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## Abbreviations

- AASS *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur*. 68 vols. Antwerp and Brussels: 1643-1940. Repr., Brussels: Culture et civilisation, 1965-1970.
- AH *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*. Edited by Guido Dreves. 55 vols. Leipzig: O.R. Reisland, 1886-1922.
- ANF *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. 1885–1887. Repr., Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980-1983.
- BHL *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Antiquae et Mediae Aetis*, Subsidia hagiographica 6. 2 vols. Brussels: Société de Bollandistes, 1898-1901.
- CCSL *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*
- CCSM *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*
- NPNF *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 28 vols. in 2 series. 1886–1889. Repr., Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980-1983.
- PG *Patrologia Graeca Cursus Completus*. Edited by J.P. Migne. 161 vols. Paris, 1857-1866.
- PL *Patrologia Latina Cursus Completus*. Edited by J.P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris, 1844-1864.

## Introduction

How can you tell the difference between truth and a persuasive lie? In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville (d. 636) expressed a common medieval fear about the danger posed by liars from their ability to ape or abuse truth, since “sometimes falsity is joined to that which is true, and often he who invents false things begins with the truth. Often poison lurks, surrounded by the sweetness of words, and a deceiver simulates truth as he deceives the one beguiled.”<sup>1</sup> Plausibility can be worse than outright falsity, and a skilled liar will take advantage of not only persuasive speech, but resemblance to actual truth, to get his auditor to swallow the potentially dangerous lie. This dissertation investigates the capacity of poison and poison metaphors to express this anxiety about the human ability to distinguish the truth from a falsehood. Things that are described as “poisonous” in the medieval world are not simply destructive, but are dangerous in a way that relies on both deception and adulteration. I argue that poison imagery in the medieval context is a tool adapted to deal with epistemological crises, in that it is used to simultaneously highlight the dangers of verisimilitude and false signifiers and to adjudicate seemingly plausible alternatives. The language of poison provides a vocabulary to think through the problems of deception and hypocrisy and, in the context of medieval hagiography, to attempt to arbitrate competing claims to truth using the medium of holy bodies.

The text at the heart of this dissertation that medieval thinkers use to suggest this possibility of arbitration is from the Gospel of Mark as it was known in the medieval world. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae* 2.30, PL 83:632. “Nonnunquam falsitas veriloquio adjungitur, et plerumque a veritate incipit, qui falsa confingit. Latent saepe venena circumlita melle verborum; et tandiu deceptor veritatem simulat, quousque fallendo decipiat.” Translators or series are indicated throughout when a modern translation is available. If the Latin is provided without a noted translator, the translation is my own.

a text that serves as something of a template for medieval hagiography as a genre, describing and authenticating the true followers of Christ, who can be distinguished by a set of specific miraculous acts described in Mark 16: 15-1:

He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink a deadly thing, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”<sup>2</sup>

Most of the signs of apostleship described in Mark 16 are consequently quite familiar in medieval hagiography. The powers of exorcism and healing, in particular, are hallmarks of sanctity in early Christian literature as well as in their medieval saintly successors. While exorcism, healing and resurrection are well-studied features of medieval hagiography, the ability to drink poison unharmed has received far less attention. I argue that the development of this particular saintly virtue speaks to the nature of discernment and is a medieval strategy to solve the problem of semblance and deception and to make theodicy legible. To situate this argument, I begin first with the exegetical reception of Mark 16 and other biblical and post-biblical

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<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. This particular Gospel text carries complications for the theologian and textual critic, since there are multiple historical variants on the end of Mark’s text. The earliest known surviving Greek documents, plus a number of important Syriac, Armenian and Ethiopic witnesses from the fourth and fifth century, end the text at Mark 16:8. Verses 9-20 as translated above are thus known as the “Longer Ending,” and fierce debate about the authorship and the context of the amendment has been ongoing since the late nineteenth century. Their true provenance, while theologically important, is immaterial to the subject of this dissertation, since the extended text was in circulation by the early second century. It was accepted and cited explicitly by Irenaeus (c. 180) and inherited by subsequent exegetes and theologians. For the entirety of the medieval period under investigation here (and indeed, into the work of Erasmus and beyond) Mark 16:9-20 are treated as the genuine completion of the Gospel of Mark. See in particular Eugene Nida and Robert Bratcher, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (Germany: Brill, 1987), 506; Suzanne Watts Henderson, “Discipleship After the Resurrection: Scribal Hermeneutics in the Longer Ending of Mark,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 63 (2012): 106-124; Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 228.

precedents for what I call the “poison trial.”<sup>3</sup> I then synthesize the scholarship that I see my project as being in conversation with before concluding with an overview of the argument that follows.

### **Mark 16:18 Medieval Exegetical Reception**

While the hagiographical material that forms the bulk of my evidence and basis for analysis frames “drinking a deadly thing” as miraculously consuming and surviving literal poison, this is not the only frame of interpretation available. In commentaries on Mark 16 there is an early and fixed tendency to understand “drinking poison” as “listening or reading.” Gregory the Great makes this exegetical move in his 29<sup>th</sup> Gospel Homily, in which he interprets “drinking poison” as being swayed by bad counsel. His gloss on the Mark text is that such miracles were necessary for the flourishing of the early church, but that such things did not occur in his time and this ought not to be considered a reason to doubt. Rather, “Holy Church does daily in a spiritual way what it did then materially...when they hear dangerous advice but are not drawn toward wicked deeds, they are indeed drinking something deadly, but it will not harm them.”<sup>4</sup> His gloss is adopted first by Bede and then the Carolingian commentators, and is incorporated into the *Glossa Ordinaria*.

There is another line of interpretation that frames the problem not as “bad counsel” in a

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<sup>3</sup> In using the phrase “poison trial,” I am consciously invoking the logic of the medieval juridical ordeal. However, I am aware of no evidence that a poison trial in the vein of a trial by combat or an ordeal by hot rod was ever practiced in medieval Europe in the regions and eras under study here. For the logic of proof and miracle in the juridical ordeal, see Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Thomas Head, “Saints, Heretics, and Fire: Finding Meaning through the Ordeal” in *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts*, eds. Lester Little, Sharon Farmer and Barbara Rosenwein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 220-238.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 229.



general sense, but considers theologically problematic speech, specifically. Augustine is an early adopter of this lens. In denouncing the writings of Vincentius Victor on the nature of the soul, he notes that addressee, the presbyter Peter, is probably not the worse for having read them, so long as he can distinguish the profitable parts from that which Augustine has just—at length—repudiated. It is in this context that he warns against letting others, less discerning, read these passages:

Lest in his ornate style they may drink poison, as out of a choice goblet... For what else are hearing, and reading, and depositing things in the memory, than several processes of drinking? The Lord, however, foretold concerning His faithful followers, that even if they should drink any deadly thing, it should not hurt them. And thus it happens that they who read with judgment, and bestow their approbation on whatever is commendable according to the rule of faith, and disapprove of things which ought to be reprobated, even if they commit to their memory statements which are declared to be worthy of disapproval, they receive no harm from the poisonous and depraved nature of the sentences.<sup>5</sup>

By the twelfth century, both Gregory and Augustine's uses of drinking poison as listening are in use; Bruno of Segni, for example, follows Gregory closely through his gloss on Mark 16, but substitutes Augustine's lens by relating the poison-drinking to the writings of heretics: "They drink a deadly thing, but it does not kill them; because, reading books of the pagans or the heretics, and often hearing the bitter, poisonous noise put forth in them, they turn a deaf ear to it, and think nothing of it."<sup>6</sup> Taken all together, the exegetical tradition demonstrates a consistent reading of "drinking poison" as listening to or reading problematic material but remaining unharmed from the exposure. This reading is interesting in that it demonstrates a parallel avenue by which discernment is tied to surviving poison, and emphasis is placed specifically the power

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *De anima et ejus origine* 2.23, *NPNF* 2/5: 342.

<sup>6</sup> Bruno of Segni, *Commentaria in Marcum*, PL 165:332. "Bibunt autem mortiferum, sed non eis nocet; quia paganorum et haeticorum libros legentes, et amara venenosa convicia sibi illata saepius audientes, surda aure transeunt et pro nihilo ducunt."

of deceptive language itself as poison, which is only one potential application of the metaphor in other contexts (see Chapter 1).

There are multiple evocative but not exact biblical exempla that perhaps form the earliest models for the trial of poison. The first of these likewise concerns discernment of hidden danger by holy figures, and comes from 2 Kings 4:38-41—the prophet Elisha and his compatriots are eating a stew in the wilderness, and an unknowing servant has included ingredients that make the stew toxic. The prophets collectively notice the poison, and Elisha renders the meal safe to eat.<sup>7</sup> The second, a model of poison survival without an act of deception or consumption, appears in the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul and his companions find themselves on the island of Melita. Paul, assisting in making a fire, disturbs a viper, which bites him. All around him are convinced he will die, and when he does not, they look upon him as one possessing great and inexplicable power.<sup>8</sup> Paul's story is clearly demonstrating accordance with Mark 16 (“they will pick up snakes with their hands”), but is distinct from saintly examples of poison *drinkers*. Undoubtedly, the ability to withstand venom is demonstrating a related virtue employing similar symbolism,

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Kings 4:38-41: “Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to his servant, ‘Put on the large pot and cook some stew for these prophets.’ One of them went out into the fields to gather herbs and found a wild vine and picked as many of its gourds as his garment could hold. When he returned, he cut them up into the pot of stew, though no one knew what they were. The stew was poured out for the men, but as they began to eat it, they cried out, ‘Man of God, there is death in the pot!’ And they could not eat it. Elisha said, ‘Get some flour.’ He put it into the pot and said, ‘Serve it to the people to eat.’ And there was nothing harmful in the pot.”

<sup>8</sup> Acts 28:1-4: “And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita. And the barbarous people showed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffers not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. However, they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god.”

but the circumstance and thus the parallel is not exact, and it is not cited by later medieval hagiographers as a proof-text. A final biblical precedent of a draught being used to uncover some hidden truth stems from Numbers 5:16, in which a trial of “the waters of bitterness” is employed to uncover adultery; if an accused adulteress drinks a specially cursed draught, she will be fine if innocent, and if guilty, will suffer a painful infertility.<sup>9</sup> The trial in a slightly different form appears in the *Protoevangelium of James*, in which both Joseph and Mary undergo the trial to prove they did not have intercourse prior to the birth of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> All of these precedents form fertile soil for the version of the trial developed in the hagiography, and yet none, with the occasional exception of reference to Elisha, are cited explicitly as precursors or proof-texts in the medieval context. This implies to me that there is something unique about the poison trial, as such, beyond surviving exposure to something deadly or drinking something in an act of vindication and adjudication.

## **Historiographical Overview**

This dissertation sits at the intersection of multiple historiographies and attempts to put them into conversation with each other. In what follows I cover hagiography as a locus of historical analysis and the methodology necessary to treat holy lives productively, the historiography of poison and poison as a metaphor, and issues of epistemology and discernment.

### ***Hagiography historiography***

Modern studies of hagiography rest on the shoulders of Hippolyte Delehaye and, half a century later, Peter Brown, who in very different ways recuperated holy lives as a legitimate

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<sup>9</sup> For the medieval reception of this trial, see Schlomo Eidelberg, “Trial by Ordeal in Medieval Jewish History: Laws, Customs and Attitudes” in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 46/47 (1979): 105-120. On the roots, see Adriana Destro, *The Law of Jealousy: Anthropology of Sotah*, Brown Judaic Studies 181 (Providence: Brown University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> *The Protoevangelion of James* 8, ANF 8:363.

subject of literary and historical inquiry from the positivist dismissals of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Ever since, we have been much occupied with the manner in which *vitae* present, in Thomas Head's words, an "ideal or model of holiness which functioned within a given cultural setting."<sup>12</sup> Tropes of hagiography, shared attributes amongst saints, and clear indebtedness to inherited texts or exempla have enabled scholars to trace and group communities of texts, both temporally and geographically, and to identify how particular arguments for saintly virtue function in particular situations, intellectual traditions and social conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Hagiographies participate in an economy of existing miracles and attributes from biblical exempla, martyrs, saints of antiquity, and contemporary or local saints. The writing, rewriting, excerpting and adapting of holy lives thus provide both an immeasurable wealth of historical insight and particular methodological challenges. In the words of Patrick Geary in his influential essay "Saints, Scholars and Society,"

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<sup>11</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Légendes Hagiographiques* 2 ed. (Bruxelles: Bureaux de la Société des Bollandistes, 1906). In translation as Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962). Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101. It is now a commonplace to trace this history and the interventions of the early-century Bollandist and the late-century scholar. For an account of this, see the introduction of almost every book or dissertation written on the subject of hagiography. A particularly good one appears in "Saints, Scholars and Society" by Patrick Geary, in *Living With the Dead in the Middle Ages* in *Living With the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: the Diocese of Orléans, 800-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 104.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Geary, *Living With the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994). Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Pamela Gehrke, *Saints and Scribes: Medieval Hagiography in Its Manuscript Context*, University of California Publications in Modern Philology 126 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind. Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); David Townsend, "Hagiography" in *Medieval Latin: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide* edited by Frank Anthony Carl Mantello and A. G. Rigg (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 618-638; Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, eds., *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Michael Goodich, ed., *Lives And Miracles Of The Saints: Studies In Medieval Latin Hagiography* (Ann Arbor: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004). For a recent overview of trends in the field, see Samantha Herrick's introduction to *Hagiography and the History of Latin Christendom, 500-1500* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1-12.

“Historians must be formalists...[and] formalists must be historians,”<sup>14</sup> which is to say that any meaning to be found in hagiography must be located in both literary inheritance and contemporary context. In this project I follow the scholarship of the last half-century by reading across multiple saints, across collections and kinds of sources, with the intent of understanding something about the society and beliefs of the people who composed, adapted, and read holy lives. As suggested by Geary nearly twenty years ago, historians have moved beyond reducing medieval *vitae* to their constituent influences or practices of textual borrowing, and beyond seeking some immutable idea of “sanctity” within a long and changeable tradition: “If we want to understand values reflected in the hagiography of a period, texts must be seen in relation to the other texts with which they were associated, read, or gathered, not in relation either to timeless views of Christian perfection or simply to other contemporary hagiographic texts.”<sup>15</sup>

The wealth of material following Geary’s reorientation of the field, however, frequently takes the form of microstudies of hagiographers and their influences in a specific temporal and cultural milieu. I take a different approach by focusing on a specific *topos*, following it through time and space, if not exhaustively, always with the approach of surveying as wide a variety as possible of places reflections of that idea appear. I take as my evidence not only *vitae* or *passiones* that circulated as such—to say nothing of the ongoing scholarly discussion about what devotional purposes to which such collections might have been put in the first place—but a wide variety of contexts in which facets of a holy life might have made an appearance, from hymns to sermons/homilies to artworks to celebratory poetry to liturgical rubrics. I am far more interested in questions of the meaning, form, and purpose of a specific trope *about* holy individuals as it

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<sup>14</sup> Geary, *Living With the Dead*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

moves through eras and contexts, rather than in making specific claims about genre or historicity. What can the poison trial as a constant thread through centuries of hagiography tell us about medieval theories of knowledge, about their intellectual production and adaptation of inherited ideas, or about the contemporary problems that could benefit from holy arbitration?

***Poison historiography: Poison as a metaphor and poison-drinking in Mark 16***

The historiography of poison is diverse and spread over many fields of interest. This project nestles between work done on poison as an epistemological problem, poison as a literal substance and a means of murder in the Middle Ages, on poison as a fruitful medieval metaphor for evil and deception, and on poison-drinking specifically as described in Mark 16.

Modern discussions of poison as a conceptual framework in the history of ideas have at their heart the work of Jacques Derrida, most explicitly in his discussion of the semantic and semiotic ambiguity encoded in the Greek term “pharmakon” in “Plato’s Pharmacy.”<sup>16</sup> Derrida, interpreting Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Phaedo*, highlights the “both-and” quality of a term that can signify both a poison and its own remedy, and the interpretive damage that follows from an insistence on one meaning over the other. The death of Socrates in *Phaedo* must be understood both as the negative result of poison and the restorative good of a catharsis. This instability, to Derrida, is fundamental to actual meaning, which is the result of a productive friction between inseparable opposites, as one can never pull apart the “medicine from the poison, the good from the evil, the true from the false, the inside from the outside, the vital from the moral, the first

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63–171. See for a primer Yoav Rinon, “The Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida I: Plato’s Pharmacy” *The Review of Metaphysics* 46, no. 2 (Dec., 1992): 369-386 and Gerasimos Kakoliris, “The ‘Undecidable’ Pharmakon: Derrida’s Reading of Plato’s Phaedrus,” in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 13, ed. Burt Hopkins and John Drummond (New York: Routledge, 2015): 231–242.

from the second, etc.”<sup>17</sup> The ambiguity of the “pharmakon” is likewise conceptually present in the Latin understanding of the “venenum,” which is a polyvalent term that can encompass medicine, magic, and serpent venom.<sup>18</sup> Augustine, for instance, in his discussion of the substance of evil as part of a refutation of Manicheism, asks rhetorically “Is not hellebore sometimes a food, sometimes a medicine, and sometimes a poison?”<sup>19</sup> My contention throughout this dissertation is that medieval hagiographers and theologians, grappling with this very problem, attempt to apply the Mark 16 as a means of stabilizing the meaning of poison into something that can convey meaning unambiguously.

The most thorough study that treats medieval poison as a literal substance in itself is Franck Collard, *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*.<sup>20</sup> Collard’s primary focus is on poison as a criminal act of murder, and on the medieval understanding of the characteristics of individuals who dispense poison. Poison, by nature of the manner in which it is often administered, is a substance denoting treachery and betrayal, and those who dispense it are thus

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” trans. Barbara Johnson, 169.

<sup>18</sup> In the medieval context, “venenum” frequently becomes synonymous with any “letiferum haustum,” reflecting the lack of specificity of the Mark 16 verse (“si mortiferum quid biberint, non eis nocebit”). Occasionally, specific substances (e.g., aconite, hellebore) are introduced into the text, and in contests with pagan priests, the lethal substance is occasionally created by means of an incantation. See James Rives, “Magic in Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime,” *Classical Antiquity* 22, no. 2 (2003): 313-339; David Kaufman, “Poisons and Poisoning among the Romans” *Classical Philology* 27, no. 2 (1932): 156-167. For classical ideas about honey, the frequent counterpart to poison, see James Andrew Foster and Kathryn M. Keuny, “From the Bodies of Bees: Classical and Christian Echoes in *Surat al-Nahl*” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3 no. 2 (2007): 145-168.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* 2.8.12, PL 32:1350. “Helleborum nonne alio modo cibus est, alio medicamentum, alio venenum?”

<sup>20</sup> Franck Collard, *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*, trans. Deborah Nelson-Campbell (Westport, CT.: Praeger Publishers, 2008); Franck Collard, “Le poison et le sang dans la culture médiévale” *Médiévales* 60 (2011): 129-155; Franck Collard, “Veneficiis vel maleficiis: Réflexions sur les relations entre le crime de poison et la sorcellerie dans l’Occident médiéval,” *Le Moyen Age* 109 (2003): 9-57. See also Hugh Magennis, “The Cup as Symbol and Metaphor in Old English Literature” *Speculum* 60, no. 3 (Jul., 1985): 517-536; Roberte Lentsch, “La Proba: L’Épreuve des Poisons à la Coeur des Papes D’Avignon” in *Les Prelats, l’Eglise et la société XIe-XVe siècles* (Bordeaux : Université Michel de Montaigne, 1994), 155-162.

those who seek to undermine the social order in some way that they can only achieve by stealth—women, servants, Jews, and outsiders.<sup>21</sup> A poison is something that destroys by means of changing the actual substance of the thing poisoned into something like itself, and such people and substances “really deserve the name of *venenum*, defined in the learned treatises as a force opposed to the principle of life, by assimilating the organism into its toxic nature.”<sup>22</sup> While Collard does mention many of the saints under study in this dissertation, his interest in the religious and theological aspects of poison is largely limited to a single frame of reference: heresy.<sup>23</sup>

In this, Collard is not alone. Generally, the scholarship has been most interested in the specific application of poison metaphors to the problem of heresy.<sup>24</sup> Florence Chave-Mahir’s article *Venenum sub melle latet: L’image du poison dans le discours anti- hérétique au Moyen-*

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<sup>21</sup> See in particular David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) especially “Lepers, Jews, Muslims and Poison in the Crown,” 93-125; see also Tzafir Barzilay, *Poisoned Wells: Accusations, Persecution and Minorities in Medieval Europe 1321-1422* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022). Robert Moore correlates poison and lepers in *Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Franck Collard, *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*, 55. Collard followed this foundational work with another specifically on poison as an act of political violence in *Pouvoir et Poison: Histoire d’un Crime Politique de l’Antiquité à Nos Jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), and similarly useful work can be found in volumes edited by Collard, including *Le poison et ses usages au Moyen Âge Cahiers de recherches médiévales* 17, ed. Franck Collard (Paris: H. Champion, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful for Collard’s work in particular for drawing my attention to Samson of Dol, whose life is a subject of analysis in Chapter 4. On the whole, his understanding of the import of poison in hagiography is limited to a fairly straightforward assessment that “the origin of [the power of saints to neutralize poison] is related to the symbolism of poison as a metaphor of evil,” and elsewhere, “for the preachers, poison exists essentially as a symbol of sin or heresy. The “*venenum invidiae*” is more decisive as an idea than as a concrete weapon. Seldom the subject of interpretative discussions, the “*veneficium*” is somewhat stripped of its criminal identity in order to draw attention to its spiritual meaning.” Collard, *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*, 70, 10.

<sup>24</sup> See in particular Emilio Mitre Fernandez, “Muerte, veneno y enfermedad, metáforas medievales de la herejía” in *Heresis: revue d’histoire des dissidences européennes* 25, 63-84. (Carcassonne: Le Centre, 1983) and the influential work of R.I. Moore, including “Heresy as Disease” in *The Concept of heresy in the Middle Ages (11th-13th c.): proceedings of the international conference Louvain, May 13-16, 1973*, ed. W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst. (Leuven: University Press, 1976), 1-11.



*Âge* most explicitly treats the image of poison concealed by honey, the subject of Chapter 1. Her primary interest is examples of the image of poison employed against heretics in the tenth to twelfth centuries as a means of explaining how it came to describe even simple sins in the sermons of the thirteenth century. To trace this change, she returns to the Greek idea of the “pharmakon” so as to demonstrate how preachers correlated the illness of sin with the salutary effect preaching. She thus connects the language of poisoning primarily with that of demonic possession, and dwells on formulas of exorcism that call upon various body parts to expel the poison of the devil from within; often, this takes the form of vomiting a poisonous substance, or in some cases expelling poisonous insects from within the body.<sup>25</sup> My project engages with much of the same themes, although I argue that poison has additional valences. Chave-Mahir ultimately argues for the relatively static and immutably negative nature of the imagery of hidden poison: “La métaphore venimeuse n’innove pas. Elle prend place dans un vocabulaire négatif inspire d’une tératologie abondante, du diable, de la possession démoniaque, de la maladie et de la mort.”<sup>26</sup> My contention is of course not that poison has nothing to do with heresy; the glosses of Mark 16 above have already demonstrated that poison-drinking is closely linked to heresy, and there are innumerable examples of heresiarchs described as “poisonous.” Chapter 1 deals almost entirely with the question of orthodoxy and authority and the application of poison metaphors to contested people and theological positions. My contention is that scholarship on heresy, and of poison as a metaphor in general, frequently rests on straightforward associations

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<sup>25</sup> Chave-Mahir’s article is a meditation on a particular aspect of her larger project, *L’Exorcisme des possédés dans l’église d’occident (Xe-XIVe siècle)*. “L’analogie entre le possédé et la victime du poison transparait à travers certaines descriptions; les effets du poison étant parfois même assimilés à la possession par le démon. Le démoniaque peut avoir ingéré le diable comme une substance nocive.” Florence Chave-Mahir, “*Venenum sub melle latet*: L’image du poison dans le discours anti- hérétique au Moyen-Âge,” in *Le poison et ses usages au Moyen Âge Cahiers de recherches médiévales* 17, ed. Frack Collard (Paris: H. Champion, 2009), 161-172.

<sup>26</sup> Florence Chave-Mahir, “*Venenum sub melle latet*,” 117.

with evil by way of serpents, rather than treating poison as the complex epistemological problem I believe such metaphors to encompass. Far from being a static idea, the meaning of poison and of poison-drinkers is altered and adapted to new contexts.

The most thorough investigation into ancient ideas about poison-drinkers and reflections of Mark 16:15-18 has been performed by James Kelhoffer in *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, in which Kelhoffer traces the connections between Mark 16 and miracle-working in early apologetic literature.<sup>27</sup> As part of this project, he provides an accounting of poison-drinking in antiquity and of early Christian examples of the miracle described in Mark 16:18. In many ways, this dissertation is a continuation of Kelhoffer's project, although the medieval use of the Mark text strays far from its origins as described in *Miracle and Mission*. Kelhoffer also briefly assesses John the Evangelist's poison-drinking in the apocrypha, the medieval reception of which forms the subject of Chapter 2.

The fundamental problem of deception, false appearance, and discernment that underlies poison metaphors is of course not only expressed in one manner only. In particular, the problem of the false appearance of the medieval heretic has drawn significant scholarly attention.<sup>28</sup>

Deceptive appearance is one of the fundamental *topoi* of the heretic identified by Herbert Grundmann in 1927, along with pride, secrecy, and hiddenness.<sup>29</sup> Lucy Sackville, in a

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<sup>27</sup> James Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Karen Sullivan, *Truth and the Heretic: Crises of Knowledge in Medieval French Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Grundmann, "Der Typus des Ketzers in Mittelalterlicher Anschauung," in *Kultur- und Universalgeschichte: Walter Goetz, zu seinem 60. Geburtstag* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1927): 91-107. See also Beverly Maybe Kienzle, *Cistercians, Heresy, and the Crusade in Occitania, 1145-1229: Preaching in the Lord's Vineyard* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001).

comprehensive analysis of tropes of heresy in thirteenth-century polemical literature, traces a shift from a twelfth-century prevalence of depicting heretics as “little foxes,” championed by Bernard of Clairvaux, towards a pre-occupation with falseness of appearance and deceptive piety expressed as a hidden poison. Where to Bernard heretics are “three kinds of foxes, namely flatterers, detractors, and seducers of the spirit, who are skilled and practiced in representing evil in the guise of good,”<sup>30</sup> less than a century later Innocent III declares that “they are innkeepers who mix water with wine, and offer the poison of the Babylonian dragon in a golden chalice to drink, having, according to the Apostle, the appearance of piety, but inwardly denying its virtue.”<sup>31</sup> Sackville concludes that the change comes from a concurrent increase in seemingly pious heretics encountered by Dominican preachers in the south of France. The fear of being misled by the hollow appearance of piety is an entirely consistent application of poison metaphors as I trace them in this project. However, there are plenty of ways in which to experience epistemic anxiety without necessarily passing the borders of orthodoxy. Discussions of poisonousness expressing only the ability of heretics to ape truth elides the many other contexts in which two competing truth claims might be adjudicated via the tool of discernment represented in poison language.

In bringing together these various strands of the historiography, I hope to place the poison trial as a hagiographical expression of the logic of Mark 16 as a focus of analysis in its own right, before returning to the question of what it might tell us about each of these individual spheres of scholarly labor. I thus aim to contribute an additional lens through which to view medieval poison discourse.

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<sup>30</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 65, quoted from Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 132.

<sup>31</sup> Innocent III, *Vergentis in senium*, quoted from Lucy Sackville, *Heresy and Heretics in the Thirteenth Century: The Textual Representations* (Rochester: York Medieval Press, 2011), 164.

## Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 establishes the foundation of poison metaphors employed in questions of truth and authenticity in the formative centuries of Christianity. I argue that certain tools of verification are developed that almost immediately become undermined by their very ability to suggest truth where none exists. The anxiety that such tools, including the practice of citing scripture, professions of adherence to conciliar formulae, and a reputation for learning and piety, could potentially be used not to authenticate but to obscure and confound is expressed through the language of concealed poison. A remarkably consistent expression of this epistemological uncertainty is that of poison hidden under the cover of honey, and by the fifth century this metaphor has been thoroughly adapted from its classical roots to fit the needs of theologians, and later, hagiographers.

Chapter 2 performs two functions. The first serves the purpose within the broader argument of the dissertation of establishing the poison trial of John the Evangelist as a prototype of lives in which a saint is openly confronted with a dangerous drink, without any valence of concealment or deception. The second function of this chapter is to trace the transformation of poison-drinking from a vignette in an early apocryphal text about John to a fundamental vehicle for making theological claims about John and his virtues. Using hymns, liturgical rubrics and homilies, I argue that poison-drinking becomes central to conveying both John's corporeal inviolability and his privileged position of authority as one who drank wisdom from the breast of Christ. I also argue that the shift in the iconography of John by the thirteenth century to that of John holding a poisoned chalice is evidence not of the popularity of contemporary collections of saint's lives like the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacques de Vitry (c.1260), but of a much longer process by which the early apocryphal narrative of the poison trial becomes central to the liturgical

celebration of John's December 27<sup>th</sup> feast day. As a result, John's chalice is embedded with signifiers of authentication that are well-known and accessible to other authors and artists.

Chapter 3 introduces a second formative model for saintly poison trials and represents an important inflection moment in the epistemic function of the trope. I argue that the poison trials of Benedict of Nursia and Sabinus of Canosa, from their origins in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great in the sixth century through the twelfth-century adaptations, transform the poison trial from a test of overt vindication to one of authority by means of discernment, as both figures encounter substances that have been made deadly without their knowledge. Shaped by Gregory's interest in interiority and exteriority as markers of holy living, Benedict and Sabinus demonstrate the ability to see within the outwardly innocuous to the internally deadly, thus reshaping the trial into a tool not just of adjudication, but of adjudication in contexts in which the alternatives are outwardly ambiguous. I argue that by means of this innovation, the poison trial becomes a useful tool to highlight the dangers of hypocrisy and false appearance and provides a mechanism by which to attempt the adjudication of competing claims to truth.

Chapter 4 thus considers the proliferation of medieval lives that incorporate aspects of these two precedents, the Johannine model and the Gregorian model of the trial. From lives produced in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, I suggest a taxonomy of uses to which the poison trial is put by hagiographers adapting and expanding the trope. The first is the basic ability of tropes to transfer known holy qualities from earlier hagiographic traditions to their own subjects; once established, poison-drinking invokes holy qualities of John and Benedict. More complicated applications of the trial go beyond reflected virtue to internal and external adjudication. I argue that in the pre-conquest insular tradition around George of Cappadocia, the poison trial serves as a form of self-authentication in a context of an uncertain or fraught

biographical tradition concerning George. Another use of the poison trial in this juridical function focuses neither inwards at individual saintliness, nor backwards at a hagiographical tradition, but extends the logic of the trial to some external social problem. The poison trials of Samson of Dol and Æthelwold of Winchester illustrate this capacity to adjudicate peripheral political conflicts using the medium of saintly bodies. This chapter also explores a largely twelfth-century innovation of the trope that both clearly belongs in the tradition of holy poison-drinkers and represents a significant departure in form from the established precedent. This innovation consists of holy individuals, and especially reformers and founders of new monastic orders, confronted by a poisonous creature that has fallen by accident into communion wine. I argue that this important difference in form serves to combine aspects of both the traditions of John and Benedict and the associated virtues, while also justifying reformist sentiment and/or new monastic orders.

The final chapter considers the negative case: individuals who fail the poison trial. I suggest that there are two different meanings of “failure,” and these different meanings of failure carry different implications. Individuals who “fail” the poison trial, in that they reportedly drink poison and consequently die, demonstrate nonetheless that the trial is employed as a conscious hermeneutic in order to identify those whose positions or persons are consequently invalidated. This is the case for Arian heretics and for the prophet Muhammad as described in a number of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian sources, all of which include a narrative of the prophet surviving a poisoning attempt in a manner reminiscent of Christian saints and all of which insist that Muhammad ultimately died from poison in a manner that denies him the status of martyr accorded by the Islamic tradition. My second category of “failure” applies to the trope itself in the case of the twelfth-century archbishop Saint William of York, in whose case the logic of the

poison trial is applied but is stretched to the breaking point in the face of narrative elements and the rhetorical needs of the hagiographers. Chronicles, hagiographical materials and liturgical resources relating to William of York all demonstrate a grappling with the ideas of vindication, martyrdom and discernment in the context of a quickly-canonized saint who is, nonetheless, also said to have died from poison. William of York demonstrates the ultimate futility of attempting to stabilize the meaning of poison into a means of reliably making divine judgements visible.

The source base and thus the methodology of each chapter varies depending on the nature of the subject. The apocryphal legend of John drinking poison has hazy geographic and chronological origins, and so is most accessible through the liturgical context in which his biographical deeds would be celebrated. This source base is fragmented and variable, and thus Chapter 1 pieces together a patchwork of liturgical materials through which development and elaboration are visible. I have chosen hymnody in particular as a genre in which the form distills meaning, as the compression necessitated by poetic forms makes the selection criteria for particular virtues of John visible. A similar logic of curation governed the choice to limit the material on Saint Benedict to an important manuscript compiled for Monte Cassino in the eleventh century by a single abbot, which reflects centuries of Benedictine monks celebrating their founder. This approach limits the scope of analysis while also reflecting both a tradition and a particular moment in which the legacy of Benedict is being cultivated and curated. A different kind of analysis is performed in Chapter 4, where instead of a diachronic analysis of the development of specific precedents, I approach the poison trial as a trope across a variety of hagiographical subjects, to determine how each *vita* engages or acknowledges the precedents of the trope, and to investigate how the language and structure reflects the context and intent of the

hagiographer. The different tools of inquiry and the kinds of sources engaged across the five chapters are tailored to both the available source base and the research question at hand.



## Chapter 1: *Venenum sub melle latet*: Hidden Poisons in Early Christianity

### 1.i Introduction

The fundamental argument of this dissertation is that an entire epistemological history is encoded in the application of poison metaphors. This history involves the codification, or at least the development, of specific tools of authentication, and the concomitant expression of anxiety that even as these tools are developed, they themselves are revealed to be fundamentally unreliable and prone to abuse. This is the paradoxical fear that the more certain a sign or signification of truth, the more useful it is as a means of concealing falsehood. Is it true? Or does it simply have the accepted hallmarks of truth? How does one tell the difference?

The actual process by which specific tools of authentication were developed in the first centuries of Christianity is not the subject of this chapter. Rather, I argue that the anxiety over their potential misuse and application in a manner that is counter to their original purpose is usefully and consistently conveyed through the language of dispensing a concealed poison. A remarkably consistent expression of this, and that which provides the foundation for later chapters, is that of a poison that has been obscured by honey. This chapter will first establish a limited number of classical precedents for this kind of imagery, notably those quoted by later authors or those which seem to lend important context or valuable contrast, before arguing that some of the fundamental tools of authentication developed in the first centuries of Christianity are encoded with anxiety about their reliability using this particular metaphor. I use the *Commonitory* of Vincent of Lerins (c. 445) as a lens through which to view the preoccupations

of early Christian thinkers concerning the reliability of signifiers of truth. I focus specifically on the use and misuse of scripture, the aping of both institutional and charismatic authority, and finally on the misapplication or deceptive nature of language itself.

