hospitality to a traveling bishop. Naturally these girls could not enter the households of the bishops concerned; instead, they remained at home until the opportunity arose for them to take the veil and enter a safe, all-female establishment. Their promotion can still be seen as some kind of episcopal version of the royal circuit, allowing them, via the nobility and aspirations of their parents, access to benefaction from members of the higher clergy, no doubt significantly increasing their chance of ending up abbesses in their chosen houses, and of receiving a significant following when they later founded their own. The families of

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<sup>113</sup> ‘devotionem, ut Dei filium Christum promeret adipisci sponsum; sed hoc pandere publice parentibus suis non audebat, eo quod cognosceret ab ipsis esse eis valde contrarium’ MGH SSRM VI p. 101, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 281.

Burgundofara and Sadalberga were notably interested in mission, and no doubt perfectly prepared to allow the alienation of part of their estate to their daughters in this way.<sup>114</sup> Presentations of parental opposition to the child's chosen path make no sense in this regard, and must be seen as dramatic touches on the part of the hagiographer, endowing the young saint with a choice which was not, in truth, hers to make.

Sponsorship cannot simply be seen as a convention on the part of the hagiographer. However it might be dressed up, the movement of a young person away from his family into the care of another, or the promotion of a young girl by a bishop, is an historical fact in the life of that young person. While there is Biblical precedent in the anointing of David for God's selection of individual children over their peers, and especially over their elders, there is none for the removal of that chosen child from the family unit, for the purpose of his or her education, as we find in these *vitae*. This kind of sponsorship seems therefore to be a medieval phenomenon, an island of historical fact amid a sea of theological stereotyping.

While this chapter has explored a variety of themes which can be associated with a holy *pueritia*, it has not touched upon one of the most essential determinants of an individual's future career: their education. To *pueritia*, the 'age of reason', is assigned the commencement of education, with which the next chapter will be broadly concerned. In addition, we must return to a subsection of *vitae* which have featured little in this chapter: the oblates, whose careers began often in infancy, and whose daily lives were proscribed by the church in every detail. What, then, was their experience of *pueritia*?

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<sup>114</sup> See McNamara's introduction to the Life of Sadalberga: McNamara and Halberg *Sainted Women* pp. 176-7.

## Chapter Five

### The education of children in and out of the cloister; life as an oblate

This chapter has two aims: the investigation of medieval educational practices via references found in *vitae*, and the pulling together of more diverse hagiographical comments in order to gain, as far as possible, an image of the life of an early medieval oblate. These aims are, of course, not mutually exclusive, and demand to be investigated in parallel due to the central importance of education in the upbringing of oblates, as well as the exclusive role of the church, and primarily the monasteries, in early medieval education. It is scarcely possible to attempt to meet either objective from hagiographical sources alone; a detour will be made into the roots, purpose and content of early medieval education, as well as its variety of forms, before an attempt is made to contextualise the details found in *vitae* concerning their subjects' learning. Similarly, it is only with knowledge of other contemporary texts that we can reconstruct the day-to-day activities of an oblate with any degree of precision.

Etymology, whether genuine or fabricated, fascinated a good many medieval scholars, most notoriously Isidore of Seville, and it is useful when investigating attitudes to education in the medieval mind to consider what contemporaries understood to be the roots of the word. The Latin *educare* (to rear, bring up) is no doubt the strict etymological source, but the term was also strongly linked with *educere* (to lead out). Price notes that the inheritance of these ideas can still be seen in the

Oxford English Dictionary, which links education with *educare*, a process of training, but notes the influence of *educere*, a process of mental, emotional and cultural development.<sup>1</sup> As will be seen in the discussion below, it seems clear that those entrusted with the upbringing of oblates had these secondary aspects of education firmly in mind. A student should essentially be led from ignorance to knowledge, but this process was not simply practical, an acquisition of a certain skill, but a development of an individual's character by means of experience and careful guidance on the part of the teacher.<sup>2</sup> The Greek and Roman inheritance was adopted largely as a means to an end: the *artes liberales* enabled deeper understanding of the Bible, and reading the 'classics' provided instruction and inspiration when interpreting it.<sup>3</sup> Price notes that the works of medieval scholars dedicated to interpreting or copying the style of classical texts are far outnumbered by those devoting literary techniques to the study of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say, however, that the *artes liberales* were exclusively used for religious training, or, indeed, that early medieval education can be characterized by a single purpose or curriculum, or indeed a single set of texts. Of central importance was that ideas be collected, organized and transmitted, preserving the authoritative voices of classical texts and the writings of the church Fathers. Monastic education was primarily intended to facilitate *lectio Divina*, but the conception of what this involved gradually embraced the study of Biblical commentaries and related texts in order to facilitate the understanding of Scripture.

Alcuin's educational ambitions can be summed up in his own words: he imagined a recreation of the schools of Plato and Aristotle in Carolingian Francia,

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<sup>1</sup> B. B. Price *Medieval Thought* (Oxford, 1992) p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> P. Riché *Instruction et Vie Religieuse dans le Haut Moyen-Age* (London, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> J. Leclercq *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York, 1961) p. 144-5. See also the comments of Boniface's hagiographer regarding his learning below pp. 156-7.

<sup>4</sup> Price *Medieval Thought* p. 54.

following the teachings of their academies with one vital addition: 'Here all secular wisdom would be surpassed by the new Athens, which, in addition, would have been endowed with the seven-fold gift of the Holy Spirit in all its plenitude'.<sup>5</sup> The seven liberal arts were to be complimented by the gifts of the Spirit, as detailed in Galatians 5:22-3<sup>6</sup> As the hagiographer of the *Vita Willibrordi*, his ideas are of central importance to the content of that text, but relate also to all the *vitae* in this sample which can be dated to the ninth century or later. The Carolingian Renaissance, in which Alcuin played such a vital role, was in part concerned with the establishment of schools and the encouragement of literacy across the Frankish kingdom. Charlemagne declared in 780 and 800 that the clergy should establish schools to teach boys from every walk of life, and at his court from 782, Alcuin pioneered a campaign of book acquisition and accurate copying of texts.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to the texts in hand, we must first address the question of when a child's education, however it might be comprised, began. It has already been mentioned that it is rare to find specific ages attributed to young saints in these *vitae*, and when trying to ascertain the age at which an individual's education might commence, we yet again encounter generic phrases: Praejectus' learning began 'when the time came for him to acquire the skills of letters.'<sup>8</sup> We have seen that Isidore of Seville connects education with *pueritia*, that stage of life which follows infancy and might commence around the age of seven. Willibald and Boniface, offered as oblates at the age of five, seem to begin their learning immediately on entering monastic life,

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<sup>5</sup> Alcuin *Epistolae* 170 MGH EP IV vol. II p. 279.

<sup>6</sup> 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control.'

