CHAPTER 27

HOLY MEN: WONDERWORKERS, APOSTLES AND SAINTS

Danny Praet

The history of scholarship on biographies of holy men is long and complicated. This chapter will discuss the special relationship between the ancient genre of biography and the religious phenomenon of holy men. We need to start our narrative with a short flashback to the beginning of the twentieth century to understand what was and, for some scholars, still is at stake in this specific branch of studies.

In his *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen*, the German philologist and religious historian Richard Reitzenstein (1906) claimed that there was a very close relationship in Antiquity between biography and holy men. He posited the existence of a specific literary genre, aretalogy, which originally proclaimed the miracles of deities (Isis, for example) and supposedly developed into several biographical subgenres which focused on subjects occupying different positions on the scale of divine versus human beings such as miracle-workers, prophets, philosophers, adventurous travellers (Reise-Aretalogie), and so forth.[1] Still according to Reitzenstein (1914, 1916), these genres had a direct impact on the emergence of Christian literature: the canonical and apocryphal Gospels and acts of the apostles, the acts of the martyrs and the Lives of saints, of which he situated the first examples in Egypt with Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, the anonymous *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, and Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*. Although contemporary scholarship no longer sees aretalogy as a genre, the *Forschungsgeschichte* offers more than a century of discussions about the links between a narrative literary genre (with many possible subgenres) and the many manifestations of holy

---

[1] See also Smith (1971, 1978). For criticism: Cox-Miller (1983: 46-51) and Haase (2006).

men, sages and miracle-workers in the 'pagan' (Egyptian, Greek, Roman, etc.) and in the Judeo-Christian traditions (Cox-Miller 1983, Anderson 1994). In his *Hellenistische Mysterienreligionen* Reitzenstein (1910: 26) also talks about the type of the 'theios anthropos' or 'Gottmensch' as a type of Hellenistic prophet and miracle-worker which influenced the New Testament. Ludwig Bieler published his very influential study (1935-1936) on the divine, god-like man (theios anēr; göttliche Mensch) a few years after the demise of Reitzenstein. Bieler did not focus on literary genre but his concept or ideal type became paradigmatic for several decades, although it also caused much controversy. Bieler's 'theios anēr' was used by Rudolf Bultmann (1951: 130) and his school to explain the Hellenistic influence on the evolution of the early Christian Kerygma of Jesus as the Son of God. He referred to 'a whole series of 'divine men' (*theioi andres*) who claimed to be sons of (a) god or were regarded as such, some of whom were also cultically worshiped. The concept of the holy man does not coincide with the concept of the divine man, but the two clearly intersect. Hence, the centuries-old debates between different Christian denominations, or between believers and sceptics, about the 'real', original message and acts of Jesus and about the identity ascribed to Jesus by his first followers, versus possible 'pagan' influences on the way his life and identity were conceived of during the first four to five centuries cannot be avoided in a chapter about biographies of holy men. To make things even more complex, we will see that some scholars have claimed that the influence went from Christian to non-Christian sources[2]. Other scholars (Holladay 1977, Blackburn 1991, Koskenniemi 1994, Flinterman

---

[2] Even a short sketch of these long debates is beyond the scope of this chapter: each bibliographical reference in this chapter contains its own full bibliography and opens the door to further discussions. Hans-Dieter Betz (1961) compared Lucian and the New Testament. The concept of 'Gottmensch' is presented in three long articles in the *RAC*: by the same Betz (1983), and also by Schottroff (1983) and Grillmeier (1983).

2

1996, Du Toit 1997) have criticised Bieler, arguing that 'theios' has different meanings in the meta- and the object-language. In most ancient sources it simply means 'beloved by the gods' or 'pious towards the gods'; it does not always ascribe a super-human ontological identity to a person. Hence some claimed the concept of 'theios anēr' did not exist as an ancient category of thought. Some even tried to argue that no miracle-workers perceived and presented as something more than mere humans existed prior to the emergence of Christianity. The discussion about the direction of the influence of concepts and literary forms such as biographies of holy men (pagan to Jewish and/or Christian or from Jewish, Christian to pagan), dates back even further when we recall Ferdinand Christian Baur and his 1832 publication on the similarities between the Gospels and the *Vita Apollonii* by Flavius Philostratus (references in Van Uytfanghe 2009).