### **1.ii. Classical Precedent**

The metaphor of sweetness employed to cover something bitter, in the context of knowledge and belief, is ancient. There are certainly predecessors to the early Christian uses, although none serve as exact parallels to those employed by Christian authors, as they are adapted to suit new epistemic needs. Perhaps the most famous, and the one most cited by later Christian authors, comes from Book 4 of the *De rerum natura* of Lucretius. He describes his method of teaching Epicureanism by means of poetry as being similar to the method by which doctors trick children into consuming bitter medicine with honey:

But as with children, when physicians try to administer rank wormwood, they first touch the rim of the cups all about with the sweet yellow fluid of honey, that unthinking childhood may be deluded as far as the lips, and meanwhile that they may drink up the bitter juice of wormwood, and though beguiled be not betrayed, but rather by such means be restored and regain health, so now do I: since this doctrine commonly seems somewhat harsh to those who have not used it, and the people shrink back from it, I have chosen to set forth my doctrine to you in sweet-speaking Pierian song, and as it were to touch it with the Muses' delicious honey.<sup>1</sup>

The basic function of the poison-in-honey trope is to supply one substance under the protective appearance or sensation of another. In this medical analogy, the goal is to give a salubrious drink the cover of something less truly healthful but more apparently desirable—to lure the drinker first into action (“deluded as far as the lips”), and then forgiveness for deception (“though beguiled, not betrayed”), as the medicine (here, philosophy) has a positive effect. Although the

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<sup>1</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.9-25, trans. William Rouse and Martin Smith, Loeb Classical Library 181 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).

basic premise is still one of deception, the precedent of Lucretius is only of limited utility, as its fundamental intent is directly inverted—while bitter, the concealed substance is ultimately for the benefit of the drinker. Christian authors quoting Lucretius in the context of deception and injury thus have to do so selectively, isolating the means but not the effect and downplaying any hint of medicinal purpose. Despite this crucial distinction, Lucretius is frequently cited by name even as his words are selectively adapted.<sup>2</sup>

Another example of this kind of language, albeit with the bitter and the sweet swapped in terms of their fundamental virtue, appears in Plutarch's treatise on flatterers and how to detect them. Someone counterfeiting friendship, according to Plutarch, knows that honest and sometimes critical speech is necessary in order to maintain the similitude of true friendship. A good flatterer, then, knows how to cover his sweet blandishments with the occasional criticism, as "just as clever cooks employ bitter extracts and astringent flavorings to remove the cloying effect of sweet things, so flatterers apply a frankness which is not genuine or beneficial...For these reasons, then, the man is hard to detect."<sup>3</sup> In this variation, the over-sweetness of the flattery is the destructive agent, and the bitter seasonings help add to the verisimilitude. The fundamental purpose is destructive and deceptive in a manner that Lucretius' "honeyed cup" is

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<sup>2</sup> An example of such selective referencing occurs when Jerome, in his letter on Priscillianism to Ctesiphon, invokes the passage to explain the mechanism of deception (honey smeared on the lip of a cup) without allowing for the possibility of "wormwood" serving any healing purpose: "He has also written a book which professes to be about monks and includes in it many not monks at all whom he declares to have been Origenists, and who have certainly been condemned by the bishops...He is careful, however, to do as the physicians, of whom Lucretius says: *To children bitter wormwood still they give/In cups with juice of sweetest honey smeared*. That is to say, he has set in the forefront of his book John, an undoubted Catholic and saint, by his means to introduce to the church the heretics mentioned farther on." Jerome, *Letter to Ctesiphon* 133.3, *NPNF* 6:272-280.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* 1.4.5, trans. Frank Bobbit, Loeb Classical Library 197 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 277.

not, and yet the substances that are doing the deceiving are inverted from the Christian examples, in which bitterness, poison, wormwood and gall are immutably negative.

Perhaps the closest precedent, in terms of both phrasing and function, comes from Ovid's *Amores* I.8, in which a cynical procuress gives advice to a young woman who has caught the eye of a rich man. Among her precepts is the advice to bilk the young man for as many gifts as possible, using all of the arts at her disposal: "Let your tongue aid you, and cover up your thoughts—wheedle while you despoil; wicked poisons have for hiding-place sweet honey [inpia sub dulci melle venena latent]."<sup>4</sup> The metaphor again pertains to dissimulation and "sweet-talking," as in Plutarch's advice about flatterers, but here the rhetorical honey hides the acquisition of goods by feigning affection. Ambivalence concerning persuasion and the deceptive potential of rhetoric certainly has echoes in the early Christian material. The most lasting legacy of this particular precedent, however, is in the word grouping "sub melle venenum latet," a phrase that appears both in the work of Ignatius and then with some consistency in the medieval material.

This is by no means an exhaustive accounting of classical metaphors for deception involving sweetness, bitterness, or poison. This brief survey is intended to acknowledge that metaphors of this sort were not invented whole cloth by Christian authors and indeed rest on established ideas about dissimulation. However, there is something distinct about the adaptation and employment of the poison metaphor when used as a Christian epistemic tool that the classical precedents do not reflect.

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<sup>4</sup> Ovid, *Amores* I.8, 103-4, trans. Grant Showerman and George Goold, Loeb Classical Library 41 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 355. "Lingua iuuet mentemque tegat — blandire noceque; Inpia sub dulci melle venena latent."

### 1.iii. Hidden Poisons in the Early Christian Tradition

The fifth-century *Commonitory* of Vincent of Lerins (c. 445) is useful as a scaffold for the pre-medieval Christian material because it lays out a taxonomy of the tools of certainty that Vincent sees as having merit, and describes a hierarchy of sources of proof. The *Commonitory* is a single point of evidence in the long development of Christian epistemology and cannot be treated as the final word in the centuries of evolution in the sources of religious authority, but it does frame certain of the pivotal categories of proof that also introduce their own sources of uncertainty. Vincent summarizes his major argument as follows: “It has always been and is today the habit of those of the catholic church to uphold the true faith in these two ways: first, by means of the authority of the divine canon, and then by the tradition of the catholic church.”<sup>5</sup> The first bulwark against error is therefore scripture. Already, Vincent notes that scripture is complex and multifaceted, and exegesis by learned church Fathers can bring forth different truths from the same verse. Scripture itself must then be supported by the “tradition of the church,” or the work of authoritative figures that have been collectively acknowledged over centuries. If the acknowledged exegetes should err, individually, or otherwise disagree with each other, the next line of defense of truth is conciliar decree, and barring explicit decree, general consensus: “And if at any time a part opposes itself to the whole...they must prefer, first of all, the general decrees, if such there be, of a Universal Council, or if there be no such, then, what is next best, they must follow the consentient belief of many and great masters.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, a nesting hierarchy of authentication rests both on the canon and on the accumulated weight of agreement and tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 29, *NPNF* 2/11:154.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, *NPNF* 2/11:152.

These two basic frameworks, scripture and tradition, are relatively straightforward in themselves, but at each stage of this authenticating process participants in it articulate anxiety that these tools can be misused. I have split the early Christian evidence into subcategories of Vincent's schema. The most widely-applied use of the metaphor of sweetness used as a lure to cover poison pertains to the potential misuse of scripture. Biblical text is simultaneously fundamental to truth structures and uniquely susceptible to misuse, and thus there are any number of warnings against heretics who use scriptural citations to cover their falsehoods. "Tradition," for my purposes, can be divided into further categories of institutional and doctrinal authority—that is to say, the authority conferred by the consensus of the church itself, and to charismatic authority, with references to the authority derived from the power of an individual teacher or from the asceticism of a "holy man." A final category of analysis is that of the dangers of rhetoric and of language itself.

### **1.iii.a. Scripture as Lure**

Vincent of Lerins places the "divine canon" at the very center of structures of religious authority, as did so many of his predecessors who made the case for the self-authenticating nature of biblical texts. The question of an emerging canon should not obscure the fundamental assumption that scripture did not itself need proving—rather, it is a tool of proof.<sup>7</sup> Yet this very power to prove is also the source of potential problems. Anxiety around the potential for

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of patristic commentary on the subject of the authoritative nature of scripture, see Charles E. Hill, "'The Truth Above All Demonstration': Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine" in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. Donald Carson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016), 35-58. See also Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett, eds., *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the subject of fraught Scriptural interpretation in the medieval world, see in particular Edward Peters, "Transgressing the Limits Set by the Fathers: Authority and Impious Exegesis in Medieval Thought" in *Christendom and Its Discontents*, eds. Peter Diehl and Scott L. Waugh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 338-362.

misapplication both of text and of exegesis is expressed explicitly by Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108) and Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202) using the poison-in-honey framework. Their uses are echoed in the work of Vincent himself, centuries after.

The practice of intentional scriptural misinterpretation is at the very heart of *Against Heresies*. From its opening lines, Irenaeus cites this problem as his motivation for writing, in order to correct such malicious distortions being taught around him so far as he is able. The fundamental issue, laid out in the prologue, is that the targets of *Against Heresies* “falsify the oracles of God, and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation.”<sup>8</sup> Pursuing this argument over the five books of *Against Heresies* by identifying and refuting misinterpretations of specific citations used by his targets, Irenaeus theorizes explicitly on the nature of deception that adopts signifiers of truth: “They are altogether deceived, who imagine that they may learn from the Scriptural texts adduced by heretics, that [doctrine] which their words plausibly teach. For error is plausible, and bears a resemblance to the truth, but requires to be disguised.”<sup>9</sup> This is the perennial problem that the poison-in-honey trope is employed to convey.

While the scope of the theological errors Irenaeus is attempting to rectify in the text is vast, all of his targets have committed, to varying extents, the same offense of extrapolating from scripture something that is not there. Equally crucially, Irenaeus will confront such abuses with the very same source of authority, because properly applied they allow for no theological ambiguity: “all Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found by us perfectly

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<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.1, *ANF* 1:315. Also quoted by Hill, “The Truth Above All Demonstration,” 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.15, *ANF* 1:439. The earliest Greek text survives only in fragments, but a very early Latin translation exists: “Decipiuntur autem omnes, qui quod est in verbis verisimile, se putant posse discernere a veritate. Suasorius enim et verisimilis est, et exquirens fucos error.” *Contra Haereses* 3.15.2, PG 7:918.

consistent; and the parables shall harmonize with those passages which are perfectly plain.”<sup>10</sup>

Appropriately, using “resemblance to truth” to introduce falsehood is a practice that is *itself* scriptural. Irenaeus notes that using a scriptural citation to obscure truth is an example set by the devil, who quoted Psalm 91 to Jesus in Matthew 4:

[The devil] endeavored again to make an assault by himself quoting a commandment of the law. For, bringing Him to the highest pinnacle of the temple, he said to Him, *If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down. For it is written, That God shall give His angels charge concerning you, and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest perchance you dash your foot against a stone*; thus concealing a falsehood under the guise of Scripture, as is done by all the heretics.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus counters this attempt at scripture-based persuasion with a biblical citation of his own— “It is written again, *You shall not tempt the Lord your God*” (Deuteronomy 6:16)—thus providing the model for this sort of disputation. Both sides cite scripture to support their arguments, but one side is doing so in bad faith. To Irenaeus, the potential scope of this misuse is vast. There are two primary means of such abuse—first, to interpret text in intentionally deceitful ways, since the multifaceted and polyvalent nature of exegesis is an acknowledged complication, and second, to selectively quote or otherwise re-arrange the text itself. Using these tactics, and by applying them not just to the writings about Christ but also to the Old Testament, anyone can support his own pernicious beliefs:

And it is not only from the writings of the evangelists and the apostles that they endeavor to derive proofs for their opinions by means of perverse interpretations and deceitful expositions: they deal in the same way with the law and the prophets, which contain many parables and allegories that can frequently be drawn into various senses, according to the kind of exegesis to which they are subjected. And others of them, with great craftiness, adapted such parts of Scripture to their own figments...<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.28, *ANF* 1:400.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.21, *ANF* 1:549.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.3, *ANF* 1:320.



A particular offender among those who “adapt parts of Scripture to their own figments,” according to Irenaeus, is Marcion of Sinope.<sup>13</sup> The passages that refer explicitly to Marcion emphasize this concern about the rearranging and redacting of scripture. As Marcion’s teaching appears to have relied primarily on a redaction of the Pauline epistles and a sole Gospel text,<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus frequently bemoans Marcion’s corruption of text as a sort of butchery with a clear agenda: “he mutilates the Gospel which is according to Luke, removing all that is written respecting the generation of the Lord,”<sup>15</sup> and “he dismembered the Epistles of Paul, removing all that is said by the apostle respecting that God who made the world, ... and also those passages from the prophetic writings which the apostle quotes in order to teach us that they announced beforehand the coming of the Lord.”<sup>16</sup> According to Irenaeus, it is explicitly because of this appropriative approach to scripture that Marcion has been able to develop any following at all—had he simply taught his own cosmology, no one would be in any way convinced by it. Here Irenaeus employs his first version of the concealed poison construct:

They set forth, indeed, the name of Christ Jesus as a sort of lure, but in various ways they introduce the impieties of Simon [Magus]; and thus they destroy multitudes, wickedly disseminating their own doctrines by the use of a good name, and, through means of its sweetness and beauty, extending to their hearers the bitter and malignant poison of the serpent, the great author of apostasy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Marcion taught that the true message of Jesus had been willfully concealed by Judaizing Christians; per Joseph Tyson, “he was struck with the contrast between the teachings of Jesus and those of the Hebrew Scriptures, and he could not be convinced that Jesus and Paul meant to signify the same deity who was known through the Hebrew Scriptures.” He thus rejected any connection between the two groups of texts, declaring that no prophecy had been fulfilled with Jesus, and rejected any Gospel passage that asserted any such connection. Joseph Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Iver Kaufman, *Church, Book, and Bishop* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27, ANF 1:352.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 353. “Nunc autem necessario meminimus ejus, ut scires quoniam omnes qui quoquo modo adulterant veritatem, et praeconium Ecclesiae laedunt, Simonis Samaritani Magi discipuli et successores sunt. Quamvis non confiteatur nomen magistri sui, ad seductionem reliquorum; attamen illius sententiam docent: Christi quidem Jesu nomen tanquam irritamentum proferentes, Simonis autem impietatem varie introducentes, morificant multos, per nomen bonum sententiam suam male disperdentes, et per

In context, it is clear that the “name of Jesus Christ” is in fact short-hand for the redacted Gospel text and the epistles, as Irenaeus declares that he will be able to correct the score by means of the very texts that Marcion finds reliable: “I purpose specially to refute him, convicting him out of his own writings; and, with the help of God, I shall overthrow him out of those discourses of the Lord and the apostles which are of authority with him, and of which he makes use.”<sup>18</sup> The antidote is to reclaim a common epistemic ground, using the shared authority of specific acknowledged texts, and in so doing to purge the poisonous content, leaving only the sweet.

Irenaeus employs similar language and related metaphors about the potential misuse of scripture many times in *Against Heresies*. Of particular note is one such warning that employs concealed poison, but using a slightly different mechanism of deception:

[T]hey destroy those persons who, by reason of the resemblance of the words, imbibe a poison which disagrees with their constitution, just as if one, giving lime mixed with water for milk, should be misled by the similitude of the color; as a man superior to me has said, concerning all that in any way corrupt the things of God and adulterate the truth, “Lime is wickedly mixed with the milk of God.”<sup>19</sup>

This iteration relies heavily on an innocuous visual appearance rather than disguised taste, but the underlying concern is that of something detrimental disguised as something nourishing:

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dulcedinem et decorum nominis, amarum et malignum principis apostasiae serpentis venenum porrigentes eis.” *Contra Haereses* 1.27.4, PG 7:689.

<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27, ANF 1:353.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3.17, ANF 1:445. “Simila enim loquentes fidelibus, sicut praediximus, non solum dissimilia sapiunt, sed et contraria, et per omnia plena blasphemias, per quae interficiunt eos, qui per similitudinem verborum dissimile affectionis eorum in se attrahunt venenum: sicut quis aquae mistum gypsum dans pro lacte, seducat per similitudinem coloris, sicut quidam dixit superior nobis, de omnibus qui quolibet modo depravant quae sunt Dei, et adulterant veritatem. In Dei lacte gypsum male miscetur.” *Contra Haereses* 3.17.4, PG 7: 932. Charles E. Hill suggests that the “man superior to me” referenced occasionally throughout *Against Heresies* is in fact Irenaeus’ teacher Polycarp. Charles Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp: Identifying Irenaeus’ Apostolic Presbyter and the Author of Ad Diognetum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 70.

misled by a use of familiar scripture, a hearer might be inclined to give the speaker more credence than he ought. The two mentions of lime and milk are not exactly parallel, but mutually reinforcing. In the first, water and lime visually represent milk but are deadly imposters, while in the second, lime actively taints the “milk of God.” The overlap of these two metaphors completes the idea that false imitations have an actively deleterious effect. The “milk of God” evokes the “pure spiritual milk” suitable for the newly converted of 1 Peter 2:2,<sup>20</sup> which follows an exhortation to avoid deceivers and hypocrites. Taken all together, Irenaeus employs multiple poison metaphors to express the potential problems of scripture as a tool of authentication, none of which derive directly from the classical precedents.

I have begun with Irenaeus because he explicitly theorizes around the issue of deception and the multivalence of biblical text, but his is not the earliest Christian author to engage with ideas of hidden poisons. A very early use of the poison-in-honey metaphor appears in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, although in its earliest form, it is not entirely clear that the anxiety pertains specifically to the potential misuse of scripture. However, later interpolations and expansions of Ignatius’ work make this point explicit.<sup>21</sup>

The warning against disingenuous invocations of the words of Jesus come as part of a much broader campaign of support for a different mode of authentication and source of authority: ecclesiastical unity in the form of monoepiscopacy. The argument in his letter to the

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Peter 2:2: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

<sup>21</sup> The attribution and dating of these texts have been the subject of much scholarly scrutiny. Of the three known versions of the letter collections, the greatest consensus, following work by J.B. Lightfoot, is that the collection known as the “middle recension” (as compared to the “shorter” Syriac collection and “longer” recension, which contains additional spurious letters and expansions on the genuine corpus) is the oldest and closest to the second-century original. For an overview, see Hermut Löhr, “The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Pratscher (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 92-115. For a summary of the long debate over the authenticity of the letters, see Hammond Bammel, “Ignatian Problems,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, 33 (1982): 62.

Trallians is thus two-fold. He condemns those who preach that Christ took flesh “in appearance only,”<sup>22</sup> while also making the case for the authority of deacons and bishop to clarify and adjudicate such matters (“whoever does anything without bishop, presbytery, and deacons does not have a clear conscience”<sup>23</sup>). In making this case, he warns against those who “mingle Jesus Christ with their teachings just to gain your confidence under false pretenses. It is as if they were giving a deadly poison mixed with honey and wine, with the result that the unsuspecting victim gladly accepts it and drinks down death with fatal pleasure.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike the reference to the “name” of Jesus employed by Irenaeus, there is no context in this version of the letter to the Trallians to suggest that misappropriation of scripture, specifically, is of concern here. However, at some point after the second century and most probably in the 4<sup>th</sup>, an unknown interpolator substantially expanded the Ignatian letters (the “longer recension”), and in doing so, elaborated the metaphor and more explicitly tied it to the problem of co-opted scripture:

I therefore, yet not I, out of the love of Jesus Christ, entreat “you that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.” [I Cor 1:10] For there are some vain talkers and deceivers, not Christians, but Christ-betrayers, bearing about the name of Christ in deceit, and corrupting the word of the Gospel; while they intermix the poison of their deceit with their persuasive talk, as if they mingled aconite with sweet wine, that so he who drinks, being deceived in his taste by the very great sweetness of the draught, may incautiously meet with his death. One of the ancients gives us this advice, “Let no man be called good who mixes good with evil.” For they speak of Christ, not that they may preach Christ, but that they may reject Christ; and they speak of the law, not that they may establish the law, but that they may proclaim things contrary to it.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Trallians (Middle Recension)* 7, *ANF* 1:69. The later recension is more explicit here: “that He did not in reality take unto Him a body, that He died in appearance, and did not in very deed suffer.”

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, *ANF* 1:68.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* “Rogo autem vos, non ego, sed dilectio Christi Jesu, ut idipsum dicatis omnes, et non sint in vobis schismata; sitis autem perfecti in eodem sensu, et in eadem Scientia. Sunt enim quidam vaniloqui et mentis seductores, non Christiani sed Christum mercantes, seductione circumferentes nomen Christi, et cauponantes verbum Evangelii, et venenum erroris commiscentes dulci blandimento, sicut oenomelli

This expansion makes explicit what had been formerly been somewhat implicit—these individuals “corrupt the word of the Gospel” and “speak of the law.” The reference to 1 Corinthians urges a unity of understanding that can withstand the “persuasive” but ultimately deceitful messaging coming from “Christ-betrayers.”

Ignatius and Irenaeus worked in very specific contexts, addressing specific individuals and groups whose teachings occasionally relied on very different understandings of what constituted authoritative text—but this particular accusation, the idea that scripture can be used to trick listeners into imbibing false ideas, persists well past the formative centuries of Christianity. The vehicle of concealed poison likewise retains salience. Vincent of Lerins himself, in discussing the various tools of authentication in the *Commonitory*, employs a version of the trope that blends the logic and words of Irenaeus with the classical precedent of Lucretius’ medical imagery. Citing the same passage from Matthew as does Irenaeus to demonstrate that the devil quotes scripture, Vincent notes that “there is no easier way of effecting his impious purpose than by pretending the authority of Holy Scripture” because the divine language provides a shield both to conceal and to defend:

But the more secretly they conceal themselves under shelter of the Divine Law, so much the more are they to be feared and guarded against. For they know that the evil stench of their doctrine will hardly find acceptance with any one if it be exhaled pure and simple. They sprinkle it over, therefore, with the perfume of heavenly language, in order that one who would be ready to despise human error, may hesitate to condemn divine words.<sup>26</sup>

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virus admiscentes; ut qui biberit illius potus gustabilem sensum, dulcedine captus, inobservanter morti addicatur. Monet autem quidam antiquorum; ut nemo bonus dicatur, qui malum bono admiscuerit. Nominant enim Christum; non ut Christum praedicent, sed ut legi contraria annuncient.” Quoted from William Cureton, *Corpus Ignatianum: A Complete Collection of the Ignatian Epistles, Genuine, Interpolated, and Spurious; Together With Numerous Extracts From Them, As Quoted By Ecclesiastical Writers Down to the Tenth Century; in Syriac, Greek, and Latin: An English Translation of the Syriac Text, Copious Notes, and Introduction* (London: F. & John Rivington, 1849), 78.

<sup>26</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 25, *NPNF* 2/11:150.

“Sed tanto magis cauendi et pertimescendi sunt, quanto occultius sub diuinae legis umbraculis latitant Sci

Vincent's poison metaphor follows, in Lucretian terms: "They do, in fact, what nurses do when they would prepare some bitter draught for children; they smear the edge of the cup all round with honey, that the unsuspecting child, having first tasted the sweet, may have no fear of the bitter."<sup>27</sup> Vincent invokes Lucretius' medical imagery, with the unavoidable implication that a bitter draught is somehow useful to the health of the nurse's charge, but he takes pains to be clear that this is an analogy of process only: "So too do these act, who disguise poisonous herbs and noxious juices under the name of medicines, so that no one, when he reads the label, suspects the poison." The recourse to the classical precedent has introduced an additional layer of deception in the metaphor—the honey disguises medicine, which is in fact poison. Despite the elapsed centuries, Vincent appears to be even more anxious about the epistemic grounds of scripture than his predecessor, noting that the closer the deceiver hews to biblical text, the more undetectable and thus pernicious and dangerous they become.

These are just three brief examples among many describing the problem of heretics deceiving the faithful through plausible biblical citation. Similar exhortations, some even using the poison-in-honey metaphor, can be found in the works of Tertullian, Jerome, Cyril of Jerusalem, and certainly many others.<sup>28</sup> The selections above were chosen for their explicit theorizing around the problem of false appearance and the misapplication of scripture, and for

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unt enim foetores suos nulli fere cito esse placituros, si nudi et simplices exhalentur, atque idcirco eos caelestis eloquii uelut quodam aromate aspergunt, ut ille, qui humanum facile despiceret errorem, diuina non facile contemnat oracula." CCSL 64, 182.

<sup>27</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 25, *NPNF* 2/11:150.

"Itaque faciunt, quod hi solent qui parvulis austera quaedam temperaturi pocula, prius oras melle circumlinunt ut incauta aetas, cum dulcedinem praesenserit, amaritudinem non reformidet. Quod etiam his curae est, qui mala gramina et noxios sucos medicaminum uocabulis praecolorant ut nemo fere, ubi superscriptum legerit remedium, suspicetur venenum." CCSL 64, 182.

<sup>28</sup> Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 15, *ANF* 3; Jerome, *Dialogue against the Luciferans* 28, *NPNF* 2/6; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 4.2, *NPNF* 2/7.

their surface-level diversity of form. It is clear that while Vincent adapts and combines established precedents, these are somewhat heterogenous expressions of what will become a much more consistent trope.

### **1.iii.b. Deceptively Correct Doctrine**

Vincent of Lerins follows his assessment of the vulnerability of scripture with a version of the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: “If the words, the sentiments, the promises of scripture, are appealed to by the devil and his disciples...what are catholics and the sons of mother church to do? How are they to distinguish truth from falsehood in the sacred scriptures?”<sup>29</sup> His solution is to “interpret the sacred canon according to the traditions of the universal church and in keeping with the rules of catholic doctrine”<sup>30</sup>—referring, when possible, to the decree of an ecumenical council. Yet even a profession of agreement to doctrinal positions can disguise hidden error, and again the image of poison hidden in honey is adapted to express this potential.

Jerome (d.420), embroiled in Christological and Trinitarian controversies, is particularly prolific in his use of the trope in this context. His opponents pretend to accord with Nicæan formulae and definitions but use them to communicate something else entirely. In a letter to Pope Damasus Jerome complains that the “Arianizers” in the Eastern church are trying to reframe the definition of “hypostasis” such that they can speak of “three hypostases,”<sup>31</sup> and that by refusing

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<sup>29</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 27, *NPNF* 2/11:151. “Set dicit aliquis: Si divinis eloquiis sententiis promissionibus et diabolus et discipuli eius utuntur, quorum alii sunt pseudoapostoli, alii pseudoprophetae et pseudomagistri, et omnes ex toto haeretici, quid facient catholici homines et matris ecclesiae filii? Quodammodo in scripturis sanctis veritatem a falsitate dicerent?” CCSL 64, 186.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. “Hoc scilicet facere magnopere curabat...ut divinum canonem secundum universalis ecclesiae traditione et iuxta catholici dogmatis regulas interpretentur.” CCSL 64, 186.

<sup>31</sup> “While both east and west (Arianisers apart) accepted the Nicene teaching of the divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, most easterners had come to deem it desirable, in order to avoid confusing the

to accept this new adaptation, Jerome himself is in danger of being branded as someone who does not profess the consubstantial Trinity. Jerome is convinced that his opponents are trying to use this terminology to re-introduce the Arian heresy of three divided “substances.” He cites the precedent of Nicaea and the more recent synod at Alexandria as having settled the issue (“Just now, I am sorry to say, those Arians, the Campenses, are trying to extort from me, a Roman Christian, their unheard-of formula of three hypostases. And this, too, after the definition of Nicaea and the decree of Alexandria, in which the West has joined”<sup>32</sup>) but insists that his opponents are creating a dangerous definitional ambiguity around the terminology, such that it functions as a vehicle for some more sinister doctrine: “I ask them what ‘three hypostases’ are supposed to mean. They reply three persons subsisting. I rejoin that this is my belief. They are not satisfied with the meaning, they demand the term. Surely some secret venom lurks in the words.”<sup>33</sup> Jerome expresses his willingness to be guided by the Pope in accepting the terminology of “three hypostases,” so long as he can also clearly articulate consubstantiality, but warns that is a doctrinal trap: “But, believe me, there is poison hidden under their honey; the angel of Satan has transformed himself into an angel of light. They give a plausible explanation of the term hypostasis; yet when I profess to hold it in the same sense they count me

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persons with one another (the heresy known as Sabellianism), to describe them as ‘three hypostases.’ Since Latins regarded ‘hypostasis as the Greek equivalent of ‘substance’, and in the Nicene Creed ‘hypostasis’ and ‘essence’ or ‘substance’ had been treated as synonymous, to speak of ‘three hypostases’ seemed to verge on tritheism, or at least on Arian subordinationism.” John Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 38.

<sup>32</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Pope Damasus*, *NPNF* 2/6:19. “Nunc igitur pro dolor! post Nicaeam fidem, post Alexandrinum juncto pariter Occidente decretum, trium hypostaseon ab Arianorum prole, Campensibus, novellum a me homine Romano nomen exigitur.” PL 22:389.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. “Interrogamus, quid tres hypostases posse arbitrentur intelligi: tres personas subsistentes aiunt. Respondemus nos ita credere: non sufficit sensus, ipsum nomen efflagitant; quia nescio quid veneni in syllabis latet.” PL 22:389.



a heretic...Why do they shelter themselves under ambiguous language?"<sup>34</sup> His Arianizing opponents are thus using the cover of doctrinal agreement to maintain their error.

Jerome again describes a creedal statement as the vehicle by which Arians have concealed their poison in the *Altercation of a Luciferian with an Orthodox*. As part of a larger staged debate about the reception of repentant Arian bishops and those who had been baptized by them, Jerome, in the persona of "Orthodoxus," suggest that there is sufficient ambiguity in the Nicaean formula to allow Arians to agree to it while still maintaining their error. Orthodoxus concludes his gloss on the profession of faith with the warning that this show of unity was the sweet shield for error: "There was the ring of piety in the words, and no one thought that poison was mingled with the honey of such a proclamation."<sup>35</sup> Doctrinal language has become the new scripture, theoretically self-authenticating but in practice easily malleable and distortable.

Jerome employs the imagery yet again in a letter to his friend Pammachius against John of Jerusalem at the height of the Origenist controversy. In the context of a grievance-filled explanation of how his compatriots ought to clear their names against the accusations of John partisans, Jerome complains that subtlety and "pseudo-simplicity" of speech can mask grave error. Even if one explains their position carefully using generally agreed upon terms in order to find common ground, this does not end the debate; the opposition will then seize upon whatever the carefully expressed words seem to dance around or omit. He invokes (again) the Arian objection to the Christological formulation concerning substance:

[I] advise you either to openly proclaim the faith of the church, or to speak as you believe. For that cautious mincing and weighing of words may, no doubt, deceive the unlearned; but a careful hearer and reader will quickly detect the snare, and will show

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<sup>34</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Pope Damascus*, NPNF 2/6:19. "Sed mihi credite, venenum sub melle latet; transfiguravit se angelus Satanae in angelum lucis. Bene interpretantur hypostasim, et cum id quod ipsi exponunt, habere me dicam, haereticus judicor...quid sub ambiguo sermone latitant?" PL 22:389.

<sup>35</sup> Jerome, *Dialogue against the Luciferians* 17, NPNF 2/6:328.

in open daylight the subterranean mines by which truth is overthrown. The Arians (no one knows more about them than you) for a long time pretended that they condemned the *Homoousion* on account of the offense [the term *Usia*] gave, and they besmeared poisonous error with honeyed words.<sup>36</sup>

In essence, Jerome is concerned about the words of theological compromise as vehicles for error. There is an echo of the language around misuse of scripture catching the unwary—but Jerome is not an unwary interlocutor, and the combination of “cautious mincing” with what appears to be disingenuous lip-service to doctrinal settlements signals that errors are concealed in such exaggerated compliance.

Jerome employs the trope with a slightly different variation in another work addressed to Pammachius, the *Apology against Rufinus*, in which he defends himself against criticism leveled at him by Rufinus concerning Jerome’s translation of works by Origen. Rufinus, too, has translated some of these controversial texts, and Jerome charges him with smoothing over some of Origen’s unorthodox beliefs, but leaving others uncritically and problematically true to the original. In this, he is mixing the plausible and the unacceptable. Trinitarian ideas, specifically, had been made inoffensive to the ear: “I at once noticed that the impious doctrine enunciated by Origen about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, to which the ears of Romans could not bear to listen, had been changed by the translator so as to give a more orthodox meaning.”<sup>37</sup> However, “his other doctrines, on the fall of the angels, the lapse of human souls, his prevarications about the resurrection, his ideas about the

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<sup>36</sup> Jerome, *To Pammachius Against John of Jerusalem*, 3, *NPNF* 2/6:426. The gist of this argument appears to be that proponents of the *homoiousion* position, instead of acknowledging their true position of “similar nature,” reject the *homoousion* position on the grounds of the term *usia*, rather than the *homoi/homo* distinction. Elsewhere Jerome notes, “As regards the term *Usia*, it was not rejected without a show of reason for so doing. Because it is not found in the Scriptures, they said, and its novelty is a stumbling-block to many, we have thought it best to dispense with it.” See in particular Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “Origen, Greek Philosophy, and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of ‘Hypostasis,’” *The Harvard Theological Review* 105, no. 3 (2012): 302-50.

<sup>37</sup> Jerome, *Apology against Rufinus*, 1.6, *NPNF* 2/3:486.

world... and others much worse than these” had not just been translated verbatim, some had been expressed “in a stronger and exaggerated manner”<sup>38</sup> based on the works of one of Origen’s defenders. Jerome finds this to be an irresponsible pairing—having corrected the Trinitarian material, an incautious reader might then accept the rest: “The effect of all this is that the reader, finding that the book expressed the catholic doctrine on the Trinity, would take in these heretical views without warning.” In short, the corrected Trinitarian material functions as a kind of “content warning,” which, being applied to one subject only, suggests an overall health that is not warranted:

You make an open profession in the prologue that you have amended what is bad and have left all that is best: and therefore, if anything in the work is proved to be heretical, you cannot enjoy the license given to a translator but must accept the authority of a writer: and you will be openly convicted of the criminal intent of besmearing with honey the poisoned cup so that the sweetness which meets the senses may hide the deadly venom.<sup>39</sup>

Rufinus thus stands accused of concealing and thus entrapping readers whose internal alarms might have been triggered by Trinitarian heresy, lending them to give credence to other dangerous material. Doctrinal correctness has itself become an unreliable signifier.

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 395), another theologian involved in fourth-century Christological and Trinitarian debates, employs the trope in a similar manner, not with reference to any conciliar doctrine, but rather to theological vocabulary itself. His target in *Against Eunomius* objects to the formula “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” on the grounds that untenable claims about substance and nature is implied by the relationship between “Father” and “Son” in human terms. Gregory, noting that “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” is the formula reported as spoken by Christ in Matthew 28:19, frames any deviation from this terminology to be a perversion of scripture:

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<sup>38</sup> Jerome, *Apology against Rufinus*, 1.6, *NPNF* 2/3:486.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Since then this doctrine is put forth by the Truth itself, it follows that anything which the inventors of pestilent heresies devise besides to subvert this Divine utterance—as, for example, calling the Father “Maker” and “Creator” of the Son instead of “Father,” and the Son a “result,” a “creature,” a “product,” instead of “Son,” and the Holy Spirit the “creature of a creature,” and the “product of a product,” instead of His proper title the “Spirit.”<sup>40</sup>

As Gregory refutes Eunomius’ Trinitarian formulation, line by line, he dwells on moments in which Eunomius performs verbal gymnastics to re-define terms like “begotten” and “uncreated.” In this project, he sees Eunomius using the acceptable phrases like “Son” and “only-begotten” as markers of orthodoxy, and claims that when Eunomius’ auditors have heard these terms, will embrace the rest:

It is for this reason that after at first confessing Him to be Son of God and Only-begotten God, he proceeds at once, by what he adds, to pervert the minds of his readers from their devout belief to his heretical notions. For he who hears the titles Son of God and Only-begotten God is of necessity lifted up to the loftier kind of assertions respecting the Son, led onward by the significance of these terms, inasmuch as no difference of nature is introduced by the use of the title God and by the significance of the term Son.<sup>41</sup>

Once the auditors have entered this state of acceptance, Eunomius performs sleight of hand, replacing “only-begotten” with “first-born,” which Gregory finds far less palatable. This proper use of terms is honey concealing poison:

Let us linger a little while, then, over his argument, that the miscreant may be shown to be holding out his first statements to people merely as a bait to induce them to receive the poison that he sugars over with phrases of a pious tendency, as it were with honey. Who does not know how great is the difference in signification between the term “only-begotten” and “first-born”?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 2.2, *NPNF* 2/5:101.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

The incautious reader will thus unconsciously become accustomed to the problematic terms after having first approving the correct ones. Lip-service to doctrinal correctness has once again served as a deceptive signifier.

One final formulation of poisonous doctrine hidden under the honey of plausibility comes from John Cassian's treatise against Nestorius, *On the Incarnation*. As part of a much broader argument about Christology in which he ties Nestorius to Pelagianism and adoptionism, John offers a developed explication of this method of deception. Nestorius has both employed scripture to mask error and perverted doctrinal professions in order to liken Christ to Adam, in such a way as to deny His divinity. John reports:

In one of your pestilent treatises you have maintained and said that "Since man is the image of the Divine nature, and the devil dragged this down and shattered it, God grieved over His image, as an Emperor over his statue, and repairs the shattered image: and formed without generation a nature from the Virgin, like that of Adam who was born without generation; and raises up man's nature by means of man: for as by man came death, so also by man came the resurrection of the dead."<sup>43</sup>

This has just enough of the good to potentially obscure the bad, and John continues with a familiar extended explanation of how such deception is meant to function:

They tell us that some poisoners have a custom of mixing honey with the poison in the cups which they prepare; that the injurious ingredient may be concealed by the sweet: and while a man is charmed with the sweetness of the honey, he may be destroyed by the deadly poison. So then, when you say that man is the image of the Divine nature, and that the devil dragged this down and shattered it, and that God grieved over His image as an Emperor over his statue, you smear (so to speak) the lips of the cup with something sweet like honey, that men may drain the cup offered to them, and not perceive its deadliness, while they taste what is alluring. You put forward God's name, in order to speak falsehoods in the name of religion. You set holy things in the front, in order to persuade men of what is untrue: and by means of your confession of God you contrive to deny Him whom you are confessing.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> John Cassian, *On the Incarnation*, 7.6, *NPNF* 2/11:607.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

John Cassian demonstrates clearly the complete Christianization of this metaphor. Jerome and Vincent of Lerins quote Lucretius' medically-tinged precedent somewhat self-consciously, taking pains to reframe the question from one of health to one of concealed-ill will. John Cassian has eschewed any direct reference to *De Rerum Natura* entirely in favor of a much more straightforward formulation: sweet deception conceals harm, not health, and this sweet deceptive blind can take the form of doctrinal orthodoxy or other "holy things."