<sup>7</sup> See J. Contreni 'The Carolingian Renaissance' *Renaissances before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* ed. W. Treadgold (Stanford, 1984) pp. 59-74 & R. McKitterick *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> 'ut tempus extaret, quod litterarum accumulata summeret' MGH SSRM V p. 227, translated in P. Fouracre and R. A. Gerberding *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720* (Manchester, 1996) p. 273.



although their *vitae* are hardly specific concerning this detail. Willibald is received into the community, then ‘afterward...initiated and perfectly trained in sacred studies’.<sup>9</sup> His education had evidently not begun before his oblation, but at some unspecified point after it. Boniface’s desire to study is conceived early, but would seem to have come to fruition during ‘the years of childhood’, which would conform to Isidore’s reckoning, as we are told that he ‘increased in age and strength and knowledge’ before reaching ‘the bloom of youth’.<sup>10</sup> Leoba’s education did not begin until ‘the child had grown-up’ according to her hagiographer, although we read later that the girl also ‘grew up’ while under the care of the abbess. As Leoba is explicitly another Samuel, the former use of the phrase might refer to her weaning, which was the point at which the Biblical Samuel was offered to the Temple, as has been discussed previously, and the latter to some other undetermined stage in her development.<sup>11</sup>

Once education was begun, one might expect children of different social status, and indeed of different genders, to be educated differently. Beginning outside the cloister, Gerald’s career as a sanctified layman, unique to this period, may offer some clues as to the standards of education commonly achieved by those who were not destined for a life in the Church. Although a young nobleman, as we have seen, might expect ‘to ride to hounds, become an archer, learn to fly falcons and hawks’,<sup>12</sup> his education might be far less varied. Gerald ‘by the will of his parents’ was taught

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<sup>9</sup> ‘posthaec ... sacris litterarum studiis imbutus atque eruditus’ MGH SS XV p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Postquam enim aetas et mira in eo scientiae praevaluit fortitudo ... puerilis adveniente decore aetatis’ MGH SRG p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> ‘sonat Adultam’ & ‘crevit ergo puella’ MGH SS XV p. 123. See Chapter Three p. 84 & Chapter Two p. 57 for a discussion of the age at which weaning might occur and its Scriptural relationship to date of oblation, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> ‘scilicet ut Molossus ageret, arcista fieret, cappos et accipitres competenti iactu’ PL 133 col. 645, translated in G. Sitwell *St Odo of Chmy* (New York, 1958) p. 97.

‘only to the extent of going through his psalter’.<sup>13</sup> It was only when he became afflicted by pimples that his parents considered putting him to letters, ‘so that if he should prove unsuited for worldly pursuits, he might be fitted for the ecclesiastical state’.<sup>14</sup> His hagiographer, Odo, evidently expected a nobleman only to be able to read the Psalter; all Gerald’s additional education was part of his parents’ Plan B for his future: ‘So it came about that he not only learnt the chant, but also learnt something of grammar.’<sup>15</sup> Non-oblate males learned ‘the sounds of grammar’ and ‘the liturgy’.<sup>16</sup> Praejectus and Leudegar in particular are recorded as being ‘accomplished in the studies that lay noblemen are wont to pursue’.<sup>17</sup> Fouracre notes that the hagiographer of Leudegar was following the *Vita Columbani* in his emphasis on the secular education of his subject, in which we read that Columbanus ‘began to devote himself to the pursuit of grammar and the sciences’, which seem to have included ‘rhetoric’ and ‘geometry’.<sup>18</sup> Learning ‘the art of grammar’ is mentioned not just in the *vitae* of Columbanus, Praejectus and Gerald, but also in the *Vita Aethelwoldi*; Aethelwold as an older youth learned ‘the art of grammar and metrics, and the sacred books and authors’.<sup>19</sup> In the case of Nicetius of the Treveri, his education, like that of Gerald, seems deliberately linked with his parents’ ambitions for their son: he was born with his hair resembling the clerical tonsure, and ‘because of that, his parents...instructed

<sup>13</sup> ‘ea tantum parentum voluntate, ut decurso psalterio’ PL 133 col. 645, translated in Sitwell *St Odo of Cluny* p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> ‘si usibus saeculi minus esset aptus, ad ecclesiasticum officium redderetur accommodus’ PL 133 col. 645, translated in Sitwell *St Odo of Cluny* p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Hac igitur occasione factum est, ut non modo cantum disceret, quin etiam et grammaticam praelibaret’ PL 133 col. 645, translated in Sitwell *St Odo of Cluny* p. 97. See J. Nelson ‘Monks, Secular Men and Masculinity, c900’ *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999) pp. 121-142 for further discussion of the education of Gerald and other lay noblemen.

<sup>16</sup> ‘de grammaticarum sonis antiphonsque’ MGH SSRM V p. 227.

<sup>17</sup> ‘adiversis studiis, quae saeculi potentes studire solent’ MGH SSRM V p. 283, translated by Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 217. If Gerald is a good example of the educational standards generally achieved by a ‘lay nobleman’, this is hardly a great compliment.

<sup>18</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 273 footnote 56; *Vita Columbani* MGH SSRM IV p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> ‘didicit manque inibi grammaticam artem et metricam, et libros divinos seu auctores’ J. Stevenson *Vita Sancti Aethelwoldi* Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon (London, 1858) p. 257.

him in letters'<sup>20</sup> Indeed, excessive learning – especially learning of a secular nature – is not always perceived as a good thing. Praejectus, who was raised in the house of Bishop Genesisus, was being taught to sing when his rivals' envy provoked a miracle: Praejectus was asked, in front of the other boys, to sing something he had not been taught. 'The Lord filled his boy so that the tone which he had not memorized before now he sang with the voice of a master.'<sup>21</sup>

It has already been mentioned that Patroclus and Leobardus were, according to their hagiographers, not of the highest nobility, and their educations are interesting in comparison. Leobardus 'learned some Psalms by heart'<sup>22</sup> at school; no other learning is mentioned but Gregory notes that 'without knowing he would one day be a cleric, he unknowingly prepared himself for the Lord's service'.<sup>23</sup> The implication seems to be that even Leobardus' 'some Psalms' were more than could reasonably be expected of a boy of his social standing. Gregory notes that he 'did outshine others by his glorious merits', and seeing as none are mentioned aside from his modest learning of Psalms, we must assume that this is what he meant. In comparison to the learning of others, notably Boniface, Leobardus' achievements were very small; Gregory would seem to be judging the child generously according to the light he had received. Patroclus is required to choose education over shepherding at the age of ten, when his brother, who goes to school while he tends the sheep, taunts him that 'the care of such a task ennobles me, while you are made common through your work'.<sup>24</sup> His relatively

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<sup>20</sup> 'exinde studiosissimis enutris parentibus, litteris institutis' MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 278, translated in E. James *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, 1991) p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> 'replet Dominus puerum suum, ut sonum, quam antea non tenuisset, magistrali voce decantaret' MGH SSRM V p. 228, translated in Fouracre and Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 275.

<sup>22</sup> 'de psalmis memoriae commendavit' MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 291, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 126 'nesciens se clericum esse futurum, iam ad dominicum parabatur innocens ministerium' MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 291, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> 'qua de re nobiliores me ipsius officii cura facit, cum te huius custodiae servitus vilem reddit' MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 252, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 66.

low birth seems to make him sensitive to such a rebuke and he immediately begins to attend school, where he excels, and soon surpasses his teasing brother. One wonders why he was not in school in the first place, since he was a noble, however minor. Was he the younger brother, considered a less worthwhile investment in educational terms and charged by his parents to take responsibility for the flock? If this was the case, it would certainly present his hagiographer with an ideal example of ‘the last shall be first’, which seems to be part of the subtext of this passage, and would also implicitly ally him to the young King David, the youngest of eight sons who is not at first presented to the prophet Samuel because he is out tending the sheep.<sup>25</sup> He might of course have been playing truant, or choosing work over study, which would facilitate our explanation of his parents’ apparent change of heart when he begins to attend school. The fact that his age is mentioned, as it so rarely is in these *vitae*, indicates that it would mean something to the intended audience. It would seem logical to assume that a boy of ten was expected to be in school; it is certainly treated as his own fault that he was not: ‘he regarded the reproach as a warning from God’.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the education of noble girls we have the examples of Radegund and Eustadiola, both of whom seem to have been raised primarily to be well-married, and who indeed were married before choosing the religious life. The little information we are given regarding their education makes it sound similar to Gerald’s as we might expect: we find that Eustadiola ‘was trained in sacred letters’ and Radegund was ‘taught letters and other things suitable to her sex’.<sup>27</sup> There is evidence that nunneries provided schools in the same manner as monasteries: Caesarius’ Rule forbade nuns to

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<sup>25</sup> The account of David’s anointing as the Lord’s chosen king can be found in 1 Samuel 16:1-15. Due to this Scriptural connection, it is tempting to conclude that the entire episode is a convenient fabrication on the part of Gregory, which would explain the apparent incongruity of even a minor noble being charged with animal husbandry.