Terminology of the holy man

The term 'holy man' was made almost canonical by Peter Brown's (1971) study of the social function of Christian saints in Late Antiquity (Elm and Janowitz 1998, Howard-Johnston and Hayward 2002, and, on philosophers, Smith 2005). The term is also used for people who did not have the same or even a comparable social function as Brown's 'holy man'. A critique formulated against Brown and the many historians he influenced, is that they used Christian hagiography as sources which could be 'mined' for historical information. Averil Cameron and others (1991, 2002) called for more attention to the rhetorical aspects of these sources and Brown has remedied this in other publications (1983, 1992), but the focus was never on these texts *as* literature. The term 'holy' is also used to describe non-Western spiritual traditions (Cunningham 2006) and seems to avoid the full acceptance of ecclesiastical authority the modern use of 'saint' can imply, or the theoretical framework the opposition 'sacred versus

3

profane' entails. But it does not solve all the terminological problems, and many attempts have been made to find a more suitable vocabulary. In his seminal article Brown used 'theios anēr' once: in a short comparison of his Syrian Christian charismatic ombudsmen with comparable pagan and Jewish figures.[3] Garth Fowden (1982) wrote an influential paper on 'the pagan holy man'. Mark Edwards (2000a) even used the term 'neoplatonic saints'. Sources documenting the lives of pagan sages, thaumaturges and Neoplatonist philosophers have been called 'pagan hagiography' and even 'gospels' (Van Uytfanghe 2009 for references). None of these terms are ideal and some were no doubt chosen for purely 'rhetorical reasons'. The problems with terms like 'pagan hagiography' or even 'Heiligkeit' in general in the history of ancient religions have been discussed by Dihle (1988) and Auffarth (2012). The evolution of the terms 'hagios' and 'sanctus' in Christian contexts has been amply studied for more than a century (Delehaye 1927; Van Uytfanghe 1987). Suffice it to say here that 'hagiography' was originally only used for the third part of the Hebrew-Greek Bible (Ketubim-Hagiographa) and that several New Testament writings call 'saint' every single adherent to the new faith (e.g. 'hagious' in *Acts* 9:32). Even when the use of the term became more exclusive and when the cult of the martyrs and the saints was well established, there was no formal procedure to decide who was a saint and who was not. The Lives that we will discuss in this chapter were not always written because the people they celebrated were already receiving a cult. In many cases it was the other way around: these texts are often performative, they create holiness or sanctity, in some cases the subject of veneration is even created in the sense that he or she is arguably totally fictional (e.g. Jerome's Paul of Thebes and Malchus). In many cases the Lives of holy men establish holiness without using any of the ancient terms we now translate as 'saint' or 'holy'. Wolfgang Speyer (1985) has tried to

---

[3] See Brown (1971: 92-93) for the comparison, also Brown (1978: 14-15) on 'literary portraiture in the form of biography and autobiography'.

introduce 'numinous men' to avoid a 'Christocentric' terminology, but the obvious reference to the theory of Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) on 'Das Heilige' has prevented this term of being universally accepted. The perspective we will adopt here is not the one of the religious sociology of Late Antiquity, let alone the viewpoint of one or other religious institution or even school in the history of religion, but of literary history. Despite all the problems, we will continue to use 'holy' as the term of a modern meta-language and as an umbrella term for all religious traditions: pagan, Jewish, Christian, Manichaean, etc. We also use it for a wide variety of people and realise that different perspectives are possible on one and the same individual: a holy man in one source can appear as a charlatan in another (Panayotakis e.a. 2015). Some modern publications differentiate between 'philosophers and holy men', 'holy men and saints' or between 'holy men and charlatans', but this again depends on the perspective taken and such distinctions between religious traditions or between levels of *paideia* are always open to debate. As Hadot (2004) has shown, ancient philosophy was sometimes more a way of life than a self-reflective theoretical discourse about man and the world. The turn towards the 'care for the self' (Foucault 1984) in the Hellenistic and Roman period can perhaps explain why we have so many biographies of philosophers (Swain 1997): in fact we have more biographies of religious and philosophical virtuosi than of military and political leaders (Hägg 2012: 282-379). The definition and social-psychological function of ancient philosophy also means the modern, almost exclusively theoretical-discursive concept of philosophy does not fully apply to our sources. Many actions and sayings attributed to ancient philosophers would not even qualify as rational, let alone philosophical in the modern sense of those words, so divisions as the ones cited supra between philosophers, holy men and miracle workers are not ideal. There are also important differences between our sources, even those discussing one and the same philosopher. If one compares the rather sceptical *Life of Pythagoras* contained in Diogenes Laertius' collection *Lives of eminent philosophers* (8.1)