### **1.iii.c. Seeming Virtue in Individuals**

The least authoritative member of Vincent of Lerin's epistemic hierarchy is the individual master. While the reasoned argumentation of luminaries of the church are themselves constituent parts of collective tradition and conciliar authority, individuals are acknowledged to be fallible. However, there are still signifiers of truth associated with individuals that can be deceptive in a way that provokes a familiar kind of anxiety. The two examples considered here to explore how the language of poison in honey is adapted to the deceptive signifiers of truth concerning individuals fall into two categories. First is the learned master whose very authority leads disciples into error. The second is the deceptive nature of apparently ascetic virtue.

Before describing Origen's fall from grace, Vincent spends significant time extolling his many virtues, each presented as self-authenticating. Origen's abilities vouched for his teaching; he was one "in whom there were many things so excellent, so unique, so admirable, that antecedently any one would readily deem that implicit faith was to be placed all his assertions. For if the conversation and manner of life carry authority, great was his industry, great his modesty, his patience, his endurance."<sup>45</sup> The premise that "manner of life" carries authority is

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<sup>45</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 17, *NPNF* 2/11:144.

central here, as the signifiers of truth established therein also have the potential to become the means of concealing falsehood. Vincent praises Origen's intellect, his learning, his techniques, noting that he did not reason from his own preferences, but indeed "no teacher ever used more proofs drawn from scripture."<sup>46</sup> Given Vincent's own familiarity with the poison/honey construct, the terms of his praise are telling: "What shall I say of his eloquence, the style of which was so charming, so soft, so sweet, that honey rather than words seemed to flow from his mouth!"<sup>47</sup> This very authority becomes a liability should the individual err, which in the case of Origen Vincent attributes to intellectual pride. The effect is the same: "Origen's authority appears to be an effectual cause in leading people to embrace error."<sup>48</sup> While Vincent does not explicitly invoke the image of a concealed poison in this discussion, the ingredients are all present. Origen's words and thus his teachings are like honey which cover error introduced under the guise of truth:

And assuredly it is a great trial when one whom you believe to be a prophet...a doctor and defender of the truth, whom you have folded to your breast with the utmost veneration and love, when such a one of a sudden secretly and furtively brings in noxious errors, which you can neither quickly detect, being held by the prestige of former authority, nor lightly think it right to condemn, being prevented by affection for your old master.<sup>49</sup>

Vincent's concern that Origen's very reputation and authority and honey-laden eloquence conceal the "noxious" errors expresses the same epistemic uncertainty as a more explicit or compact use of the language.

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<sup>46</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 17, *NPNF* 2/11:144.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, *NPNF* 2/11:138.

An entirely different version of deceptive behavioral signifiers as hidden poison derives from the coenobitic tradition. Athanasius' fourth-century *Life of Antony*<sup>50</sup> presents specific ascetic behaviors as deceptive, and indeed demonic in origin:

Often the demons sing the psalms while remaining invisible, shocking as it is to tell. In addition they recite the sacred words of scripture with a foul mouth, for often when we are reading, they repeat the last words like an echo. They also awaken to prayer those who are asleep, so as to deprive them of sleep for the whole night. They disguise themselves as genuine monks and put pressure on many of the monks, accusing them of their former sins in which the demons themselves were their accomplices. But you must reject their accusations as well as their advice to fast and their suggestion that you should stay awake, for they are deceiving you. They assume shapes familiar to us so that they may harm us through their resemblance to virtue: they think they can more easily inject their poison and destroy innocent people by means of seemingly admirable behavior.<sup>51</sup>

The ascetic behaviors here—fasting, staying awake, singing the psalms, even rebuking monks—are all behaviors presented elsewhere as proof of a specific kind of holy individual. In the sixth-century translation of the roughly contemporary *Life of Pachomius*, for instance, the disciple Theodore is marked for future greatness in remarkably similar terms, as he is “sedulous in fasting, strict in his vigils, intent in his prayers, who chased every spiritual grace, large or small...and he could rebuke with humble good-will anyone who strayed into any

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<sup>50</sup> It is the Latin translation attributed by Jerome to Evagrius, bishop of Antioch, that circulated widely in the West. The poison language appears to have been introduced by the translator, which, according to Jerome, occurred within two decades of the Greek composition.

<sup>51</sup> “Life of Antony by Athanasius” in *Early Christian Lives*, trans. Carolinne White (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 52. “Solent etiam cum modulatione nonnunquam apparentes psallere, proh nefas! ad haec et impuro ore sacra Scripturarum eloquia meditantur. Frequenter enim legentibus nobis, quasi Echo ad extrema verba respondent. Dormientes quoque excitant ad orandum, ut totius noctis somnum eripiant; plerosque etiam, dum se in monachorum nobilium habitu transferunt, monachos coercent, et pristina, quibus conscii sunt, peccata imputant; sed spernendae sunt eorum increpationes, et admonitiones jejunandi, vigiliarum quoque fraudulenta suggestio. Ob id enim familiares nobis species assumunt, ut affinitate virtutum nocentes, facilius virus interserant, et innocentes quosque per speciem honestatis elidant.” PL 73:139.



transgression.”<sup>52</sup> In the *Life of Antony*, these same behaviors are not signals of virtue, but “resemblance to virtue” designed to wear down the monks and invite them to despair. Again, the language of poison highlights anxiety over the reliability of visual signifiers and established patterns of holiness.

These two somewhat disparate examples demonstrate that the imagery of poison is sufficiently flexible to cover the shifting epistemic grounds of the first centuries of Christianity, including the development of communal living and the rise of the holy men and charismatic teachers. Behaviors and signifiers designated as authoritative or reliable are undermined even as they are established, once they have been identified as markers for concealment rather than verification.

#### **1.iii.d. The Dangers of Rhetoric**

The last distinct implementation of the language of hidden poison in the context of signifiers of truth addresses the danger in learned rhetoric as a means of persuasion. Beautiful words do not in themselves prove the worth of concepts conveyed through them, and indeed can function as a palatable means of conveying problematic content.<sup>53</sup> Poison as representing the potential ambivalence of language is an overwhelmingly prevalent image outside the Christian sphere as well as in it, but the specific concerns of Christian authors necessarily established a distinct usage.<sup>54</sup> There is an established scholarship on the at times fraught relationship between

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<sup>52</sup> *Vita sancti Pachomii abbatis* 30, PL 73:251. “In jejuniis sedulus, in vigiliis intentus, in oratione sollicitus, nunquam penitus ommitens, quo minus spiritualis gratiae majora munera sectaretur...et eos qui aliquo peccato deviaverant, admonitione humili atque benevola corripbat.”

<sup>53</sup> This is not an opinion limited to Christian communities; critics in many spheres bemoan the abuse of rhetorical training, as in Cicero’s *De Inventione*, when “a certain sort of complaisance, a false copyist of virtue, without any consideration for real duty, arrived at some fluency of language, then wickedness, relying on ability, began to overturn cities, and to undermine the principles of human life.” Cicero, *De Inventione* 1.2, trans. Charles Younge (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1878), 243.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, Juvenal *Satires* 3.123: “cum facilem stillavit in aurem exiguum de naturae patriaque

philosophy and Christianity experienced by figures such as Augustine, and the long process of adapting the one to the other. I treat the category only to demonstrate that the language of poison and honey is a remarkably consistent tool applied in such fraught moments in which the foundations of knowledge shift.

Some uses directly confront the adaptation of philosophy and the study of rhetoric itself to Christian purposes. St. Basil (d. 379) in his *Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, for instance, argues that secular literature must be treated with caution, and goodness extracted as bees extract honey from flowers, “lest through our love for letters it receive some contamination unawares, as men drink in poison with honey.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in the *Divine Institutes* Lactantius (d. 320) worries about the newly converted and infirm in the faith: “For many of them waver, and especially those who have any acquaintance with literature. For in this respect philosophers, and orators, and poets are pernicious, because they are easily able to ensnare unwary souls by the sweetness of their discourse, and of their poems flowing with delightful modulation. These are sweets which conceal poison.”<sup>56</sup>

Theophilus, who served as bishop of Antioch towards the end of the second century, was also among those concerned by the influences of philosophy and rhetoric on the Christian community. His treatise *Ad Autolyicum* is an argument for the supremacy of Christianity over pagan culture, addressing the perceived merits of various philosophies and subordinating all pagan authors and philosophers to the prophets of the Christian tradition. He begins by warning

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veneno.” Silius Italicus *Punica* 9.476-477: “nam virus et aestus flammiferae novi mentis.” Ovid *Tristia ex Ponto* 4.6.34: “verba velut tinctu singula virus habent.” Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. “venenum,” “virus.”

<sup>55</sup> Quoted from Frederick Morgan Padelford, *Essays on the study and use of poetry by Plutarch and Basil the Great* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1902), 104.

<sup>56</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.1, ANF 7:163.

his readers not to be deceived by the flair for language displayed by such authors: the opening lines of the preface caution “fluent speech and euphonious diction produce delight and praise—resulting in empty glory, among wretched men who have a depraved mind. The man who loves truth, however, pays no attention to defiled language but examines the fact behind the word to see what it is and what it means.”<sup>57</sup> He takes particular offense at the various accounts of creation proposed by poets, which though rhetorically affecting, do not approach the beauty of the account of Genesis: “no man can adequately set forth the whole exegesis and plan of the Hexameron (six days’ work), even if he were to have ten thousand mouths and ten thousand tongues.”<sup>58</sup> However, many have tried, and here Theophilus sees poison:

[M]any writers have imitated it, and have desired to compose a narrative about these matters, but, although they derived their starting-point from it in dealing with the creation of the world or the nature of man, what they said did not contain even a slight spark worthy of the truth. What has been said by philosophers, historians, and poets is thought to be trustworthy because of its embellished style, but what they say is proved foolish and pointless by the abundance of their nonsense and the absence of even the slightest measure of the truth in their writings. Even if something true seems to have been proclaimed by them, it is mixed with error. Just as some deadly poison when mixed with honey or wine or anything else makes the whole harmful and useless, so their loquacity is found to be pointless labor and causes harm to those who are persuaded by it.<sup>59</sup>

This is again a related but distinct treatment of the idea that the appearance of virtue can disguise error. The poison is not the “embellished style” itself; rather, language is wine or honey disguising an underlying, profitless meaning. This places it in a slightly different role than misinterpreted scripture or false virtue. Where the former package error with an agent identified as truth, Theophilus’ iteration casts language itself as a deceitful, collusive blind.

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<sup>57</sup> Theophilus, *Ad Autolytus* 1.1, trans. Robert M. Grant, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.12, trans. Grant, 45.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

This use is not limited to raising alarm over philosophy. Theologically problematic positions can also be conveyed through the vehicle of honeyed words, as in this account of the Origen controversy in the *Life of Pachomius*: “Just as those who are in the habit of blending poisons conceal the bitterness with honey, so did Origen smear the rim of his own errors with the sweetness of divine words, and thus offered his pernicious doctrine to the unlearned to drink.”<sup>60</sup> Vincent’s praise of Origen’s eloquence is of a similar nature (“honey rather than words seemed to flow from his mouth!”). Linguistic and rhetorical deception is categorically different than the other abuses of truth signifiers explored in this chapter, but the metaphor lends itself just as well to the problem of uncertainty around the ability to test truth claims.

#### **1.iv. Conclusion**

This study illuminates the early Christian process of adapting the image of poison concealed by honey to the various epistemic shifts of the first half-millennium of Christian thought. Using the scaffolding of the *Commonitory* of Vincent of Lerins, we have seen the metaphor employed to deal with various means of authentication first adopted and then undermined, including the co-opting of scripture, the shield of doctrinal compliance, literal “virtue signaling,” and finally the rhetorically powerful but suspect message. As the criteria of certainty and proof continue to shift, the construct of poison conveyed in honey is a remarkably consistent means of expressing anxiety over these signifiers of truth.

However, none of these applications of the language attempt to fundamentally solve the issue of false appearance. Even for Vincent of Lerins, whose concern over the tools of deception

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<sup>60</sup> *Vita sancti Pachomii abbatis* 27, PL 73:247. “Sicuti solent qui venena temperant, amaritudinem melle contegere; sic iste propria vitus erroris, coelestium verborum dulcedine liniens, exitiosa rudibus dogmata propinavit.”

prompted the writing of a hierarchy of knowledge and certainty, there persists a tension between self-evidence and plausibility—despite his evident recognition of the concerning unreliability of the tools in his hierarchy, he also insists that truth is recognizable by its simplicity, that it will show itself to be true just as false information will reveal itself to be false. Vincent suggests that the problem of deception is ultimately resolved when error inevitably makes itself known: “But what says the Savior? *By their fruits you shall know them*; that is, when they have begun not only to quote those divine words, but also to expound them, not as yet only to make a boast of them as on their side, but also to interpret them, then will that bitterness, that acerbity, that rage, be understood; then will the ill-savor of that novel poison be perceived.”<sup>61</sup> This is to say, concealed poison, no matter how convincingly it is administered, will ultimately reveal itself by its effects—bitterness cannot be concealed past the first deluding sip, and poison meant to kill will become quickly apparent. Individuals and groups who rely on broken signifiers of truth are thus an ever-present hidden danger, and, simultaneously, patently obvious. This ambivalence and tension persists, but new strategies are required to confront this problem of false-seeming, as the language of hidden poison begins to be connected with Mark 16 and other methods of adjudication.

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<sup>61</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 25, *NPNF* 2/11:150.

## Chapter 2: The Poison Trial of John the Evangelist

### 2.i. Introduction

In 1090, the Benedictine Osbern of Canterbury laid out in the prologue to the *Liber Miraculorum* of his *Vita sancti Dunstani* a brief statement on the nature of belief.<sup>1</sup> As though fearing that his personal experience would not be sufficient to authenticate the miracles he claimed to have witnessed from Dunstan, Osbern prefaced his account with a defense of faith in miracles witnessed by another:

Indeed, we know the truth of these things which are to be written down, most of which, or nearly all, were done in our time—indeed, very few were done before our time, but which we accept from the most trustworthy reports of the most trustworthy men. We invite anyone who deigns to read these things to believe them, for this reason: if they themselves, by chance, wish to write about the deeds of their own time, and if they themselves desire to be believed, so also should they believe us, when they hear those things told which were seen by us [...] For if nothing which they were to write of their own time in fact happened, this does not convict *us* of falsehood. [...] Is it to be believed any the less that Peter, the first of apostles, restored health to the lame at the door of the temple, because it has not happened in our own time? Or indeed, is it to be thought that the blessed Evangelist John did not drink poison without injury, and did not resurrect those who had been poisoned, because the liar and the unbeliever did not see it?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Jay Rubenstein, “The Life and Writings of Osbern of Canterbury” in *Canterbury and the Norman Conquest: Churches, Saints and Scholars, 1066-1109*, ed. Richard Eales and Richard Sharpe (London: Hambledon, 1995), 27-41. For an overview of the life of Dunstan, see the introduction by Nicholas Brooks in *St. Dunstan: His Life, Times and Cult*, ed. Nigel Ramsay, Margaret Sparks and Tim Tatton-Brown (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), 1-27.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne of Canterbury, *Vita sancti Dunstani* and *Liber Miraculorum Sancti Dunstani*, in *Memorials of St Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. W. Stubbs, Rolls Series 63 (London, 1874), 69–161. “Verum quoniam eorum quae scribenda sunt, pleraque ac fere omnia nostris temporibus facta cognovimus; pauca vero aliis quidem temporibus facta, sed nobis verissima verissimorum virorum relatione exposita accepimus: hac ratione omnes qui haec dignabuntur legere, ad credendum invitamus, ut sicuti sibi credi volent, si forte aliqua suis temporibus facta scribere voluerint, ita nobis credant, cum audierint ea narrari, quae a nobis potuere videri[...] Quod si nulla quae scribi debeant, suis temporibus fieri contingant, non ideo nos statim falsitatis arguant, [...] Num enim idcirco minus credendum est principem apostolorum Petrum ad portam templi speciosam claudum sanasse, quod nostris temporibus istud non fecerit, aut ideo

The first of Osbern's proof-texts, the miracles that admit of no doubt and serve as rhetorical props for the strength of his own reports, comes from the account of apostolic deeds recorded in the biblical Acts of the Apostles. His second, however, has no biblical source. The story of John the Evangelist drinking poison derives from a late antique apocryphal tradition of apostolic *vitae*, in which, challenged by a pagan priest, John proves immune to the poison's deadly effects. By the middle ages, the story is a standard piece of John's biography, depicted in art, celebrated in liturgy, and, as in Osbern's preface, invoked as an exemplum of saintly vindication.

The fact that an extrabiblical narrative becomes central to the commemoration of a saint is not in itself notable—this is a well-known process of expansion, enrichment, and embellishment in the vast hagiographic tradition.<sup>3</sup> The ascent of the poison trial of John from an apocryphal tale of the continued life of a saint to proof-text and exemplum by which miracles, persons, and theological positions are evaluated, however, is one that is particularly striking in the context of the history of doubt and anxiety over the usefulness, and indeed the theological safety, of apocryphal apostolic lives. As Els Rose has demonstrated, the anxiety over the use of apocryphal materials evinced by medieval authors rises from the concern that whatever might be

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beatus evangelista Joannes venenum sine laesione non bibit, et qui veneno deperierant non resuscitavit, quod ista nescio quis impostor et calumniator non viderit.”

<sup>3</sup>The scholarship on early Christian apocrypha is vast; see in particular Avril Camron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). For the medieval reception tradition, see Els Rose, “Apocryphal Traditions in Medieval Latin Liturgy: A New Research Project Illustrated with the Case of the Apostle Andrew,” *Apocrypha* 15 (2004): 115-138. Zbigniew Izydorzyc considers the effect of apocrypha on liturgy in “The *Evangelium Nicodemi* in the Latin Middle Ages” in *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus: Texts, Intertexts and Contexts in Western Europe* (Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1997), 43-101. On adaptation and “réécriture” see Rose, “La réécriture des Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres dans le Moyen-Âge Latin,” *Apocrypha* 22 (2011): 135-166. Rose here identifies three stages of rewriting apocryphal acts: first, the prefaces to Latin translations of earlier Greek Acts show active reflection on the purpose of these collections. Second, the visible migration of miracle stories derived from these sources into liturgical commemoration. Finally, the iconography of these miracles influence the visual tradition, in her study thirteenth century English stained-glass cathedral campaigns.

useful or beneficial in pious stories of holy figures be overwhelmed by the potential for untruths put forth by an unverifiable authority. In the words of Augustine, “For though there is some truth in these apocryphal writings, yet they contain so many false statements, that they have no canonical authority...just as many writings are produced by heretics under the names both of other prophets, and, more recently, under the names of the apostles.”<sup>4</sup>

The very problem introduced by apocrypha—to what extent are they theologically problematic, if they are perhaps truth mixed with falsehood—is often the anxiety expressed in medieval invocations of hidden poisons. So Pope Leo I (d. 461), condemning not narratives *about* apostles but those supposedly *by* them, wrote:

[We] found many of their copies most corrupt, though they are entitled canonical. For how could they deceive the simple-minded unless they sweetened their poisoned cups with a little honey, lest what was deadly should be detected by its bitterness? Therefore care must be taken, and the priestly diligence exercised to the uttermost, to prevent falsified copies that are out of harmony with the pure Truth being used in reading. And the apocryphal scriptures, which, under the names of Apostles, form a nursery-ground for many falsehoods, are not only to be proscribed, but also taken away altogether and burnt to ashes in the fire. For although there are certain things in them which seem to have a show of piety, yet they are never free from poison, and through the allurements of their stories they have the secret effect of first beguiling men with miraculous narratives, and then catching them in the noose of some error.<sup>5</sup>

Poison trial stories, I argue, function both to acknowledge the epistemological problem of distinguishing truth from falsehood, and attempt to solve the problem through the medium of

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<sup>4</sup>Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 15.23.4. Quoted from Els Rose, *Ritual Memory: The Apocryphal Acts and Liturgical Commemoration in the Early Medieval West (c.500-1215)* (Leiden: Brill 2009), 54.

<sup>5</sup>Leo Magnus, Letter 15, *NPNF* 12:24-5. “[M]ultos corruptissimos eorum codices, qui canonici titularentur, invenimus. Quomodo enim decipere simplices possent, nisi venenata pocula quodam melle praelinirent, ne usquequaque sentirentur insuavia, quae essent futura mortifera? Curandum ergo est, et sacerdotali diligentia maxime providendum, ut falsi codices et a sincera veritate discordes, in nullo usu lectionis habeantur. Apocryphae Scripturae, quae sub nominibus apostolorum multarum habent semina falsitatum, non solum interdicendae sunt, sed etiam penitus auferendae atque ignibus concremandae. Quamvis enim sint in illis quaedam quae videantur speciem habere pietatis, numquam tamen vacua sunt venenis; et per fabularum illecebras hoc latenter operantur ut mirabilium narratione seductos, laqueis cujuscumque erroris involvant.” PL 54:688. See also discussion of this passage by Els Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 47.



saintly arbitration.

This chapter sketches the history and evolution of the poison trial of John the Evangelist. Invoked by medieval hagiographers as the exemplum for later saintly poisonings, the origin of the narrative itself is unclear. I will begin by outlining the earliest sources for the trial narrative and describe the state of the literature concerning the dating of these documents. I will then turn to the medieval reception of John's poison trial, its proliferation and use in liturgy, and the adaptations of the story that appear in hymns and sermon literature. I argue that the poison trial becomes useful as a vehicle for conveying specific theological claims about John, at the expense of other potential signifiers of his sanctity. The poison trial is used as a synecdochic representation of all John's other potential moments of heroic suffering, and is thematically tied to all John's virtues, including his corporeal purity and status as reputable source of testimony. Each form of evidence—hymnody, the construction of offices and selection of readings in liturgy, and homiletics—provides a different mechanism through which to imbue the poison trial with meaning. The structural requirements of hymn composition yield significant compression and abbreviation, and thus both the distillation and collapsing of important ideas into richly dense forms. The selection of readings and the rubrication of the liturgical office provides the opportunity not only to interrogate the choices governing such selection, but also to see constructive meaning generation in the resonances of combinations of psalms, antiphons and lessons. Sermons and homilies provide the opportunity to see all of these ideas and theological claims about John's poison trials expanded and explicitly theorized by a single thinker, whose work is then adapted and enriched by others. As a result of these various processes, the poison trial is endowed with important ideas about authorship and authenticity that become available to hagiographers.

I conclude the chapter by comparing the adaptations of John's trial that appear in medieval chronicles with the great hagiographic collections of the thirteenth century, the *Abbreviatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum* of Jean de Mailly (c. 1243), the *Liber Epilogorum in gesta sanctorum* of Bartholomew of Trent (c. 1245), and the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacques de Vitry (c.1260). In surveying all of these sources and in making this comparison, I argue that the influence of these thirteenth century collections on homiletics, liturgy, and visual representations of John has been overstated. The *Legenda Aurea*, in particular, enjoyed a circulation that far eclipses almost all other medieval literary production; more than a thousand extant manuscript copies exist, plus innumerable early printed editions in many vernacular languages.<sup>6</sup> The incredible circulation of this text has led to the assumption that representations of John's poison trial in art and in liturgy are attributable to the popularization of the story achieved by the popularity of the collection. The inclusion of John's poison trial in the *Legenda* collection is not a cause but a symptom of a broader interest in poison trials, as the culmination of centuries of generating meaning around the trial in liturgy.

## **2.ii. The Poison Trial in the *Virtutes Iohannis* and *Passio Iohannis***

I begin with the text and context of the poison trial, as it is presented in the two texts most widely quoted in the medieval sources, the *Virtutes Iohannis* and *Passio Iohannis*. The provenance and dating of these texts are both fraught questions, to which we will return. Both versions pick up John's biography after the crucifixion and after events recounted in the biblical

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<sup>6</sup> See Sherry L. Reames, *The Legenda Aurea: a Reexamination of its Paradoxical History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985) and Barbara Fleith, "Le classement des quelque 1000 manuscrits de la *Legenda aurea* latine en vue de l'établissement d'une histoire de la tradition" in *Actes Du Colloque International Sur La Legenda Aurea, Texte Latin Et Branches Vernaculaires À L'Université Du Québec À Montréal, 11-12 Mai 1983*, ed. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1986), 19-24.

Acts of the Apostles, with the persecutions of the Emperor Domitian and John's exile to Patmos. After his return, he performs a number of miracles in and around Ephesus. The confrontation with pagan priest Aristodemus is the last of John's acts, in the context of a series of conversion miracles on an increasing scale, from individuals to crowds. The first is a resurrection. John has been asked to restore a newly married young man to his family and grieving widow. John having interceded on his behalf, the resurrected young man then requests him to intercede on behalf of the rest of the onlookers—which is to say, convert them. John does so, neatly pairing a literal renewal of life with the promise of Christian resurrection. The episode is bookended with the plight of two particular converts whose doubt is only removed by a miracle of physical transformation. John had turned sticks into rods of gold and pebbles into gems to alleviate their pecuniary suffering, and, at their insistence, returned them to their original states to illustrate the virtues of spiritual richness in poverty and penance.

Following this sequence, John continues to Ephesus and visits a temple of Artemis on a day of celebration. He chastens the public for vain sacrifices and calls upon the strength of the Lord to pull the temple down around them, and the resulting destruction converts 12,000 people. This is the miracle immediately preceding John's poison trial and confrontation with Aristodemus—if this is a pattern of escalating scale and import, the poison sequence is then perhaps meant as a capstone, more impressive even than the conversion of a multitude. Elements of the two preceding miracles are also present in the poison sequence: resurrection, power over the physical world, and a public demonstration of strength. Thus follows the introduction of Aristodemus, presumably attached to the now defunct temple, and his dialogue with John:

“Now when Aristodemus, who was chief priest of all those idols, saw [the destruction] he was filled with a wicked spirit, and stirred up sedition among the people, so that the people prepared to fight amongst themselves. And John said to him, “Tell me, Aristodemus, what can I do to take away the anger from your soul?” And Aristodemus

said, “If you want me to believe in your God, I will give you poison to drink, and if you drink it and do not die, it will appear that your God is true.” The apostle said to him, “If you give me poison to drink, with the invocation of the name of my Lord it will not be able to harm me.” Aristodemus said again, “First I wish you to see others drink it and die straight away, so that your heart may recoil from that cup.” To which blessed John responded, “I have told you already: I am ready to drink it, so that you may believe in the Lord Jesus Christ when you see me whole after drinking the cup of poison.” Aristodemus therefore went to the proconsul and asked him for two men who were to be executed for their crimes. And when he had set them in the center of the square before all the people, in the sight of the apostle he made them drink the poison; and as soon as they had drunk it, they died [lit. “exhaled their spirits”]. Then Aristodemus turned to John and said, “Listen to me and depart from your teaching with which you call away the people from the worship of the gods; or take and drink this, that you may show that your God is almighty if, after you have drunk, you can remain whole.” Then the blessed John, with those who had drunk the poison lying dead, like a fearless and brave man took the cup and, making the sign of the cross, said, “My God, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom all things are subject, whom all creation serves, whom all power obeys, fears, and trembles, when we call on you for succor; upon hearing whose name the serpent is still, the dragon flees, the viper is quiet, the frog is still and strengthless, the scorpion is quenched, the basilisk vanquished, and the spider does no harm; in a word, all venomous things, and the fiercest reptiles and troublesome beasts are covered with darkness, and all roots hurtful to the health of men dry up. I say, quench the venom of this poison, put out its deadly workings, void it of the strength which it has in it, and grant in your sight to all these whom you have created eyes that they may see and ears that they may hear and a heart that they may understand your greatness.” And when he had said this, he armed his mouth and all his body with the sign of the cross and drank all that was in the cup. And after he had drunk, he said, “I ask that those for whose sake I have drunk be turned to you, O Lord, and by your enlightening receive the salvation which is in you.” And when for the space of three hours the people saw that John was of cheerful countenance, and that there was no sign at all of paleness or fear in him, they began to cry out with a loud voice, “He whom John worships is the one true God.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This version of the *Virtutes Iohannes* taken from Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, *L'Histoire des actes apocryphes des Apôtres du 11e au IXe Siecle: Le cas des actes de Jean*, Cahiers de la Revue de théologie et de philosophie 7 (Geneve; Lausanne; Neuchâtel, 1982), 824-825. “Tunc Aristodimus, qui erat pontifex omnium idolorum, repletus spiritu nequissimo excitavit seditionem in populo ita ut populus contra populum pararetur ad bellum. Sed beatus Iohannes ait: ‘Dic mihi, Aristodime, quid faciam ut tollam indignationem de animo tuo?’ Cui Aristodimus dixit: ‘Si vis ut credam deo tuo, dabo tibi venenum bibere, quod cum biberis si non fueris mortuus, apparebit verum esse deum tuum.’ Cui sanctus apostolus ait: ‘Venenum si dederis mihi bibere, invocato nomine domini mei non poterit nocere me.’ Cui Aristodimus ait: ‘Prius est ut videas bibentes et statim morientes ut vel sic possit cor tuum ab hoc poculo formidare.’ Cui beatus Iohannes respondit: ‘Iam dixi tibi: tu paratus esto credere in dominum Iesum Christum cum me videris post veneni poculum sanum.’ Perrexit itaque Aristodimus ad proconsulem et petiit ab eo duos viros qui pro suis erant sceleribus decollandi. Et statuens eos in medio foro coram omni populo in conspectu apostoli fecit eos bibere venenum: qui mox ut biberunt spiritum exhalaverunt. Tunc dicit Aristodimus: ‘Audi me, Iohannes, et aut recede ab ista doctrina qua a deorum cultura revocasti populum, aut accipe et bibe ut ostendas omnipotentem esse deum tuum si postea quam biberis potueris

Aristodemus, unconvinced, insists that John prove his power once more by resurrecting the dead prisoners. John hands Aristodemus his tunic, upon contact with which the dead men spring to life. Aristodemus is finally converted, along with a similarly truculent proconsul.

The language of the trial itself reinforces its use as proof-text, structured as it is to place faith on trial and provide mechanisms with which to distinguish between the true and the false. If the destruction of the temple of Artemis is meant to demonstrate the powerlessness of the idol, the poison trial is perhaps meant to parallel this destruction by demonstrating the power of the Christian god to protect his vessel, John. Both parties consider the stakes of the trial to be belief. The dialogue repeatedly underscores this point; Aristodemus prefaces his challenge with “If you want me to believe in your God,” and John echoes him, “That you may believe in the Lord Jesus Christ when you see me whole.” After the interlude in which the two prisoners demonstrate the efficacy of the poison, Aristodemus again repeats the challenge and the stakes: “[depart from your teaching] or take and drink this, that you may show that your God is almighty.”

Also foregrounded in the sequence is the question of physical perception and the need for visual proof. Indeed, the narrative hinges on multiple moments of visual corroboration. It is not

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*incolumis permanere.’ Tunc beatus Iohannes, iacentibus mortuis his qui venenum biberant, intrepidus et constans accepit calicem et signaculum crucis faciens in eo dixit: ‘Deus meus et pater domini Iesu Christi, cuius verbo caeli firmati sunt, cui omnia subiecta sunt, cui omnis creatura deservit et omnis potestas subiecta est et metuit et expavescit cum nos te ad auxilium invocamus, cuius audito nomine serpens conquiescit, draco fugit, silet vipera et rubeta illa quae dicitur rana inquieta torpescit, scorpius extinguitur, regulus vincitur et sphalangius nihil noxium operatur et omnia venenata et adhuc ferociora repentia et animalia noxia terebrantur et omnes adversae salutis humanae radices arescunt, tu extingue hoc venenosum virus, extingue operationes eius mortiferas et vires quas in se habet evacua, et da in conspectu tuo omnibus his quos tu creasti, oculos ut videant, aures ut audiant, et cor ut magnitudinem tuam intelligant.’ Et cum haec dixisset, os suum et totum semetipsum armavit signo crucis et bibit potum quod erat in calice. Et postea quam bibit dixit: ‘Peto ut propter quos bibi convertantur ad te, domine, et salutem quae apud te est, te illuminante mereantur.’ Attendentes autem populi Iohannem per tres horas vultum habere hilarem et nulla penitus signa palloris aut trepidationis habentem, clamare coeperunt: ‘Unus deus verus est quem colit Iohannes.’”*

only John's survival that provides this—first, Aristodemus insists that the poison be tried on two prisoners, not just to satisfy for himself that the trial is in fact true, but so that John might falter (“First I wish you to see others drink it and die straight away, so that your heart may recoil from that cup”). He then expands the audience of this proof, relocating the affair from the ruins of his temple to the marketplace “before all the people,” but also “in sight of the apostle.” John's lengthy prayer, in which he calls upon the power of the lord to conquer all kinds of venom, ends with the request that the crowd be granted “eyes that they might see,” plus other faculties of understanding. The final proof that John has done all he has promised is in his physical characteristics— it is not only that he continues alive, but that the crowd sees that “there was no sign of paleness or fear in him.” Every element of the trial is visible, public, and relies on the perception of all parties involved to validate it. While the visual nature of the miracle is not always highlighted in the same fashion in later adaptations, which can vary wildly in terms of language and reported dialogue , it establishes the self-validating framing of the trial. This quality is foundational to later invocations of the trial as a proof-test.

### **2.ii.a. The Provenance of the *Virtutes/Passio Iohannis***

The language of the trial makes its later use by Osbern comprehensible—but where did Osbern hear of it? To speak of the first appearance of the poison trial of John the Evangelist is to speak of the scholarly debate surrounding the production of Latin translations of apocryphal literature concerning the apostles. An abundance of texts concerning the deeds and deaths of biblical figures flourished in the first centuries AD, and participated in the same controversies over the authorization of holy texts prompted by Gospel and epistolary literature—like Gospel texts, Greek acts of the apostles circulated individually and in collections before the end of the

second century.

Generally, the corpus of apostolic lives in Latin, and particularly that concerning John the Evangelist, has been distinguished into two clusters. The first is known as the *Virtutes Iohannis* (BHL 4316), from a larger collection of *Virtutes Apostolorum*. It is attributed to “Abdias,” the legendary first bishop of Babylon. The other is traditionally attributed to “Melito,” purportedly bishop of Laodicea, and titled the *Passio Iohannis* (BHL 4320)—a somewhat spurious title for John, as the Evangelist’s status as martyr is the subject of many centuries of debate. It is unclear whether or not “Melito’s” text originated in Greek, as only a Latin version is extant in the manuscript tradition. The attribution to Melito occurs in the text’s prologue, although it is likewise uncertain whether this prologue is original or an accretion to the translation.

The debate over authorship and the relationship between pseudo-Melito and pseudo-Abdias begins with the very first editions. A 1531 edition of apostolic lives compiled by Nausea, *Anonymi Philalethi Eusebiani in vitas, miracula, passionesque Apostolorum Rhapsodiae*, forwards neither attribution.<sup>8</sup> The attribution of the whole corpus to Abdias was made in an edition from 1552, on the basis of a reference to this author in an epilogue to the lives of Simon and Jude. The attribution is preserved in the 1703 *Codex Apocryphus* of Fabricius, and it has been subsequently preserved by later scholarship as “pseudo-Abdias.”<sup>9</sup> Junod and Kaestli, in their work on the apocryphal traditions of John, have assumed that these two texts ought to be

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<sup>8</sup> Junod and Kaestli, 751. See also Nautin Pierre, François Bovon, Michel Van Esbroeck, *Les Actes apocryphes des apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen*, Publications de la Faculté de théologie de l’Université de Genève 4 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Junod and Kaestli, 752. “La seconde et dernière édition de la collection est due à l’érudit W. Lazius (Bale 1552). Son texte sera fréquemment repris par d’autres éditeurs. On le trouve notamment reproduit dans le *Codex Apocryphus* de G.A. Fabricius (Hambourg 1703). C’est ce texte que l’on désigne habituellement sous le nom de collection du Ps-Abdias. Lazius lui a en effet donné le titre: *Historia Apostolicae, autore Abdia Babyloniae Episcopo*... Cette attribution à Abdias est l’œuvre de Lazius qui se fonde sur l’épilogue.”

preserved as distinctly circulating collections, with non-identical lineages. They propose that the *Virtutes* text is specific to Frankish Gaul, while the *Passio* tradition of apostolic lives is the product of Rome and northern Italy.<sup>10</sup> This assumption is adopted by many scholars in the field of early Christian apocrypha.<sup>11</sup>

Junod and Kaestli distinguish between the *Passio* and *Virtutes* collections based on the inclusion or omission of certain miracle narratives, and the order in which the apostles appear in the larger collection. In the case of John, they argue that the collections can be distinguished by *incipit* and by the text of John's "death," which include significant textual variants. The endeavor is complicated by a lack of critical editions, particularly of the *Passio* branch. The two extant are the 1668 collection of Florentius, *Vetustius occidentalis ecclesiae martyrologium*, and its reproduction by Fabricius in the 1724 *Codex apocryphis Novi Testamenti*. The *Patrologia Graeca* preserves, in Latin, the work done by editor Heine in his *Bibliotheca anecdotorum* of 1848.<sup>12</sup> Recently, Els Rose has argued that we have overstated the stability of these collections—that the selection criterion for each "branch" seems to be simply an engine for producing exceptions. Rose argues that we might with confidence only speak of a *Virtutes apostolorum* tradition that encompasses both attributions and which should not be considered the work of a single or even two discrete individuals.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Els Rose, "Abdias scriptor vitarum sactorum apostolorum? The "Collection of Pseudo-Abdias" reconsidered" in *Revue d'histoire des textes* 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 229n10.