<sup>26</sup> ‘hanc increpationem quasi a Deo sibi transmissam putans’ MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 252, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> ‘quae puella inter alia opera, quae sexui eius congruebant, litteris et erudita’ MGH SSRM II p. 365.

take into their school anyone who was not joining the community properly, either as an oblate or as an adult novice. The decrees of the Council of Aachen (816) allow for nunnery schools without stating that all pupils had to be full community members, but we find that Louis the Pious recommends that the teaching of boys in monastic schools should only be those actually becoming monks. McKitterick suggests that such restrictions might ‘imply that some houses were in fact functioning as schools and thus remaining in touch with the outside world’.<sup>28</sup> She raises the possibility that boys as well as girls were trained in nunneries, citing among others the examples Bede provides, including that of Caedmon and five other future bishops being taught at Whitby by Hild.<sup>29</sup> We cannot know exactly what they learned, and whether it differed materially from the education given to boys, but female monasteries seem to have educated not only their own but also women of the upper classes not intended for the spiritual life. McKitterick notes that a great many well-known saints, founders and abbesses entered the monastic life after being widowed: ‘they came as educated women and contributed to the life they found there.’<sup>30</sup> Not only the educations of Eustadiola and Radegund, but also that of Geretrud can be understood in this context. Although Geretrud’s girlhood learning is not mentioned, her mother, once widowed, founded the nunnery at Nivelles and installed her daughter there. Geretrud later ‘exercised pastoral care towards the implements of ecclesiastical study, and with God’s inspiration she deservedly obtained...relics of the saints and holy books from Rome, and from the regions across the sea, experienced men for the teaching of divine law and to practice the chants for herself and her people.’<sup>31</sup> The desire to acquire

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<sup>28</sup> R. McKitterick *Uses of Literacy in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1990) p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (eds.) *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* revised version (Oxford, 1992) p. 408.

<sup>30</sup> McKitterick *Uses of Literacy* p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Erga ecclesiastica studia vasa summo studio pastorem habebat curam, et per suos nuntios, boni testimonii viros sanctorum patrocinia vel sancta volumina de urbe Roma et de transmarinis regionibus

books would seem to suggest that she had an interest in learning. Following this statement, her hagiographer praises her as ‘vigorous in the training of the young’, and although any kind of training might be meant, it is the training of the mind which seems to be suggested here.

Considering the education of girls within the confines of monastic life, among this sample is one *vita* of a woman who inhabited a nunnery known for its manuscript production. McKitterick notes that the existence of a *scriptoria* at Chelles, where Bertilla was abbess, has long been recognised. Although it was originally a double house, the evidence points to inhabitation only by women from the mid eighth century, and Bernhard Bischoff’s work on manuscripts originating from the *scriptoria* there dates them between 785 and 810.<sup>32</sup> Bertilla’s eighth century *vita* sadly makes no mention of her education at Jouarre. She did later send relics, books and teachers to England, indicating her wealth of resources and also her patron Balthild’s continuing links with the land of her birth. The dating of Bertilla’s *vita*, considering the evidenced period of activity of the *scriptoria* at Chelles, seems to indicate that it is all the more likely to have been the work of a feminine hagiographer. It is possible that Chelles was not the only female house with a *scriptoria*: manuscripts originating from Jouarre, mother house of Chelles, have been argued to demonstrate an earlier version of the particular Chelles miniscule. McKitterick suggests that nuns from Jouarre sent along with Bertilla to form the first Chelles community, ‘may have brought a distinctive scribal tradition with them.’<sup>33</sup>

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gignaros homines ad docendum divini legis carmina, Deo inspirante, meruisset habere’ MGH SSRM II p. 457, translated in Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 322.

<sup>32</sup> See J. Nelson ‘Queens As Jezebels’ *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, 1992) p.

46. Bischoff’s work is summarised and expanded in McKitterick ‘Frauen und Schriftlichkeit im Frühmittelalter’ *Weibliche Lebensgestaltung im frühen Mittelalter* (Cologne, 1991) pp. 65-118.

<sup>33</sup> R. McKitterick, *Books, Scribes and Learning in the Frankish Kingdoms 6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Aldershot, 1994) p. 14.

If we were only to rely on the *vitae* of the two female oblates within this sample, we could hardly construct a picture of feminine monastic education at all. Leoba was taught ‘the sacred sciences’ or ‘sacred knowledge’<sup>34</sup> with no explanation of what this might be, while Rusticula ‘memorized the entire Scripture’, a feat which would seem more allied to the *puer senex* topos than to her actual educational achievements.<sup>35</sup> Many *vitae* mention only that their subjects were ‘put to letters’, or, in other words, taught to read, but we should expect a good deal more of a woman such as Leoba. In a letter to her kinsman Boniface she recalls how she was taught to write Latin verse, which must have happened while she was at Wimborne under Abbess Tetta, as she was apparently made oblate at a young age.<sup>36</sup> Although she is not a saint featured in this sample, Huneberc, hagiographer of Willibald, is the only certainly female author of any of this sample of *vitae*, and it is interesting when considering the monastic education of girls to examine her work for traces of her own learning. She was a member of the double house of Willibald’s foundation at Heidenheim; Peter Dronke notes that she writes ‘exuberantly crammed, complex periods, enhanced by rare words and phrases, new formations and coinages, by alliteration and by elaborate series of nouns and adjectives.’<sup>37</sup> She quotes from Aldhelm, is familiar with the notion of the *aetates hominis* and rhetorical devices, and attempts to elevate her style by piling adjective upon adjective. We can only guess in the absence of evidence that other nuns at her foundation might have been capable of the same level of skill, or perhaps greater.

Education within monasteries had been prescribed standards by the 816 Council of Aachen, and required reading during periods of *lectio* included Scripture,

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<sup>34</sup> ‘scientia divina’ MGH SS XV pp. 123.

<sup>35</sup> ‘omnes scripturas divinas memoriter retineret’ MGH SSRM I p. 342.

<sup>36</sup> *Epistolae Bonifacii* No 29 pp. 102-4. This is mentioned by McKitterick *Books, Scribes and Learning* p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> P. Dronke *Medieval Women Writers* (New York, 1985) p. 33

works of the Church Fathers and the lives of the saints. Young monks were also required to learn singing and become word-perfect in hymns.<sup>38</sup> The *Vita Bonifatii* predates the Aachen prescriptions, but alone amongst the *vitae* of male oblates in this sample, it provides details as to what the young saint was actually studying. We have seen above how too much secular education might occasion criticism. In comparison Boniface, notably an oblate separated from the secular world, was careful to focus his considerable expertise on suitably holy texts: ‘he really shone in his knowledge of Scripture – not only proficient in the art of grammar, the modulation of metre and the very essence of eloquence, but also in the simple exposition of history’.<sup>39</sup> His hagiographer makes careful allusion to the fact that he has received a good classical education, and is well-versed in the *trivium*, but he puts this training to use in the most medieval way, using the techniques of times past to reveal the much older mystery of faith. It is hardly remarkable that Boniface’s hagiographer makes so much mention of his subject’s academic achievements: Boniface’s reputation as a scholar was widely known during his lifetime and this *vita* only serves to enhance it. The impact of the Carolingian Renaissance is difficult to discern in these *vitae*. Alcuin’s own effort, the *Vita Willibrordi*, displays more of his own learning in its elegance than it records regarding its subject. Willibrord was taught ‘religious pursuits and sacred learning’, from which phrase we can only guess what Alcuin meant by tentative reference to his other works, which deal with grammar, rhetoric, dialectic and arithmetic.<sup>40</sup> The *vitae* of Leoba and Rictrude mention little of nothing concerning their subjects’ educations, but then, Charlemagne’s edicts and the Aachen pronouncements notably made no

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<sup>38</sup> M. DeJong ‘Growing up in a Carolingian Monastery’ *Journal of Medieval History* 9 No. 2 (June 1983) p. 115.