5

with Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* and the treatise *De vita Pythagorica* by Iamblichus one notices clear differences in the attitudes towards the miraculous (Edwards 1993b, Clark 2000, Staab 2002, Von Albrecht 2002, Urbano 2013). We should also add immediately that Iamblichus actually wrote about the Pythagorean way of life (*bios*), but his work also contains a Life (of Pythagoras) in the chapters 2-57. Furthermore, as we said, the definition of philosophy itself is open for debate in Late Antiquity. Christianity presented itself as the true philosophy. Whether Anthony was an illiterate peasant or not, according to Athanasius (*VA* 72) Anthony defeated pagan philosophers in a dispute and advised them to imitate his own lifestyle. Theodoretus of Cyrrhus called the Syrian ascetical athletes in his *Historia Religiosa* (Prol. 2-3) 'philosophers' without any reference to intellectual debates. Perspective is also relevant as we have said. Lucian of Samosata attacked the 'pagan' Alexander of Abonutichus, the 'false prophet' of the god Glycon because he was popular and, in his eyes, a fraud. The career-Christian Peregrinus Proteus was portrayed by him as both a Cynic and a cynic. But his *Life of Demonax* seems serious and positive about the philosopher who ridiculed a holy man: a 'magos' and his charms (23). According to Lucian, when Demonax visited people's houses for food and lodging this was seen as 'almost a divine visitation' (63). There is no question in Lucian's mind that Demonax was anything more than a virtuous - and witty - philosopher. The *Vita Apollonii* - if that is the correct title (Boter 2015) - by Flavius Philostratus had many functions: one of which is apologetic, defending the Pythagorean sage against the accusation of *goēteia*. One man's charlatan is clearly another person's holy man. But if our only surviving source is negative towards a person others clearly saw in a much more positive way, should we include this and other 'charlatans' in our discussion here or not? The miraculous is not a criterion for 'holiness' either (Van Uytfanghe 1981). Rather than accepting Tiede's (1972) strict difference between the two 'types' of the wise man and the miracle worker, we believe that there is a continuum of the miraculous on which holy men can be placed. The

Greek and Latin words 'aretai' and 'virtutes' can be used in the double meaning of moral virtues and of miracles, and some biographies of holy men ascribe both or only one of the two meanings to their subjects. Possidius' *Life of Augustine*, for example, leaves no room for the miraculous but discusses his moral and intellectual qualities, and his ecclesiastical accomplishments. As mentioned above, 'saint' or 'holy' imply an ecclesiastical perspective, which scholars should not adopt, but we should not limit our selection of Lives of holy men to collections of miracles either. The variety of views within ancient Christianity (or should one say 'Christianities') was immense. Not every holy man is a saint, and not every saint is a holy man, and certainly not for every Christian denomination. There are several apologetic and celebratory Syriac Lives of Severus of Antioch, who was a heretic from a Chalcedonian point of view (Brock and Fitzgerald 2013). The sixth book of Eusebius' *History of the Church* is often seen as a *bios* of Origen of Alexandria (Cox Miller 1983), but he was anathematised in 553 and is not formally a saint in any church as far as we know.

The subjects of hagiographical discourse

We will adopt the solution offered by Marc Van Uytfanghe in his many important publications on the hagiographical discourse and spiritual biographies (1987, 1993, 2001, 2009, 2011). He applied the concept of 'hagiographical discourse' developed by Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) to spiritual biographies in general.[4] This allows scholars to study both pagan, Jewish and Christian texts. It bypasses questions of religious ontology, canon and genre. The people presented in spiritual biographies have a close connection to the divine without being full-fledged gods themselves. It can be applied to the canonical Gospels because there are sufficient passages in the synoptic Gospels which do not yet seem to treat

---

[4] See also Gemeinhardt and Heyden (2012: 418) and Gemeinhardt (2014).