<sup>11</sup> Johannes Klauk, *Apokryphe Apostelakten: eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2005); Alan Culpepper, *John the Son of Zebedee: Life of a Legend* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 187-243; Knut Schaferdiek, "Die Passio Johannes des Melito von Laodikeia und die 'Virtutes Johannis,'" *Analecta Bollandiana* 103 (1985): 337-382. See Kaestli's response in "Le Rapport Entre les Deux Vies Latines De L'Apôtre Jean: A Propos d'un récent article de K. Schaferdiek," *Apocrypha* 3 (1992): 111-123; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal Jesus: Legends of the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149-151.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Daniel Kaestli, "Le Rapport Entre les Deux Vies Latines De L'Apôtre Jean: A Propos d'un récent article de K. Schaferdiek," *Apocrypha* 3 (1992): 111.

<sup>13</sup> Els Rose, "Abdias scriptor vitarum sactorum apostolorum? The "Collection of Pseudo-Abdias"



The dating of these collections, consequently, is also a subject of debate. Kaestli and Junod have located both texts in the sixth-century orbit of Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours, a judgment in turn adopted from the work of Richard Lipsius in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Lipsius made the correlation based on a poem by Fortunatus, in which the order and details of apostolic lives accords closely to the order and details given in the hagiographic corpus. Again, Rose has argued that there is little to no evidence in support of this connection.<sup>15</sup> The earliest manuscripts containing a complete set of the *Virtutes Apostolorum* date to the late eighth or early ninth century in liturgical compilations of hagiographic materials.<sup>16</sup> Guy Phillipart identified a number of such collections in his foundational study, *Les légendiers latins et autres manuscrits hagiographiques*. By parsing Phillipart’s list into complete and non-complete collections of apostolic lives, Rose locates the first complete collection of the *Virtutes*, of which the *Passio Iohannis* is a simply variation, in the eighth century.<sup>17</sup>

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reconsidered” in *Revue d’histoire des textes* 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 227-268. See also “Virtutes Apostolorum: Origin, Aim, and Use,” *Traditio* 68 (2013): 57-96; “La Reécriture des Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres Dans le Moyen-Age Latin,” *Apocrypha* 22 (2011): 135-166. See also Gisele Besson, “La Collection Dite du Pseudo-Abdias: Un Essai de Définition à partir de l’étude des Manuscrits,” *Apocrypha* 11 (2000): 181-194.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1983), 104.

<sup>15</sup> The question that Els Rose is interested in answering (where and when can we locate a collection of apostolic lives in a more or less stable form—also apparent from her selection criteria; see “La réécriture des actes apocryphes des apôtres,” 143) is not quite the same as that I am asking—it is plausible for her to look to the insular tradition of Aldhelm and Bede to ask why the collection stabilized and, potentially, returned anew to circulate on the continent. In this endeavor, the conclusion of Junod and Kaestli, that the *Virtutes Iohannes* stem from sixth-century Gaul, is not useful—there may have been a tradition known to Gregory and Fortunatus, but it cannot speak to the existence of the collection as such (see Else Rose, “Virtutes Apostolorum: Origin, Aim, and Use,” *Traditio* 68 (2013), 71: “it is difficult to maintain previous assumptions of the circulation of a complete series of *Virtutes apostolorum* in late sixth-century Gaul”). As I am more interested in pieces than the whole, it is more interesting that we might identify elements of the *Virtutes/ Passio* tradition that do not exist in the *Acta Iohannes*, described below, and yet were unknown to Eusebius, who also includes vignettes about John in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

<sup>16</sup> Rose, “Virtutes Apostolorum,” 83.

<sup>17</sup> Guy Phillipart’s work on legendaries is foundational to the field. Guy Phillipart, *Les Légendiers Latins et autres manuscrits hagiographiques*, Typologie des sources du Moyen Age Occidental (Turnhout:

### 2.ii.b. The Dating of the Poison Trial as an Episode

But this is to speak of a collection, as such, rather than to trace the genealogy of one particular vignette within it. The dating of the *Virtutes* and *Passio* traditions is only of consequence here because it potentially indicates the origin of the poison trial in the narratives of the life of John—the question for my purposes is not the coalescing of a tradition of speaking about the apostles, collectively, but when and where the poison trial entered the tradition of John’s biography, specifically. While certainty is impossible, there are suggestive if not concrete pieces of evidence in which the presence or absence of the Aristodemus sequence allows tentative conclusions.

The first, which greatly simplifies matters, is that John’s poison trial appears in both the earliest extant *Passio Iohannis* and *Virtutes Iohannis* manuscripts, in language indistinguishable enough to suggest direct influence of one on the other, or a shared common source. Untangling the complex relationship between the two manuscript traditions is of limited utility: both can be useful in tracing the spread and familiarity with the specific narrative element of interest here. I will therefore, following Rose, speak of a *Virtutes/Passio* tradition, except where a distinction between the two is profitable.

What of that potential shared common source? The second suggestive piece of evidence is that a second-century Greek text known as the *Acta Iohannis* does not include a poison trial or reference to any such sequence.<sup>18</sup> The basic framework is there for the moment in which the

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Brepols, 1977). For catalogue work related to John, see pages 16-18.

<sup>18</sup> For the Greek *Acta Iohannis* see the critical edition by Junod and Kaestli, also James Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: the Authentication of Missionaries and their Message in the longer ending of Mark*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 449-450.

poison trial will later appear: the conversion of the Ephesians is achieved by the destruction of the temple of Artemis, through the power of John's prayer. The priest, unnamed, dies as a result, and is himself converted when he is resurrected by John.<sup>19</sup> The *Virtutes* and *Passio* clearly elaborate on this framework, displacing the resurrection miracle from the priest himself to two poisoned prisoners. If the poison trial circulated in the second century it did so separately.

The third piece of evidence is that the poison trial does appear in at least one other Greek source: the Greek *Acts of John in Rome*, which in the nineteenth century was read as an introduction to the *Acta Iohannis*.<sup>20</sup> This text, too, has been variously dated to the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries—Junod and Kaestli have noted that there are similarities between the *Acts of John in Rome* and the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Eusebius, which led them to suggest a *terminus post quem* for the *Acts of John in Rome* as 303-311. The poison trial is not among these narrative similarities, suggesting that it was perhaps unknown to Eusebius. Again, the content is similar but sufficiently varied as to preclude any obvious conclusions concerning the direction of influence and adaptation. In this version, John's contest is not with anyone affiliated with the pagan temple, but with the emperor Domitian directly. John offers to drink poison without prompting, declaring the terms of the trial himself. Convinced that his survival is a hoax of some kind, Domitian insists that someone else prove the efficacy of the poison, after, rather than before. John's declared purpose is not to convert the populace through a show of divine strength, but to convince the emperor that Christians are harmless and not worth persecuting; insisting that he cannot allow himself to become a murderer, he resurrects the unlucky poison-taster. Again, the conjunction of these two miracles is necessary to convince Domitian, not to convert to

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<sup>19</sup> Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 459n94.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 459n95.

Christianity, but rather to stay John's execution and commute the sentence to exile on Patmos, where he will have his Apocalyptic revelations.<sup>21</sup> Kelhoffer, Junod, and Kaestli conclude from the similarities evinced between the *Acts of John in Rome* and the *Virtutes* tradition that the mind behind the poison trial was the author of the *Acts of John in Rome*, or, again, that this person adapted some other tradition unknown to Eusebius. They also raise the possibility of an earlier Greek version of what would eventually become the Latin *Virtutes Iohannis* as the source for the *Acts of John in Rome*, a rather complex web of influences.

In short, there is no satisfactory way to date the introduction of the poison trial based on the relationship to the Greek texts. The details of the poison trial in the *Acts of John in Rome* do not seem to be incorporated in the Latin tradition beyond the basic premise. Domitian, of course, looms large in the story of John's trials as the author of the persecution of Christians, but the version in which the emperor himself serves as the antagonist does not gain traction in the Latin tradition. It does suggest, though it cannot be conclusive, that a poison trial story concerning John is in circulation no sooner than the fourth century.

Another piece of evidence points to a specific *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the Aristodemus sequence, or at least of the poison-cup in the Latin tradition. This refraction of the tradition is visible in the *De ortu et obitu patrum*, a collection of highly abbreviated lives attributed to Isidore of Seville and therefore placed before his death c. 630. This summary of the life of John includes both biblical and extrabiblical information, summarizing John's career as apostle and banishment to Patmos before continuing to list other miracles attributed to the saint. It is a useful list of the major miracles drawn from the *Virtutes/Passio* tradition as well as a reference list of the major descriptors of John:

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<sup>21</sup> Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 460n96.

John, apostle and evangelist, son of Zebedee, brother of James, virgin beloved of God, who loved him most above the rest, who reclined on the breast of the Teacher, and whose Gospel he drank from the breast of his holy Lord as from one of the rivers of paradise, and spread the Word of God through the whole world. And who, at the will of Christ, succeeded in his place, the disciple accepting the Teacher's mother, taking his place as a sort of second son. This man, while he preached the Gospel of Christ in Asia, was banished to the mines of the island of Patmos, where he inscribed the Apocalypse. After the death of Domitian his exile lifted and he returned to Ephesus, there refuting the subtleties of the heretics, begged by the bishops of Asia to put stop to their novelties. Indeed, amongst all his other virtues, were these great signs: he turned to gold the twig of a leafy branch, and turned stones to gems. The fragments of this same gem he restored to their proper nature, and, roused by the prayers of the people, resurrected a widow, and returned the soul of a young man to his corpse. Drinking a deadly poison, he not only evaded peril, but returned to life those prostrate from the drink. So, sixty-seven years after the passion of the Lord under the emperor Trajan, now wearied by the feebleness of age, when he felt that his removal from this world was near, he willed his own grave be dug, and so saying goodbye to his brothers, having prayed, he entered his tomb alive, whereupon he lay in it as though on a bed.<sup>22</sup>

Isidore has condensed the two different lines of tradition surrounding John. The biblical tradition highlights John's virginity, his place as reputed author of a Gospel narrative and a vision of the Apocalypse, the "virgin chosen of God," the "beloved disciple, who leaned upon the chest of the Lord." Isidore also isolates a few of the many miracles of the *Virtutes* tradition: John is able to

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<sup>22</sup> Isidorus Hispalensis, *De ortu et obitu patrum* 71.1-4. "Iohannes, apostolus et evangelista, filius Zebedei, frater Iacobi, virgo electus a Domino atque inter ceteros magis dilectus, qui etiam super pectus magistri recumbens evangelii sui fluentia de ipso sacro dominici pectoris fonte potavit, et quasi unus de paradisi fluminibus verbi Dei gratiam in toto terrarum orbe diffudit. Quique in loco Christi, Christo iubente, successit, dum suscipiens matrem magistri discipulus etiam ipse pro Christo alter quodammodo derelictus est filius. Hic dum Evangelium Christi in Asia praedicaret, a Domitiano Caesare in Pathmos insulam metallo relegatur, ubi etiam positus Apocalypsim scripsit. Interfecto autem Domitiano, a senatu exsilio resolutus, recessit Ephesum ibique ob haereticorum refutandas versutias, efflagitatus ab Asiae episcopis Evangelium novissimum edidit. Cujus quidem inter alias virtutes, magnitudo signorum haec fuit: mutabit in aurum silvestres frondium virgas littoreaque saxa in gemmas. Item gemmarum fragmina in propriam reformavit naturam, viduam quoque praecepto populi suscitavit et redivivum iuvenis corpus revocante anima reparavit; bibens letiferum haustum, non solum evasit periculum, sed eodem prostratis poculo in vitae reparavit statum. Hic autem anno sexagesimo octavo post passionem Domini salvatoris sub Traiano principe, longae iam vetustatis senio fessus, quum diem transmigrationis suae inminere sibi sentiret, iussisse fertur effodire sibi sepulcrum, atque inde vale dicens fratribus facta oratione vivens tumulum introivit, deinde in eo tanquam in lectulo requievit." Isidorus Hispalensis, *De ortu et obitu patrum*: Vita y muerte de los santos, ed. and trans. Cesar Chaparro-Gomez (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012), 205-209. The above is my translation from Chaparro-Gomez's Latin edition, rather than from his Spanish translation.

transmogrify natural materials, resurrect worthy people, and drink poison unharmed.

There is a later recension of the *De ortu et orbitu patrum* that sometimes travels under the same name and sometimes as the pseudo-Isidorian *De ortu et obitu patriarchum*. The relationship between *De ortu et obitu patrum* and the *De ortu et obitu patriarchum* is complex—the latter is thought to be from the milieu of an Irish bishop in southern Germany c. 780, placing it a century after its namesake and font of source material.<sup>23</sup> This version maintains much of the language of Isidore’s work (Isidore’s text is in italics) but expands on the original in important ways:

*Indeed, amongst all his other virtues, were these great signs: truly he demonstrated the will to be a martyr, rising from the cauldron of boiling oil unharmed; he drank a draught of poison and did not die, and resurrected the two men who had died from the poison; he turned to gold the twig of a leafy branch, and turned stones to gems and the fragments of this same gem he restored to their proper nature, and, roused by the prayers of the people, resurrected a widow, and returned the soul of a young man to his corpse; and, what is said to be greater, revealed the second coming of Christ to the world.*<sup>24</sup>

The later compiler appears to have re-prioritized the miracles; his greatest concern is to assert

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<sup>23</sup> See esp. Robert McNalley, and notes to the edition prepared by Carracedo Fraga, *Liber de ortu et obitu patriarchum*, CCSL 108E, ed. Carracedo Fraga (Turnholt: Brepols, 1996). McNalley proposes that this text “is a sister work of the Irish pseudo-Isidorian *Liber de Numeris*. Both are among the very earliest pseudepigrapha assigned to St. Isidore of Seville (+636); both are fundamentally compilations from sources of different quality and provenance...both originated about the middle of the eighth century in southeast Germany, probably in the wide circle of the Irish bishop of Salzburg, St. Virgilius (+ ca. 784).” Robert McNalley, “‘Christus’ in the Pseudo-Isidorian ‘Liber de ortu et obitu patriarchum,’” *Traditio* 21 (1965): 168-169. Where Fraga identifies two distinct families of manuscripts from southeast and southwestern German provenance, McNalley reads the latter family as indicating “Irish, Frankish and Spanish symptoms, intermingled” (169). This author also appears to have been pre-occupied with the dating of the feast and potential conflict with John Baptist, and whether or not John ought or ought not be considered a martyr.

<sup>24</sup>Pseudo-Isidore, *Liber de ortu et obitu patriarchum* 48.3, ed. Fraga. “*Cuius quidem inter alias virtutes magnitudo signorum fuit: ‘martyr veraciter voluntate exetit, missus namque ‘in ferventis olei doleum’ inlaesus inde evasit; veneni poculum potavit et ei nihil nocuit, duos viros de veneno mortuos suscitavit; ‘silvestres frondium virgas in aurum mutavit litoriaque saxa in gemmas’ formavit ‘et gemmarum fragmina in propriam naturam reformavit; viduam quoque praecepto populi suscitavit et redivivum’ cuiusdam ‘iuvenis corpus’ in vitae statum ‘reparavit’; et quod dictu magis est, Christi generationem secundum mundo monstravit.*”

that John is, in volition if not in result, a martyr, by grouping and foregrounding the two moments in which John's body came through deadly ordeals undamaged. He then continues Isidore's list of miracles, appending another reference to the visions of the Book of Revelations. By re-ordering the miracles, pseudo-Isidore strengthens John's claim to martyr-hood. It is less clear why all of Isidore's language has been preserved except that of the poison trial, which has been re-written completely. What makes "he drank a draught of poison and did not die; he resurrected the two men who had died from the poison"<sup>25</sup> a better choice than the original "drinking a deadly draught, he not only evaded peril, but returned to life those prostrated by the drink"?<sup>26</sup>

The change is perhaps achieving two things: first, the new language accords more closely with the *Virtutes/Passio* tradition, which is consistent in referring to the liquid as a "venenum" rather than the vaguer "letiferum haustum". Similarly, both the *Virtutes/Passio* text and the pseudo-Isidore text have chosen to underscore the stakes of the trial with "nocere"—it is not about avoiding danger ("evasit periculum"), but physical bodily harm and death. Secondly, the change has separated the poison miracle into two discrete grammatical units. Isidore's "not-only-but-also" construction highlights the resurrection miracle; the reviser's choices have allowed him to separate and so emphasize the poison-drinking, supporting his campaign to cast John as a martyr.

In sum, the origins of the poison trial as part of John's biography are obscure. Possibly

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<sup>25</sup> Isidorus Hispalensis, *De ortu et obitu patrum* 71.4, ed. Chaparro-Gomez: "veneni poculum potavit et ei nihil nocuit; duos viros de veneno mortuos suscitavit."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 48.3. "Bibens letiferum haustum, non solum easit periculum, sed eodem prostratis poculo in uitae reparavit statum." Here the text of the *Virtutes* and *Passio* reads somewhat similarly but not identically to the *De ortu*: "nam venenum bibens non solum ipse incolumis perseverat, sed etiam eos qui veneno mortui fuerant per manus meas tunicae eius tactu suscitati vivunt." The text comes from the section in which Aristodemus is explaining John's feat to the proconsul.

circulating in Greek but not sufficiently well-known as to be incorporated by Eusebius into the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, by the sixth century, and certainly by the eighth, it had become cemented in John's biography of apostleship and quasi-martyrdom. The confusion surrounding the genealogy of post-biblical apostolic hagiographies, evidenced by the confusion of editions and scholarly judgements, is itself a constituent element of the later adaptation of such plausible, useful, unverifiable miracles. Even without access to the precise thread of evolution, it is clear that over the course of the first eight centuries of Christian history, the poison trial of John the Evangelist underwent revision and re-theorization. This process is made more visible in the later period, to which we now turn.

### **2.iii. Visualizing John's Chalice: The Shifting Iconography of John**

To get to the point at which Osbern and his contemporaries would find invocation of John's poison trial as natural as that of Peter's healing at the temple (Acts 3), the tale had to find its way from obscure origins and passing references to become firmly planted in the biography of John the Evangelist. How it did so, and what effects that process had, is the subject to which we now turn. In doing so, I must frame the question slightly differently, and offer a number of different metrics for both the popularity and the import of the tale. Osbern's invocation in the eleventh century is a useful benchmark, but a perhaps stronger piece of evidence requires us to focus the chronological lens forward, to take as our high-water mark for the popularity of the poison trial its inclusion in the visual depictions of John in the high medieval period.

Between the eleventh and the fourteenth century, the iconography of Saint John the Evangelist underwent a transformation. Early illuminators and artists had developed a number of standard iconographies for Evangelists—holding a scroll or book, at work writing—and specific



identifiers for the four in the form of the ox (Luke), eagle (John), angel (Matthew) and lion (Mark). John himself developed other representational cues based on biblical narratives; he was often portrayed as the figure immediately to the right of Christ in depictions of the Last Supper, and with Mary beside the cross at the Crucifixion. But by the fourteenth century, he had developed a new iconography, an identifying marker not derived from any narrative of scripture. In arrays of apostles and saints, John the Evangelist could be identified as the figure holding a chalice, from which rose something monstrous:



Image 1. Two portal statues of John the Evangelist. Left to right: Trier c. 1240 [replica], west façade. Courtesy of Lothar Spurzem/Wikimedia Commons; Amiens c. 1220 [restored], west façade. Courtesy of Cornell University Library.

There are two separate questions here: why the change at all, and given the change, why

this specific choice, the poisoned cup? The first question is enmeshed in a broader historiographical argument concerning the thirteenth century. Art historians have long described a transition in this period towards an expanded iconographic program for representing and identifying saints. The explanation for why this happens ranges from parallels with the encyclopedic tradition,<sup>27</sup> to an increased interest in the semiotics of symbols, to the prosaic need for practical identifiers for an exploding number of popular saints.<sup>28</sup>

Fixing the evolution of Johannine iconography within a period of acknowledged change is not a self-sufficient explanation—why the chalice? Art historians have pointed to a contemporary thirteenth-century source to explain this choice. Often, the new iconography is explained by the incredible popularity of a late thirteenth-century collection of the lives of saints compiled by Dominican preacher Jacobus de Voragine known as the *Legenda Aurea*. Indeed, the rise of this new Johannine iconography roughly coincides with the advent of this collection—while visual depictions of the poison trial as a vignette exist pre-*Legenda Aurea* (see, for example, the cupola dedicated to John in the basilica of St. Mark's, Venice), John does not seem to take the chalice as his attribute before the thirteenth century.<sup>29</sup> However, invocation of the *Legenda Aurea* as the natural source of the image is an historiographic trend of attribution visible

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Pastoreau, “Pour une histoire des attributs dans l’image médiévale” in *Des signes dans l’image: Usages et fonctions de l’attribut dans l’iconographie médiévale*, ed. Michel Pastoreau and Olga Vassilieva-Codognot (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 15. “Or ce qui se passe dans la société véritable se produit aussi dans les images: le XIIe siècle finissant et les premières décennies du XIIIe représentent une importante phase d’accélération, d’intensification et de systématisation des attributs iconographiques. Ceux-ci deviennent envahissants et aident à savoir qui est qui, qui appartient à tel ou tel groupe, et même parfois quelle est sa place au sein de ce groupe.”

<sup>28</sup> Louis Reau, *Iconographie de l’art chrétien, tome troisième: Iconographie des saints* (Paris: Press universitaires de France, 1958), 712. “La coupe de poison a souvent la forme d’un calice et au lieu du dragon, on représente au-dessus du calice une hostie. Cette variante s’explique par un contresens iconographique et une contamination avec un des attributs habituels de sainte Barbe.”

<sup>29</sup> After the thirteenth century, examples abound: see, for example, the iconographic campaign of the west front of the Cathedral at Exeter.

from the nineteenth century to the present. In his 1867 work, *Caractéristiques des saints dans l'art populaire*, Charles Cahier notes that the Evangelist “tenant une sorte de calice surmonté d’un petit serpent ou dragon. C’est la traduction d’un fait de sa légende.”<sup>30</sup> A footnote directs readers to the *Legenda Aurea*. One hundred years later, Reau makes the same connection more explicitly in his *Iconographie de l'art Chrétien*, noting that the legend of the poison-cup is “popularisé par la Légende dorée.”<sup>31</sup>

The tendency of art historians to see the hand of Jacobus de Voragine in John’s transition to the cup (and the manner in which they employ him as causal rather than representative) is visible in the magisterial works of Emile Mâle, who, in seeking an organizing schema for his expansive essays on Christian art, uses Jacobus as a guide-book to all visual depictions of saintly legends. Although Mâle begins with the recognition that Jacobus’ work is not, in itself, innovative,<sup>32</sup> he treats it as representative, the distillation of all hagiography and the carrier of all the traditions borne in legendaries, particularly useful in decoding the windows and statuary depicting saints.<sup>33</sup> There is a danger of over-statement and of eroding the directionality of the correlation here, which Mâle eventually erodes to the point of confusion particularly in the case of John the Evangelist. Mâle recognizes precursors to John’s narrative, and that the text of John’s

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Cahier, *Caractéristiques des saints dans l'art populaire* (Paris: Poussielgue Frères, 1867), 172.

<sup>31</sup> Reau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 718. “Ce récit, popularisée par la Légende dorée, n’est que l’application et l’amplification de deux passages des Evangiles [Matthieu 20, 20-24 and Marc 16.17];” Also, “Dans les cycles des Apôtres, il a pour emblème une coupe empoisonnée d’où s’échappe le venin, exorcise par un signe de croix, sous la forme d’un petit dragon a une ou plusieurs têtes. L’attribut de la coupe empoisonnée, qui apparaît tardivement au XIII siècle, demeure assez rare dans la peinture italienne ou il est remplacé par un livre,” 712.

<sup>32</sup> Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Thirteenth Century*, trans. Matthews Bollingen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 272.

<sup>33</sup> “Such a book admirably represents a whole series of works, and, if need be, makes it unnecessary to consult them. When we have read it, we can explain almost all of the reliefs and windows representing legends in our cathedrals.” Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, 273.

life presented in the *Legenda Aurea* is abridged from previous versions, but also presents a muddy causality.<sup>34</sup> It is both source material and explicative of that material.

Eventually, this confusion leads Mâle to the point at which he asserts not that the *Legenda Aurea* are useful in decoding visual depictions of saintly lives, but that the proliferation of thirteenth-century saint emblems proves the popularity of the Golden Legends themselves.

Again, he uses John to demonstrate this point:

Sometimes a famous episode in the life of the saint provided the artist with an emblem. The chalice surmounted by a serpent identified St. John and recalled that the apostle had drunk a cup of poison unharmed after he had made the sign of the cross...In this way, the entire life of the saint was concentrated into one detail. This shows how popular the *Golden Legend* was, for all these characteristic signs were borrowed from it. We must keep it constantly before us if we are to identify by their attributes the saints of portals and windows.<sup>35</sup>

There is a long distance between “useful for understanding” and “borrowed from,” and this slippage is problematic when attempting to unravel the sources and implications of John’s iconography in the thirteenth century. The first problem, and the most fundamental, is chronology: the shift in iconography occurs before the circulation of Jacobus’ work. John begins to appear in statuary with his chalice in the 1220s (see, e.g., Trier and Amiens, Image 1), while the earliest possible date for Jacobus’ work is in the 1260s. Even the famous precursors to Jacobus’ work, the Dominican collections of Jean de Mailly and Bartholomew of Trent, only take us to the 1240s. The shift in iconography does not *follow* the popularity of these collections.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mâle argues both that “the story of Saint John, also, is taken almost entirely from the Golden Legend” and that “Nevertheless, even though it is abridged, the story [of John] told by Jacob of Voragine is sufficient to explain all the thirteenth-century works of art.” Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, 298-99.

<sup>35</sup> Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, 286.

<sup>36</sup> This is an admission that Yoshiko Tanako makes in the fourth appendix of his *Répertoire des vitraux du Moyen Age figurant la Vie de saint Jean l'évangéliste en France et en Angleterre*, after having cited Jacobus’ work throughout: “Cependant je me dois de renouveler l’attention sur le fait que les trois-quarts des vitraux sur ce thème, catalogues ici, datent de la première moitié du XIIIème siècle; ils précèdent la diffusion du texte de Voragine, qui n’a donc pu être la source directe des événements et miracles racontés en image sur les baies des églises de France et d’Angleterre, même si les thèmes en sont proches, jusque

The second problem is that this sort of attribution buries the most pertinent question. The question is not what the most proximate source for the image might be, in the thirteenth century, for which any rendition of the tradition of John's deeds is the only possible answer (and Jacob of Voragine's work perhaps the most convenient). The more interesting question is this: given a well-known narrative about a saint, which includes any number of miracle stories, what governs the choice of any specific attribute? In short, how do we get from the point reflected by Isidore, in which the poison trial is simply another of John's great proofs of holiness, to the point at which it is his primary signifier? Why this particular signifier, and what does it signify?<sup>37</sup>

#### **2.iv. The Popularization of John's Poison Trial in Medieval Liturgy**

A yardstick by which to measure the extent of the poison trial's proliferation is the inclusion of this particular hagiographic extract in the context in which such material is used, both privately for personal edification and in public celebration at the mass and office celebrated on the feast day of a particular saint. The process by which apocryphal writings enter the liturgy has been described as a type of "domestication," in which the need for materials with which to celebrate the office caused compilers to overlook any potential problems of their source material; in the words of Els Rose, "Liturgy might even be considered an important intermediary of the

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dans les détails." Yoshiko Tanako, *Repertoire des vitraux du Moyen Age figurant la vie de saint Jean l'évangéliste en France et en Angleterre* (Tokyo: Accea Co. Ltd., 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger and others have done extensive work on the deification of John, the thesis of which is that John's elect status as virgin and visionary prompts the gradual merging of iconographies of John and iconographies of Christ, fertile ground for mystical theology. Nothing that follows is meant to contest this thesis; rather, I intend to follow a parallel track. Certainly, the chalice can be read as having eucharistic valence, although the monstrous figure within suggests that different reading must be put forth alongside it. Jeffrey Hamburg, "Brother, Bride and alter Christus: The Virginal Body of John the Evangelist in Medieval Art, Theology and Literature" in *Text und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150-1450*, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft-Symposium, ed. Ursula Peters (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), 296-328.

apocryphal traditions and may, in particular cases, be regarded as a crucial instrument in the development and ‘canonizations’ of apocryphal traditions.”<sup>38</sup> In the case of John, the medieval sources bear witness to this process. In spite of an explicit recognition of the lack of patristic authorization for a post-biblical life of John, hagiographical narratives become integral to his office.

One cannot, of course, speak of “liturgy” as a self-evident, complete and stable thing. Practice varies over time, region, and context. Evidence can be found in the many resources compiled for the proper observation of mass and office, in missals, psalters, graduals, collectars, processionals, ordinals, antiphonals, sacramentaries, lectionaries, benedictionals, pontificals, and tapers. Before the combination of some of these materials of the office into fewer and more complete books, it can be unclear, for example, what exactly the readings or antiphons are, and how many are observed, for any given feast day. It is particularly difficult to uncover consistent lectionary usage, and harder still to collect a complete set of books for any one monastic or secular office use. What follows can therefore in no sense be definitive or exhaustive, but is a tapestry of liturgical documents concerning the feasts of John the Evangelist.<sup>39</sup>

There are two feast days on which hagiographic materials concerning the Evangelist are

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<sup>38</sup> Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 27. See also Els Rose, “Apocryphal Traditions in Medieval Latin Liturgy: A New Research Project Illustrated with the Case of the Apostle Andrew,” *Apocrypha* 15, (2004): 115-138, and “Liturgical Commemoration of the Saints in the ‘Misalle Gothicum’ (Vat. Reg. Lat. 317). New Approaches to the Liturgy of Early Medieval Gaul,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 58, no. 1 (Feb 2014): 75-97. This process is also discussed by Rachel Fulton Brown, who traces an analogous process in Marian liturgy in “‘Quae est ista quae ascendit sicut aurora consurgens?’: The Song of Songs as the historia for the Office of the Assumption,” *Mediaeval Studies* 60 (1998): 56-57.

<sup>39</sup> There have been a number of studies on the liturgical practices surrounding John— see in particular the work of Anette Volfing and Jeffrey Hamburger, who have investigated the cult of John and in particular its liturgical manifestations in late medieval German contexts. Anette Volfing, *John the Evangelist in Medieval German Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See both Jeffrey Hamburger, *John the Divine: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology* (University of California Press 2002) and Hamburger, “Brother, Bride, and *alter Christus*: the virginal body of John the Evangelist in medieval art, theology and literature,” 296-328.

relevant. The first is his major feast, usually classified as either his nativity or dormition, which falls on December 27<sup>th</sup>. The second is the feast of John at the Latin Gate, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, which commemorates John's immersion in boiling oil. The former is by far the more important and more consistently celebrated in monastic and secular observances—falling as it does between the feast of the Nativity and Epiphany, it is often included in the Temporale, rather than the Sanctorale, and so is among the minority of saints whose liturgy circulates with major feasts of the cycle.<sup>40</sup> The following sections will accomplish two purposes—to demonstrate that the poison trial is well-represented in the liturgical commemoration of John, and to explore the developing ideas about John and his virtues implicated by this inclusion. These two aims are intertwined. As the meaning of the poison trial is clarified, it becomes more useful and consequently more visible.

The key to understanding this second process stems not from the selections from hagiography incorporated into the office readings, which I will explore below, but from the epistle rubricated for the mass on John's December 27<sup>th</sup> feast, Sirach 15:1-6:

He that feareth God, will do good: and he that possesseth justice, shall lay hold on her, And she will meet him as an honourable mother, and will receive him as a wife married of a virgin. With the bread of life and understanding, she shall feed him, and give him the water of wholesome wisdom to drink: and she shall be made strong in him, and he shall not be moved. And she shall hold him fast, and he shall not be confounded: and she shall exalt him among his neighbours. And in the midst of the church she shall open his mouth, and shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and shall clothe him with a robe of glory. She shall heap upon him a treasure of joy and gladness, and shall cause him to inherit an everlasting name.

The image of John drinking the “water of wisdom” is one that is taken up in the liturgy as part of the process by which John drinks from the breast of Christ and puts forth his Gospel (in the

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<sup>40</sup> The distinction is between feasts the observance of which depends on the movable cycle of Sundays, which changes based on the date of Easter (Temporale), and feasts with fixed dates, like those of saints (Sanctorale). The Temporale generally but not always begins with Advent.

words of Isidore, as quoted above, “who reclined on the breast of the Teacher, and whose Gospel he drank from the breast of his holy Lord as from one of the rivers of paradise, and spread the Word of God through the whole world”). This is the crucial image of drinking that I believe forms the underpinning of interest in the poison trial in hymns, sermons, lectionary readings, and in the relationship between psalm and text in the office. It becomes a useful bridge by which to link John’s hagiographical moments of (potential) martyrdom with his virginity and authority as an Evangelist.

This section will therefore consider a number of strands in the liturgical tradition: hymnody and benedictional compositions, liturgical rubrics for the structure of the office itself, and homiletics. In each case, the poison trial is incorporated into the medieval celebration of John in ways that reinforce the value of the trial itself as an epistemic tool to be wielded by other authors, while also encapsulating more and more of John’s virtues until Male is correct in asserting that “the entire life of the saint was concentrated into one detail,” which then became John’s iconographic attribute.

#### **2.iv.a. Johannine Hymnody and Benedictions**

This survey of the themes of Johannine hymnody is not comprehensive, nor is it meant to suggest a linear genealogy. It is by nature of the sources both fragmentary and sweeping.<sup>41</sup> From the outset I have separated hymns dedicated to John into two categories: those that deal with the

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<sup>41</sup>The literature on hymn composition is vast. For a general overview, see Joseph Szövérfy, *A Concise History of Medieval Latin Hymnody* (Leyden: Brill, 1985). See also Susan Boynton, “Glosses on the Office hymns in Eleventh-century continental hymnaries,” *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 11 (2001): 1-26; “The Bible and the Liturgy,” in *The Practice of the Bible in the Western Middle Ages*, ed. Susan Boynton and Diane Reilly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10-33; see also Andreas Haug, “Ritual and repetition: the ambiguities of refrains” in *The Appearances of Medieval Rituals: The Play of Construction and Modification*, ed. Nils Holger Peterson, Mette Birkedal Bruun, Jeremy Lleyellyn and Elyolf Ostrem (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 83-96.



Evangelist in general terms, dwelling on characteristics like his virginity and status as “beloved of Christ,” and those that employ specific, extrabiblical narrative events from his hagiographical tradition to develop these and other themes. Hymns of the first category are very popular and appear with great frequency in the hymn collections of many countries and monastic disciplines. To take one example, *Sollemnis dies advenit*, a hymn that appears in dozens of rubrics from before 1100, includes no extrabiblical narrative events but dwells on John’s presence at the Last Supper, his reclining on the breast of Christ, and his reception of the Virgin as his mother.<sup>42</sup> This survey does not mean to imply that poison-drinking comes to dominate Johannine hymnody.

I am strictly concerned with hymns that include extrabiblical information. When extrabiblical narrative events are employed in this genre to typify specific virtues of John, poison drinking is, over time, more and more prevalent at the expense of other potential Johannine signifiers. Given a series of narrative choices with which to underscore specific points about John’s theological virtues, the poison trial, over time, is chosen as a useful vehicle. These hymns also demonstrate a cultural literacy with respect to the *Virtutes/Passio Iohannis* tradition—the relatively fragmented physical record of the hagiographical text need not indicate a lack of familiarity with the narratives.

A survey of Johannine hymnody must, as is true of hymnody in general, begin with Ambrose (c.334-397). Ambrosian hymns began a tradition of many centuries—they are metrical, non-repetitive, and dependent on saintly narratives.<sup>43</sup> There are very few hymns dedicated to individual apostles in the early Christian world, and fewer still specifically to John. One such is

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<sup>42</sup> James Mearns cites dozens of manuscripts in France, Germany, and Italy. James Mearns, *Early Latin Hymns: An Index of Hymns in Hymnaries before 1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 81.

<sup>43</sup> Roald Dijkstra, *The Apostles in Early Christian Art and Poetry* (Leyden: Brill, 2016), 137. See also Arthur Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 16 and following.

*Amore Christi nobilis*,<sup>44</sup> which provides a fourth century benchmark for the aspects of John's life considered worthy of commemoration—notably, while elements of the extrabiblical narratives are present, Ambrose does not include the poison trial:

John, celebrated by Christ's love,  
and "son of thunder," did reveal  
in words of sacred utterance  
the hidden mysteries of God.

His custom was to harvest fish  
to feed his father in old age;  
while tossed upon the turbulent deep,  
he persevered, steadfast in faith.

He plunged his hook into the deep,  
the word of God was what he caught;  
he cast his nets into the waves,  
in them he raised true life for all.

The good fish is devoted to faith,  
which swims upon the world's salt sea,  
reclining on the breast of Christ,  
and speaking with the Holy Spirit:

"In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God. The same  
was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him." Just so  
let him speak praise, just so sound forth;  
for his writings let him be crowned  
with laurel as the Spirit's gift.