<sup>39</sup> ‘maxima demum scripturarum eruditione – tam grammaticae artis eloquentia et metronum medullata facundiae modulatione quam etiam historiae simplici expositione’ MGH SSRG p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> ‘religiosis studiis et sacris litteris’ MGH SSRM VII p. 118. For a detailed catalogue of the works attributed to Alcuin, see Peter Godman’s introduction to his edition of Alcuin’s *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York* (Oxford, 1982).



mention of the education of girls. Sturm's *vita* provides more detail: he studies the Psalms, the Gospels and the Old Testament, and Eigil notes that 'his understanding was profound', but considering the *Vita Bonifatii*, this seems hardly remarkable enough to claim that a change in educational content or practice can be discerned in these later *vitae*.<sup>41</sup>

The education one might acquire did not only depend on one's position in society, or one's gender, but also, naturally, one's geographical location. In the *Vita Bonifatii* we find that a saint may need to take responsibility for his own educational needs: 'provoked by the lack of tutorship in reading' he exchanged the monastery at Eximchester, near Exeter, for Nursling, near Winchester.<sup>42</sup> He later travelled to Ireland to further supplement his education. Nursling is described as '*finitima*', translated by Talbot as 'neighbouring', which seems unlikely considering the geography involved here! Another translation might be 'like-minded', which would still beg the question of why Boniface needed to move if the two foundations were so similar. It would certainly seem that the two monasteries were somehow akin to one another.<sup>43</sup> Education seems generally to have been provided by members of the clergy, even when children were not specifically attached to a monastic school: Odo was entrusted to 'a certain priest', while Praejectus 'was handed over to be taught by the schoolmaster at the church of Isoire'<sup>44</sup>. Some children were apparently educated by relatives, although these might also be officers of the Church: Nicetius'

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<sup>41</sup> MGH SS II pp. 367.

<sup>42</sup> 'magisteriali lectionis provocatus penuria' MGH SSRG p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> See T. Head and T. Noble *Soldiers of Christ* (London, 1995) p. 113 Boniface's search for suitable teachers brings to mind Asser's words concerning Alfred's predicament: 'quod maxime desiderabat, liberalem scilicet artem, desiderio suo non suppetebat, eo quod, ut loquebatur, illo tempore lectores boni in toto regno occidentalium Saxonum non erant'. W. H. Stevenson *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (Oxford, 1904) p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> 'magistro traditur Occidrense diocesim docendus' MGH SSRM V p. 227, translated in Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 273.

‘parents...instructed him in letters’<sup>45</sup>; Leudegar was given ‘an invigorating upbringing’ by his uncle, bishop of Poitiers; Austreberta’s parents ‘gave her strict masters for her instruction’.<sup>46</sup>

Actual learning methods can for the most part only be guessed at from the evidence provided in *vitae*, although the repetition of certain phrases offers some clues. It would seem logical that in an age when book-production was a lengthy and costly business, and books were consequently scarce, that memorization was an important educational tool, and might deliberately be fostered in children. The capability of young children to commit vast amounts of information to memory was certainly not lost on medieval educators - prodigious memory is but one facet of the *puer senex* topos as we have seen, and is quite frequently attributed to child saints. Sturm ‘learned the Psalms by heart and mastered many books by repeatedly going over them in his mind.....[in order] to fix in his mind by continual reading the Old and New Testaments’<sup>47</sup> Regarding Leoba, ‘whatever she heard or read she committed to memory’.<sup>48</sup> Anstrude ‘exercised her capacious memory for reading and listening, training herself in the mastery of learning’<sup>49</sup> A good memory was no doubt a distinct advantage, and quite possibly an essential characteristic of any individual who might develop a reputation on account of their learning. The ‘infant’ Rusticula’s memory is certainly seen as miraculous: ‘while the infant was learning the psalms, she fell asleep, as children do, leaning against the knee of one of the sisters who whispered

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<sup>45</sup> ‘nutritum diligentia litteris ecclesiasticis mandavit instituti’ MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 241, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 105. We should note that the persons teaching him were ‘nutritum’ rather than ‘parentes’: his true parents rather than other members of his kin.

<sup>46</sup> ‘magistris strenuis imbuenda traditur’ AASS Februarii 10 p. 420, translated in J. A. McNamara and J. E. Halberg *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham and London, 1992) p. 309.

<sup>47</sup> MGH SS II pp. 365-77.

<sup>48</sup> ‘audita vel lecta memoriae commendans’ MGH SS XV p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> ‘legendo capax memoriae, exercens se etiam in magisterio doctrinae’ MGH SSRM VI p. 66, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 291.

the psalm in her ear. When she awoke, she recited it by heart as though she read it.<sup>50</sup> We might recall Alfred's miraculous feat apparently completed before he had been taught to read. His mother offers a beautiful illuminated book to whichever of her sons is able to understand and recite it the fastest. 'Taking the book from her hand, he immediately learned it. Having read the book, he took it to his mother and recited it.'<sup>51</sup> While we might attribute at least Rusticula's precocity to subliminal learning rather than divine assistance, it seems clear that the Psalms, and indeed other holy texts, were being learned by rote. We might imagine that it was the soft rhythm of the poetry, recited by the supervising nun, which caused the child to fall asleep. The consistent mentioning of the Psalms, in particular, would also seem to indicate that these were the first texts a child was expected to tackle. Even those with limited education were expected to know their Psalter; McKitterick notes that it was used to teach children to read.<sup>52</sup> Religious texts were evidently memorized and then digested at length: returning to Sturm we see the fruits of his labour: 'after he had learned the psalms by heart and mastered many books by repeatedly going over them in his mind, the boy began to understand the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures.'<sup>53</sup> It has been argued that the capacity of the young for memorization was increasingly recognized as being an aspect of their particular stage of development, and that their capability in this area would decrease as they grew up. Boynton's research into customaries of the central middle ages leads her to remark: 'Apparently younger children were expected

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<sup>50</sup> 'dum infans psalmos pararet, et ut adsolet infantia, sompno occuparetur, recumbens in genua uni de sororibus, psalmum et ipsa in aure dicebat. Quae mox ut expergefata fuisset, tamquam si eum legisset, ita memoriter recensebat' MGH SSRM IV p. 342, translated in McNamara & Halberg *Sainted Women* p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> 'tunc ille statim tollens librum de manu sua magistrum adiit et legit. Quo lecto matri retulit et recitavit.' Stevenson *Asser's Life of King Alfred* p. 73. Alfred is subsequently taught to read his Psalter, which was normally the first text attempted: see note 494.

<sup>52</sup> McKitterick, *Books, Scribes and Learning* p. 154.

<sup>53</sup> MGH SS II pp. 369.

to learn liturgical texts aurally, while older ones needed the visual prompt of a book<sup>54</sup> It is not always clear in these *vitae* whether children were learning by hearing texts read or sung aloud, or whether they were engaged in individual, necessarily text-based, study. Rusticula, as an ‘infant’, was evidently being educated aurally when her sleepiness resulted in a miracle, but in the majority of other *vitae* it is impossible, even when personal reading seems to be indicated by the text, to ascertain with any certainty the age of the child concerned. At any rate, it seems logical that only the most elementary aspects of monastic training were given aurally, *lectio Divina* being such a fundamental aspect of monastic life.