7

Jesus as a god (Mc. 10:18, 15:34 and parallels). The pagan and the Jewish-Christian traditions have a different ontology of the divine, although the divide is not always absolute. The ontology of gods and men is hierarchical but potentially dynamic in the ancient Greek and Roman worldview. Demigods exist and both demigods and mere mortals can ascend to a higher status. There are intermediate beings for whom the term 'theios anēr' might not be an adequate, object-language term, but the existence of intermediate beings is well attested from the classical period onwards. In *De Vita Pythagorica* , Iamblichus quotes Aristotle on the Pythagorean philosophy who knew of a theory in which reasonable beings were divided into three categories: gods, men, and then a third category of beings 'like Pythagoras' (31; Most 2016: 40-41) The ontological status of Apollonius of Tyana - god, mortal or 'something like Pythagoras' - was probably deliberately made ambiguous by Philostratus (Praet, Demoen and Gyselinck 2011, Miles 2018). A second important remark is that in the Pythagorean and Platonic traditions, the soul is seen as divine, even in mortals who are not imagined to be 'something like Pythagoras'. This care for the soul as the core of the care of the self, is the main goal of philosophy since Socrates. In Plato we already have the ideal of becoming like god, with the important further qualification 'as far as possible' (*Tht.* 176b: ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν). The philosophical lifestyle, including both practical (e.g. asceticism) and theoretical (mathematics, astronomy, etc.) aspects, allows one to perfect oneself to a higher degree than most people ever achieve. So there are at least two pagan models to establish a link with the divine without claiming that the subject of the biography was a full god. The fluidity of these models is shown by Eunapius in his *Lives of philosophers and sophists* (1, 3-4), where he says, on one and the same page, that Apollonius of Tyana was something in the middle between gods and man (οὐκέτι φιλόσοφος· ἀλλ᾽ ἦν τι θεῶν τε καὶ ἀνθρώπου μέσον), and that Philostratus should have called his book on Apollonius the sojourn amongst men of a god (δέον Ἐπιδημίαν ἐς ἀνθρώπους θεοῦ καλεῖν).

8

In the Jewish-Christian texts the special relation to the divine will rather be expressed by the term 'man of god' than by the acceptance of intermediate beings between the transcendent god and his creation. But the discourse of the angelic life in monastic biographies (Frank 1964) and the philosophical ontology of someone like Gregory of Nyssa, allowing man to either rise to the dignity of angels or stoop to the level of pigs, are two examples of how there was a middle-ground between the polytheist and the monotheist positions. The ontologies are comparable but not identical: the subjects of Jewish and Christian spiritual biographies are not themselves presented as anything more than mortals. Gregory of Nyssa stresses that the spiritual ascension towards perfection is a *progressio ad infinitum*: the ascent towards the divine is infinite, the 'theiosis' remains forever tangential for mortals (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 219). Man must imitate the exempla given in Scripture and hagiography but will never become god. The 'Lives' written by Philo of Alexandria are also good examples. His *Life of Moses* is a combination of paraphrase of the biographical material in the Bible and of biblical exegesis and commentary. Van Uytfanghe (2001) has called it perhaps the earliest extant example of the hagiographical discourse: Moses has an exceptional relation with the deity and ascends to the highest level possible but he remains human. In rabbinic traditions, there are several miracle-workers who show parallels with polytheist figures but there is no biographical tradition comparable to what we have in pagan and Christian Lives.

The apostles

The inclusion of the apostles in this chapter seems to pose several problems. The biographical material about the apostles is mostly contained in what international scholarship calls the 'apocryphal acts'. Although this term clearly stems from a pre-secular period of scholarship,

9

we will continue to use it as a convention. It is impossible to give an overview of the rich biographical literature about the twelve apostles (or rather the thirteen or even fourteen if one includes the apocrypha on Matthias, and the Gospel of Judas Iscariot; Burnet 2014, Pagels and King 2007). These texts resonate in later martyr accounts (see chapter 28 in this volume on Martyrs). It is a survival of a theological approach to treat texts about apostles as a different category than the Lives of martyrs, non-martyred saints or pagan holy men. The apostles are miracle-workers or, in the Christian tradition, god is said to perform miracles through them. One could also discuss the genre of these texts: fluidity seems to be a major aspect. There has been much discussion about the unity of the Gospel of Luke and (the canonical book of) Acts and, as a consequence, of the genre of Acts as history or (collected) biography, the influence of the novel and other genres (Pervo 1987, Futre Pinheiro, Perkins and Pervo 2012, Adams 2013). The so-called apocryphal acts are contemporary with most of the other texts we discuss in this chapter. They have been mostly discussed as fringe-novels rather than biographies, but the fluidity between historical and fictional has long been recognised for the genre of ancient biography[5]. Titles are not a good indication for genre. The material in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* has been further elaborated in the *Life and Miracles of Thecla* (Dagron 1978, Bremmer 1996, Johnson 2006b-c). The Greek *Acts of Andrew* have been translated and made more orthodox by Gregory of Tours in his *Liber de Miraculis Andreae Apostoli*, which was labelled 'Vie d'André' by Jean-Marc Prieur (Bovon 1997: 934-

---

[5] Arnaldo Momigliano (1993: 55) called Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* 'the most accomplished biography we have in classical Greek literature', although it clearly contains fictional elements and should be called a historical novel or an *Erziehungsroman*. The fluidity between novel, history and biography is also very strong in the traditions about Alexander the Great starting with Ps.-Callisthenes (Van Uytfanghe 1988: 70-71, 88). On these texts, see chapters 9 (Humble) and 17 (Jouanno) in this volume respectively.