Many experience suffering,  
and bloodshed that expunges sin;  
but this transcends the martyrs' deaths,  
this justifies their martyrdom.

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<sup>44</sup> There are a large number of pseudo-Ambrosian hymns—*Amore Christi nobilis* is among those which have been authenticated as genuine by Jacques Fontaine, *Ambroise de Milan: Hymnes* (Paris: Cerf, 1992). See also *One hundred Latin hymns: Ambrose to Aquinas*, ed. and trans. Peter Walsh and Christopher Hutch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 16 and Mearns, *Early Latin Hymns*, 8.

When cast in chains by wicked men,  
with hot oil, the story goes,  
he cleansed the foul dust of this world,  
stood victor over the envious one.<sup>45</sup>

The majority of the strophes highlight John's role as Evangelist, beloved of Christ, quoting at length directly from the start of his Gospel and referencing the privileged knowledge revealed to John by the Holy Spirit. These are characteristics of John that undergo very little evolution. Ambrose has included only two pieces of narrative history specific to John—that he was a fisherman before joining the apostles, and that he was boiled in oil. The first of these is biblical (Luke 5:1-11, Mark 1:16-20, Matthew 4:18-22) not just in reference to his prior occupation but in the subsequent translation of this occupation into fishing for souls (Luke 5:10). John is not the only apostle who gave up a life as a fisherman—the same is true of his brother James as well as Simon Peter—but here he is given a privileged haul as the “good fish” reclining on the breast of Christ.

The second narrative element of the hymn is the extrabiblical reference to John's torture in boiling oil. The event is clearly cast as a martyrdom, following as it does an instructive strophe on the benefits of cleansing suffering and death, although John himself is not killed in the process. Ambrose appears to recognize the lack of biblical authority for this event, noting simply that “it is said,” (“dicitur”). It is said, specifically, by Tertullian (d. 220), who provides the first extant reference to John's immersion in oil, in the context of other martyrdoms intended to demonstrate the glory of the church.<sup>46</sup> Of the various trials and tribulations of John, this

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<sup>45</sup> Walsh and Hutch, *One hundred Latin hymns: Ambrose to Aquinas*, 16-19. Dijkstra provides an in-depth analysis of this hymn, both thematically and metrically, including its influences from classical poetry and clear biblical references. Dijkstra, *The Apostles in Early Christian Art and Poetry*, 148-151.

<sup>46</sup> Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 36, ANF 3. “How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! where Peter endures a passion like his Lord's! where Paul wins his crown in a death like John's, where the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into

particular episode finds the most utility here in underscoring the power of martyrdom in general, and in John's case in particular. There is no obvious influence of the *Passio/Virtutes Iohannis* tradition on the composition.

By the time of the liturgical reforms of the Carolingians, that influence is more evident.<sup>47</sup> A hymn for the feast of John attributed to Notker Babulus (d. 912), *Iohannes hiesu christo*, maintains a number of the familiar themes highlighted by Ambrose: John is the beloved of Christ, who left life as a fisherman to be an apostle. His privileged position as interpreter and Evangelist stems in Notker's version from his virginity, which likewise qualifies him to be given care of the holy Virgin. Notker also includes only one specific narrative component to underscore these virtues, but has made a different choice:

John the virgin, greatly beloved of Jesus Christ  
Because of your love for him,  
You left your earthly father in the boat,  
You renounced a wife's soft bosom to follow the Messiah  
So that at his breast you might be worthy to drink the sacred stream,  
In your life on earth you gazed on the glory of God's Son,  
Which, according to our creed, can be seen only by saints in eternal life.  
You were the one to whom Christ, in His triumph on the cross, committed to the care of  
His Mother,  
So that you, a virgin, might attend the Virgin and generously see to her needs.  
You, broken by prison and scourges rejoiced in your witness for Christ,  
Indeed, you are unaffected by deadly poison and raise the dead to new life, all in the  
name of Jesus  
To you God the Father unveils His Word, which is concealed to others  
So, through your ceaseless prayers, may you always be our advocate in the presence of  
God,  
John, beloved of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

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boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile!"

<sup>47</sup> There is vast scholarship on this subject: see Rosamond McKitterick, particularly *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789-895* (London : Royal Historical Society, 1977); *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> *AH* 51.168:

Iohannes, Iesu Christo multum dilecte virgo,  
Tu eius amore carnalem  
In navi parentem liquisti

Notker has chosen the poison-cup in lieu of the boiling oil. “Prison and scourges” alone demonstrate the strength of John’s role as martyr, while the ability to stay “unaffected deadly by poison” and raise the dead “in the name of Jesus” are highlighted as proof of his connection to divine power. This choice is particularly notable in the context of Notker’s own rejection of *passio* narratives concerning apostles; in his survey of salubrious literature, the *Notatio de illustribus viris*, Notker praises the genre in general but notes that there is no authority for them:

Moreover, you must thoroughly examine the contests and victories of the holy martyrs, so that you accustom yourself by their example not only to despise the enticements of the world, but also to give your life to Christ and to consider the torturing of your body nothing...and first of those of the principal apostles Peter and Paul, Andrew and James the brother of John, and James the brother of the Lord. The church, though, dismisses the authority of the *historiae* that are written about Andrew and John, and the passions of the other apostles.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the relative patristic authority of the story of John’s immersion in oil, Notker has chosen instead to highlight a vignette from a text of which he himself is dubious. Hymns are a medium in which there is limited space to convey information about a holy person—it is not surprising therefore that Ambrose and Notker chose one important narrative event to underscore general theological points. What, then, makes any one choice more useful than another?

Notker’s student at St. Gall, Ekkehard IV (c. 980- c.1057),<sup>50</sup> demonstrates one manner in

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Tu leve coniugis pectus respuisti Messiam secutus,  
 ut eius pectoris sacra meruisses fluentia potare  
 Tuque in terra positus gloriam conspexisti filii Dei  
 Quae solum sanctis in vita creditur contuenda esse perenni  
 Te Christus in cruce triumphans matri suae dedit custodem,  
 Ut virgo virginem servares atque curam suppeditares  
 Tute carcere flagrisque fractus testimonio pro Christi es gavisus  
 Idem mortuos suscitans inque Iesu nomine venenum forte vincis.  
 Tibi summus tacitum ceteris Verbum suum pater revelat  
 Tu nos omnes precibus sedulis apud Deum semper commenda  
 Iohannes, Christi care.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted from Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 67.

<sup>50</sup> A not particularly well-sketched character; as with so many ninth- and tenth-century authors, we know

which the poison trial can be used to express more than simply one narrative event in the life of John. Ekkehard's composition is part of a collection of verse organized by the annual calendar of feast days, the *Benedictiones super lectores per circulum anni*. There is no indication of musical notation: rather, the verses appear to be benedictions intended to accompany the office lections. The collection appears in a composite manuscript from St. Gall (Cod. Sang. 393) and is in his own hand. As it is also glossed in his own hand, the verse provides a unique opportunity to see a poet clarify his intentions. The verse designated for the octave of the feast of St. John contains a number of elements of the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition:

Many rose from the sepulcher at the behest of John.  
 I know not which of his acts is greatest:  
 By prayer he made the broken gems whole;  
 By the love of Christ he turned the twig to gold;  
 He drank the poison of the deadly vine,  
 Thrice drank death and maintained life in peace;  
 Lay his worn body on the tomb as though a bed;  
 Slept as though reclining on the breast of Christ;  
 From his tomb delivered a great many blessings.  
 Ephesus rejoiced: the earth, sea, and skies praised him.  
 The tomb brought forth manna from which to make flour.  
 This manna, if drunk, drove out many evil things:  
 No one offends the faith who believes such a trustworthy thing.  
 He let no tears fall in torment: the wise man rests in peace.  
 He passed through the joy of living without a bloody end.  
 He drank three draughts of the chalice, facing the redness of blood  
 All you, extoll such holy excellence!  
 The blessing of peace can disturb a thousand evil deeds.<sup>51</sup>

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him by his output rather than his biography. (In the words of Egli, "Über die Lebensumstände Ekkeharts IV is wenig bekannt." Thus begins many essays on early figures.) We have in his hand the collection of Benedictions of which our hymn forms a part, plus descriptions of life at St. Gall in his tenure and a useful history of the same. *Der Liber Benedictionum Ekkeharts IV. nebst den kleineren Dichtungen aus dem Codex Sangallensis 393*, ed. Johannes Egli. Mitteilungen zur vaterländischen Geschichte 31 (St. Gallen: Fehr, 1909).

<sup>51</sup> *Der Liber Benedictionum Ekkeharts IV*, ed. Johannes Egli, 36-37:

Surgebant multi Iohanne precante sepulti.  
 Nescio quid maius fore possit in actibus eius.  
 Confractas gemmas prece fecit item fore summas.  
 Efficit aureolas Christi dilectio virgas.  
 Morte bibit plenum vite pincerna venenum.

Ekkehard has structured his verse entirely around the narrative tradition of John's extrabiblical miracles, from the transformational miracles to the poison-drinking to the miraculous "death" and effects of his tomb. At first glance, it appears that Ekkehard has interpreted the poison challenge as though John drank from the chalice three times himself, perhaps in lieu of the prisoners ("thrice drank death and maintained life in peace"). Ekkehard makes his meaning clear, however, in a marginal note, glossing the line "mortem ter hausit" with "dolio, exilio, veneno": the three "drinks of death" are his encounter with boiling oil (lit. "cauldron"), his exile on Patmos, and finally his poison trial. He underscores this meaning both by repeating the idea in verse ("He drank three draughts of the chalice") and by repeating the gloss: "in dolio, exilio, veneno." Other glosses do similarly clarifying work: Ekkehard adds that the manna is effective "if potatum ab infirmis," consumed by someone ill, and that the "sanguinis metam" should be read as "cruciatum," torture and martyrdom.

Ekkehard's move of collapsing all types of torture into one act of drinking is in accord with a strand of biblical exegesis which interprets "drinking from the chalice" as suffering, patterned on the passion of Christ. Indeed, John and his brother James are singled out in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew as seeking to share this particular honor, to which Jesus replies,

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Mortem ter hausit, vitam sub paceque clausit.  
 Corpore defecto tumulo cubat utpote lecto,  
 Dormit amor Christi recubans ceu stramine busti,  
 Efflat virtutes tumulo crebrasque salutes.  
 Effesus his gaudet: mare, terra, polus bona laudet.  
 Bustum mannam vomit eius abinde farinam.  
 Manna quod ebullit, haustum mala plurima pellit.  
 Nemo fidem laedit, qui tanta fidelia credit.  
 De cruce non fleuit: sapiens in pace quievit.  
 Vivendi letam subiit sine sanguine metam.  
 Pocula ter calicis bibit ante cruore rubentis.  
 Virtutes sancti tantas extollite cuncti.  
 Mille malis macto benedictio pace peracto.

“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:28). Jesus affirms that both brothers shall drink from the cup. This causes some problems for later commentators, who note that while James is beheaded in the book of Acts, John is known to have died a peaceful death. Jerome (d. 420) gets around the problem by dwelling on John’s suffering:

People ask how the sons of Zebedee, namely, James and John, drank the cup of martyrdom, when the scripture narrates that James alone of the apostles was beheaded by Herod, but that John, on the other hand, ended his life by natural death. But in the ecclesiastical histories we read report that John too, for the sake of martyrdom, was put into a cauldron of boiling oil. After that the athlete of Christ proceeded to take up the crown when he was immediately packed off to the island of Patmos. Thus we see that his heart did not fall short of martyrdom, and that John drank the cup of confession.<sup>52</sup>

Ekkehard is clearly not the first to interpret John’s exile to Patmos as a second martyrdom, but where Jerome collapses these events into a metaphoric “drinking” so that they satisfy the pronouncement of the Gospels, Ekkehard uses a specific narrative event from the extrabiblical tradition to make this point. John quite literally “drinks of death” to prove his faith, and this is representative of all moments of potential martyrdom. The poison trial has become useful in encapsulating all John’s moments of heroic suffering.

Hymns attributed to a specific author potentially offer insight into when and why they chose the attributes highlighted in the Johannine hymns. Those to which we cannot securely attribute authorship or date of composition can still suggest trends. A series of hymns for John’s December 27<sup>th</sup> feast in collections from Benedictine foundations offer this kind of survey. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 1092 and Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,

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<sup>52</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 3.20.23, trans. Thomas Scheck, *The Fathers of the Church* 117 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008). See also Annette Volting, *John the Evangelist and Medieval German Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 55.



MS Vat. lat. 7172, both Benedictine hymnals c.1000,<sup>53</sup> include a number of Johannine hymns and demonstrate both that the poison trial is represented in the commemoration of this feast, and that there is great potential for variation—frequent representation of this theme does not lead to homogeneity. Invocation of the poison trial is a choice not limited simply by convention. Three of the five entries rubricated for the December feast of John invoke the trial and include poison-drinking as an important characteristic of John.<sup>54</sup> *Agite omnes diem sacratissimum*, also present in a Benedictine hymnal from Farfa c. 1000, provides evidence not of the primacy of the poison trial amongst the various miracles of John, but of the circulation of them as a collection, and familiarity with the narrative in monastic settings. This hymn is a full 12 stanzas, and begins with familiar themes. The first makes clear that this is intended for the feast of John (“Come all ye to this holy day,/a shining day, a most celebrated day,/The day of John, the day of the Evangelist’s birth/The day of the apostle, on which he departed from the world to the Lord”<sup>55</sup>). The second and third establish his identity as the beloved disciple, who reclined on the breast of the Lord, which gave him privileged insight into the present and the future. Then comes a sequence of miracles, in the order in which they appear in the *Virtutes Iohannis*: John turns branches of wood to gold and rocks to gems (4), resurrects Drusiana (5) and Stacteus (6), and counsels two boys,

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<sup>53</sup> All can be found in the collection of Beneventan hymns edited by Dreves known as the “Severinian Hymnal,” from the Abbey of St. Severin in Naples (*AH* 14).

<sup>54</sup> Of the two remaining, one is in the form of an *abecedarium* and makes passing reference to the persecutions of Domitian and boiling oil. The other expands on the theme of virginity and John’s role as most beloved apostle and mystical channel of the Word, mentioning no narrative specifics but that he is a “vir exuberans miraculis.”

<sup>55</sup> *AH* 14.15:

Agite omnes diem sacratissimum,  
 Diem praeclarum, diem celeberrimum,  
 Diem Iohannis, diem natalitium  
 Evangelistae, diem apostolicum,  
 In quo e mundo migravit ad Dominum.

Attico and Eugenio (6). Strophes 7 and 8 are dedicated to the poison trial and its effects: “[John] remained unchanged, having consumed poison,/ and bestowed the gift of life on those who had been given poison./He commanded that Aristodemus, the perfidious priest,/ resurrect those who were dead/by covering them with John’s own tunic.”<sup>56</sup> Consequently, “He baptized that same Aristodemus, /washed in baptism the pontifical consul, /and also all who witnessed that hour,/ and at the word of John the populace/ tore down all the idols and built a church.” Strophes 9-11 detail the miracle of John’s “death,” in which the grave he dug for himself was found full of manna but without a body, and the hymn ends with praises to the Trinity. The use of the specific names of Drusiana, Stacteus, the two boys, and Aristodemus indicates that the hymnodist most likely has access to the *Virtutes* or *Passio* text—these are not preserved in any of the other iterations of John narratives, like that of Jerome. This is specificity beyond that of the other hymns, which refer in general terms to miracles of resurrection and transformation. This suggests that the hymn is not only composed with familiarity with the miracle tradition of the *Virtutes*, but is perhaps meant as a companion to its reading.

The remaining two hymns explicitly link poison-drinking to characteristics of John. The shortest hymn of the three, *Jubilemus carmen dulce*, is only five stanzas, of which the first and last are exhortations. Of the three remaining, one establishes John’s unique virginity, one is split between two miracles of transformation (twigs to gold and gems to stone), and the third is dedicated fully to John’s ability to drink poison unharmed and resurrect those who had died

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<sup>56</sup> AH 14.15:

Hausto veneno perstitit immobilis,  
 Danti venenum dona vitae contulit,  
 Aristodemum, perfidum pontificem,  
 Suae protexit indumento tunicae,  
 Jussit, ut ea mortuos resuscitet.

testing it: “After consuming the drink of death/he maintained his bodily integrity/returning now to life from death/the men who had drunk the poison.”<sup>57</sup> Integrity of both body and substance is the common theme to the miracles and virtues selected by the hymnodist: integrity of person in virginity, complete transformation of substance into objects valued for purity, and the preservation of that physical bodily integrity (“*artus rexit convalenter*”) in the face of an adulterating substance. Poison-drinking, here, in conjunction with the transformation miracles, is thematically tied to John’s corporeal purity.

The last hymn of the collection, *Ecce, Johannis, Domini Dilecti*, likewise links theological claims through various kinds of drinking, correlating the image of John drinking wisdom from the breast of Christ with his mystical knowledge and physical invulnerability. The hymn begins with an acknowledgement of the feast day: “Behold, John, beloved of the lord/the shining festival brightens the world/ All we faithful properly worship,/ Praising Christ.”<sup>58</sup> The hymnodist then establishes John’s virginity in two stanzas, the result of which is divine knowledge: “On account of which, on behalf of all, by heavenly will,/Drinking from the breast of highest wisdom/The blessed Evangelist solemnly intoned/ the sacred mysteries.”<sup>59</sup> Two verses on

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<sup>57</sup> AH 14.17:

Post absorptum mortis potum  
 Artus rexit convalenter,  
 Reddens vitam jam defunctis  
 Virus, virus qui hauserant.

<sup>58</sup> AH 14.16:

Ecce, Johannis, Domini dilecti,  
 Festa praeclara rutilant in orbe,  
 Cuncti fideles veneremur apte  
 Christum laudantes.

<sup>59</sup> AH 14.16:

Unde prae cunctis numinis superni  
 Hauriens alta pectore sagaci  
 Mystica rite intonat beatus  
 Evangelista.

John's exile by Domitian follow. Then the hymnodist comes to the poison trial, immediately following it with a number of stanzas on the benefits of salutary drinks:

Swallowing venom brought no  
Sad consequence to his former vigor,  
No indeed, he was even more  
Wonderful to behold afterwards.

In addition, conquering the laws of death,  
The venerable spirit likewise restored  
By means of contact with his own tunic  
Those who had been poisoned.

The minister of light, sublime eagle,  
Saw the unmixed radiance of heaven  
soaring beyond creation  
and ascending in service to Christ.

He drank the waters of life flowing from paradise  
and irrigated the world through preaching,  
Turning parched souls green  
with eternal fruits.<sup>60</sup>

The thematic linking of drinking and speaking, of suffering and witnessing, is perhaps the culmination of the development of Johannine hymnody and indeed the crux of John's liturgical

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<sup>60</sup> *AH* 14.16:

Virus nam hausto pristini vigoris  
Nil tulit triste, potioris immo  
Sisti deinceps visibus tuentum  
Contuebatur.

Insuper leti legibus subactas  
Animus reddit venerandus idem  
Vestis contactu propriae veneno  
Functis eodem.

Lucis minister aquila sublimis  
Liquide jubar conspicatur saeculi  
Ultra creata transvolando scandens  
Munere Christi.

Vitae fluenta paradisi fonte  
Hausit ac mundum praedicando rigat,  
Arida quibus pectora virescant  
Fructu perenni.

commemoration. John's authorship, exile on Patmos, and his poison trial are mutually reinforcing—John drinks from Christ to produce holy texts, survives drinking a less salubrious cup, and pours out his “drink” in the form of preaching. The hymnodist links his incorruptible body with his virginity, but also with his ability to drink poison unchanged and ability to see the light of heaven “unmixed,” which is to say, unadulterated. The poison trial is employed as the thematic lynchpin between each of these ideas.

#### **2.iv.b. The Poison-cup in Liturgical Rubrics and Breviaries**

The refinement and reification of John's miracles in hymns becoming encapsulated by his ability to drink poison is a process not exactly paralleled in the liturgical rubrics, which allow for significant variation and possibilities for generating internal resonances by means of pairings of the various materials needed to celebrate an office. The analysis which follows of the role of the poison trial in liturgy is thus predicated on exploring choices and combinations of material, rather than on meaning as generated by compression, as in the hymns.

Anette Volfing's study of the liturgy of the hours in both secular and monastic contexts provides the basic framework for understanding how John's extrabiblical hagiographic materials enter the liturgy in the first place.<sup>61</sup> The office of matins is, with exceptions, composed of a series of three nocturns, in which there are a variable number of readings drawn from saintly *vitae* and sermon collections, bookended by psalms, verses, and antiphons.<sup>62</sup> Secular matins for John's

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<sup>61</sup> Annette Volfing, *John the Evangelist and Medieval German Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> “Matins” once referred to the first office of the day—by the medieval period it had been refashioned into the night office, with “lauds” as the first (theoretically) daylight office. The full daily cycle, as specified by Benedict of Nursia, is composed of matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline. For the basics of the medieval monastic office, see Andrew Hughes, *Medieval Manuscripts for Mass and Office: A Guide to Their Organization and Terminology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 53 et passim. On the sources of liturgical hagiographical collections see also Thomas Hall, “Latin

December 27<sup>th</sup> feast include nine such readings and psalms evenly divided between nocturns. Benedictine monastic observances increase the number of readings to a total of twelve, divided into three sets of four, plus a Gospel reading and a collect, and include three psalms in addition to the nine recited at secular matins.<sup>63</sup> Other monastic observances vary. The psalms are set as part of the weekly cycle of reciting the whole psalter, which is the primary function of the office, but antiphons and verses can be derived from the readings, from the psalms, or from other biblical sources. Despite the potential for great variety in the combination of lessons, responses, and antiphons available to the liturgist concerning John, readings for the lessons of Matins derive from a relatively small pool of sources, including Isidore's *De ortu et obitu*, Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the *Passio/Virtutes* texts, and sermons by Bede, Augustine, and Jerome. Even within this pool, great variety in lesson selection and length is possible.

It is partially through such readings in the liturgy of the hours, monastic and secular, that I argue the poison trial gains cultural currency. The fundamental question remains the same as that underlying hymnody, although the expression takes a different form: given a set of options for constructing the commemoration of a saint, what governs any choice of material? In the case of John, especially, the employment of a *vitae* at all is not a matter of course—rare amongst saints, there is biblical material, other than the Gospel text he is credited with writing, accounting for John's actions after the crucifixion. Some observances take advantage of this material; for instance, a twelfth-century secular breviary from Bamberg instructs the use only of the Book of Revelation for the lessons of the first nocturne.<sup>64</sup> It is therefore important to keep in mind, when

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Sermons for Saints in Early English Homilies and Legendaries” in *The Old English Homily: Precedent, Practice, and Appropriation*, ed. Aaron Kleist (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 227.

<sup>63</sup> Volfing, *John the Evangelist and Medieval German Writing*, 72.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. Volfing suggest that the second and third nocturnes come from Isidore and either Bede or Augustine. The breviary edition by Farrenkopf instructs: “Prime tres lectiones de apocalypsi. Secunde tres

discussing genres often characterized as imitative and increasingly standardized, that content represents ongoing choices made by compilers. The poison trial emerges as a choice that is both made consistently and that is productive of rich meaning surrounding John's ability to drink poison, paired with other forms of privileged drinking and speaking.

### *Evidence from incipits*

The evidence from ordinals—service books which provide directions for the offices and the mass—points to widespread adaptation of the biographical traditions of John, but the highly abbreviated nature of the ordinal obscures the exact nature of the lessons taken from the biographical sources.<sup>65</sup> It is clear from incipit markings that both the *Virtutes/Passio Iohannis* and *De ortu et obitu* are represented in the rubrics, but whether or not the readings are of sufficient length to cover the poison trial is not. The early thirteenth-century ordinal of Innocent III proscribes “Sex lectiones leguntur de vita et transita eius scilicet *Secundam post Neronem* et tres omelia” indicating that six readings of unspecified length come from the *Passio* narrative tradition, and three from an unspecified sermon. An ordinal edited from a thirteenth-century MS of the Abbey of the Holy Trinity, Fecamp, indicates readings of the first nocturn that derive from Isidore (incipit *Iohannes apostolus et evangelista filius Zebedei*) but does not clarify lesson divisions.<sup>66</sup> On occasion, ordinals are more explicit about incipits and excipits. The late

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lectiones de sermone *Iohannes apostolus*. Tercie tres de evangelio *Dixit Ihesus Petro*. *Hystoria Valde honorandus.*” *Breviarium Eberhardi cantoris, die mittelalterliche Gottesdienstordnung des Domes zu Bamberg. Mit einer historischen Einleitung*, ed. Edmund Karl Farrenkopf (Münster: Aschendorff, 1969), 38. I am not convinced, pace Volting, that the “lectiones de sermone Iohannes apostolus” refers to the *de Ortu et Obitu*.

<sup>65</sup> The most obvious limitation of an edition of an ordinal, of course, is that there is no way of knowing how closely observance followed the printed rubric. If the 1898 edition of *The Use of Sarum*, ed. Walter Frere (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898) to be believed, there is no commemoration of Dec 27 at all, when evidence from other Sarum-related manuscripts indicates the contrary.

<sup>66</sup> *The Ordinal of The Abbey of the Holy Trinity Fecamp (Fecamp, Musée de la Benedictine, Ms 186)* ed.

thirteenth-century ordinal of Saint-Denis (Paris BNF Lat. 976, fols. 68r-68v) calls for readings with the incipit *Cu[m] au[tem] o[mn]is civitas Ephesior[um]*, which is the beginning of the *Passio Iohannis* section in which John tears down the pagan temple and meets Aristodemus, to the “end of the book.” This, depending on the copy, implies that the readings not only cover Aristodemus and the poison trial, but privilege it at the expense of the other preceding miracles of the *Passio*.<sup>67</sup>

### ***Evidence from lectionary rubrication***

Lectionaries are collections of actual readings, rather than incipits, designated for use on a specific feast day. London, British Library, Egerton MS 2889, an eleventh century Italian collection of hagiographic materials, demonstrates how little such collections can tell us about actual reading practices—the texts indicated for the December 27 feast of the Nativity of John begin with an extract from the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Eusebius (fol. 67v, incipit *Audite fabulam*) before moving on to the *Passio* text (fol. 68v, incipit *Secundam post neronem*). Partway through the poison trial (fol. 71v) the text abruptly switches to an excerpt from an Augustinian commentary on John 21:19-25, before concluding with the genuine Bede homily.<sup>68</sup> On the other end of the spectrum is a twelfth-century legendary-homiliary from the region of Maine-Anjou (BnF MS lat. 3788), in which the only text given for John’s feast is the full *Passio* text (incipit

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David Chadd, 2 vols. Henry Bradshaw Society (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), 1:117. The manuscript itself comes from the early thirteenth century but is thought to reflect the reform campaign of the eleventh-century Abbot William of Volpiano. The readings for the second nocturn come from Bede’s genuine homily.

<sup>67</sup> The response indicated in the ordinal, “*Ecce ego mitto vos sicut oves,*” is Matthew 10:16: “I am sending you out into the world as sheep among wolves. Be therefore canny as serpents and simple as doves.” The theme of discernment and danger is evocative.

<sup>68</sup> London, British Library, Egerton MS 2889, fol. 72r, *Omelia uen. Bede presbyteri, incipit Lectio sanceti euangelii que nobis lecta est.*



*Secundam post neronem*), also without lection divisions. Such a confusion of materials offers options but no clarity in reading practices at Matins.

A strategy for uncovering specificity in these selections comes in the form of lectionary indications in the margins of lectionaries, legendaries, and in other collections of lives not obviously designed for use in the liturgy.<sup>69</sup> Els Rose has catalogued a few such examples. A twelfth-century collection in BnF MS lat. 9737, fol. 57v includes an incipit mark in the John text at *Secundam post neronem*, with the marginal note indicating that is for use on the May 6<sup>th</sup> feast of John at the Latin Gate.<sup>70</sup> BnF MS lat. 12604, a twelfth-century collection of saints lives produced at Corbie for the monks of St. Germain-des-Prés, is a *passionale* with clear lesson rubrication.<sup>71</sup> The *Virtutes Iohannis* (incipit *Tempore illo sancti apostoli*) on fol. 38r and following is clearly marked with lection numerals in text divisions.

BnF MS lat. 12604 provides a perfect case study for lectionary choices taken from a larger collection of *vitae*. The text begins with a rubrication (*Incipiunt capitula de virtutibus[us] s[an]c[t]i joh[ann]is evangeliste*) and nine capitula organizing the text by significant miracles and narrative events: John's exile and return from Patmos, the resurrection of Drusiana, the transformation miracles, the episode at the Temple of Artemis, and the apostle's death. These

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<sup>69</sup> There are, of course, collections that are designed to reflect the order of the liturgical cycle, ordering hagiographic and sermon material sequentially by feast: see Paris BNF Lat. 5280, identified as a thirteenth-century collection of *Vitae, Passio, Homiliae et sermones* for such an example. John's life appears on the first extant folio, titled *Incipit vita vel assu[m]ptio sancti Iohannis ap[osto]li et evangeliste qui supra pectus domini in cena recubuit*. The text is attributed to Melito, and follows the text of the *Passio*. Aristodemus appears on fol. 4r. A sermon of Eusebius of Caesarea on the feast of the Innocents follows, as it does in the liturgical calendar. There are no obvious lectionary marks. The foundational study of this literature is Guy Phillipart, *Les légendiers latins et autres manuscrits hagiographiques* (Turnhout, Brepols, 1977), 24-25.

<sup>70</sup> Rose, "Virtutes Apostolorum: Origin, Aim, and Use," 85-87. I have consulted BnF MS lat. 12604 but not BnF MS lat. 9737.

<sup>71</sup> This manuscript is thoroughly treated by Delbert W. Russell, ed. *Legendier apostolique anglo-normand* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1989), 34.

section headings roughly but not exactly correlate to the nine enumerated lections that follow, which are of variable length—lessons one through three fill one column each of a two-column folio, where the later lessons cover six columns of text. The lectionary markings and the capitula deviate at numeral three: *de drusiana suscitata* (concerning the resurrection of Drusiana) is the fourth capitula but the third indicated lesson. The capitula and lectionary markings re-align at lection five, concerning Crato and the gems. The Aristodemus narrative appears under lection eight (fols. 47r-47v), filling roughly six columns of text.

Identical capitula rubrication appears in BnF MS lat. 3779, also produced with influence from Cluny in the eleventh century but for the cathedral Saint-Vincent de Chalon-sur-Saone. Where BnF MS lat. 12604 appears to be a collection of lives to which lectionary markings have been added, BnF MS Lat. 3779 is properly a lectionary, with materials ordered by the liturgical year of both sermon extracts and *vitae*. Here the reading divisions are indicated both by numerals and capitula repeated within the text itself, with consistent numbering—as in BnF lat.12604, Aristodemus appears in lesson eight, *Destructione templi et mortuis suscitatis*. The consistency of these divisions suggests a consistency of use in the office as it is known in Cluny—there is a method of organizing John’s life into nine lessons, and the destruction of the temple and the poison trial is included as a distinct vignette within it.

### ***Breviary constructions***

This sort of reconstruction can only ever be tentative. A more complete liturgical picture forms from the breviary, although the potential distance between prescription and reality is just as far. The breviary as it emerges over the eleventh century combines psalm, reading, antiphon and verse into one complete use. Again, the campaign to commemorate John’s life advances in a

number of different ways between sources of this type, and demonstrates how the sources of John's biographical material can be shuffled and recombined. To take two examples: the first nocturn in a twelfth-century breviary of the use of Rouen (BnF MS lat. 17991, fol.19v) comprises the entirety of Isidore's *De ortu et obitu*—the split separates the text into three thematic parts, covering John's virginity and acts as apostle, the list of extrabiblical miracles, and his remarkable "death." In this division, the poison trial appears as the closing line of the second reading: "Drinking a deadly poison, he not only evaded peril, but returned to life those prostrate from the drink." Readings of the second nocturn are from Eusebius and the third from Bede's genuine sermon on the nativity of John. An almost identical program can be seen in the contemporary monastic observance of Benedictine monastery at Disentis (St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek Cod. Sang. 403, f369v), split slightly differently to accommodate the four lessons per nocturn. To demonstrate the variety possible within a single geographical tradition, compare BnF MS lat. 17991 with a thirteenth-century breviary owned by the Cathedral of Beauvais, also of the use of Rouen (BnF MS Nov. acq. lat. 1083, f10v). The later breviary takes its hagiographic material from two different sources. The first five lections are taken again from Isidore, though split into different lessons, such that the reference to the poison trial appears in the fourth reading. The fifth lesson completes Isidore's text with the miracles concerning John's death and tomb. The sixth lesson then expounds on this theme by excerpting material related to the miracles performed by the tomb provided by Orderic Vitalis in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This method of expanding on a particular theme by excerpting related material from other sources is one to which we shall return.

The evidence thus far has been from continental foundations. The observance of the monastic and secular office in England follows a unique trajectory, and although it cannot be said

to be uniform, it does not reflect the dizzying array of sources and influences of the continental material. Perhaps the most influential English use is that of Sarum, or Salisbury, the development of which is tied up in the post-Conquest transition from Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Norman church. The liturgical reforms of the Anglo-Norman church, led by Lanfranc (whose student Osbern begins this chapter), reflect the customs of Bec and Cluny while allowing for the observance and celebration of English saints. The development of the use of Sarum was motivated by the 1075 move of the cathedral at Sherborne to what would become Salisbury (Old Sarum), and the transition from a fully monastic use to a secular one.<sup>72</sup> While the cathedral was rebuilt in 1225 and many of the manuscripts post-date this, it is reasonable to see in the thirteenth-century evidence influence from the earlier overhaul of the liturgy.

The manuscript corpus of the Sarum and Sarum-influenced use is vast, such that no modern attempt has been made to prepare any sort of standard edition; the most recent is that published in 1879 by Procter and Wordsworth, itself merely a re-organization of materials from a 1531 printed edition, based on a number of known and currently unknown manuscripts.<sup>73</sup> There is no reason, given the textual instability of the manuscript tradition, to consider this a “standardized” edition that represents the majority or even a plurality of uses. It is still useful in that it reflects an early attempt to codify the Matins office in England. I will use this edition as a baseline from which to compare a small number of breviaries of the Sarum use, to demonstrate a consistent application of the Aristodemus sequence in the Matins office of the December feast of

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<sup>72</sup> For the development and history of the use of Sarum, see esp. Richard Pfaff, *The Liturgy of Medieval England: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 365 et passim. Volfing also uses evidence from the Sarum use in her analysis and this section of my argument is greatly indebted to her work, although our pursuits are not identical. See Volfing, 72-83.

<sup>73</sup> Francis Procter and Christopher Wadsworth, ed. *Breviarium Ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum* (Oxford, 1879) 1: ccxv-ccxix.

John.

The structure of the office is basically that outlined by Volfing for a secular observance; three nocturns of three readings are punctuated with antiphons and responses, interspersed by psalms 18, 33, 44, 46, 60, 63, 74, 96, and 98. While the psalms are set as part of the liturgical cycle, the theological work of the office is to interpret these psalms through the lens of the feast in question. The selections for antiphons and responses do this work, taking text from the psalms themselves and from the hagiographic lections to inflect text that does not strictly speaking pertain to John.

This process is evident from the first antiphon of the first nocturn, taken from the upcoming first lesson and providing the introductory context: “John, Apostle and Evangelist, the virgin chosen by the Lord, whom he loved most among all.” Then follows psalm 18 (*Caeli enarrant*) and the second antiphon, also from the first lesson: “Who reclined on the breast of the Teacher, and whose Gospel he drank from the breast of his holy Lord.” The next psalm is psalm 33 (*Benedicam Dominum*) and the verse, again, a continuation of the quote from the lesson: “Like one of the rivers of paradise, John the Evangelist poured the grace of the Word into the whole world.” Psalm 44 is next (*Eructavit cor meum*), followed by the verse, which is a line from psalm 18, acting as a bookend: “Their sound has gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the earth.” Taken individually, the psalms speak in general terms about praising and recognizing the power of God; when placed in the immediate context of John’s privileged drinking, authorship, and promulgation of the Word, the psalm texts take on new meaning. Psalm 33 foregrounds the flavor of words and holy inspiration (“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall always be in my mouth,” and perhaps more evocatively, “O, taste and see that the Lord is sweet”). Psalm 44 shifts the emphasis from drinking to writing (“my tongue is like the

pen of a quick-writing scribe,” “Grace is poured abroad in thy lips”). The antiphons are chosen so as to bring out aspects of the existing psalms that, with the correct emphasis, refract meaning pertaining to John. The first lesson, taken from Isidore, reiterates the text of the first set of antiphons, before covering John’s relationship to Mary, his preaching and exile to Patmos, the authorship of Revelations, and his miracles of transformation (“he turned to gold the twig of a leafy branch, and turned stones to gems. The fragments of this same gem he restored to their proper nature.”<sup>74</sup>) The lesson ends just after the miracles of transformation, in a manner that echoes the psalm that opened the office, which declares the judgements of the Lord “more to be desired than gold and many precious stones.”<sup>75</sup> Taken all together, the psalms, antiphons, and lesson celebrate the authorship and evangelization of John.