### Life as as oblate

Of the 38 *vitae* used here, seven concern the careers of oblates. Despite the fact that these constitute only one seventh of my total sample, it is appropriate that a study of childhood should give much attention to a practice which exclusively concerns children, and moreover one which is so characteristic of medieval monastic life and therefore indicative of contemporary ideas. We have seen in Chapter Three how a child might be offered as a living sacrifice to a monastery, the motives behind this practice and the age at which it might occur.<sup>55</sup> However, the *vitae* in question contain tantalisingly few details of the young saints’ subsequent upbringing within monastic confines. Hagiographers familiar with the process of oblation, writing for communities which may well have contained a large number of children, had no need

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<sup>54</sup> Susan Boynton quotes the Fruttuaria commentary of c. 1100 regarding lessons with a cantor ‘no-one looks at the book there, except a boy who is so old that he cannot learn otherwise’. The same commentary, making allowances for the education of novices (i.e. adults entering the monastic community), prescribes each to be given a Psalter and a hymnary for private study. ‘according to the Fruttaria commentary, teachers avoided using books as a primary support for children, but depended upon them for the education of novices.’ S. Boynton ‘The Liturgical Role of Children in Monastic Customaries from the Central Middle Ages’ *Studia Liturgica* 28 (1997) p. 11-12.

<sup>55</sup> See Chapter Three pp. 84-8.

to spell out the specifics, and might concentrate instead on the virtues which illuminated the lives of the child saints rather than the shadows of everyday life which we struggle so hard to see. In order to shed light on those half-seen details, we need to look outside the *vitae*.

While the Rule of St Benedict makes only generalised prescriptions for the upbringing and education of oblates, the Carolingian commentaries, and particularly the ninth-century Hildemar commentary, provide much more detail.<sup>56</sup> Although he apparently composed the commentary at Civate (sic.) in Northern Italy, Hildemar was originally a rather accomplished monk of Corbie, well acquainted with the large Frankish monasteries and their concerns.<sup>57</sup> His work concerns male oblates, commencing with their offering, preferably by their father, before witnesses at the altar during Mass. Although he comments on the confusing use of childhood terminology in the Rule itself, his own is subject to variations, although he is evidently well-acquainted with Isidore of Seville's time-scales for the various stages of life, and occasionally makes use of these.<sup>58</sup> Female oblates he fails to mention; we might assume along with Riché that the education of males and females differed little, and based on the few details found in these *vitae*, as discussed above, the jury is still out, but we cannot know for sure.<sup>59</sup>

Hildemar's work details the special arrangements made for the weaker members of the monastic community hinted at in the Rule, which he interpreted as requiring an extra meal every day, although with smaller portions than the healthy adults were given. At least some of them ate meat, which was forbidden to the adult monks but deemed necessary, by Hildemar at least, for the proper development of

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<sup>56</sup> See DeJong 'Growing up in a Carolingian Monastery' pp. 99-128.

<sup>57</sup> DeJong 'Growing up in a Carolingian Monastery' p. 101.

<sup>58</sup> For a full discussion of the various medieval schemes of the Ages of Man, see Chapter Two pp. 52-4.

<sup>59</sup> Riché *Instruction et Vie Religieuse* pp. 211-2.

children, especially those under the age of six.<sup>60</sup> The 816 Council of Aachen had made an attempt to restrict the consumption of meat to those oblates who were ill; Hildemar disagreed with their restriction and delegated responsibility for the childrens' diet to the cellarer, who was required to ensure 'that the children were fed in accordance with their age, that they ate regularly, but did not receive large quantities at any one time.'<sup>61</sup> Leoba grew up at Wimborne under Tetta, whose regime seems likely to have been stricter than Benedict's Rule, and we see in her *vita* some concern regarding the girl's food intake: 'She exercised such moderation in her use of food and drink that she rejected dainty dishes and the enticements of sumptuous fare, and was satisfied with whatever was placed before her.'<sup>62</sup> Her *vita*, composed at Fulda before 837, predates the commentary but not the Council of Aachen. While it is possible that it alludes to the council's pronouncement in its unusual level of culinary detail, it is perhaps more likely that it is modelled instead on other *vitae*. None of the other texts in this sample reveal such interest in a saint's eating habits, although the phrase could be taken as equivalent to a rather common idea, that young saints, especially but not exclusively girls, should eschew fine clothes and trinkets.

Hildemar's attitude to childhood exhibits a certain ambivalence, similar to that found in the majority of monastic writers of the time.<sup>63</sup> On the one hand, the child is innocent and malleable, and for this reason a structured monastic life is an ideal upbringing, fostering only positive character traits and mental attitudes. We have seen this attitude in practice already in the *Vita Willibrordi*: 'his father gave him to the church at Ripon...so that living in a place where he could see nothing but what was virtuous and see nothing but what was holy his tender age should be strengthened by

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<sup>60</sup> DeJong 'Growing up in a Carolingian Monastery' p. 104.

<sup>61</sup> DeJong 'Growing up in a Carolingian Monastery' p. 104.

<sup>62</sup> 'Cibi autem et potus ita temperavit usum, ut contemptis deliciis et escae lautioris illecebris, his tantum, quae dabantur, contenta, nihil amplius requireret' MGH SS XV pp. 120.

<sup>63</sup> In this regard he mirrors Isidore, Smaragdus and Origen.

sound training and discipline.’<sup>64</sup> He was of the belief that childhood habits cast long shadows: the hungry child would become the greedy adult, and we can see this notion in particular informing his prescriptions regarding the childrens’ diet. Our *vitae* consistently reinforce the view that the detachment from the secular world that oblation offered produced individuals who were single-minded in their faith. Leoba ‘was taught with such care by the abbess and all the nuns that she had no interests other than the monastery and the pursuit of sacred knowledge’.<sup>65</sup> Bede’s *Vita Cuthberti* quotes the prophet Jeremiah to make what is in essence the same point: ‘it is good for a man to have borne the yoke in his youth; he shall sit in solitude and be silent because he will raise himself above himself’.<sup>66</sup> ‘By assiduous application to his daily duties and continual attention to his studies’ Willibald ‘disciplined his mind with such vigour and firmness that he made unbroken progress in the way of monastic perfection’<sup>67</sup>

The 816 pronouncements at Aachen characterized childhood and youth as ages exhibiting a strong tendency towards sin, and Hildemar also seems to have adhered to this view.<sup>68</sup> The Benedictine notions of *custodia* and *disciplina* were worked up into a programme of supervision and discipline which was designed to leave nothing in the young monks’ development to chance. Oblates were to be supervised at all times, everywhere they went, and Hildemar claims that he had already seen this kind of preventative system in place in other monasteries. De Jong notes that he may have

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<sup>64</sup> ‘ut fragilior aetas validioribus invalesceret disciplinis, ubi nihil videret nisi honesta, nihil audiret nisi sancta’ MGH SSRM VII p. 118.

<sup>65</sup> ‘et tantam abbatissae cunctarumque sororum curam erudiebatur, ut nihil aliud praeter monasterium et caelestis disciplinae studia cognosceret’ MGH SS XV pp. 121.

<sup>66</sup> ‘bonum est viro cum portaverit iugum ab adulescentia sua, sedebit solitarius et tacebit, quia levabit se super se’ Bede’s *Vita Cuthberti* B. Colgrave *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940) p. 154, translated p. 155 (Lamentations 3:27-8).

<sup>67</sup> ‘divinis litterarum studiis inhaerendo die noctuque eatenus vigeret, et rectitudinis rigore mentem edomaret, ut de die in diem ad melioa caelestis militiae instrumenta proficeret’ MGH SS XV Vol. I p. 84.

<sup>68</sup> M. DeJong *In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996) p. 105.

been referring to Corbie, or perhaps ‘Hildemar based his idea on current practices which had long been in vogue.’<sup>69</sup> She also notes that in contrast to the Rule, Hildemar places far more importance on *custodia* than on *disciplina*; ‘it is clear that he saw punishment as medicine. The medicine was only to be administered when all preventative measures had failed.’<sup>70</sup> We are, naturally, highly unlikely to find incidents of discipline in *vitae*, although we do very occasionally see young monks and nuns in the company, or possibly *custodia*, of their elders.