10

972). The main reason to treat them as separate texts and the apostles as a separate category of holy men is the sheer volume of modern publications discussing them. The same goes, *a fortiori*, for the canonical Gospels and the canonical acts of the apostles. The redaction of many of the apocryphal acts is very complicated and again shows the fluidity or absence of generic boundaries in biographical material from Late Antiquity. The *Acts of Thomas* include the famous so-called Hymn of the Pearl or Hymn of the Soul (108) which was most probably interpolated and has triggered long discussions about its origin and meaning: gnostic or not (Hennecke, Schneemelcher 1991-1992, Bovon 1997: 1418-1419, Bremmer 2001, Luttikhuizen 2001). This fable or madrasha poem, presented as a first-person 'autobiographical' narrative by a prince traveling to Egypt and forgetting about his home country, shows interesting parallels with the Greek Cologne Mani codex which is often called a *Life of Mani* but bears the title *On the origins of his body*. (Koenen and Römer 1988, Cameron and Dewey 1979). The *Acts of John*, which have come down to us in a fragmentary state, have several components: the chapters 94-102 and 109 are probably from a different, gnostic source. The richness and variety of the biographical traditions on the apostles in different languages is well illustrated by the recent publication in the *Series Apocryphorum* of the *Corpus Christianorum* of Thecla and Paul's Armenian dossier by Calzolari (2017), comparing the Acts, Miracles and Martyrdom with the better known Western texts. In English-language scholarship Judith Perkins, Richard Pervo, Dennis MacDonald and others have done a lot to discuss the apocrypha from a literary perspective, assessing the influence of other narrative genres like epic and the novel. One of the most puzzling questions about these texts but also of some other hagiographical texts is to what extent they were meant as entertainment (Huber-Rebenich 1999).

Lives, biography and hagiography

Some scholars seem to use 'biography' for a supposedly reliable Life in a historical-documentary sense whereas 'hagiography' seems to stand for embellishment and/or pure invention. The situation is more complicated than that (Insley and Mellon Saint-Laurent 2018). Talking specifically about the Lives of holy men, some, but definitely not most, of the works bore the title of 'bios' or 'vita': most just offered a name or something elusive like the already mentioned *Vita Apollonii* which was actually just called *Ta es ton Tyanea Apollonion* or *Es ton Tyanea Apollonion* which left (even) the title open to interpretation by the reader (Demoen, Praet 2009, Boter 2015, Robiano 2016, Miles 2018). The genre of this text is notoriously impossible to define: it has been called a biography, a piece of pagan hagiography, a novel, a travel-account, an apology and an encomium and it is, in fact, all these things (Van Uytfanghe 2009). One can interpret the reference to multi-formed Proteus in *Vita Apollonii* 1.4 as generically self-referential. But the problems are not confined to this one or a few works. Koen De Temmerman, in his introduction to this volume, has already addressed the elusiveness of generic genealogies and definitions. The diversity of the Lives themselves seems to refute anything but a nominalist approach. Even supposedly common-sense definitions like the one proposed by Arnaldo Momigliano (1993: 11: 'An account of the life of a man from birth to death is what I call a biography') does not solve the problem since many biographies give no information about the birth of their subject and some were simply written well before the person died. Porphyry, in his *On the Life of Plotinus and the order of his books* , rejects the *topoi* on ancestry, parentage and birthplace, and deliberately inverts the normal order of a biography by starting with the death of his teacher ((1-2; Edwards 2000b). In my view Richard A. Burridge (2004) made a valuable contribution to the debate when he proposed to use Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblances as an escape-clause from the generic problem: he argued that the Gospels would have been recognised as *bioi* by ancient

readers because there are enough features overlapping with other works labeled *bioi*, even if no single *bios* ever offers all 'the' features making it into 'the' ideal-type Life. Hence, we will not distinguish between biographical and hagiographical works.