The following response and verse gloss John’s virginity and relationship with the other virgin, Mary, (“The blessed John is greatly to be honored, who reclined on the breast of the Lord, to whom Christ on the cross committed his mother, virgin to virgin” and “The virgin beloved of the Lord who loved him most above the rest, to whom Christ on the cross committed his mother, virgin to virgin”<sup>76</sup>), before continuing with Isidore into the second lesson: “Roused by the prayers of the people, [he] resurrected a widow, and returned the soul of a young man to his corpse.” The *De ortu et obitu patrum* would here continue to describe the poison trial (“Drinking a deadly poison...”), but instead, the second lesson switches abruptly into the pertinent section of the *Passio Iohannis* narrative introducing the contest at the Temple of

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<sup>74</sup> Isidorus Hispalensis, *De ortu et obitu patrum*, ed. César Chaparro-Gomez, 205-209.

<sup>75</sup> Psalm 18:11: “Desiderabilia super aurum et lapidem pretiosum multum.”

<sup>76</sup> *Breviarium Ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. Procter and Wadsworth, 216. “R. Valde honorandus est beatus Johannes, qui supra pectus Domini in cena recubuit. Cui Chistus in cruce matrem virginem virgini comendavit.

V. Virgo est electus a Domine atque inter ceteros magis dilectus, cui...

Artemis. The lesson ends with the destruction of the temple and the conversion of the multitude. The *Passio Iohannis* text continues with the confrontation between John and Aristodemus and the poison trial in lesson three, the last of the first nocturn, and concludes with the resurrection of the prisoners in the first lesson of the second nocturn.

This sort of interpolation is not itself remarkable—these sources are not important as individual components, but are treated as elements of the macro-tradition of the history of John, to be excerpted, elaborated, and molded. The transition to the poison trial occurs exactly where it would have been mentioned in Isidore’s text. This particular compiler uses only the parts of the Isidore that establish the themes of authorship, glosses it with responses to emphasize John’s virginity, and relies on the *Passio* text to expand on the important miracles. The inflection of the responsories in lessons pertaining to Aristodemus do the work of setting John up as witness whose testimony should be trusted:

R. This is the disciple who presents this testimony, and has written these things.  
And we know that his testimony is true.

V. Who attested to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ and to all that he saw. And we know that his testimony is true.<sup>77</sup>

These glosses come from the end of the Gospel of John (John 21:24) and the beginning of the Revelations (somewhat re-worded from Revelations 1:2: “qui testimonium perhibuit verbo Dei, et testimonium Jesu Christi, quaecumque vidit”), and are clearly meant to emphasize John’s privileged and trustworthy authorship. Volfing reads this placement, in the midst of two lessons

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<sup>77</sup> *Breviarium Ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. Procter and Wadsworth, 217. “R. Hic est discipulus qui testimonium perhibet de his et scripsit haec. Et scimus quia verum est testimonium eius.

V. Qui contestatus est Verbum Dei, et testimonium Jesu Christi in his quaecumque vidit. Et scimus quia verum est testimonium eius.” Also quoted by Volfing, *John the Evangelist and Medieval German Writing*, 82.

concerning John's interaction with the temple of Artemis, as a missed opportunity:

“Disappointingly, perhaps, this responsory is not used in connection with any hagiographical text recording the writing of the Apocalypse...This is just one example of how the relationship between responsories and lessons tends to be characterized by the same lack of clear-cut thematic overlap as is the relationship between antiphons and psalms.”<sup>78</sup> In the context of the poison trial, however, I think it is not a missed opportunity at all, nor is the relationship between response and lesson (and, indeed, antiphon and psalm) obscure; rather, the verse and responsory extend the “testimony” in question to cover not only the Gospel of John and his Revelations, but also the process by which John's body is publicly placed in danger and survives to attest to the power of his God. The poison trial is chosen amongst the other miracles of John to perform this authenticating work—by its very structure as a public event in which the stakes are clearly laid out, the trial is structured to verify the message of its subject. The final response, which closes the first nocturne, neatly recalls the themes of the opening and ties together the earlier incidences of “drinking” as divine inspiration with the authenticating drinking of the poison trial: “This is John who reclined on the breast of the Lord. Blessed Apostle, to whom was revealed secrets of the heavens.”

The second nocturn continues along the same lines as the first, employing antiphons to color the set text of the psalms with Johannine overtones. The antiphons refer to John's exile and ordeal in oil, which, in proximity to the poison trial, harkens back to Ekkehard's three “draughts.” The first antiphon is from Eusebius: “John the Apostle was placed in boiling oil; by divine grace he emerged from it uninjured;”<sup>79</sup> the second from Bede's genuine homily: “Because

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<sup>78</sup> Volfing, *John the Evangelist and Medieval German Writing*, 82.

<sup>79</sup> *Breviarium Ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. Procter and Wadsworth, 219. “In ferventis olei dolium misus Johannes Apostolus: divina se protegente gratia illaesus excibit.”



of his unstoppable perseverance in evangelizing, he was sent into exile: he deserved to be eased by frequent divine visions and addresses;”<sup>80</sup> and the third, “The whole population of men and women went to meet the blessed John, returning from exile, crying out and saying, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,”<sup>81</sup> is taken from a section of the *Passio Iohannis* otherwise unused in Sarum. Antiphons along these themes interpret psalms 46 (*Omnes gentes*), 60 (*Exaudi Deus deprecationem*), and 63 (*Exaudi deus orationem meam*) through the lens of John’s trials and exile, making lines like “I have cried to you from the ends of the earth; when my heart was in anguish you have exalted me upon a rock” (Psalm 60:3) particularly evocative by gesturing to John’s exile on the island of Patmos. Psalm 63, *Exaudi deus orationem meam*, similarly becomes a meditation on martyrdom as a tool of conversion (“Hear my entreaty, O God; preserve my life from a fearful enemy. Protect me from the hidden plans of the wicked, from the scheming of evildoers...then everyone will fear; they will proclaim the works of God, and understand his deeds”).<sup>82</sup> Although the poison trial is staged publicly and thus cannot be a “hidden plan,” the psalm directly echoes John’s prayer in the *Passio* reading to be preserved from danger so that his onlookers might observe the works of God.

The readings and responses that follow cover the resurrection of the poisoned men with John’s tunic and John’s dormition, spread over two lessons. The responses all rest on the theme of choice and reward, on John’s “death” and the reward for his suffering:

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<sup>80</sup> *Breviarium Ad Usus Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. Procter and Wadsworth, 219. “Propter insuperabilem evangelizandi constantiam exilio relegatus: divinae visionis et allocutionis meruit crebra consolatione relevari.”

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* “Occurrit beato Johanni ab exilio revertenti omnis populus virorum ac mulierum clamantium et dicentium: Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.”

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* “Exaudi Deus orationem meam cum deprecor a timore inimici eripe animam meam/Protexisti me a conventu malignantium a multitudine operantium iniquitatem...Et timuit omnis homo et adnuntiaverunt opera Dei et facta eius intellexerunt.”

R. On that day I will receive you as my servant, and place you as though a seal in my sight. For I have chosen you, says the Lord.

V. Be faithful unto death, and I shall give you the crown of life. For I have chosen you, says the Lord.<sup>83</sup>

and again:

R. The Lord appeared to his beloved John with his disciples: and he said to him, Come to me, my dear one. For this is the time for you to dine at my banquet with your brothers.

V. And when the Apostle had completed the course of his life in person: the Savior of the world appeared to him and said to him, Come to me, my dear one. For this is the time for you to dine at my banquet with your brothers.<sup>84</sup>

Taken all together, the themes of the second nocturn function as a case for John's status as martyr, marrying his earthly sufferings with heavenly rewards. It is notable that the bulk of the poison trial does *not* fall in this nocturn—it is cast not as an example of John's trials, in the vein of boiling oil and exile, but as part of the campaign of authentication and as an example of John's ability to "drink" truth.

The final nocturn is comprised of Bede's genuine homily; in consequence, fully half of the hagiographical material in the Sarum office is dedicated to the poison trial and the events at the temple. The antiphons of the third nocturn continue to dwell on the heavenly banquet (*convivium*), implicitly recalling the first set of antiphons, in which John reclines on Christ at the last supper and drinks the Gospel. The psalm texts are again inflected by context, as when Psalm

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<sup>83</sup> *Breviarium Ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. Procter and Wadsworth, 220. "R. In illa die suscipiam te servum meum, et ponam te sicut signaculum in conspectu meo. Quoniam ego elegi te, dicit Dominus. V. Esto fidelis usque ad mortem, et dabo tibi coronam vitae. Quoniam ego elegi te, dicit Dominus."

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 222. "R. Apparuit charo suo Johanni Dominus cum discipulis suis: et ait illi, Veni dilecte mi ad me. Quia tempus est ut epuleris in convivio me cum fratribus tuis. V. Cumque complexisset Apostolus cursum vitae praesentis: apparuit ei Salvator mundi, et ait illi, Veni dilecte. Gloria Patri. Quia tempus."

74 (*Caeli enarrant*) emphasizes drinking from a pure source: “For in the hand of God is a cup of pure wine, well mixed, and he will pour from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drink it to the dregs.” In the context of the poison trial and the reading from Wisdom, the text reinforces the established themes around John.

This analysis of the Matins office of John in the Sarum use depends on a post-medieval edition; how does it hold up to extant manuscripts? London, British Library, Add MS 52359 (the “Penwortham Breviary, c. 1300, Lancashire) and BL Stowe MS 12 (the “Stowe Breviary, c. 1322, adapted for use at Norwich) provide a framework for understanding the possible variety of forms present in liturgical manuscripts purportedly of the Sarum use. Importantly, both preserve antiphons, verses and responsories in the same order as that of the Procter and Wordsworth edition. Readings are the source of variety; while both manuscripts preserve nine lessons over three nocturns, the only real pattern are that both dedicate one or more lessons to the poison trial, and in both the last three nocturns comprise Bede’s homily. The Penwortham Breviary spends the first three lessons dwelling on accounts of John’s authorship and exile on Patmos. The second nocturn, then, is left to relate the miracles, and here again Stowe demonstrates variety, spending one lesson each on significantly abbreviated renditions of the transformation of the stones into gems, the poison trial, and the dormition. The poison trial is down to the essentials, without the destruction of the temple, the resurrection of the prisoners, or indeed the full dialogue between Aristodemus and John, nor John’s prayer.<sup>85</sup> The Stowe Breviary, in contrast, dedicates a whole four lessons (three, four, five, and six) to John’s destruction of the temple and the poison trial from the *Passio* tradition, interspersed with the antiphons reinforcing John’s authorship.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> London, British Library, Add MS 52359, fols. 43v- 44r.

<sup>86</sup> London BL Stowe MS 12, fols. 23v-25v.

Ultimately, the only narrative hagiographic information given about John at all in the Penwortham Breviary is the poison trial.

What, then, to make of all this variety? Despite the instability of forms, it is clear that through the selections of readings, and the pairings of antiphon and psalms, significant work is done in elaborating the themes of John's life. As in the case of hymnody, individual choices distinguish amongst the many options possible in making a case for John's specific virtues, and the poison trial is seen as an option that speaks particularly to the themes of virginity and authorship being celebrated on John's feast day.

#### **2.iv.c. Homilies and Sermons for the Feast of John**

This section will examine three texts specifically noted for the December 27<sup>th</sup> feast of John the Evangelist, and will trace a similar evolution to that seen in hymnody contexts and in the liturgy.<sup>87</sup> As the specific virtues of John are hashed out in the context of other materials concerning the saint, the poison trial emerges as a constituent element through which to construct John's corporeal purity and authorship. Again, the question at hand is how the theme of drinking becomes sufficiently important to John that an anecdote about poison-drinking seems like a natural element necessary to his story. Preaching materials are an opportunity to see how the details of John's life from the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition are explicitly theorized and developed by individuals.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Homilies and sermons are not strictly speaking interchangeable, but for the present purposes, the texts will be referred to as they are in the secondary literature without an attempt to pin down the exact context in which they might have been read, studied, delivered, or used as exemplars.

<sup>88</sup> Since I have begun thinking about the problem of apocryphal lives in the insular preaching context, a particularly relevant monograph on the subject has been published by Brandon W. Hawk, *Preaching Apocrypha in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). See especially "Homilies, Apocrypha and Preaching Networks" and "Ælfric and Correct Doctrine." For suggestions on how and when the apocryphal narratives around John reached England, see Rolf Bremmer, "The

The first of these homilies is that which is most commonly represented in the liturgical proscriptions for John's feast, by Bede. This homily serves as an entry point not only as a function of its later ubiquity but because it is an example of the process by which the Gospel reading proscribed for the feast day is interpreted in such a way that incorporates, by design, narrative details of the saint. Although Bede does not in fact include any reference to the specific narrative element of the poison trial, his work lays the thematic foundation for later authors, who see in it the natural launching point for a discussion of this particular episode.

The realities of John's biography as martyr matter to Bede because the homily is, in a large part, a meditation on the distinction between the contemplative life and the active life, and how Peter and John fulfilled in different ways the command of the day's Gospel text (John 21), "follow me." Bede begins by addressing what comes immediately before the designated Gospel reading ("so that we may be capable of fully considering the beginning of this reading, I would like to reflect briefly on what comes before it..."<sup>89</sup>). This context is the return of Christ to the disciples as they are fishing. The conversation that immediately precedes the reading for the feast of John is that in which Christ tells Peter of his impending martyrdom—in Bede's words, "Christ indicated that Peter would be crowned in martyrdom through the death of a cross...he would be overcome by a persecutor...he would suffer the torments of suffering against his will in his human weakness..."<sup>90</sup>

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Reception of the Acts of John in Anglo-Saxon England" in *The Apocryphal Acts of John* Studies of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 1 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 183-196. What Bremmer refers to as the "Acts of John" in this context appears most likely to be the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition rather than some other translation of the Greek Acts of John.

<sup>89</sup> Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels, Book One: Advent to Lent*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, Cistercian Studies Series 111 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 85.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

Bede starts explicating the reading for the day with an explanation of the various meanings of “follow me”; in this context, it is both a blocking cue (Peter and John follow Christ down the beach away from the other disciples) and the entry point for teasing out the two different methods of following Christ represented by John and Peter’s post-resurrection experiences. Peter’s is made clear—Bede notes that “follow me” means explicitly, “imitate me by suffering the cross.” John’s path is more complicated, and this is the entire premise of the Gospel text—what, exactly, is meant by “I wish him to remain thus until I come”? The Gospel text itself raised the interpretation that John does not die at all, and will be alive and intact when Christ returns again. However, both Christ and Bede make clear that the distinction being made here is not whether John will die at all, or whether he will escape the persecution coming for Peter, but rather that John will not die from the violence coming for the other disciples. Bede elaborates, in the voice of Christ: “I do not wish that he be brought to perfection through the suffering of martyrdom, but that without [undergoing] violence from a persecutor he waits for the last day, when I will come myself and receive him into the mansion of the eternal blessedness.”<sup>91</sup> Bede is clear that this does not excuse John from suffering, but refers exclusively to the manner of his dying, arguing that:

It was to be understood thus—that while the rest of Christ’s disciples were brought to perfection through suffering, he would wait in the peace of the church for the coming of his heavenly calling...not that he would not first undergo for the Lord’s sake many labors and distresses from evil people, but that he would conclude his final old age in peace, after the churches of Christ had been founded far and wide throughout Asia, where he ruled.<sup>92</sup>

This is the context in which the elements of John’s biography are relevant, in elaborating on the kinds of suffering experienced by John in his style of “following.” This list draws on familiar

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<sup>91</sup> Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. Martin and Hurst, 89.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

themes including the incorruptibility of John's flesh as a result of his virginity and the experience of exile in which he produced the book of Revelation:

In the Acts of the Apostles it is found that he was scourged with the rest of the apostles... And it is told in the church history how he was put by the emperor Domitian into a tub of boiling oil, from which, since divine grace shielded him, he came out untouched, just as he had been a stranger to the corruption of fleshly concupiscence. And not much after, on account of his unconquerable constancy in bringing the good news, he was banished in exile by the same prince to the island of Patmos, where although he was deprived of human comfort, he nevertheless merited to be relieved by the frequent consolation of the divine vision.<sup>93</sup>

Bede chooses not to invoke any of the other miracles listed by Isidore, but does reference the boiling oil as derived from Eusebius. The moment in which the extrabiblical narrative transmitted in Isidore and in the *passio* tradition becomes relevant is when Bede accounts for John's peaceful death. John's experience is not free from suffering entirely, but the pronouncement of Christ means "that he would pass over from the world without the pain of suffering."<sup>94</sup> Bede acknowledges the problematic history of John's death by citing the "writings of the fathers," who relate that John called his disciples together and performed a farewell mass on the day of his death. Ultimately, the perhaps problematic source of the narrative of John's death is useful to explain how he died peacefully, a necessary component of the distinction made by Christ in the Gospel reading. Bede thus relates John's death as it is in Isidore: "he descended into the place dug for his grave, and when the prayers had been performed, he was taken to his fathers, being found as free of the pain of death as he was a stranger to the corruption of the flesh."<sup>95</sup> Again, bodily integrity is the lynchpin of these ideas.

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<sup>93</sup> Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. Martin and Hurst, 89.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

Bede does not even hint at a poison trial. Bede is unambiguous about rejecting the work of Pseudo-Abdias and Pseudo-Melitus and thus the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition as “uncertain and mendacious.”<sup>96</sup> He certainly employs aspects of the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition, but only as refracted in Isidore’s work. He cites his sources as “writings of the fathers,” but does not mention the poison-drinking even as a rejected or questionable biographical tradition. However, the theme of drinking, and of drinking contemplative wisdom from the breast of Christ, lays a suggestive foundation. This theme is present throughout the sermon. John’s Gospel is described as more mystical than material in its relation of the life of Christ, “suggesting what great matters of heavenly teaching he had imbibed from Jesus’ breast, and which he was pouring forth for us.”<sup>97</sup>

Drinking also appears in relation to the core message of the sermon, which delineates the virtues of the active life as manifested in Peter and the contemplative, as embodied by John (“mystically speaking we can take these things which were predicted by the Lord to Peter and John...as designating the two ways of life in the church which are carried out in the present, namely the active and the contemplative”<sup>98</sup>). In pursuit of this distinction, Bede interprets “remaining thus” as the enduring happiness of contemplation, even after human death: “Contemplative happiness, however, which commences here, will there be made perfect without end when the presence of the heavenly citizens of the Lord himself will be seen... Hence about this [life] Jesus properly said under the image of the disciple whom he loved and whom he made

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<sup>96</sup> Quoted from Rose, *Ritual Memory*, 63.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>98</sup> Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. Martin and Hurst, 90.



to lean upon his breast, ‘I wish him to remain thus until I come.’”<sup>99</sup> Here again Bede introduces the theme of drinking, invoking the words of Psalm 35:

It as if he were clearly saying, “I do not want the taste of contemplative delight, which I especially love in my saints, who are hoping in the protection of my wings, inebriated by the abundance of my house, and who have been made to drink from the torrent of my refreshment—I do not want this to be ended by the act of dying, as [happens after] laborious action, but [I wish it] to be more sublimely perfected after death, when I will appear and lead them into the sight of my majesty.”<sup>100</sup>

The contemplative life, therefore, is an act of continuous drinking that cannot be stopped or tainted by death. As in the other accounts of John’s life, this privileged access to the draught of wisdom consumed from Christ allows John to confound heretics and establish the church in Asia, as “instructed by revelation and intoxicated by the grace of the Holy Spirit, he drove out all the darkness of the heretics by a suddenly-disclosed light of truth (his Gospel).”<sup>101</sup>

In none of this is the poison trial present, nor does it seem to be lurking behind any of Bede’s prose. However, the themes of corporeal purity and drinking an unquenchable and incorruptible liquid, tied together throughout, make the introduction of the poison trial a natural move for later innovators adapting Bede’s text. Carolingian exegete and scholar Haymo of Auxerre (d. 875) provides just such an example, in his sermon for December 27.<sup>102</sup> Haymo’s sermon follows Bede’s in broad strokes, intervening with additional information when he seems to find it necessary and expanding or glossing sections at will. Nowhere is this more evident than

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<sup>99</sup> Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. Martin and Hurst, 92.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>102</sup> Of the somewhat limited work on Haymo, see in particular Sumi Shimahara, *Études d’Exégèse Carolingienne : Autour d’Haymon d’Auxerre : Atelier De Recherches, Centre d’Etudes Médiévales d’Auxerre, 25-26 Avril 2005* Collection Haut Moyen Âge 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 9 and Dominique Ionga-Prat, “L’œuvre d’Haymon d’Auxerre: État de la question” in *L’école carolingienne d’Auxerre: de Murethach à Rémi, 830-908: entretiens d’Auxerre* 1989, ed. Ionga-Prat, Colette Jeudy and Guy Lobrichon (Paris: Beauchesne, 1991), 157-179.

in the section that enumerates John's miracles, which are meant in Haymo's sermon, just as in Bede's, to demonstrate that John's "contemplative" path does not save him from persecution and suffering. The language is sufficiently similar as to indicate that Haymo is intentionally quoting and adapting Bede. Where Bede narrates:

Now in the Acts of the Apostles it is found that he was scourged with the rest of the apostles when they went forth rejoicing from the presence of the council, since they were accounted worthy to suffer indignity for Jesus' name. [Acts 5:41] And it is told in the *Ecclesiastical History* how he was put by the emperor Domitian into a tub of boiling oil, from which, since divine grace shielded him, he came out untouched, just as he had been a stranger to the corruption of fleshly concupiscence.<sup>103</sup>

Haymo includes the same Acts text and the reference to Eusebius, but includes another example of John's immunity to corruption:

For in the Acts of the Apostles it can be read that he was publicly whipped with a switch when the disciples went forth rejoicing from the presence of the council, since they were accounted worthy to suffer indignity for Jesus' name. [Acts 5:41] And it can be read how he was placed by the most impious Emperor Domitian into a tub of boiling oil, from which he rose without bodily injury, as though corruption of the flesh was entirely alien to him. For in the *Ecclesiastical History* we read that he drank poison, and experienced no evil effect, fulfilling that which the Lord had said, And if they drink any evil thing, it will not kill them.<sup>104</sup>

There are a number of innovations of note here. Haymo has preserved the basic structure, the reference to Acts and to the *Ecclesiastical History*, and the fundamental point of John's corporeal incorruptibility. However, he has reshuffled these pieces of evidence in support of the larger point. The poison trial is introduced as additionally explanatory, supporting the premise

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<sup>103</sup> Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. Martin and Hurst, 89.

<sup>104</sup> Haymo's sermons can be found under the name of Haymo of Halberstadt, *Homiliae*, PL 118. Sermon 11 is that on John, PL 118:72. "Nam in Actibus apostolorum publice virgis caesus legitur, quando ibant discipuli a conspectu concilii gaudentes, quoniam digni habiti erant pro nomine Jesu contumelias pati. Et a Domitiano impiissimo Caesare in ferventis olei dolium missus legitur, ex quo tantum liber exiit a dolore corporis, quantum alienus erat a corruptione carnis. Nam in historia Ecclesiastica legimus eum veneno esse potatum, et nihil mali passum, impleto in eo quod a Domino dictum fuerat: Et si mortiferum quid biberint, non eis nocebit."

that “corruption of the flesh was alien to him,” which in Bede’s account is specifically attributed to “divine grace.” Haymo has omitted this attribution, but substituted another; the poison trial is useful in that it allows John’s corporeal purity to be the fulfilment of another biblical pronouncement. The poison trial is corroborative in a manner that Haymo finds instructive.

In one sense, Haymo treats the poison trial as more authentic than even the traditional moment of martyrdom in boiling oil. Where Bede (correctly) attributes the episode with Domitian to the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, Haymo has both displaced this reference to the poison trial and supported it with the Mark text. Although the trial does not in fact appear in Eusebius, the effect is such that the second miracle appears to have greater textual support. Indeed, the line of reasoning seems to make John’s bodily autonomy in the face of boiling oil almost ancillary to the miracle of surviving poison; the Mark text foretells that John will not be corrupted by poison, which implies a corporeal imperviousness that also, incidentally, allows him to survive his ordeal in oil.

There is no obvious reason for the addition of the poison trial—Bede’s work, although suggestive in its invocation of drinking and incorruptibility, does not logically require the introduction of this other miracle to make the points it makes concerning John’s role as martyr and his contemplative path of “following” Christ. Haymo, like Bede, correlates the contemplative life with an act of continuous drinking, and also relates John’s confounding of heretics to a process of inebriation. Haymo also elaborates on the process by which John came to write his Gospel: “He was said to be so filled with the Holy Spirit, that his mind was entirely taken in contemplation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and he drank from that most pure font of life eternal, which he offers to all of us who thirst.”<sup>105</sup> Taken all together, Bede has provided

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<sup>105</sup>Haymo of Auxerre, *Homiliae*, PL 118:55. “Quod cum fecissent, tanta gratia Spiritus sancti dicitur fuisse repletus, ut usque ad contemplandam Patris et Filii ejusdemque Spiritus sancti divinitatem mente

the pre-conditions for Haymo to include the poison trial as an entirely natural and logical elaboration on the theological significance of John's role as typifying the contemplative life. Haymo, like Notker, sees something necessary in the trilogy of ordeals (oil, poison, and exile), although in this instance drinking signifies not suffering but heavenly contemplation and the process of divine inspiration. The theme of drinking heavenly grace, writ large, has perhaps made the inclusion of the poison trial a natural extension.

Haymo and Bede's sermons provide one manner of interpreting the reading for John's feast day, one grounded solidly in the feast's Gospel reading. Another type of sermon, later in provenance, follows the contours of the hagiographical tradition more closely, and in doing so introduces more explicitly elements from the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition and thus implies a complete rehabilitation of the extra-canonical narratives, despite the explicit caution of Bede. Ælfric of Eynsham, a prominent figure of the Benedictine reform movement in England, student of Æthelwold, and famous for his series of vernacular homilies, lives, and other writings, embraces the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition wholeheartedly. Ælfric used both Haymo and Bede, plus Augustine and other church fathers, to provide a sequence of homilies for the liturgical year in the vernacular.<sup>106</sup> Ælfric himself cites these individuals in the Latin preface to his *Catholic*

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raperetur, et de aeternae vitae purissimo fonte potaret, quod nobis sitientibus propinaret."

<sup>106</sup> Scholarship on Ælfric is vast; of general use here is Mary Swan and Hugh Magennis, *A Companion to Ælfric* (Leiden: Brill NV, 2009); Mechtild Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Malcom Godden, ed. *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*. EETS, SS 18 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Paul E. Szarmach, ed. *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and their Contexts*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996); Milton McC. Gatch, *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Wulfstan* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977). For Ælfric's sources, see Smetana, "Ælfric and the Homiliary of Haymo of Halberstadt," *Traditio*, 17 (1961): 457-469, and in particular an unpublished thesis by Patrick Zettel, "Ælfric's Hagiographic Sources and the Latin Legendary Preserved in B.L. MS Cotton Nero Ei and CCC MS 9 and Other Manuscripts" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1979). For Ælfric's hagiography, see Zettel, "Saints' Lives in Old English: Latin Manuscripts and Vernacular Accounts: Ælfric," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 17-37; Peter Jackson and Michael Lapidge, "The Contents of the Cotton-Corpus Legendary," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints'*

*Homilies*, insisting that his primary care has been to avoid the introduction of questionable material or heresy:

We have...translated this book from Latin works, namely from Holy Scripture, into the language to which we are accustomed for the edification of the simple who know only this language, whether through reading or hearing it read; and for that reason we could not use obscure words, just plain English, by which it may more easily reach to the heart of the readers or listeners to the benefit of their souls, because they are unable to be instructed in a language other than the one to which they were born. We have not translated word for word throughout but in accordance with the sense; guarding, nevertheless, most diligently against deceptive errors so that we might not be found to have been led astray by any heresy or darkened by fallacy. For, indeed, we have followed these authors in this exposition: namely, Augustine of Hippo, Jerome, Bede, Gregory, Smaragdus, and sometimes Haymo, for the authority of these is most willingly acknowledged by all the orthodox. We have not only expounded homilies on the Gospels in this book but also the passions of lives of the saints for the benefit of the uneducated among this people.<sup>107</sup>

Editors have attempted reconstructions of these sources, such that it is clear that Ælfric is mostly indebted to Bede and Haymo, and indeed seems to have had access to a written collection of the sermons collections of each.<sup>108</sup> Ælfric's John sermon is the third in the first collection known as the *Catholic Homilies*, most likely written at the monastery of Cerne at the end of the ninth century.<sup>109</sup> It begins with a mix of Bede and Haymo, recounting John's virginity and presence at

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*Lives and their Contexts*, P. E. Szarmach, ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 131–146; Frederick M. Biggs, "Ælfric's Andrew and the Apocrypha" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104, no. 4 (Oct., 2005): 473-494.

<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Wilcox, ed. *Ælfric's Prefaces*, Durham Medieval Texts 9 (Durham : Durham Medieval Texts, 1994), 127: "Nec ubique transtulimus verbum ex verbo, sed sensum ex sensu, cavendo tamen diligentissime deceptivos errores, ne inveniremur aliqua haeresi seducti seu fallacia fuscati. Hos namque auctores in hac explanatione sumus sequuti, videlicet Augustinum Hipponensem, Hieronimum, Bedam, Gregorium, Smaragdum, et aliquando Haymonem; horum denique auctoritas ab omnibus catholicis libentissime suscipitur. Nec solum Evangeliorum tractatus in isto libello exposuimus, verum etiam Sanctorum passiones vel vitas, ad utilitatem idiotarum istius gentis."

<sup>108</sup> See Zettel, "Ælfric's Hagiographic Sources," 39 et passim, and the critical infrastructure of Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*.

<sup>109</sup> Jonathan Wilcox, "The Use of Ælfric's Homilies: MSS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85 and 86 in the Field" in *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. Hugh Magennis and Mary Swan. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 347.

the wedding at Cana.<sup>110</sup> What it does not do, strikingly, is make any reference to the biblical text that so occupied Bede and Haymo (John 21). Ælfric spends no time at all on the question of the contemplative or active life, or on what Jesus meant by “follow me.” Ælfric instead begins by establishing the theme of John’s chastity: “John the Evangelist, [beloved of Christ], was on this day, through God’s visitation, taken to the joy of the kingdom of heaven. He was the son of Christ’s maternal aunt, and he loved him particularly, not so much for the consanguinity, as for the purity of his uncorrupted chastity. He was in chastity chosen to God, and he ever continued in undefiled chastity.”<sup>111</sup> Ælfric then turns immediately to the narrative of John’s trials under Domitian, the submersion in oil and exile to Patmos, and a number of miracles familiar from the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition: the resurrection of the widow Drusiana, the transformation miracles of the gemstones and golden twig, the encounters with the philosopher Crato and the youths Atticus and Eugenius. An interlude about the composition of John’s Gospel follows, which again recalls Haymo and Bede in its discussion of the character of the other Gospels, before the narrative turns to John’s experiences at the temple, the poison trial, and finally his miraculous death.

The poison trial cannot be said to take up more than perhaps a fifth of the overall volume to text; of the miracles, the most space is given to Christ’s speech to two youths who were previously converted after giving all of their worldly possessions away, but who afterwards regret their penury—undoubtedly a useful theme in the context of monastic preaching. Ælfric does not appear to be privileging the poison trial over other narrative vehicles for conveying salutary lessons, but his treatment of it includes much of the specific dialogue of the *Virtutes/Passio* tradition, which Ælfric could not have taken from Haymo nor indeed Isidore:

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<sup>110</sup> Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies*, 28.

<sup>111</sup> *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part, Containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, trans. Thorpe (London: The Ælfric Society, 1844; 1971 reprint), 59.

But the chief idolater still refused with great perverseness, and said that he would not believe unless John drank poison, and through God's might overcame the deadly drink. Then said the apostle, "Though thou give me poison, through God's name it shall not hurt me." Then said the idolater Aristodemus, "Thou shalt first see another drink it, and instantly die, that so at least thy heart may fear the death-bearing drink." John answered him, "If thou wilt believe in God, I will fearless receive this drink." Then Aristodemus went to the prefect, and took from his prison two thieves, and gave them the poison before all the people, in the presence of John; and they immediately after the drink died. Then the idolater gave the venomous drink also to the apostle, and he having armed his mouth and all his body with the sign of the rood, and exorcised the poison in God's name, with bold heart drank it all. <sup>112</sup>

Ælfric gives no clear indication of why he has preferred the narrative John to the biblical John; no obvious sign pointing or theorizing by Ælfric makes the logic of the interpolation clear. In his edition of the *Catholic Homilies*, Malcom Godden forwards a plausible, if somewhat ironic, explanation for Ælfric's departures from his source material. Concerned always about introducing heretical ideas, or ideas too complicated for his audience to parse, Ælfric errs on the side of caution. Bede and Haymo are consumed with the problem of whether or not John died or "remained" until the return of Christ; Ælfric was perhaps wary of lending credence to the idea that John did not in fact die at all but was elevated before death, or with introducing too many interpretations of the passage through the complex exegesis undertaken by his predecessors. Consequently, his sermon takes episodes from the life of John presumably known through other collections of *vitae* and structures and expands them around a particular homiletic theme. The importance of this move cannot be overstated—it indicates a confidence in the narrative form of John's life that surpasses even the authority of Ælfric's own cited sources.

Using text from the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition also provides existing dialogue, as that between Aristodemus and John, and the opportunity to provide new speeches for John. Ælfric

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<sup>112</sup> Ælfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, trans. Thorpe, 73.

can then expand and ventriloquize lessons for his auditors in the voice of the saint.<sup>113</sup> Ælfric chooses to have John speak not about the virtues of the contemplative versus the active life, although that would presumably be an appropriate rumination for his monastic audience, but about the proper use of wealth and the dangers of covetousness. The longest speech of the text is one that appears to be entirely Ælfric's own invention, and rails against covetousness and the accumulation of worldly goods at the expense of future rewards ("Verily he is not lord of those possessions, when he cannot distribute them, but he is the slave of those possessions, when he wholly serveth them"<sup>114</sup>). Perhaps the most analytically useful speech, however, is one that Ælfric provides for John as he prepares to enter the grave he has had dug for himself, in which John appears to highlight his own purpose:

Lord Christ, I thank thee that thou hast invited me to thy banquet: thou knowest that with all my heart I have desired thee. Oft have I prayed thee that I might go to thee, but thou saidst that I should abide, that I might gain more people to thee. Thou hast preserved my body against every pollution, and thou hast ever illumined my soul, and hast nowhere forsaken me. Thou hast set in my mouth the word of thy truth, and I have written down the lore which I heard from thy mouth, and the wonders which I saw thee work.<sup>115</sup>

Despite the earlier elaboration on worldly goods and covetousness here Ælfric returns to the familiar themes from Bede and Haymo—John's body is preserved from every pollution, not just in the sense of the chastity with which Ælfric opens the sermon, but also in his ability to remain safe from the effects of poison. Ælfric reiterates this point in a manner that reflects echoes of Bede and Haymo's concern that John died peacefully, neatly tying the ideas of painless death with corporeal purity: "He departed as joyfully from the pain of death, from this present life, as

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<sup>113</sup> Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, 269.

<sup>114</sup> Ælfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, trans. Thorpe, 65.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.



he was exempt from bodily defilement.”<sup>116</sup> While the poison trial is not the primary miracle around which Ælfric expands, it is clear that the connections between physical purity, resisting poison, and speaking truth are still fundamental to the commemoration of John.

This excursion into sermons composed for the December 27<sup>th</sup> feast of John highlights a number of points—first, that as in the context of hymnody, liturgy, and iconography, John’s biography becomes more and more important in conveying John’s virtues. The language of drinking, in terms of either consuming a pure source or resilience against an impure one, undergirds each of the texts and echoes the readings ascribed in the liturgy. Second, Bede, Haymo, and Ælfric serve as the closest thing possible to a linear development of thought around John as each adapts the last and incorporates more and more of the narrative tradition.

The general trend is that which is present in the other genres we have surveyed—John’s poison trial is introduced into a list of his miracles such that it complements or replaces them, in such a way that emphasizes the overall themes developing around John relating to his corporeal purity and trustworthy authorship. This is particularly evident when Haymo quite literally rewrites Bede’s list of miracles to include the poison trial, but also in the manner in which Ælfric and Haymo build themes based around or easily illustrated by the biographical traditions.

## **2.v. John’s Trial in Chronicles and Thirteenth-Century Hagiographical Collections**

To return to the framework with which we began this section—the rebuttal of any interpretation of John’s iconography as relying on the *Legenda Aurea* for popularity can be found in the tradition of the universal chronicle. The liturgical evidence for a healthy representation of John’s poison trial, and the rehabilitation of a formerly suspect tradition of post-biblical apostolic

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<sup>116</sup> Ælfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, trans. Thorpe, 76.

lives, that occurs well before the second half of the thirteenth century is overwhelming, but this can be augmented by one more indicative genre. John's narrative is incorporated into accounts of the history of the world. Medieval chroniclers and historians understood themselves as fitting into a long trajectory of history, beginning with Creation, or else with the life of Christ. This necessitated the compilation of biblical, post-biblical, and classical histories to frame the chronicler's present, and it is in this context that we can glimpse practices of adapting elements of John's biography. Here, too, we see elements of the familiar evolution. Early documents cite Isidore, but later chroniclers incorporate the longer text established in the liturgical tradition and circulating in independent hagiographical materials.