### **The Transition to Adulthood**

Often imperceptible in these *vitae* is the point at which the child becomes an adult, and excludes him or herself from further attention here. Hildemar may offer some clues as to monastic notions of when a child became a man: his commentary states that children of fifteen were to eat the same diet as adult monks, although De Jong questions whether he considered them to have grown up at this age. ‘He only remarks that a fifteen-year-old should content himself “just like one of the adults”’.<sup>71</sup> His contemporary and fellow commentator, Smaragdus, followed the Rule of the Master which restricted ascetic demands on children until their sixteenth year. Benedict’s Rule states that *custodia* is to persist until a child reaches the age of discretion, and refers to the group of children under supervision as ‘children up to fifteen’,<sup>72</sup> and Hildemar expands on this notion of discretion by delineating the concept of *aetas intelligibilis* – the age at which a person could understand the meaning of excommunication, ‘that is, when they had learnt to fear it’.<sup>73</sup> Fifteen was, according to Hildemar, the minimum age at which this might happen, in which case

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<sup>69</sup> DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 107.

<sup>70</sup> DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 107.

<sup>71</sup> ‘sicuti unus de maioribus’ DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 104.

<sup>72</sup> ‘infantes usque quindecim annorum aetates’ DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> M. DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 108.



the young monk might be released from close supervision, although if his behaviour did not indicate this kind of maturity, then he remained under *custodia*. Excommunication would involve some measure of exclusion from the monastic community, and for it to act as a deterrent required both the desire to remain part of the monastery, adhering to its restrictions, and the ability to live according to the Rule without constant supervision. Hence, Hildemar reckoned ‘maturity was a condition of mind which was not automatically acquired at a specific age, but was expressed in a conformity of behaviour.’<sup>74</sup> Young monks might be well past what we might consider to be their ‘childhood’ before their supervision was relaxed, although we naturally would not expect to find young saints, particularly those characterized by the *puer senex* topos, lingering long under *custodia*.

These ideas would seem to complicate rather than clarify the determination of the end of childhood in hagiographic writing where oblates are concerned. We might instead look for evidence of a youngster’s profession, the point at which they ceased to be a novice and became a full member of the monastic community. This kind of detail is, however, suspiciously absent from any of the *vitae* examined here, and the reason for this becomes clear when we consider Hildemar’s attitude to the commitment of oblates: not only does he, along with many of his contemporaries, believe the parental vow to be irrevocable, but he makes no mention of a confirmation of this vow when the oblate reaches that elusive ‘age of discretion’. ‘From the moment of their oblation, children were full members of the community, and would always remain so.’<sup>75</sup> For example, the infant Willibrord ‘received the clerical tonsure and made his profession as a monk’ and ‘was trained along with the other

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<sup>74</sup> DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 109.

<sup>75</sup> DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 102. Smaragdus & Hrabanus Maurus also saw oblation as irrevocable. Confirmation of monastic vows as an adult may have been the product of eleventh century church reform.

adolescents'.<sup>76</sup> His profession was made by his parents at his oblation: he was still a youth after it and would remain so for some time. In the case of oblates, therefore, we must rely on text rather than incident to provide us with a point at which childhood ends. In some cases we are fortunate: the *Vita Willibaldi* seems quite clear as to the point in the narrative at which Willibald is no longer a youth. 'When he had outgrown his infantile delight in pranks, and his boyhood mischief, and the immodest enticements of that self-indulgent age... he at length came to adolescence'.<sup>77</sup> Although no specific age is mentioned, and we cannot necessarily rely on Huneberc's use of terminology to provide us with one, she is evidently telling us that Willibald had attained the age of discretion and his actions henceforth are to be considered the deeds of an adult. It has already been mentioned how this passage seems to contradict everything she has previously said regarding the character of the exceptionally holy child; she rather clumsily utilises a common childhood stereotype in order to provide her plot with punctuation.<sup>78</sup> Alcuin similarly details Willibrord's attainment of manhood: in 'the twentieth year of his age' Willibrord is still referred to as a 'youth' and is still seeking education.<sup>79</sup> It is not until twelve years later that Alcuin considers him grown-up, although this rather excessive period of adolescence, even by medieval standards, might be explained by the method of Alcuin's reckoning. Willibrord's 'mature age of manhood' was apparently linked with 'the full age of Christ', which we might assume to be thirty-three years.<sup>80</sup> However, if Willibrord was nineteen when he sought Irish teaching, then twelve years later he would have been thirty-one.

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<sup>76</sup> 'puer clericatus accepit tonsoram et pia professione monachum se fecit esse, et inter ceteros eiusdem sanctissimi monasterii adolescentes enutritus' MGH SSRM VII p. 118.

<sup>77</sup> 'Cumque aliquanti temporis intercapedine transacta, post illa infantilis eius oblectationis ludicra, et pueriles incentivorum lascivias, et illecebrosas luxuriosae aetatis petulantias ... ad lanuginem, et pubertatis adolescentiam pervenisset.' MGH SS XV vol I p. 86.

<sup>78</sup> See Chapter Three for details.

<sup>79</sup> 'ad vicissimum aetatis suae annum adoliscente proficiente' MGH SSRM VII p. 118.

<sup>80</sup> 'donec occurreret in virum perfectum et in aetatem plenitudinis Christi' MGH SSRM VII p. 119.

Although Alcuin may at this point have been referring to the age at which Jesus is reckoned to have begun his mission, rather than his much-quoted age at crucifixion, a logical parallel considering the fact that Willibrord was now ready to begin his own life's work, later text confirms Willibrord as thirty-three when he begins preaching, so we must assume that the desire to study in Ireland predated his period of study there. At any rate, Alcuin's late attribution of manhood has religious significance and should not necessarily cause us to stretch childhood's boundaries into an individual's third decade.

In many *vitae* the cutoff point is clear, although the age at which this occurs remains elusive. We read of Sturm, following a recital of his boyhood virtues, that 'after a certain length of time he was, with common consent, ordained priest'.<sup>81</sup> In some cases a child seems to mature mid-sentence, as in the case of Leudegar: 'Fully accomplished in the various studies that lay noblemen are wont to pursue, he shone in all the disciplines and was chosen to shoulder the task of being the archdeacon in Poitiers.'<sup>82</sup> The *vitae* of female oblates are similarly troublesome. Geretrud is apparently made oblate, 'handed over' to a monastery, and put 'in charge of the holy flock of nuns' in one action: this cannot have been the case, but the hagiographer unfortunately provides no details of Geretrud's sacrificial life before she shouldered adult responsibility. Rusticula's *vitae* provides a little more detail, as we have seen, but moves directly from her miracle of learning as an 'infant' to her appointment as 'mother' when the abbess dies.<sup>83</sup> Hildemar describes a probationary period for young monks who were reckoned to be ready to leave *custodia*: entrusted to the care of an older monk, the boy was to be supervised and gradually detached from his former

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<sup>81</sup> MGH SS II pp. 369.

<sup>82</sup> 'copia erat repletus, fuisset strinue aenuitris et ad diversis studiis, quae saeculi potentes studire solent, adplene in omnibus disciplinae esse lima politus, in eadem urbe ad onus archidiaconatus fuit electus' MGH SSRM V p. 283, translated in Fouracre & Gerberding *Late Merovingian France* p. 217.

<sup>83</sup> MGH SSRM IV p. 343.

companions. His progress was reported upon after a year at most, at which point he might be admitted into the adult group. Hildemar mentions no rite of passage which marked this transition into adulthood, and we see none played out in any of the *vitae* considered here, but it may well have been the case that some ritual defined the moment at which the oblate took up his new, and potentially somewhat elevated, position in the community.