Formal characteristics

We use hagiology for the modern study of saints and things related to the cults of the saints (Philippart 1994, pace Talbot 2008). Hagiography stands for the writings about saints but it is not a genre. Some English-language scholars use the word 'hagiography' as a countable noun synonymous for 'vita' but we will use it in a much broader sense, including letters, panegyric, funeral orations, poems, epigraphical material et cetera. Hagiography is thus much broader than the Life, 'bios' or 'vita' which, as has been said, is also far from a homogeneous (sub-)genre. Speeches, panegyrics cannot be clearly separated from written biographies about holy men. Libanius' *Lament over Julian* (*Or.* 17) is only about 10 pages long, but his so-called *Funerary Speech* on the same emperor (*Or.* 18) is ten times longer, making it either a written work or the forerunner of Fidel Castro's speeches. The same can be said about Gregory Nazianzen's *Oration* 43 on Basil the Great. Other works are presented as letters, but are actually Lives so filled with oratory *topoi* that we could just as well call them encomia. What is the genre of Jerome's *Epistula* 108, the *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*, which was written as a consolation addressed to her daughter Eustochium but which flows over into the encomiastic and the biographical genre (Mohrmann 1975)? The scholarship has proposed all sorts of subgenres and mixed genres for which names like 'encomiastic Lives' , 'biographical orations' or 'hagiobiography' (Wilson 1998) have been invented, but the reality of the Lives of holy men and women is that there is a constant crossing of boundaries, so much so that Thomas Hägg has remarked that the ancient writers do not give us the impression of knowing

that such boundaries existed, so we should perhaps give them up as modern creations or at least stop conceptualising genres in spatial terms. Instead of thinking of domains with boundaries and overlaps, we should think in musical metaphors where certain themes are repeated but with new material and variations on old themes, played with different instruments, sampled and remastered, and so on.

In search of a definition of spiritual biographies we should also realise that the Lives of holy men and women are not always narrative. Most people think of biography as a subgenre of historiography, possibly influenced by rhetoric and/or by the ancient novel, but a narrative genre nevertheless. This is not always the case for the texts we are discussing here. We have referred to the canonical Gospels (Burridge 2004), but if the hypothetical Q source were ever to materialise we would have a collection of mainly logia attributed to Jesus (Quesnel 2016). This is, as we know, the reality of the Gospel of Thomas, of Philip and other apocryphal writings, which have only the shortest possible narrative framework. Many other 'Lives' are actually similar collections of sayings or apophthegmata with a very limited narrative frame-story about the life of the celebrated sage. The *Life of Secundus Silentiarius* is perhaps an extreme example of a biographical fringe novel (Perry 1964, Morales 2009: 10-11). It has a short frame story explaining why Secundus refused to speak. He once engaged in a philosophical experiment about the sexual morality of women. Testing the hypothesis that all women are whores, he decided to seduce his own mother. Scientifically speaking the experiment went all too well, but the topical *anagnorismos* did not lead to a happy ending: the incest was not actually consummated, but after the philosopher-son had revealed his true identity, his mother killed herself. Secundus then decided he would never persuade anyone ever again: with words or with money. The Life is a clever meta-reflection on philosophy and rhetoric, because his silent way of living, a mix of the Cynic and the Pythagorean *bios*, made him so famous that the emperor Hadrian sought his advice. Refusing to answer even the

14

emperor, the philosopher came close to becoming a pagan martyr, but they finally engaged in a silent, written philosophical dialogue. The rest of the work is a pagan philosophical catechism of questions and answers. The Life became Christianised and was very popular in the Middle Ages but its literary, unorthodox and hybrid character is also reflected by the manuscript tradition in which it frequently occurs without the biographical frame-story.

We have similar works in the ancient Christian tradition: the *Life of Syncletica*, spuriously attributed to Athanasius, consists of 113 chapters with only a minimal biographical framework. The rest contains spiritual advice on numerous matters given by Syncletica. As Castelli (1990: 265) notes, some of these sayings also appear in the apophthegmata-collections, celebrating the sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (Ward 1975: 230-235). We should also look at the problem from another angle. The famous collections of Sayings of the Desert Fathers offer more than simple sayings. In many cases, we have small biographical anecdotes and in some cases, the anecdotes and sayings of a given father or mother amount to a short biography. Some of the individual apophthegmata are longer than some chapters with a single anecdote or a single saying of desert fathers in collective works which are traditionally seen as collective biographies of desert saints like the *Historia Lausiaca* or the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*. Susan Ashbrook Harvey (2008) has rightly spoken of short cameos of saints. But if we have several pages of anecdotes and sayings attributed to, say Macarius the Great, why would we not call that a fringe-biography?