Carolingian chronicler Frechulf (d. 850) demonstrates a baseline. His text, the *Historiarum libri XII*, begins with the creation of the world and includes details from various sources about the post-biblical lives of the apostles. Frechulf includes John's biographical details in the context of the persecutions of the early church in Rome, although not without some angst over when one might anchor these post-biblical acts in time. His source for this information is Isidore, not cited by name, whose text he weaves with his own interjections, and Eusebius, cited by name.<sup>117</sup> The poison trial is thus included as one of Isidore's list of miracles ("Bibens letiferum haustum non solum euasit periculum, sed eodem prostratos poculo in uitae reparauit statum"). Frechulf expresses no anxiety over the historicity of the miracles.

Exactly where, historically speaking, the poison trial appears in such chronicles depends on the organizational scheme of the author. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Orderic Vitalis (d. 1142) incorporates significant biographical material about John in the context of the post-

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<sup>117</sup> Frechulfus Lexouiensis, *Historiarum libri XII*, ed. Michael Allen. CCCM 169A. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004).

resurrection activities of the apostles—and in doing so, he offers one of the few explicit medieval citations of the text to “Mellitus.” Orderic’s version of the text includes significant quotation from the *Virtutes/Passio* tradition, occasionally abridged, and indicates both knowledge and acceptance of the tradition.<sup>118</sup> Vincent of Beauvais (d. 1264) uses the trials of John in his *Speculum Historiale* to illustrate the various persecutions of Christians under Emperors Diocletian and Maximian. As such, John’s trials are mixed in with a number of other tales of martyrdoms, and the sections concerning John specifically are derived from a number of different sources. The poison trial is quoted in its entirety, with no abridgement of the speeches or other context.

Vincent of Beauvais’ death c. 1264 places him squarely as the contemporary of the compilers of the great hagiographical collections of the thirteenth century. Of these, perhaps the most famous are the great Dominican collections, the *Abbreviatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum* of Jean de Mailly (c. 1243), the *Liber Epilogorum in gesta sanctorum* of Bartholomew of Trent (c. 1245), and the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine (c.1260). Although the last of these is undoubtedly the most popular, the reliance of Jacobus on his predecessors Jean de Mailly and Bartholomew of Trent is well established. The latter, Bartholomew of Trent, provides the most abbreviated version of the poison trial. His *Liber Epilogorum in Gesta Sanctorum*, arranged like many similar examples according to the liturgical year, provides much abbreviated and condensed versions of holy lives. The section on John follows a familiar pattern, introducing John and his biblical activities before providing brief vignettes of John’s post-biblical career. Bartholomew identifies Drusiana, Crato, Atticus and

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<sup>118</sup> See in particular Charles Rozier, Dan Roach, Elisabeth van Houts and Giles E. M. Gasper. eds. *Orderic Vitalis: Life, Works and Interpretations* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2016) and John O. Ward, “Ordericus Vitalis as Historian in the Europe of the early Twelfth-Century Renaissance” *Parergon* 31 (2014): 1-26.

Eugenius and Aristodemus by name but preserves no dialogue. The poison trial is rendered in two brief sentences:

Aristodemus, however, chief priest of the temple refused to believe unless the Apostle would drink poison, and, so that he would tremble at the idea, gathered two condemned men for the apostle to see drink it. Which persons suddenly collapsed dead, but the Apostle, fearing nothing, drank the poison and resurrected the dead men; whereupon Aristodemus and the proconsul and many others were converted.<sup>119</sup>

The narrative has been reduced to the basics, but not quite to Isidorian levels of brevity. The important elements, the stakes of belief and the visual proof provided by the convicts, are all present, as are the consequences. The prayer, the exact mechanics of John's survival, the use of the tunic to resurrect the dead men, and all of the dialogue are missing entirely.

The other direct precursor to the *Legenda Aurea*, the *Abbreuiatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum*, has perhaps most in common with it. Jean de Mailly's recension of Johannine material also includes significant elements drawn from Bede, Augustine, and other aspects of the narrative tradition. No mention is made of the transformation miracles at all, such that the resurrection of Drusiana appears immediately preceding John's encounter with Aristodemus. Aristodemus is referred to simply by the title *pontifex paganorum*. In spite of this, a fair amount of detail is preserved for the trial itself:

Then however the chief priest of the pagans excited such sedition in the people that they, in turn, wanted to kill each other. And the holy John said to him: "What can I do that would appease you?" And he said "If you want me to believe in your god, I will give you poison to drink, and if it does not kill you it will appear that your God is true." To which the Apostle replied: "Let it be as you say." And he: "I want," he said, "for you to see others dying from it, so that you should fear." And going to the overseer asked him for two bandits who were to be killed. And standing them in the middle of the square before all the watching people he gave to them poison to drink, and they died at once. Then the Apostle more calmly accepting the poison prayed, and crossing

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<sup>119</sup> Bartholomew of Trent, *Liber Epilogorum in Gesta Sanctorum*, ed. Emore Paoli (Florence: SISMELE edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001), 37. "Aristodemus vero templi pontifex credere noluit nisi venenum biberet apostolus et, ut id facere perhorret, duos damnatos apostolo vidente coegit bibere. Qui statim mortui corruerunt, sed Apostolus, nil timens, et venenum bibit et mortuos suscitavit; unde et Aristodemus et proconsul et multi alii sunt conversi."

himself, drank it all. And when all those watching perceived no evil result, they praised God.<sup>120</sup>

Jean de Mailly does not include the full text of John's prayer, but much of the dialogue between Aristodemus and John is preserved, and indeed privileged above other miracles. Also highlighted in the selection of text are the visual stakes—Aristodemus wants John to witness the death of the other poison-drinkers, who are placed in the middle of the square, and the watching crowd relies on the visual evidence of John's power. The version of the trial in the *Legenda Aurea* is almost identical to the text of Jean de Mailly.

The point is not that Jacobus de Voragine used known sources from which to compile his wildly popular text—indeed, it is clear from the comparison that although modern editions cite Pseudo-Abdias or Pseudo-Mellito as his sources, more proximate sources are perhaps the most likely. If not Jean de Mailly, Vincent of Beauvais, Orderic Vitalis or any number of legendary collections and liturgical texts could have been employed in compiling the *Legenda Aurea*. The point is rather that Jacobus de Voragine alone, despite his popularity, is in no way pivotal to the popularity of John's poison trial. He is best viewed as additional proof of the medieval interest in such stories, and a conviction that John's particular encounter is a necessary part of his commemoration and celebration.

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<sup>120</sup> Jean de Mailly, *Abbreviatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, *Millennio medieval 97* (Florence: SISMEL edizioni del Galluzzo, 2013), 10. "Tunc quidam pontifex paganorum tantam seditionem excitavit in populo quod se invicem occidere volebant. Et ait illi sanctus Iohannes: "Quid tibi vis faciam ut placheris?" Ait ille; "Si vis," inquit, ut credam in deum tuum, dabo tibi bibere venenum, et si tibi non nocuerit apparebit verum esse deum tuum." Cui apostolus: "Fac quod dicis." Et ille: "Volo," inquit, "ut videas alios ex eo morientes ut timeas." Et pergens ad praepositum petiit ab eo duos latrones qui erant occidendi. Et statuens eos in medio foro coram omni populo vidente fecit eos bibere venenum et statim mortui sunt. Tunc apostolus constanter accipiens venenum oravit; et signans se totum bibit. Et cum vidissent omnes quid nullum malum sentiret laudaverunt deum."

## 2.vi. Conclusion

To return to the question with which we began this section: what would motivate a change in John's iconography such that he would be depicted with the poison cup? The long process by which the poison trial becomes an accepted and in fact celebrated element of John's biography is visible in the various genres of material through which we have worked, and despite the patchwork nature of such a study, a few observations are in order. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, the narrative is incorporated into the liturgy and a thematic exoskeleton is constructed for it—Haymo of Auxerre sees a lacuna in Bede's work that he fills with the trial, and Einhard and Eckhardt both make conscious decisions to highlight the poison trial as being specifically exemplary of John's virtues. Also evident is the end of the discussion about the problematic nature or provenance of the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition. By the time of the compilation of the well-known thirteenth-century hagiographical and lectionary collections, the *Virtutes/Passio* tradition has been rehabilitated to the extent that it becomes necessary to fill in details and embellish the sparser accounts that lend the trial legitimacy in the first place. Ælfric, for example, cites Haymo and Bede as his reputable sources while significantly backfilling with dialogue and text from the *Virtutes/Passio* tradition. A combination of inherited acceptance and the self-authenticating nature of the trial itself helps explain this trend.

The liturgical evidence is that by the twelfth century, John's poison trial is well-represented in the rubrics and glossed with the psalms, such that the thematic through-lines of drinking wisdom and pouring forth authority find echoes in his ability to drink poison and thus to authenticate his writings and his power. I contend that it is the very nature of the work done in the liturgical and exegetical context to encapsulate the other strands of John's authority in his encounter with the poison cup that makes this possible, and indeed it is this process that helps establish the poison trial as itself a validating proof-text even when it is applied to figures other

than John.

Images of John with his chalice thus invoke this validating function. Two final images demonstrate this iconographic linkage. They appear in the “Codex Gisle,” a gradual created and illustrated by a Cistercian nun from Osnabrück and dated to the late thirteenth century. In the context of the first introit for the December 27<sup>th</sup> feast of John the Evangelist, taken from Sirach 15:5 (“And in the midst of the church she shall open his mouth, and shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and shall clothe him with a robe of glory”), the artist has included John, alone, in the initial, blessing his chalice (fol. 108r). The artist includes John and his cup elsewhere, in an initial for an introit for the Ascension (fol. 48r). In this crowd scene, the chalice is treated as John’s attribute; as Peter has his key, John has his chalice:



Image 2. John the Evangelist in Liturgical Initials from the “Codex Gisle,” Diözesanarchiv Osnabrück Inv. Nr. Ma 101, fols. 108r and 48r. Courtesy of the Bistumsarchiv Osnabrück/Wachsmann.

Together, the illustrations demonstrate that the chalice has become shorthand for a number of important characteristics of John. It represents John’s volition to be a martyr, and to “drink from the same cup” as Christ, and thus collapses moments of suffering from the biographical tradition like his exile, boiling in oil, and poison trial. It represents John’s privileged position as the Beloved Disciple who rested his head on the breast of Christ at the last supper and, per Isidore of Seville, “drank from the breast of his holy Lord as from one of the rivers of paradise, and spread the Word of God through the whole word.” As drinking poison without ill consequence



demonstrates the triumph of John against his pagan detractors, drinking wisdom per the Sirach text and drinking from the breast of the Lord demonstrate John's unique authority as a preacher and composer of biblical text. By virtue of this collapsing of each moment of drinking in John's liturgical materials, the depiction of John and his poisoned chalice is a shorthand means of saying, in the words of John 21:24, "This is the disciple who presents this testimony, and has written these things. And we know that his testimony is true." It is a statement of validation.

Why iconography of the saints changed at all in the thirteenth century is outside the scope of this argument; why, as a function of that change, the poisoned chalice becomes John's attribute is much clearer. Emile Mâle's declaration that "the entire life of the saint was concentrated into one detail" holds true, but owes nothing to the popularity of the *Legenda Aurea* and everything to the long development of John's biography and the place of the *Passio/Virtutes Iohannes* text in liturgical celebrations. As a result of this development, not only can Osbern of Canterbury use the miracle as the standard of unassailable historical truth in a discussion about the uncertain authority of contemporary miracles, as in the quotation that opens the chapter, but the validation performed by the poison trial in the context of John provides the framework and the precedent for centuries of hagiographers.

## Chapter 3: Benedict of Nursia and Sabinus of Canosa

### 3.i. Introduction

Abbot Desiderius II (c. 1058-1095), who oversaw the great eleventh-century restoration of the monastic foundation at Monte Cassino, celebrated his achievement with the commissioning of a luxurious lectionary (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 1202) for the office of vigils, dedicated to the great founder of monastic life and patron of Monte Cassino, Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-550).<sup>1</sup> In his extensively illuminated manuscript, Desiderius compiled sermons, celebratory poems, and hymns lauding the life, miracles, and legacy of Saint Benedict. Among the readings in this collection is the great prototype for Benedictine observance and the foundational document of the cult of Benedict himself, in the form of excerpts from the *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory I (c.540-604) relating the first known *vita* of Benedict.

The *vita* is illuminated with a cycle of images depicting important scenes from the life of the saint. One of these is a scene in which Benedict sits at a table with another nimbed monk at

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<sup>1</sup> See H. E. J Cowdry, *The Age of Abbot Desiderius: Montecassino, the Papacy, and the Normans in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). For the restoration of Monte Cassino and the abbacy of Desiderius, see Herbert Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). For Vat. lat. 1202, see Francis Newton and Eric Hobsbawm, *The Scriptorium and Library at Monte Cassino 1058-1105* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68; Beat Brenk, *Das Lektionar des Desiderius von Montecassino, Cod. Vat. lat. 1202: ein Meisterwerk italienischer Buchmalerei des 11. Jahrhunderts* (Zurich: Belser, 1987).

his side (fol. 48r). At the foot of the table stands a robed and tonsured figure who holds out a vessel to the seated saints. An onlooker makes a gesture of surprise:

Image of Vat. lat. 1202, fol. 48r. removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holder is the Vatican Library.

Image 3. Benedict and Sabinus at table. Detail of Vat. lat. 1202, fol. 48r.

Within this one formulation there are references to a number of different scenes from the *Dialogues*.<sup>2</sup> The nimbed figure sitting with Benedict is Saint Sabinus of Canosa, a figure whose life and miracles also feature in a later book of the *Dialogues*, although not one included in Desiderius' manuscript. The inscription under the image identifies this scene as that in book two of the *Dialogues* in which Sabinus visits his holy friend Benedict and Benedict prophesies the fall of Rome to him. However, the illuminators have made more out of this meeting by introducing the monk-figure with the cup, which is offered to the two saintly figures; in so doing, they have neatly paired the two saints in the *Dialogues* who undergo a poison trial.

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<sup>2</sup> John Wickstrom notes this multivalence in his work on the illustrations of this corpus. John Wickstrom, "Gregory the Great's 'Life of St. Benedict' and the Illustrations of Abbot Desiderius II," *Studies in Iconography* 19 (1998), 31-73. Wickstrom suggests that the monk closest to Benedict in 48r is intended to be the same individual as that seated next to Sabinus in 26r; I see no reason to suppose this, as he seems to have grown significantly younger in the intervening years. The gesture and reaction to the scene in front of him, however, are most certainly intended to evoke recognition.

Compositionally, the image on fol. 48r refers directly to an earlier episode in the *Dialogues*, fully recounted and illuminated in Desiderius' manuscript, in which a younger version of Benedict is seated at a similar table, offered a similar vessel (fol. 26r). In this image, Benedict is in the process of making a gesture of benediction as the cup he is being offered shatters:

Image of Vat. lat. 1202 fol. 26r and detail removed for copyright reasons.  
Copyright holder is the Vatican Library.

Image 4. Benedict's shattered cup. Detail of Vat. lat. 1202 fol. 26r and detail of shattering cup.

The scene portrayed on fol. 26r, in which Benedict is unknowingly given poison to drink but emerges from the encounter unscathed, provides the foundations for this chapter. The second image on fol. 48r., which goes out of its way to provide a visual pairing of these saints on thematic grounds not immediately relevant to the narrative contained in the manuscript, represents the second major claim of the chapter. By the eleventh-century context of Desiderius' project, the poison trials of Benedict and Sabinus of Canosa had gained a salience that transcended their origins in the *Dialogues* and influenced subsequent invocations of poison language and poison trials.

This chapter will trace the evolution of the poison trials of Benedict and Sabinus of Canosa from their origins in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great in the sixth century through to the twelfth century, by which point there has been a refinement of the virtues represented by each figure and as communicated through their encounters with poisoned cups. I argue that the details and messaging of the poison trials of Sabinus and Benedict build on the blueprint provided by the hagiographical tradition of John the Evangelist, in that their trials are staged not only as tests of survival but also as tests of discernment. In both trials, the poison is offered in a manner that is concealed from the holy figures. In surviving their encounters unscathed, they demonstrate an ability to see within the innocuous to the evil that is held inside. Benedict and Sabinus also provide the framework for later uses of the poison trial by demonstrating how it might be used against an abbot or a bishop, a remarkably consistent criterion for eleventh- to thirteenth-century hagiographical uses (See Chapter 4). I suggest that, because of the refinement of the virtue of discernment expressed through this specific version of the trial, this is the juncture at which the poison trial as a hagiographical trope becomes part of a broader conversation about the potential that something apparently good can obscure something evil. As can be seen in the material elaborated around the figures of Benedict and Sabinus, the poison trial becomes a useful tool to highlight the dangers of hypocrisy and false appearance and provides a mechanism by which to adjudicate competing claims to truth. In employing the poison trials in this manner, medieval hagiographers develop a hermeneutic for unpacking other contexts of linguistic or metaphorical poisons.

Any consideration of Benedict's or Sabinus' *vitae* must begin with Gregory and the intellectual backdrop of Gregory's hagiographical writings. Benedict, by virtue of his importance in the monastic tradition and the breadth of contexts in which he was commemorated, inspired a

vast literature of hymnody, sermons, and efforts to re-interpret Gregory's famous *vita* for contemporary monastic use. I therefore take as my ordering principle the Benedict-focused literature chosen by Desiderius for his great eleventh-century lectionary, including laudatory poetry by Paul the Deacon (c.720-799) and Bertharius of Monte Cassino (c. 810-883), in addition to one of the most widely-circulating hymns for Benedict's March 21 feast day. Records of Sabinus of Canosa are not so fecund. I will therefore treat the three known recensions of his *vita*, beginning with his appearance in Gregory's *Dialogues*. There is also a ninth-century recension, known in editions as the *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus*, and an eleventh-century verse life composed for the occasion of Sabinus' translation to Bari in 1091. I will conclude with the afterlife of Sabinus and the use of his poison trial as something of a prototype in the high medieval considerations of the trope. Given the relative paucity of sources concerning his liturgical commemoration, his consistent invocation in later discussions of poison trials indicates a somewhat outsized influence, and the adaptations evident in the extant sources suggest important thematic work developing within the poison trial.

### **3.ii. The Thematic Underpinnings of the *Dialogues* in the *Moralia in Job***

Benedict and Sabinus help understand the process by which early concerns over discernment and the distinction between external appearance and internal reality become entangled in poison trial language. The poison trial is of course one of many proof concepts that confront the worrying disjuncture of form and essence. The aspects of the trial that are a relatively straightforward juridical process, a weighing of claims and a rendering of divine judgement (as is the case in the medieval literature around the poison trial of John the Evangelist; see previous chapter), become gradually eclipsed by those elements that propose a solution to the

problem of concealment and false-seeming: a saint offered a poisoned cup will be able to tell that it has been made deadly, and his ability to drink it unharmed is both the effect of and proof of his holiness. This does not, however, imply that the thought problem of the poisoned cup comes into being with the hagiographical trope of the poison trial. Instead, the aspects of concealment and false-seeming are layered onto the existing framework of vindication described in Mark 16 concerning the true disciples of Christ (“if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them”).

Foundational to this chapter, and indeed to the *vita* of Benedict and the history of Benedictine studies, is the figure of Pope Gregory I (c. 540-604).<sup>3</sup> Gregory was particularly concerned about the potential distinction between the external man and his internal nature. In many ways, the adaptation of the poison trial to this problem is a natural extension of his rhetoric and philosophy. Interiority and exteriority provide the scaffolding of thought for much of Gregory’s biblical exegesis and subsequent theorizing on the premise and function of communal monastic life. Following Cassian and Augustine, Gregory sees the postlapsarian world as one of “epistemological darkness” in which the mind and soul of mankind are occluded and so deceived

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<sup>3</sup> There has been ongoing debate since 1987, when Francis Clark first raised his doubts, as to whether or not Gregory is in fact the author of the *Dialogues*, or whether the text that includes the foundational life of one of Christianity’s most influential saints is attributable to some other author who is simply imitating Gregory, and to which Gregory’s name was connected sometime in the seventh century. Clark’s argument rests largely on early modern scholarship on Gregory and on the paucity of manuscript sources for the *Dialogues* before the eighth century, with a parallel argument concerning the perceived inferior intellectual qualities of the *vitae* in comparison to the balance of Gregory’s output. The debate, while intriguing, has little impact on the line of inquiry pursued here—the first post-*Dialogue* source considered here is that of Paul the Deacon in the late eighth century, after the proposed accretion of Gregory’s name to the text. The authorship of the *Dialogues* itself is less interesting than the work it does in forwarding the poison trial as a tool of thought, and still more telling is the variety in interpretations that follow. Following the general scholarly convention, I refer to “Gregory”—although partisans of the Clark camp may supply “pseudo-Gregory” without any erosion of the fundamental argument. See Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues* (Leiden: Brill, 1987) and *The “Gregorian” Dialogues and the Origins of Benedictine Monasticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). For a useful summary of Clark’s two arguments, see the review by Ann Kuzdale in *Speculum* 79 (2004), 748-750.

by human desires that they cannot pursue the good.<sup>4</sup> Holy figures, then, are those with divinely-instituted clarity of thought and purpose. Their purpose is to adjudicate between the deceptive and the true, for the benefit of the less discerning.<sup>5</sup> Given Gregory's preoccupation with the potential disjuncture of interior and exterior, it is not surprising that the miracles performed by the holy figures in the *Dialogues* generally showcase discernment as a particularly saintly skill—both Benedict and Sabinus, for instance, are able to identify royal individuals masquerading as servants.<sup>6</sup>

Gregory provides another background against which the saintly poison trials of Benedict and Sabinus should be read, in the form of rhetoric employed in his monumental exegetical treatise *Moralia in Job*. Following the precedent set by patristic fathers in applying poison language to situations of dubious or uncertain authority, Gregory employs two different but related figurative constructions of poison that represent the dangers of mixing the good with the evil. The first comes in the context of Gregory's extended exegesis concerning Job's friends,

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<sup>4</sup> The scholarship on Gregory the Great is vast. The most important studies of the last 40 years include R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and G.R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1986). Particularly useful on the subject of interiority/exteriority is the work of Claude Daegens, *Saint Gregoire le Grand. Culture et experience Chretiennes* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1997). For linguistic analysis of the terms "interior" and "exterior" see Paul Aubin, "Intériorité et Extériorité dans les *Moralia in Job* de Saint Gregoire le Grand," *Rech. Sc. Rel* 62 (1974), 117-166. For an overview of Gregory's cultural milieu and eastern influences, Joan Peterson, "'Homo omnio Latinus'? The Theological and Cultural Background of Pope Gregory the Great," *Speculum* 62 (1987), 529-551. The term "epistemological darkness" is from Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great*, 100.

<sup>5</sup> "To possess *discretio* is to see the invisible reality, and to discern spirits accurately enough to expose the hypocrite hiding behind a false exterior." Carole Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> For Gregory's impact on hagiography see William D. McCready, *Signs of Sanctity: Miracles in the Thought of Gregory the Great* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1989), particularly the chapter on "Miracles and Sanctity," 74-77. See also Stephen Lake, "Hagiography and the Cult of Saints" in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, eds. Neil and Dal Santo (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013) and Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).



interpreted by Gregory as pertaining to those whose advice is well-meant but fundamentally unsound. Gregory takes this opportunity to expound on a familiar theme concerning the habits of heretics—they mix truths into their lies in order to make them plausible, and in so doing offer the listener a cup of poison that has been sweetened by honey:

Heretics have this especial peculiarity, that they mix good and evil, that so they may easily delude the sense of the hearer. For if they always said wrong, soon discovered in their wrongheadedness, they would be the less able to win a way for that, which they desire. Again, if they always thought right, then, surely, they would never have been heretics. But whilst with artfulness of deceiving they engage themselves with either, both by the evil they vitiate the good, and by the good they conceal the evil, to the end that it may be readily admitted; just as he that presents a cup of poison, touches the brim of the cup with honeyed sweets, and while this that has a sweet flavor is tasted at the first sip, that too which brings death is unhesitatingly swallowed. Thus heretics mix right with wrong, that by making a shew of good things, they may draw hearers to themselves, and by setting forth evil they may corrupt them with a secret pestilence.<sup>7</sup>

Gregory is clear that the danger of this sort of thing is in the admixture—purely evil content is obvious, and purely true sayings are unobjectionable. It is apparent plausibility that is problematic, because the underlying lies cannot be detected. Structurally and thematically, this kind of rhetoric is part of the scaffolding of thought behind the trope of poison trials in hagiography. A second invocation of the poison cup in the *Moralia in Job* is still more pertinent to the themes presented in the *Dialogues*. This second use comes in Book 33 of the *Moralia*, explicitly describing the actions of hypocrites and the falseness of appearance and human behavior. The Antichrist, Gregory reflects, can appear many ways to many people. He can “lay

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<sup>7</sup> Gregory, *Morals on the Book of Job* 5.11, trans. and ed. John Henry Parker; (London: J.G.F. and J. Rivington, 1844), 262. “Habent quippe hoc haeretici proprium, ut malis bona permisceant, quatenus facile sensui audientis illudant. Si enim semper prava dicerent, citius in sua pravitate cogniti, quod vellent, minime persuaderent. Rursum, si semper recta sentirent, profecto haeretici non fuissent. Sed dum fallendi arte ad utraque deserviunt, et ex malis bona inficiunt, et ex bonis mala, ut recipiantur, abscondunt; sicut qui veneni poculum porrigit, ora poculi dulcedine mellis tangit; dumque hoc quod dulce est primo tactu delibatur, etiam illud quod est mortiferum indubitanter absorbetur. Itaque haeretici permiscunt recta perversis, ut ostendendo bona, auditores sibi attrahant; et exhibendo mala, latenti eos peste corrumpant.” PL 75:701-702.

snare for the good” and thus “deceives them under a show of sanctity,” appearing to them under a “cloak of comeliness...in order to introduce secretly, concealed beneath the cover of a good action, the evils which he cannot publicly effect.” The Antichrist’s followers, too, share this ability:

Whence also his members, when they are unable to injure by open wickedness, often assume the guise of a good action, and display themselves to be wicked in conduct, but yet deceive by their appearance of sanctity. For if the wicked were openly evil, they would not be received at all by the good. But they assume something of the look of the good, in order that while good men receive in them the appearance which they love, they may take also the poison, which they avoid, blended with it. Whence the Apostle Paul, on beholding some men under the cloak of preaching devoting themselves to the service of the belly, says, “For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. What wonder then if his ministers are transformed as the ministers of righteousness? [2 Cor. 11, 14]”<sup>8</sup>

This is the theme that is most explicitly elaborated upon in the lives of Benedict and Sabinus—the poisoners in each iteration of the trial are generally those who envy the holy men for their goodness, and who wish to appear blameless themselves while simultaneously removing their rivals. This is a theme particularly suited to contests in which both parties are servants of the church, as it allows the hagiographer to underscore human failings without implicating the entirety of the priesthood—while a man in holy orders may have the “appearance of sanctity,” there is always the troubling possibility that trust in such authority figures is misplaced, in which case there must be a mechanism for adjudicating claims in which both parties have recourse to the authority of an ecclesiastic or monastic hierarchy.

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory, *Morals on the Book of Job* 33.24, trans. Parker, 598. “Unde et membra eius saepe cum aperta nequitia nocere non possunt, bonae actionis habitum sumunt; et prava quidem se opere exhibent, sed sancta specie mentiuntur. Iniqui enim si aperte mali essent, a bonis recipi omnino non possent; sed sumunt aliquid de visione bonorum, ut dum boni viri in eis recipiunt speciem quam amant, permistum sumant etiam virus quod vitant. Unde quosdam Paulus apostolus intuens sub praedicationis velamine ventris studio servientes, ait: Ipse enim Satanus transfiguratur se in angelum lucis.” PL 75:701-702.

These two brief examples demonstrate that there is an existing framework of thought, harkening back to the poison-in-honey metaphors explored in Chapter 1, behind the use of the application of the poison trial in Gregory's work. My contention is that this combination—his preoccupation with the dangers of plausibility and his familiarity with the established rhetoric of hidden poisons as expressing a similar anxiety—result, by means of Gregory's hagiographical campaign, in the application of the poison trial to the problem of contested sanctity.

### **3.iii. The Poison Trial of Benedict of Nursia**

To demonstrate how exactly this innovation comes to have such an impact, I turn to the trials themselves, starting with the first known account of Benedict's life. This analysis will serve as a baseline of comparison for the subsequent elaborations, re-interpretations and applications of the trial. I am treating Desiderius' lectionary primarily as a point of entry into the vast corpus of Benedictine material. The lectionary, by nature, collects some of the "greatest hits" of poetry, hymnody, and sermon literature pertaining to Benedict composed over four centuries, from such luminaries as Gregory the Great, Paul the Deacon and Peter Damian (c. 988-1072/3), and from lesser-known poets of Monte Cassino. The choice is not meant to be exhaustive—nor limiting, as I also treat sources with significant manuscript traditions nonetheless not included by Desiderius. The lectionary, with its thematic visual pairing of the two saints, instead functions as a window and a developmental marker concerning the cult of Saint Benedict, which grew along with the profile of the style of monastic life with which he is credited. I make no claim to a direct genealogy of influences, but I do hypothesize that the contours of the process by which Benedict's poison trial emerges as a useful *exemplum* for later hagiographers are visible in the selection of materials developed between the *Dialogues* and the eleventh-century assembly of the

manuscript itself.

### **3.iii.a. Benedict in the *Dialogues***

Benedict, in fact, has two poison trials in the *Dialogues*. The first appears immediately following the sequence—well-known from medieval art and saintly *exempla*—in which Benedict overcomes fleshly temptations by throwing his body into a bush of brambles. It is this experience, according to Gregory, that prepares him for what will become his most important legacy: reforming and codifying communal monastic living. His reputation for purity is what brings him to the attention of a group of monks who have lost their leader. The conflict that will culminate in the poison trial is evident from the beginning, as the brothers are explicitly described as being unlike Benedict, and his ways are not theirs: “The whole brotherhood came to that venerable Benedict, and with forceful petitions asked that he would plant himself among them and take them in charge. He put them off for a long time, telling them that his manner of living and their own would not suit each other: but at length, overcome by their entreaties, he gave in.”<sup>9</sup> As Benedict has predicted, they resist the constraints of “regular order” and regret that they have invited Benedict to be one of them. The wicked brothers plot to take drastic action to rid themselves of their abbot: “because the life of virtuous men is always oppressive to those of perverse character, some of them tried to uncover a means to his death. These, having discussed it together, mixed poison with wine.”<sup>10</sup> The poison trial, then, occurs in the context of a meal:

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<sup>9</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, Sources Chrétiennes 260 (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1979), 140. “Non longe autem monasterium fuit, cuius congregationis pater defunctus est, omnisque ex illo congregatio ad eundem venerabilem Benedictum venit, et magnis precibus, ut eis praesentia deberet, petiit. Qui diu negando distulit, suis illorumque fratrum moribus convenire non posse praedixit, sed victus quandoque precibus, ad sensum dedit.” All translations from this source are mine from de Vogüé’s Latin edition rather than his French translation.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 142. “Sicut pravis moribus semper gravis est vita bonorum, tractare de eius aliquid morte conati sunt. Qui, initio consilio, venenum vino miscuerunt.”

And when that vessel of glass, in which the pestilential drink had been placed, was offered to the father to be blessed in the usual manner, Benedict, with his hand outstretched, made the sign of the cross, and the vessel which was held at some distance from him at this signal broke, and was indeed utterly shattered, just as though in place of the cross a stone had been thrown at the vessel of death. Thereupon the man of God understood that the drink held death, which could not bear the sign of life.<sup>11</sup>

Compared with the poison trial of John the Evangelist as transmitted in apocrypha and liturgy, there are a number of innovations of note here. The first is that Benedict is not explicitly aware that he is engaging in the trial. The poison has been concealed and the attempt has been issued covertly. The second difference is that Benedict does not, in fact, drink the poison—indeed, this version of trial, famous as it is on account of the fame of its subject, is unique in that Benedict’s survival is a result of the destruction of the chalice itself rather than his holy body’s ability to withstand something deadly. A juxtaposition of holiness and deadliness is indeed present, but is provided not explicitly by the body of the saint but by the sign of the cross.

Most notable, perhaps, given Gregory’s established preoccupation with discernment and the privileged interior vision of holy individuals, is that in this earliest version of the trial, Benedict does not in fact recognize the poison at all. He is made aware of it as a result of the shattering of the glass. What, then, does Gregory see as the point of this episode? Benedict does not remain with the brothers after this incident. After admonishing them, he returns to his solitude in a remote place in the mountains. His first attempt at communal living appears to have resulted in failure. Gregory takes this opportunity to underscore the moral of this sequence. The student-teacher dialogue which structures the narrative makes it clear that the poison trial is in fact about contamination, and the potential that Benedict might have been in some way

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 142. “Et cum vas vitreum, in quo ille pestifer potus habebatur, recumbenti patri ex more monasterii ad benedicendum fuisset oblatum, Benedictus, extensa manu, signum crucis edidit, et vas quod longuis tenebatur eodem signo rupit, sique confractum est, ac si in illo vase mortis pro cruce lapidem dedisset. Intellexit protinus vir Dei quia potum mortis habuerat, quod portare non potuit signum vitae.”

diminished by contact with those whose observances were so different from his own. The Peter/Student figure expresses confusion as to what it means that Benedict left the murderous brothers and “dwelt alone with himself.” The Gregory/Teacher figure clarifies:

If the holy man had stayed longer with those who had unanimously conspired against him, and whose style of life was so unlike his own, trying to hold them together under his control, perhaps he would have exceeded his own strength and tranquility of manner, to the extent that he would turn the eyes of his soul away from the light of contemplation, and so exhausted by correcting their errors daily would care for himself less, and perhaps abandon his own self, without finding them. For how often are we led away too far from ourselves by excessive mental care, such that we are still ourselves, but not indeed *with* our own selves, because we are wandering around in the cares of others, and not our own? <sup>12</sup>

The logic of dilution that is at play here is particularly telling in the context of a poison trial. Benedict is at risk of losing himself within the irreligiosity of the brothers; like the poison which has overcome the wine, the brothers have put Benedict in the position of becoming overwhelmed and diminished by the poisonous matrix in which he finds himself. He is at risk of becoming *less discerning* (he would have turned “the eyes of his soul away from the light of contemplation”). Metaphorically, Benedict must rupture the community like he shattered the chalice in order to purge himself of the poison of the brother’s irregular behavior. The first poison trial is thus both one of actual purgation of poison, and the acknowledgement that Benedict must maintain the purity of his form of observance by avoiding contact with such unreformed characters. It does not, however, highlight his ability to *see* the poison when it has been administered.

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 144. “Si sanctus vir contra se unanimiter conspirantes suaeque conversationi longe dissimiles, coactos diu sub se tenere voluisset, forasse sui vigoris usum et modum tranquillitatis excederet, atque a contemplationis lumine mentis suae oculus declinasset, dumque cotidie illorum incorrectione fatigatus minus curaret sua, et se forsitan relinqueret, et illos non inveniret. Nam quotiens per cogitationis motum nimiae extra ducimur, et nos sumus, et nobiscum non sumus, quia nosmetipsos minime videntes per alia vagamur.”

Benedict's second poison trial is simultaneously more and less like those that will come after it; while it has some of the common elements (a jealous or malicious poisoner, a surreptitious offering of something deadly concealed in something overtly positive), it is unique in terms of both the substance that bears the poison and the method of its unveiling. As before, the poisoning is prefaced by an increase in Benedict's holy reputation. This time, his manner of living has flourished into multiple monastic foundations. Again, this very success has evoked a backlash; where previously the brothers were provoked to action by resentment at the gap between their own abilities and Benedict's ("because the life of virtuous men is always oppressive to those of perverse character"), this poisoning is prompted by the envy of a nearby priest named Florentius:

Then, when [the monastic foundations] shone near and far with love for the Lord God Jesus Christ, and many people relinquished their worldly lives, and subdued their souls under the gentle yoke of the Redeemer—then, just as it is the custom of the wicked to envy in others the virtues of good men, which they do not desire to have themselves—a local priest named Florentius (grandfather to our own subdeacon, Florentius), overcome with ill will by the ancient enemy, grew jealous of the holy man, and began to disparage his monastic vocation, and to prevent anyone from going to see him. When he observed that he could not stop Benedict's success, and indeed, that his monastic vocation was growing in fame, and that many were called to a better condition of life by his example, he was inflamed more and more with the fire of jealousy, and became more and more wicked. He wished to receive praise for his style of living, but did not wish to lead a praiseworthy life.<sup>13</sup>

The envy of this individual explicitly takes the form that the poison trial serves to upend—the priest wishes to have the outward appearance of goodness, but the freedom to act as he chooses.