The Rule of Benedict recognised one hierarchy of monks; ‘the position of the monks therein was determined by their date of entry to religious life, by their general conduct, and by the abbot’s evaluation of it.’<sup>84</sup> *Aetas non discernat ordines*: thus children might rank above or below adults, and oblates, considering their early entry into monastic life, had a distinct advantage. The monastic round provided another opportunity for a child to be promoted: on Sundays and other holy days the oblates were required to take part in the liturgy, singing the first of the twelve lessons. If an adult monk was not good enough to sing the Psalms, a child might be chosen to take his place, although Hildemar restricts this promotion to the duration of the office.<sup>85</sup> It was Gallus’ ‘marvellously sweet and agreeable’ voice which earned him a promotion which led to the royal court: ‘the blessed bishop Quintianus came to the monastery and heard him sing, and did not allow him to stay there long.’<sup>86</sup>

Hildemar disagreed with the ‘*aetas non discernat ordines*’ structure and ranked monks under *custodia* differently from the rest, although his system of ranking within the resulting two groups may well have been the same. Once a boy had matured sufficiently to enter the adult hierarchy, i.e. those outside the confines of *custodia*, his date of *oblation* would determine his position in the monastic hierarchy.

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<sup>84</sup> DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 109.

<sup>85</sup> DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 113.

<sup>86</sup> ‘beatus Quintianus episcopus ad eundem monasterium veniens cantatem audisset, nom eum permissit ultra illuc reteneri’ MGH SSRM I Vol. II p. 231, translated in James *Life of the Fathers* p. 34.

On entering adulthood, an oblate by virtue of his long monastic service was granted a kind of instant promotion.<sup>87</sup> Reuter notes that oblates ‘were almost predestined to leadership in the church’.<sup>88</sup> This reckoning of seniority might possibly be behind some of the instances in these *vitae* of apparently rather young abbots and abbesses, such as Rusticula’s seamless transition from infant to mother. This kind of ascension in rank – although perhaps less meteoric than Rusticula’s – might have seemed the norm to her contemporaries.

Having finally left the years of childhood behind, what characterizes the description of *pueritia* in this sample of *vitae*? This stage of childhood is certainly most prevalent among the texts examined here: the entire sample mentions incidents which may be related to boyhood or girlhood. While *infantia* set the scene for a holy Life, presenting the young saint as sanctified from birth and prefiguring his or her future career in a variety of ways, *pueritia* is concerned with many of the pivotal experiences of growing up: the commencement of education, the attainment of legal majority, the possibility of leaving one’s parents to be fostered in the house of a stranger and every individual’s realization that the prospect of marriage is looming on the horizon. That *pueritia* features more commonly than *infantia* within this sample seems logical considering this catalogue of important events, although the importance of the earlier stage of childhood in many of these *vitae* should not be forgotten. From this body of *vitae*, then, it is to some extent possible to reconstruct an individual’s experience of boy or girlhood, according to their hagiographer at least, and a variety of hagiographic themes are clearly identifiable in the *pueritia* of young saints.

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<sup>87</sup> DeJong *In Samuel’s Image* p. 110.

<sup>88</sup> T. Reuter (ed) *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St Boniface and the Church at Crediton* (Exeter, 1980) Introduction p. 23.

## Conclusions

There can be no doubt that Anglo-Saxon and Frankish hagiography composed between c. AD 400 and AD 1000 has proved a useful tool for the investigation of childhood in the early medieval period. This thesis has explored contemporary ideas about childhood, its developmental stages and its relationship to adulthood, as well as something of the everyday experiences of children in early medieval England and Francia. We can never forget that these texts are considering a most unique kind of child: the holy child, whose portrayal is consciously designed in accordance with a construct of sanctity in the mind of the hagiographer. While it is important to recognise that individual authors work out not only their own ideas, but the concerns of their patrons in these texts, we cannot fail to notice the remarkable congruence of themes of childhood holiness across Western Europe and over the course of six hundred years. Those who would detract from hagiography's usefulness as a source for social and intellectual history cite this 'formulaic' aspect of *vitae*, and discredit the information contained within its pages on the grounds that it amounts to nothing more than pious repetition of a few key characteristics with the names of the protagonists altered to suit. This view may be challenged, in the childhood sections of these texts, even by the sheer variety of terms which hagiographers employ to describe their subjects, and it seems clear that criticism along these lines fails to recognise the sometimes formidable literary skill which went into the creation of many of these texts. Hagiography has its conventions and saintly childhood has its stereotypes, yet it is the subtleties employed by authors within those stereotypes which sometimes give

access to other worlds of meaning and idea. The apparent subjection of individual childhoods to a common ‘model’ or ‘ideal’ may in some cases be more superficial than has been acknowledged, and certainly the childhood sections of the more sophisticated *vitae* among this sample merit closer attention than can be given here.

### **The construction of sanctity**

This thesis has naturally not considered *vitae* which do not contain childhood detail, due to its aims, yet it may be argued from the proportion of the total *corpus* of *vitae* that contain such detail (around one fifth, and higher if only the *vitae* of females are considered) that the inclusion of information about a saint’s childhood is not a hagiographic novelty, but a tried and tested aspect of the construction of sanctity. Roughly one third of my sample of *vitae* contain details which relate to *infantia*. This would seem to demonstrate that infancy had an important part to play in the schemes of many hagiographers, and it may well be the case that the most important function of sections relating to infancy in these texts is their establishment of the saint as an individual set apart from the everyday, a child sanctified in the womb. Such individuals, in this body of hagiography, have been argued to be *exempla* of the power of God’s grace, but not always models which the ordinary Christian can practically base his or her life upon. It seems likely that individuals with access to these *vitae* could and would deliberately emulate the deeds of one saint or another in order to bring themselves closer to God. However, while they might be able to identify with the saint on a practical level, they could not claim for themselves that central tenet of sanctity which is demonstrated in the vast majority of these *vitae*: sanctification before or at the point of birth, made manifest by miraculous portents and visionary dreams. In this way it can be seen that there were limits to the notion of *imitatio*:

ordinary Christians could never quite achieve that unique relationship with God that allowed, by means of grace, the transcendence of nature's laws. This ultimate separation of the profane and the divine seems essential if hagiographers, who were after all in the business of promoting their holy subjects, wanted to ensure that saintly men and women retained an otherworldly allure which guaranteed their popularity and patronage of their shrines.

It may be the case that the ideology which kept the saints apart from their emulators was soon to come under threat. The most notable difference between the *vitae* examined here and their post twelfth century counterparts would seem to be ideas concerning when a child becomes a saint. We have seen from Istvan Bejczy's work that later *vitae* display two distinct views: either a saint is born such, or he or she experiences some kind of conversion around the time of transition from *infantia* to *pueritia*. The *vitae* examined here almost exclusively portray saints as having been sanctified from the moment of birth, if not beforehand. It may be suggested that the increased inclusion of some kind of moment of conversion, as seen in post twelfth century *vitae*, represents a response to contemporary theological concerns. At any rate, the *vitae* used in this study generally display a marked disregard for Augustinian ideas concerning original sin, preferring to ally their saints to the Scriptural precedent of a child born sanctified, that of John the Baptist. This seems to suggest, regarding this aspect of theology at least, that early medieval *vitae* are *not* always functioning as promoters of correct religious thought, but may be more concerned either with the promotion of an essentially unattainable ideal, or, more overtly, with connecting their subjects incontrovertibly to the community of the faithful described in the Bible. In this manner the subjects of these *vitae* correspond to Gregory of Tours' notion of a singular 'life' lived by all saints: all those who reach out to God may be considered



essentially one in Christ. There would seem to be a tension between these two ideas: on the one hand, the choice of living a Christian life is open to all, and allying oneself in this way with the kind of power demonstrated in hagiography, as well as in Scripture, was no doubt appealing. On the other, there remains a kind of two-tier hierarchy among believers, if it is believed that some, through sanctification almost before life has begun, have a more direct access to heavenly power than others.

This is not to say that contemporary ideas on doctrine, or indeed more subtle political concerns, did not influence the ways in which these *vitae* were written: we have seen the conflict between Irish and Roman traditions played out in these texts, with hagiographers exclusively allying themselves to the victorious Petrine way.