Biographies can also take the form of philosophical dialogue. Early in the twentieth century, a newly-discovered papyrus showed that Satyrus (ca. 200 BCE), who published philosophical Lives, also wrote a *Life of Euripides* in dialogue-form (*POxy.* 1176; Schorn 2004) as part of a trilogy on the three classical Athenian tragic poets. The *Life of John Chrysostom* attributed to Palladius also takes the form of a dialogue, and the same can be said about part of the hagiographical dossier on Martin of Tours. The *Vita Martini* was written

15

during the life-time of the saint and so did not cover the life 'from the cradle to the grave'. Sulpicius Severus later published three letters on the death and burial of Martin, which are usually added to the actual vita in modern editions. But the hagiographer added yet another piece to the dossier: the *Gallus*, a dialogue in the tradition of Cicero and Minucius Felix, with further biographical material about Martin but also including travel-accounts about Eastern monks, miracles and so on. To make the generic fluidity even higher, the whole dossier was paraphrased by two poets of the fifth and sixth centuries who turned it into epic hexameters: Paulinus of Périgueux and Venantius Fortunatus (Labarre 1998). What is the 'genre' of all these writings? Does a biography, rendered into verse, become an epic?

We have many such poetic paraphrases, both cento's and in original verses. The Gospels were paraphrased in Latin by Proba and by Iuvencus. In Greek we have the famous paraphrase of the Gospel of John by Nonnus of Panopolis, the author of the *Dionysiaca*. The latter work is considered mythical epic : but is the paraphrase a biography ? A less known (but in principle comparable) prose and verse dossier exists about the imaginary Cyprian of Antioch, a magician who converted to Christianity and who was confused in the tradition with Cyprian the bishop of Carthage. His 'vita' was one of the sources of the Faust-legend. There are three short Greek texts which constitute a Life or rather a novel: the confession, conversion and passion of Cyprian, in which the story is told of a pagan, enamoured of an unwilling Christian virgin, Justina. Cyprian is called in to work his love-magic but he converts to Christianity and he dies the chaste martyr's *Liebestod* with his beloved virgin. This story was known to Gregory Nazianzen who used it in his Oration 24, *In praise of Cyprian of Carthage*. Prudentius also alludes to his magical past in his *Peristephanon*, Passion of Cyprian (13.21-25). But towards the middle of the fifth century, the empress Eudocia turned the novelistic Greek 'vita et passio Cypriani' into hexameters (Bevegni et al. 2006). Compared with the 'genuine' Latin 'vita et passio Cypriani' by Pontius, this is

generically speaking something quite different, but all these texts can be brought together under the umbrella of 'discours hagiographique'.

Stylisation

We have referred to the debate about the historical-documentary value of spiritual biographies. Whether pagan, Jewish or Christian, they are all characterised by different degrees of stylisation of the historical subject. Jacques Fontaine, in his influential and book-length methodological introduction to the *Vita Martini* (1968), seems to assume there is usually some basis in historical fact from which the stylisation started. We have also mentioned 'biographies' of characters who never really existed and of people about whom biographers knew absolutely nothing apart from a name. In this case stylisation turns into pure invention. Although these spiritual biographies of invented characters contain explicit truth claims, the doubts about the veracity of saint's Lives are not limited to modernity. Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes* made the supposedly first hermit and his meeting with Anthony famous, but it also met with negative reactions. In his *Life of Hilarion*, a saint who is known from other sources, Jerome felt forced to react against critics who had rejected his *Life of Paul* on the grounds that 'he who had always lived hidden, had never existed.' (Prol.) The *Life of Malchus* the captive monk is presented by Jerome both as a 'story of chastity' (*historia castitatis*, 11; ed. Gray 2015) and as an exercise for the writing of a full-scale history of the Church (1.1-3), but it is so reminiscent of the *topoi* of the ancient novel and of Biblical narratives that most modern scholars would call it a work of fiction, although Walter Berschin (1986, 140) seems to accept the historicity of the figure. But even when the biographee is a historical person, the stylisation can be so strong that we cannot trust the biography to give us any reliable information about the reality behind him. The late antique biographies written