Themes common to the portrayal of *infantia* also include the foreshadowing of an individual's future career. Sainly children are not merely chosen, but predestined to further God's kingdom in certain ways, which they often begin to understand at an even earlier age than did the 'boy' Jesus, possibly due to the constraints of the *aetatis hominis* when it came to portraying miraculous infant ability: if a child had reached the equivalent of boyhood or girlhood, *pueritia*, the 'age of understanding', then their precognition of their futures might seem less remarkable.

The notion that saints were born holy also demonstrates the hagiographer's desire to justify, at as early a stage in the *vita* as possible, the less palatable aspects of an individual's true career, especially when that individual was very much within living memory. Thus political wranglings and youthful violence may be glossed over, and apparently spurious claims of martyrdom validated by miracles of infancy which incontrovertibly demonstrate divine favour.

## Issues of Gender

*Pueritia* is the stage of childhood most likely to be detailed in this sample of *vitae*: each of the 38 texts used here contains information which, even if it is not specifically attributed to *pueritia* within the text, can be allied to a child's life between seven and fourteen years. It is in hagiographic portrayals of *pueritia* that it becomes clear that *vitae* are corresponding to sets of contemporary expectations concerning childhood, and that these expectations are to some extent gendered. We have seen that the *vitae* of female saints are more likely to contain childhood information than the *vitae* of males, and it has been suggested that this fact relates to the cloistered, intimate nature of feminine monasticism. In such a setting there is scope for women to be portrayed as gradually developing in Christian merit, moving more slowly from childhood to adulthood, in contrast to the world of men, whose monastic or secular experience might involve dealings with secular rulers and ascension through the ranks of the church, leaving little space in their *vitae* for concentration on childhood.

These *vitae* clearly demonstrate that adult notions of gender-suitable pursuits were promoted in childhood. Saintry girls seem to have been educated differently to saintly boys, although it is not clear whether this is as true within monastic foundations as it is without. While girls seem just as likely as boys to conform to the *puer senex* topos, and praise of their capacity for learning seems equivalent across both genders, it can be argued that the lack of detail provided by the hagiographers of saintly girls concerning the specific details of their education hints at more limited expectations of them in this regard. While several of the *vitae* in this sample seem likely to have been written by nuns, only one makes her identity as a female known, and even then disguises her name in a cryptogram. Aside from its portrayal in hagiography, feminine learning has been seen to be far more developed within the

monastic community than these *vitae* would suggest. That female authors, assuming that some of the texts in this sample have been composed by such, choose to remain anonymous could be seen as prudence on the behalf of these women. The fact that hagiography is apparently lagging behind reality can be seen as a result of the imitation, albeit to a limited extent, of classical and patristic writings concerning women as the weaker and more malleable sex, which leads in these *vitae* to the exhortation of saintly girls to emulate ‘manly’ characteristics, and behave in ‘masculine’ ways, if they are to achieve greatness in Christian (or in secular) life. A female hagiographer might expect her work to be better received if she did not declare her gender, or perhaps she considered the fact that she was a woman irrelevant to her work.

Returning to the children described in this sample of *vitae*, girls are consistently portrayed as pursuing different interests from boys: it is remarkable when they resist the temptations of beautiful clothes, fine jewellery and trinkets, whereas males are tested by the lure of sports and hunting. That both sexes are shown rejecting their worldly inheritance not only demonstrates the fundamental monastic concern of poverty, but also that under Salic law both men and women could inherit the wealth of their relatives, and might therefore be tempted to enjoy a degree of financial independence.

The relationship between sanctity and nobility is constantly attested in these *vitae*, generally within their childhood sections as this is where details of their progenitors may be found. It has been argued that the West Frankish preoccupation with pedigree and the East Frankish comparative carelessness in describing a holy child’s forbears might be due to the varying political circumstances in which these *vitae* are written. While gender determines a child’s experiences and aspirations as

recorded in the pages of hagiography, earthly status predetermined whether one might be written up as a saint at all.

### **Further Research Possibilities**

Having identified a variety of contemporary ideas regarding childhood, as evidenced in these *vitae*, as well as aspects of the construction of childhood sanctity, it would be most interesting to conduct further comparative study of the hagiographic products of different European territories, which would enable more detailed comparison of hagiographic traits and the possible identification of the use of varying models of sanctity in different geographical regions. It has already been mentioned that several of these *vitae*, particularly the *Vita Geraldi*, would benefit from closer individual study if their remarkable portrayals of saintly childhood are to be fully investigated. In addition, further investigation into the potential female authorship of several of the *vitae* in this sample, or certainly rigorous application of Nelson's criteria, which seem scarcely applicable in childhood, across the entirety of these texts might clarify how male and female hagiographers portrayed their subjects and could potentially suggest differences in the portrayal of childhood. These issues, due to our ignorance in many cases of which texts were composed by females and which by males, have not been elucidated here.

### **The Relationship between Saint and Hagiographer**

There remains the question of whether the subjects of these *vitae* could possibly have expressed their own experiences of childhood, or deliberately influenced the manner in which their childhood was presented, in the biography which was composed after their death. We have seen in a great many of these texts

how hagiographers claim to have personally known their subject, and characteristic of this sample of *vitae* from the early medieval period is the *vita* written within living memory of the saint it describes. It is clearly the case that hagiographers who genuinely knew their subjects would have had first-hand access to tales from the ‘real’ childhood of that individual. How they then incorporated these into their scheme was up to them. However, was it possible, or probable, that the subject of a *vita* would be able to determine the shape of his or her Life in a more subtle manner, and might this have an impact on how childhood was presented? Considering Janet Nelson’s interpretation of the *Vita Balthildis*, it is surely possible, if not likely, that the subjects of hagiography managed their public images to the extent that contemporaneous and later hagiographers were influenced, directly or otherwise, by the projected personality of their living subjects. The majority of *vitae* in this sample were apparently composed shortly after the deaths of their subjects; many hagiographers claim to have known their subjects and those who did not are anxious to confirm that they received their biographical information from trustworthy sources. It has been claimed that hagiographers took as their sources Scripture, the writings of the church Fathers and earlier hagiography as their models when constructing their versions of the saintly ideal. It is certain that they were aided and abetted in this exercise by saints who consciously strove to emulate the careers and characteristics of their holy predecessors, but it is also possible that politically-minded individuals went a stage further, and to some extent deliberately determined by their actions or their use of symbolism the image of themselves which their hagiographers would present after their deaths. The relationship of this idea to saintly childhood is unclear and, it seems, virtually impossible to investigate considering the very frequent lack of almost any other contemporary details of the lives of many of the saints discussed here;

Balthild is a case in point. One wonders whether the individuals who became immortalized in hagiography considered their own childhoods as important in the overall scheme of their lives, but even if they did not, considering the fact that the prefiguring of future roles is a key feature of childhood in these *vitae*, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that their hagiographers might have deliberately modelled the childhood sections of their *vitae* around the perceived image of their subject's adult career. If saints deliberately presented their lives within certain contexts, then they may have influenced how they were portrayed in childhood once their earthly careers were over.

Hagiography is a many-layered genre, comprising a smattering of verifiable historical fact, plenty of contemporary religious doctrine and a sprinkling of Biblical models, seasoned with a little social comment and having a definite after-taste of political polemic. Its very complexity and the multiplicity of sources it draws upon, acknowledged and otherwise, render it a unique and versatile tool for the exploration of social phenomena. This thesis has found a variety of ideas about childhood, details of childhood experiences and the construction of childhood sanctity contained within this body of *vitae* which are not accessible via other kinds of source. Thus the spotlights that hagiographers chose to direct on certain aspects of childhood, and the refraction of those strong, deliberate beams, through their constructs, do combine to illuminate the world of the early medieval child.

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