about Plato, for example, present him as a god-like figure. Apuleius' *De Platone et dogmate eius*, although not a classical biography, contains many elements of Plato's stylisation into a superior being. The biography added by Olympiodorus as an introduction to the commentary of Plato's *Alcibiades* 1, and the anonymous sixth-century *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* enhance those elements (Layne 2017). Even Diogenes Laertius refers to older traditions that associate the birth of Plato with Apollo, although he also includes negative traditions, like the charges of plagiarism which go back to Theopompus of Chios in the fourth century (see also Dillon 2012 on Aristoxenus' unsympathetic *Life of Plato*). We have already mentioned the different traditions on Pythagoras. A figure sometimes associated with him, Empedocles, is a good example of how the stylisation can start with the self-presentation by the person himself. Diogenes calls the philosopher from Agrigento at times 'boastful and selfish' for which he quotes the line 'All hail! I go about among you an immortal god, no more a mortal' (8.2). He also recorded the hilarious, skeptical story about Empedocles' attempt to confirm his apotheosis by jumping into the Etna. His divine disappearance act supposedly failed because one of his famous bronze slippers was found next to the crater. This story of a self-styled death-apotheosis resonated well into the times of Hölderlin and Nietzsche. The principle of stylisation in Van Uytfanghe's hagiographical discourse is based on Fontaine (1968). Sometimes, the first stage of stylisation can imply self-stylisation by the historical person. The second possible level is operated by other people: the entourage, the transmission of stories in oral or written form. Finally, the biographer in the written text usually makes the largest contribution . It could be argued that Fontaine developed this model to protect hagiography against criticism of historical unreliability (Barnes 2010, Praet 2016). The first and second levels of stylisation are usually impossible to prove but in cases where biblical stylisation is obvious, he could then argue that the holy man himself might have consciously or unconsciously imitated biblical and non-biblical figures or his entourage might

have interpreted him in that way, thus avoiding to ascribe the *topoi* to the literary imagination of the hagiographer. Both in the pagan and the Christian spiritual biographies, one can find identical or very similar *topoi* about the special birth and the death of the hero, about exceptional capacities, etc. But, as we have already suggested, these are not exclusively related to miraculous powers. Spiritual biographies celebrate 'aretai' or 'virtutes' in the double sense of moral virtues and miraculous powers. Here again there are many possible variations and positions: one text will emphasise the moral character over miracles, the other will do the opposite. Both the *Life of Origen* contained in Book 6 of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, for example, and Possidius' presentation of the *Life of Augustine* contain little to no miracles. In other Lives the balance will tip towards miracles with almost no attention paid to the moral character or spiritual teaching of the thaumaturge. Spiritual biographies are not neutral; they are not part of objective historiography. Stylisation implies that the primary function is not to inform the reader in a historical-documentary sense. The aim of the authors is often to establish or defend the authority of the person or the tradition he or she stands for. It can be apologetic or paraenetic: the person, his or her deeds and sayings are offered as an example, their moral character (ēthos) is offered as an ideal for mimesis. As we mentioned, the work of Iamblichus usually quoted with its Latin title (*De vita Pythagorica*) is, not a biography but a philosophical treatise on the 'way of life' (*bios*) initiated by Pythagoras. It was also part of a much larger handbook or compendium in which the Syrian philosopher introduced Pythagoreanism in all its practical and theoretical aspects. The same goes for other works in the Platonic and Pythagorean traditions: they are introductions to a curriculum. Sometimes the author feels the need to defend and praise the biographee, as is clear in the so-called *Life of Apollonius*. These apologetical and panegyrical aspects of spiritual biographies imply that there is also a positive selection of features whereas the negative traits of the characters are ignored or refuted as slander.

19

Conclusion

Spiritual biographies are performative texts. One rarely becomes a general because someone writes a text claiming you were one. In the case of spiritual authority and exemplarity there are many examples of characters who were established as holy men by the texts written about them. Some of these were totally invented by the authors, others lived in such a distant past or the information was so scarce or the intention of the authors were of such a nature that nothing can be accepted as historically reliable. These texts were written to serve a purpose: examples for moral mimesis, establishment of spiritual or philosophical authority, or the promotion of a cult with all its implications of power and wealth. There is no formal unity: spiritual biographies exist in prose and in verse, in narrative and in dialogue-form, as letters and speeches, they can be very short and very long, contain many or few miracles. Aretalogy was never a real genre, but these text are focused on exceptional people and their 'aretae' or 'virtutes' in the double sense of miracles and virtues.

Further reading

On writing spiritual Lives, Van Uytfanghe (2001) is thorough and foundational. Aigrain (2000) deals with sources, methods and the history of life-writing of saints in particular. On apocryphal writings, Gregory et al. (2015) is the most recent comprehensive starting point; for texts and translations, see Bovon et al. (1997) and Geoltrain et al. (2005).