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<sup>13</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 160. "Cum iam loca eadem in amore Dei Domini Iesu Christi longe lateque ferverent, saecularem vitam multi relinquerent, et sub leni redemptoris iugo cervicem cordis edomarent, sicut mos pravorum est invidere aliis virtutis bonum, quod ipsi habere non appetunt, vicinae ecclesiae presbiter Florentius nomine, huius nostri subdiaconi Florentii avus, antiqui hostis malitia percussus, sancti viri studiis coepit aemulari, eius quoque conversationi derogare, quosque etiam posset ab illius visitatione conspescere. Cumque se iam conspiceret eius propectibus obviare non posse, et conversationis illius opinionem crescere, atque multos ad statium vitae melioris ipso quoque opinionis eius praeconio indesinenter vocari, invidiae facibus magis magisque succensus deterior fiebat, quia conversationis illius habere appetebat laudem, sed habere laudabilem vitam nolebat."

His desire for an exterior reputation does not match his internal wishes. Benedict, however, sees through both this kind of presumption and the resulting actions of Florentius. Florentius hides poison within a loaf of bread and sends it to Benedict as a gift:

He was blinded by the darkness of envy, and was induced so far as to send to the servant of almighty God a loaf of bread infected with poison, as though it were a blessing. The man of God accepted it gracefully, but the poison which lurked within it did not escape his notice.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas before, Benedict becomes aware of what is hidden in the poisoned vessel only when it shatters (“thereupon the man of God understood that the drink held death”), in this instance he exhibits the ability to see the evil gift for what it is. This, then, squarely formulates the poison trial as a test of discernment—one contrasts Florentius’ “blindness” with Benedict’s privileged interior vision.

The dénouement of this poison trial is not Benedict consuming the poison or otherwise rendering it harmless—instead, the proofs of Benedict’s saintly power are the consequences of the initial act. Benedict commands a crow to dispose of the bread elsewhere. Florentius attempts once more to subvert Benedict’s monks by sending “into the garden of the monastery before their eyes seven naked young women, who, taking each other by the hand, teasing each other in turn before them, in order to inflame their minds towards perversity with lust.”<sup>15</sup> Benedict, although he has withstood the poison trial itself, once more “gives place to envy” and removes himself from the vicinity of Florentius. Florentius, rejoicing at his apparent victory, experiences

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<sup>14</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 160. “Qui eiusdem invidiae tenebris caecatus, ad hoc usque perductus est, ut servo omnipotentis Domini infectum veneno panem quasi pro benedictione transmitteret. Quem vir Dei cum gratiarum actione suscepti, sed eum, quae pestis lateret in pane, non latuit.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 162. “Sed praedictus Florentius, quia magistri corpus necare non potuit, se ad extinguendas discipulorum animas accendit, ita ut in horto cellae, cui Benedictus inerat, ante eorum oculos nudas septem puellas mitteret, quae coeam eis, sibi invicem manus tenentes et diutius ludentes, illorum mentem ad perversitatem libidinis inflammarent.”



divine retribution as the room he is in collapses upon him, and Benedict instructs his followers to mourn the envy that corrupted this priest.

The episodes fit neatly within the pattern of Benedict's other miracles, some of which foreground his ability to see deception in other ways, as when he recognizes a flask of wine as having been stolen, or identifies Lombardic King Totila in the guise of a servant. Other episodes seem to highlight the themes of the purity of vessels, as when he re-assembles a shattered platter or heals a leper. The poison trials thus function within Gregory's broader hagiographical campaign. They also set a precedent of use that transcends the immediate context, as over the course of four centuries the trials are adapted and re-interpreted.

This, then, is the basic framework concerning the poison trials that later hymnodists, liturgists and homilists have to work with. I now turn to the process of distillation by which Gregory's miracles are mined for meaning and the virtues described in them are re-inflected to suit other contexts. This process of refinement accrues more and more discernment to Benedict and lends the poison trial greater epistemic clarity.

### **3.ii.b: Paul the Deacon and the poetry of the *Historia Longobardorum***

Desiderius's manuscript, Vat. lat. 1202, demonstrates one way in which such a distillation occurs. Immediately following the *Vita S. Benedicti* in Desiderius' lectionary is a composition in verse by eighth-century Benedictine and Carolingian scholar Paul the Deacon (c. 720-799), introduced on fol. 86v as *Versus de miraculis sancti patris Benedicti*. This is the first of three laudatory poems in the manuscript. Paul the Deacon's composition demonstrates how, by the end of the eighth century, Gregory's source text has been re-arranged to highlight more directly Benedict's agency as a poison-revealer.

This poem primarily circulates within Paul the Deacon's magisterial *Historia Longobardorum*, in a section dedicated to an aside about the founding of Monte Cassino. Paul narrates Benedict's departure from Subiaco and arrival at Monte Cassino, citing the life of Benedict in Gregory's *Dialogues* as his source.<sup>16</sup> The narrative aside is in fact quite brief; the bulk of the digression is dedicated to two lengthy poems in honor of Benedict. The first, with the incipit *Ordiam unde tuos, sacer o Benedicte, triumphos*, Paul describes as an accounting of Benedict's miracles in "couplets of elegiac meter."<sup>17</sup> It is this text that immediately follows the *vita* in Vat. lat. 1202, and indeed it is prefaced in the manuscript by a prose excerpt from Book 26 of the *Historia*. Not included by Desiderius, but pertinent and lucrative as a comparison, is the second composition extant in editions and manuscripts of the *Historia Langobardorum*.<sup>18</sup> This composition (incipit *Fratres, alacri pectore*) Paul describes as a "ymnum" in praise of Benedict's miraculous deeds in "Archilochean iambic meter." Both compositions demonstrate shifting uses and ascribed meaning of the poison trial *vis-a-vis* Benedict's virtues.

The first and longer composition, *Ordiam unde tuos, sacer o Benedicte, triumphos*, is most explicit on this front. There are thematic linkages between Benedict's two poison trials and

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<sup>16</sup> See Kurt Smolak, "Poetologisches zu den Benedikhymnen in der *Historia Langobardorum* des Paulus Diaconus," in *Paolo Diacono: uno scrittore fra tradizione longobarda e rinnovamento carolingio, atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Cividale del Friuli, Udine, 6-9 maggio 1999*, ed. Paolo Chiesa (Udine: Forum, 2003), 105-27. Paul also includes a short history of the founding that he claims is unknown to Gregory, or at least which Gregory does not relate, concerning the divine guidance that led to the selection of the location for the monastery.

<sup>17</sup> This is the composition that has been included in Desiderius' collection of materials in praise of Benedict. Susan Boynton has noted that the earliest music from the imperial abbey of Farfa is in fact a noted and somewhat expanded version from the ninth century. The Farfa library likewise includes a manuscript of Gregory's life of Benedict into which Paul's laudatory poem had been inserted. Susan Boynton, *Shaping a Monastic Identity: Liturgy and History at the Imperial Abbey of Farfa, 1000-1125* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 41-43.

<sup>18</sup> Boynton has hypothesized that the poems were composed at an earlier date, and incorporated into the *Historia* at this juncture rather than composed contemporaneously with the rest of the narrative. There is inconsistency in the manuscript tradition concerning the inclusion and substance of the poems. Boynton, *Shaping a Monastic Identity*, 43.

outright alterations of Gregory's text that tie both trials more directly to Benedict's virtue of discernment. The poem employs epanalepsis, such that the same phrase begins and ends each two-line grouping. This allows both for a reiteration and emphasis of subject matter, and for a subtle shifting of focus dependent on this grammatical construction. Paul performs significant revision of Gregory's narrative in his accounting of Benedict's first poison trial, in which he is poisoned by the brothers of the monastery he has agreed to serve as abbot. The composition in general treats each incident in the *vita* in couplets bookended by the repeated epanaleptic phrase; thus, the first poison trial is condensed to two lines with bookended language:

The lurking hostile poison is perceived from afar by the wise one;  
Unable to bear the forces of the cross is the lurking hostile poison.<sup>19</sup>

The "pestis iniqua latens" serves as the grammatical subject of both lines. Rather than dwell on, or even mention, the source of the poison or the conflict with the brothers, all of the focus is on Benedict and his actions. Where in Gregory's version Benedict makes the sign of the cross and shatters the vessel, and only then understands what had been concealed in it, Paul has inverted the order to insist that Benedict made the gesture *because* he understood what had been proffered to him. The language makes clear that this is explicitly a virtue of Benedict's; he is not only able to discern ("deprendere") the contents, he is able to do so at a distance ("procul"). Neither of these abilities are highlighted in Gregory's source material, and both place explicit emphasis on Benedict's ability to see through deception.

The second poison trial in *Ordinar unde tuos, sacer o Benedicte, triumphos* receives significantly more attention. Where the earlier trial and most other miracles are covered in a

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<sup>19</sup> Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1.26, PL 95:470:

Pestis iniqua latens procul est deprensa sagaci;  
Non tulit arma crucis pestis iniqua latens.

single two-line construction, the attempted poisoning by means of bread occupies a full six lines, in three two-line constructions. This relative expansiveness allows Paul to delve into the motivations of the various parties involved:

Deceitful hearts groan, driven by malignant prickings;  
From the Tartarean flames deceitful hearts groan.  
The raven carries off the offered foodstuffs with obliging talons;  
When bidden, the raven carries far away the cursed foods.  
Holy breasts mourn the death of the foe from his sin;  
The excess of his disciple holy breasts lament.<sup>20</sup>

The contrast between Benedict and the poisoners, here represented in the plural, is established by the repeated phrase of the first two and last two lines. “*Perfida corda gemunt*” (deceitful hearts groan) while “*pectora sacra dolent*” (holy breasts mourn)—one construction emphasizes the internal deceitfulness of the individuals who presented the bread as though it were innocuous, while the other emphasizes the internal knowledge of the holy figure as knowledge which makes him lament. There is likewise a linguistic parallel with the first poison trial, in that the raven bears the poisoned bread “*procul*” (far off), just as previously Benedict was able to sense the poison at a distance. The exigencies of the epanaleptic form require significant abbreviation and short-hand, such that the verses would be perhaps opaque to one unfamiliar with Gregory’s *vita*—only such familiarity could identify Florentius as the foe who dies from his sins (“*inimicum labe peremptum*”), or the exulting of Benedict’s student as the “*discipuli excessum*.”

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<sup>20</sup> Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1.26, PL 95:470:

*Perfida corda gemunt stimulis agitata malignis;*  
*Tartareis flammis perfida corda gemunt.*  
*Fert alimenta corax digitis oblata benignis;*  
*Dira procul iussus fert alimenta corax.*  
*Pectora sacra dolent inimicum labe peremptum;*  
*Discipuli excessum pectora sacra dolent.*

This shifting of emphasis to refashion the poison trials into more obvious tests of discernment is likewise evident in *Fratres, alacri pectore*, which, although it is not included in Vat. lat. 1202, is extant in a multiplicity of manuscript sources from the eleventh century or earlier, including three from Monte Cassino itself that pre-date Desiderius' lectionary.<sup>21</sup> It is marked for use on the March 21<sup>st</sup> feast of Benedict. Benedict's second poison trial in this composition functions explicitly to highlight Benedict's power to reveal hidden things.<sup>22</sup> In Gregory's text, although Benedict senses the concealed evil, the visible miracle is the obedience of the bird who removes the tainted bread; in *Ordinar unde tuos, sacer o Benedicte, triumphos*, the act of poisoning itself is mentioned only obliquely. In *Fratres, alacri pectore*, however, the revelation of the hidden poison is presented as the fundamental point of the episode:

The hidden poison he reveals.  
The bird executes his commands.  
Ruin overcomes the enemy.<sup>23</sup>

As is often true of hymns that are hagiographical in nature, the narrative itself is terse to the point of nonsense and clearly relies on familiarity with the expanded *vita*. As a distillation of the hymnodist's understanding of this particular episode, it underscores how fundamental Benedict's act of discernment is.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> AH 50.95. Mearns, *Early Latin Hymnaries* also includes three c. eleventh-century manuscripts from Monte Cassino, including Paris Maz. 364 and Vat. Urb. 568. A number of others listed include eleventh and twelfth century MS from Farfa and Benevento.

<sup>22</sup> The reference to the first poison trial recounts the basic narrative while using an active tense that gives Benedict more agency than might be suggested by Gregory, but otherwise is to the point: "Fregit veneni baiula/Crucis per arma cymbium" (He broke the bowl holding the poison/With the force of the cross).

<sup>23</sup> AH 50.95:

Virus patescit abditum.  
Mandata praepes efficit.  
Hostem ruina conterit.

<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on internal sight and the ability to see within bodies that present a different outward appearance is again emphasized in a later verse. The miracle described is one in which Benedict interacts with the Gothic King Totila, and is able to uncover a dissimulation by which a servant poses as the king.

Given the circulation of Paul's texts, independent of the use of Vat. lat. 1202 at Monte Cassino, this is perhaps the evolution of the poison trial with the greatest influence of those considered here; the *Historia Langobardorum* itself has survived in hundreds of copies, and *Fratres, alacri pectore* circulated in Benedictine liturgical materials independently of the other historical work. Consequently, Paul's version of Benedict's discernment at a distance spread and continued to be copied well past the eleventh century.

### **3.ii.c. Bertharius of Monte Cassino, *O Benedicte pater cunctis celeberrime terris***

Following Paul the Deacon's *Ordinar unde tuos, sacer o Benedicte, triumphos* in Vat. lat. 1202 are two compositions by monks of Monte Cassino. The first is attributed to a Marcus, about whom little is known beyond a suggested date of birth in the early seventh century. This relatively brief poem, covering two manuscript folia, praises Benedict in general rather than biographical terms, in an extended metaphor correlating Benedict's nurturing and ordering effect on wild desert terrains with the positive effects his monastic rule has on monastic communities.

About the second Cassinian poet, and the last included in Desiderius' manuscript, significantly more is known. Bertharius of Monte Cassino (c. 815-883) served as abbot of Monte

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Benedict then prophecies to Totila concerning the king's downfall. Paul uses this incident to describe Benedict's virtues, beyond those strictly related to this miracle of discernment.

*AH 50.95:*

Rector vafer, deprenderis.  
Inique possessor, fugis.  
Futura praenoscimini;  
Arcana, cor, non contegis.  
[Cunning ruler, you are discovered.  
Unjust occupier, flee.  
Future events, you are foreknown;  
Heart, you conceal no secrets.]

Cassino in the second half of the ninth century. His attributed writings include homilies, including a homily for the feast of the birth of St. Scholastica that is also included in Vat. lat. 1202, and a *Memoratorium* which served as the basis for later chronicle accounts of Monte Cassino in the ninth century.<sup>25</sup> Bertharius is perhaps most famous for his death: he was abbot when the second foundation at Monte Cassino was destroyed by the raiding forces of the Aghlabids in Sicily. His death, his output and his reputation as the last abbot of the monastery before its exile and resurgence in the eleventh century have cemented Bertharius' place in Benedictine tradition.

The laudatory poem included in Vat. lat. 1202, incipit *O Benedicte pater cunctis celeberrime terris*, follows closely the sequence of miracles in Gregory's *Dialogues*, although it does not treat each with equal attention. Bertharius dispenses with Benedict's first poison trial in a bare-bones recitation:<sup>26</sup> "The cup in which the venom lurked was shattered by means of the cross/when signed by the so holy right hand of the Father." Bertharius maintains the "lurking" quality of the poison, but makes no mention of Benedict's powers of discernment. The emphasis is instead placed on the strength his holiness in making the sign of the cross. The second poison trial, however, represents a far more extreme alteration of the source material. In Bertharius' rendition, the events of the trial are rearranged such that the language of poison bookends the comeuppance of the poisoner:

A priest, willing with dreadful intentions to do any evil deed,  
Himself first bore the brunt of the toxic thing he had sent.  
Behold the wretch crumple under the caved-in roof—  
The one shattered in body one seeks the ravages of Hell.

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<sup>25</sup> See Herbert Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) and Francis Newton and Eric Hobsbawm, *The Scriptorium and Library at Monte Cassino 1058-1105* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Bertharius, *Carmen de Sancto Benedicto*, PL 126:975. "Frangitur arte crucis vas, virus quo latitabat/Cum signat tanti dextera sancta Patris."

While the student swiftly bears news of such things,  
The innermost heart of the holy Father shook.  
Because he [the student] took such great joy in the death, the Father told him  
That he should mourn for his own faults with weeping.  
A bird removed the bread, in which that poison had hidden,  
And concealed it where no man would be able to discern it.<sup>27</sup>

The moral of the episode is foregrounded: the poison, represented by the jealousy of the priest, rebounded on him and caused his death. Benedict's discernment is focused not immediately on the admixture of bread and poison, or even on uncovering evil intent—it is expressed instead in his ability to know of the priest's death even before news of it has arrived via messenger (“While the student swiftly bears news of such things/ The innermost heart of the holy Father shook”). The removal of the toxic bread (indeed, the first mention of the actual act that precipitated this confrontation) comes only at the end. This framing again recasts the stakes and purpose of the trial, such that the actual removal of the poison follows the comeuppance of the poisoner, and seems to encompass both the envy of the priest and the exultation of the student as poisonous faults of mind that are purged by death and weeping, respectively.

The trial seems to have wandered afield of Gregory or even Paul the Deacon's conception of it; however, there are a number of evocative linguistic choices of note here that tie the verse squarely to the earlier theorizing of the trials and demonstrate that Bertharius is consciously

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<sup>27</sup> Bertharius, *Carmen de Sancto Benedicto*, PL 126:976:

Promptus ad omne malum dira cum mente sacerdos,  
Toxica quae misit, sustulit ipse prius.  
Corruit ecce miser collapsi culmine tecti,  
Corpore confractus tartara saeva petit.  
Talia discipulus dum perfert nuncia cursim,  
Concussit sancti intima corda Patris.  
Cui pater indixit ob talis gaudia mortis,  
Ut lacrymis culpam defleat ipse suam.  
Panem tollit avis, quo virus texerat ille,  
Abdit ubi nullus cernere possit homo.



adapting the *Dialogues*. First, Bertharius has chosen “confractus” (shattered) to describe the body of the priest, a direct reference to the description in the *Dialogues* of Benedict’s glass vessel (“et vas quod longuis tenebatur eodem signo rupit, sique confractum est”). If the body of the priest “bore the brunt of the toxic thing he had sent,” this renders the *priest* as the poisoned chalice that is shattered by Benedict’s holiness. Second, the bread is removed “ubi nullus cernere possit homo.” Once again, this references the language of the *Dialogues*, in which Benedict instructs the bird not once but twice to take the poison where no one could find it (“ubi a nullo homine possit inveniri...ubi inveniri non possit”).<sup>28</sup> However, where the source material repeats *inveniri* (to find/discover), Bertharius has maintained the overall structural similarity but selected the more evocative “cernere” (discern/distinguish), reflecting both a reliance on the earlier formulation and the evolution in the terms of the trial.

Bertharius dwells on poisonousness once more in his poem, in the final 11 lines that serve as both prayer and colophon. Extolling Benedict’s function as a beacon of rectitude and invoking his protection for all the monastic brotherhood (not excluding Bertharius himself), Bertharius appears to reference both poison trials as symbolizing a certain kind of danger that might confront the brothers:

Oh, see! Holy father, you who set forth such great light,  
 Shimmering with piety, seated in the heavens with Christ,  
 Be for your servants a protector and doctor forever,  
 Let neither lurking wolves, nor a poisonous enemy  
 Remove one of your sheep from the flock,  
 which you keep fast by means of your own code.  
 And guard and protect your own servant, Bertharius,  
 Led by the love of you which prompted this worthless rhyme.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 162.

<sup>29</sup> Bertharius, *Carmen de Sancto Benedicto*, PL 126:978:

Eia, sancte pater, tanto qui lumine praestas,  
 Sedibus in superius Christi pietate coruscus,  
 Esto tuis famulis custos doctorque per aevum,

Bertharius' composition demonstrates perhaps less of a direct evolution of the meaning of the trial than Paul the Deacon's contributions, but the work does demonstrate that the two trials began to be treated in conjunction with each other, as part of the same conceptual category rather than as independent miracles among many. Bertharius' casting of Benedict's contest with the jealous priest in the terms of his first poison trial underscores this point.

### **3.ii.d. Eleventh century Pseudo-Bertharius *Ad Tertiam***

The last piece of evidence from the tradition of laudatory poetry demonstrates how, over time, the thematic impact of the poison trial can inflect how other aspects of Benedict's *vita* are recounted and theorized. Also circulating under the name of Bertharius, but not included in the collection assembled by Desiderius, is an intriguing composition of 147 stanzas elaborating and celebrating the miracles recounted in the *Dialogues*. This composition accrued its attribution to the ninth-century Bertharius in the late sixteenth century at the hands of Benedictine editor Arnoldus Wion, who sources the text in an eleventh-century manuscript at the Benedictine foundation at Mantua. This attribution is almost certainly spurious, as the composition does not appear with Bertharius' other works in manuscripts from Monte Cassino before the eleventh-century. Based on poetic trends and compositional markers, editor Traube suggested the eleventh-century figure of Alfano of Salerno, who has a diverse corpus of poetic as well as

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Ne lupus insidians, hostis ne pestifer unquam  
De grege tollat ovem, proprio quem iure retentas.  
Berthariumque tuum famulum me protege, serva,  
Ductus amore tuo qui carmina vilia prompsi.

scientific works, as a possible author. General consensus places the composition of the piece in the eleventh or twelfth century.<sup>30</sup>

The text circulates under a number of names, most reflecting the metrical structure of the lengthy composition: *Aliud carmen sapphicum ejusdem S. Bertharii pro festo S. Benedicti per omne horas canonicas distributum*, *Vita beati Benedicti in sapphicum exarata* and *Carmen perperam adscriptum Berthario* (BHL 1109). It is most reliably identified by incipit: *Sanctae lux, fratres, hodierna poscit*. As suggested by Wion's initial title, the composition is separated into sections based on the daily office, although the irregular nature of the composition makes use in private contemplation perhaps more likely than direct liturgical application.

The section identified "Ad Tertiam," or the mid-morning office of terce, ties together a number of Benedict's miracles, using the first poison trial as a thematic superstructure. The poet thus inflects Benedict's experience with the bramble-bush and his subsequent isolation after the failed attempt at communal life with the language of poison, purity, admixture, and discernment. The section immediately preceding ("Ad Primam") ends with an account of Benedict's growing fame in the countryside where he has been fasting and praying. The verses for terce launch Benedict right back into conflict with the devil, which takes the form of a blackbird. Benedict is able to fend off the bird, but it leaves behind a wave of sexual temptation. Here, the poet frames the problem in a manner that ties it clearly to the forthcoming poison trial:

Meanwhile, the hostile enemy  
recommenced the war, and in the guise of a blackbird,  
the lying one circled him,  
making noise with wing and beak.

It fled at once at the sign of the cross,

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<sup>30</sup> Chiara Bissolotti, "Hagiographische Dischtung zwischen christlicher Botschaft und antiker Formtradition. Ein sapphisches Kleinepos nach Gregors Benedicktsvita" in *Dichen als Stoff-Vermittlung*, ed. Peter Stotz (Zurich: Chronos, 2017), 85-99.

but such incredible pleasures  
poured into the very marrow of the man  
like a sweet poison.<sup>31</sup>

The poet has greatly elaborated on the source material; where the *Dialogues* offered the more prosaic “A great temptation of the flesh followed, more than anything the holy man had yet experienced,” the poet has offered the “sweet poison” of lust. The juxtaposition of sweetness and poison is itself tapping into a long tradition (see Introduction), and by its very nature underscores the theme of deception and discernment. The experience of temptation is thus construed as a poison trial in itself, in that Benedict must purge himself of *venenum* that has been “poured” into the vessel of his body.

Benedict then mortifies his flesh by throwing himself into the bramble bush. The process is successful, and the poet again underscores the elements of the poison trial by maintaining the metaphor:

Thus wholly mangled, skin  
of the holy virgin bathed in gore,  
he purged that which Venus had polluted,  
what he had drunk into his bones.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Pseudo-Bertharius, *Vita Latino-Graeca S. P. Benedicti* (Venice: Bartholi, 1723), 20-22:

Inter haec autem furiosus hostis  
Bella molitur, merulamque pullam  
Mentiens rostro gravis ora circum  
Clangit, et alis.

Quae statim signo crucis evolavit,  
Sed voluptatis tamen illa tantum  
Fudit in totas hominis venenum  
Dulce medullas.

<sup>32</sup> Pseudo-Bertharius, *Vita Latino-Graeca S. P. Benedicti*, 20-22:

Sic cutem totus lacer, et cruore  
Membra perfusus sacra virginali  
Diluit quicquid Venus inquinarat  
Ossibus hausta

The verbs “diluere” (dilute/purge), “inquinere” (stain/pollute), and “haurire” (drink/swallow) drive home the similarities between this experience and that which immediately follows.

As in the *Dialogues*, the poet dwells on the fame that follows Benedict as a result of this purifying experience. He is invited to join a group of brothers who have lost their abbot, but quickly finds them unmanageable. The poet draws out both the source of the conflict and the trial itself over 12 stanzas, including dialogue not sourced from the *Dialogues*. The set-up of the trial itself hews fairly closely to Gregory:

Inflamed by the Stygian fire (o wicked crime!),  
they gathered themselves  
with the holy and obedient one,  
and the blackly evil ones mixed  
vessels with poison.

In these things [the vessels] a demon<sup>33</sup>  
had hidden, but, unable to bear  
the sign of the Redeemer,  
burst asunder as though hit  
with a powerful stone.<sup>34</sup>

Where Paul the Deacon insisted that the discernment came before the shattering, the poet of *Sancta lux fratres* seems to split the difference, emphasizing that Benedict discerns and is astounded simultaneously by repeating in close proximity “simul” (simultaneously/at once):

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<sup>33</sup> The inclusion of the “demon” that bursts from the vessel might be influenced by the growing iconographic campaign surrounding John the Evangelist and his poison chalice, which was increasingly frequently depicted with a serpent or other creature emerging from the cup (See previous chapter). There may also be crossover with the different versions of the *Passio Georgii* coalescing in the eleventh to twelfth centuries (see next chapter).

<sup>34</sup> Pseudo-Bertharius, *Vita Latino-Graeca S. P. Benedicti*, 20-22:

Igne succensi stigio (nephandum  
Proh scelus) sancto sibi quem parenti  
Legerant, nigri mala miscuere  
Vasa veneni.  
  
Quae Redemptoris qua daemon intus  
Delitescebat, nequiere signum  
Ferre, sed saxo crepuere tanquam  
Icta potenti.

Discerning this, and simultaneously  
seeing with astonishment from how much danger  
the Lord had delivered him,  
he thus said to the brothers:

As the kind Creator has given favour  
to all of you, why have you given me this drink  
to consume, bearing the venom  
of the Stygian serpent?

Did I not tell you before, that neither our lifestyles  
nor customs would suit each other?  
Find yourselves another prelate,  
more suited to your ways.

Thus he spoke, and departed from them  
to find pleasant caves in the wilderness,  
so as, in the face of the great Creator,  
to be alone with himself.<sup>35</sup>

The section “Ad Tertiam” concludes with two stanzas celebrating Benedict’s continued  
campaigns against the “*fraudibus hostis*” (deceptions of the enemy) followed by a doxology.

Taken as a whole, the composition demonstrates a remarkable expansion by the eleventh century  
of the thematic import and potential use of the poison trial. The poet has found the basic premise

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<sup>35</sup> Pseudo-Bertharius, *Vita Latino-Graeca S. P. Benedicti*, 20-22:

Hoc simul cernens, simul obstupescens  
Vidit e quanto Dominus periclo  
Se redemisset Benedictus, et sic  
Fratribus inquit.

Donet indulgens veniam Creator  
Omnibus vobis, mihi potionem  
Cur propinastis stygiae ferentem  
Virus echidnae?

Nonne praedixi, quia nostra vestrae  
Vita, nec mores bene convenirent,  
Praesulem vestris alium parate  
Moribus aptum.

Dixit et vasti sibi gratiosa  
Antra deserti petiit, futurus  
In Creatoris facie superni  
Se penes unum.

of the trial—victory over something ill-intentioned and deceptive— sufficiently malleable and expansive enough to encompass another miracle whose elements, at least on the surface, are entirely unlike those of the poison trial: mortification of the flesh, ascetic commitment to virginity, direct confrontation with the devil. The poison trial has become useful as a tool for framing other holy contests that involve deception.

The materials developed in praise of Benedict thus demonstrate both richness and flexibility of interpretation, and a refinement in the discernment exhibited by Benedict in his confrontation with two hidden poisons. Compared to the source material in the *Dialogues*, Paul the Deacon and the poets of Monte Cassino progressively foreground and clarify when and how Benedict is able to see through the disguised evil. *Ordinar unde tuos, sacer o Benedicte, triumphos* meditates on the contrast between the internal state of Benedict and his poisoners and thus on the disjuncture of appearance and true intent. The text clearly attributes to Benedict powers of discernment both earlier and at a greater distance than described in the *Dialogues*, turning the suggestion of privileged internal knowledge into the primary virtue expressed by the poison trial. In a similar manner, *Fratres, alacri pectore* selects from a wealth of narrative detail to frame the second trial primarily as Benedict making known that which is hidden (“Virus patescit abditum”). The Pseudo-Bertharius *Sanctae lux, fratres, hodierna poscit* demonstrates that, as was the case with the poison trial of John the Evangelist, Benedict’s poison trial offers a superstructure on which to hang other thematically related miracles and to read them through the language of poison and deception and the triumph over something that appears good but masks ill-intent.

This sample size is of course limited; there are any number of hymns, sermons, hagiographies and collections of exempla referencing Benedict’s life and miracles. The limiting

device of Vat. Lat. 1202 does, however, allow a view of the contours of interpretation of Benedict's poison trial between the sixth and eleventh centuries. The group of texts compiled by Abbot Desiderius, and a number of related texts, collectively demonstrate this evolution of Benedict's trials into clear demonstrations of a specific kind of discernment.

### **3.iv. The Poison Trial of Sabinus of Canosa**

I turn now to the second figure portrayed in the miniature (Vat. lat. 1202 fol. 48r) with which we opened this chapter, Sabinus of Canosa. Sabinus cannot be credited with anything near the historical or cultural influence of Benedict, but his experience is sufficiently intertwined with Benedict's as to be foundational to the adaptation of the trope into a test of explicitly hidden poisons. It likewise appears plausible that some of the mechanics of discernment displayed by Benedict in the later Benedictine material might have migrated to him from the form of the poison trial undertaken by Sabinus.

Sabinus is particularly instructive in that while his origins in the hagiographical tradition parallel those of his more famous colleague Benedict, the distribution and later revision of his hagiographical record is as limited as Benedict's is fecund.<sup>36</sup> There is little evidence that his liturgical commemoration ever expanded much beyond southern Italian regions, and is centered largely around his native Canosa and neighboring Bari, where his relics are said to have been transferred in the eleventh century. In consequence, the evidence for Sabinus' contribution to the trope of the poison trial consists of one chapter of Gregory's *Dialogues*, an anonymous *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* from the ninth century, a verse life from the late eleventh century, and a collection of references from the eleventh and twelfth centuries of

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<sup>36</sup> The two recensions considered here are those included by Mabillon, AASS Feb. 9 (BHL 7443 and 7444). Between the two, the Bollandists catalogued only 14 manuscripts.



individuals using the poison trials of Sabinus and Benedict as exempla. I know of only one hymn for Sabinus from a Beneventan hymnal with extensive lacunae, and other liturgical formulae that exist in later sources can only suggest an earlier practice.<sup>37</sup>

The history of the hagiography of Sabinus is the more general history of the southern Italian cult of saints and the regional contests for the power found in pilgrimage sites. The stratigraphy of these three texts has been most thoroughly analyzed by Ada Campione and placed in the broader context of the power relationships of Beneventan Lombards and Normans.<sup>38</sup> The ninth-century anonymous *Vita* expands on the foundation of the *Dialogues* to relate posthumous miracles, and tells the story of an emerging center of pilgrimage based around the rediscovered

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<sup>37</sup> Nicola Bux has considered a number of liturgical manuscripts from the thirteenth century and later from the archive of the Basilica of St. Nicolas in Bari to make general observations on the forms of commemoration of Sabinus. Although it is unclear from which manuscript it derives, Bux reports an intriguing antiphon and prayer that make explicit reference to both Mark 16 and Sabinus' poison trial:

Dicit Dominus: In nomine meo si mortiferum quid biberint, non eis nocebit, super aegros manus imponent et bene habebunt. Protector omnium in te sperantium Deum, qui tua virtute beatum Sabinum Confessorem atque Pontificem a veneno incolumem effecisti; tribue nobis ipsius intercessione, ut, peccatorum veneno liberati, bona adipiscamur aeterna.

What the liturgical context is is unclear, as is the timeframe of practice and provenance of the manuscripts in question. Nicola Bux, "La liturgia barese di s. Sabino" in *La tradizione barese di s. Sabino di Canosa* ed. Salvatore Palese (Bari: Edipuglia, 2001), 99-105. The prayer in question appears on p. 102. Equally frustrating is the scant manuscript record concerning hymnody around Sabinus; there are no entries for Sabinus in the *Analecta Hymnica* or similar catalogues. The most promising evidence for a hymn tradition comes from a 2016 dissertation by Bibiana Carmela Pia Vergine. Vergine traces a hymn for Sabinus in an eleventh-century Beneventan hymnary (Biblioteca Capitolare of Benevento MS 37) that has extensive lacunae (*Presulem sanctum reboate*, Ben 37 fol. 19v, 37r-v). Among the elements that Vergine managed to transcribe is a verse that appears to reference Sabinus' command to the boy to hand over the poisoned vessel:

Basculum mortis puer vane caret  
porrigens ore Domini sed obstat  
territis servus michi dicit hoc sit  
servus suoque.

An eighteenth-century transcription of Ben 37, Borg. Lat. 296, 107v., does not fill in any useful holes. Bibiana Carmela Pia Vergine, "The Hymns of Medieval Southern Italy: Music, Politics, and the Transformation of Local Liturgical Song" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Ada Campione, "Sabino di Canosa tra storia e leggenda," in *La tradizione barese di s. Sabino di Canosa*, ed. Salvatore Palese (Bari: Edipuglia, 2001), 23-46.

relics of Sabinus—a story underscored in the text itself, as Sabinus reveals the location of his own bones. The text describes the translation of the holy bones to the cathedral at Canosa, the better to accommodate an ever-growing number of visitors. The eleventh-century verse life, attributed to an archdeacon of Bari, uses this expanded framework as a basis on which to develop the claim that Bari, newly Norman and on the rise, had on the holy body of the saint. This recension of the tale recounts the miraculous discovery of Sabinus’ bones under the altar at Bari, where they had been secretly translated a century before. The three iterations of Sabinus’ life and the various claims to the translation of his bones thus reflect a much larger picture of political and regional change in Southern Italy. For my purposes, they represent a chance to unpack the messaging of the poison trial in the sixth, ninth and eleventh centuries, as each adaptation expands and re-interprets Sabinus’ experience in accordance with contemporary currents of poison discourse.

### **3.iv.a. Sabinus in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great**

The account of Sabinus of Canosa in the *Dialogues* is brief. The *Dialogues* are at heart a collection of miracles performed by Italian holy men, in which Benedict alone merits what might be termed a full *vita*. Most of the roughly four dozen other Italian figures described by the Gregory figure in the text consequently receive significantly less attention. Sabinus appears in book three, immediately following four holy men of previous centuries. As a preface to the miracles performed by Sabinus, the Gregory figure emphasizes that he is now describing events “of our own time,” which can be corroborated by living witnesses.

Sabinus performs two miracles in the *Dialogues*, both of which showcase discernment as his primary virtue, both of which are structured as tests that force the holy figure to see through

deception, and both of which involve Sabinus being handed a cup of wine. The first is an interaction with Totila, King of the Goths, who is a recurring figure of villainy in the *Dialogues*. Sabinus, although entirely blind, has developed a reputation for holy insight which the nefarious Totila disbelieves and wishes to test. Totila serves Sabinus a glass of wine in the context of a meal, in the place of the usual servant. Sabinus recognizes him with his internal sight and blesses him, and the King admits Sabinus' power. There is an obvious parallel with Benedict's experience with this same Totila, who disguises one of his servants in kingly robes to discover if Benedict could uncover the ruse.<sup>39</sup>

The second miracle performed by Sabinus in the *Dialogues* is explicitly a poison trial, and one that bears particular significance in my taxonomy of the genre. Benedict's poison trials involved many of the principal components (hidden poison that is rendered harmless, jealous clergy, ability to uncover deception), but in neither case does Benedict *actually drink poison*. Sabinus, as represented in the *Dialogues*, combines the precedent set by the hagiographical tradition around John the Evangelist and the Mark 16 text together with the broader hagiographical campaign of Gregory highlighting discernment. The result is a use of the poison trial that explicitly highlights the physical body of the saint and his physical ability to withstand "a deadly thing" while also explicitly highlighting the saint's ability to see through deception.

There is no uncertainty as to how or when Sabinus discovers the presence of the poison—in this sense, it is a clearer framing of the stakes of the trial than in those featuring Benedict. The parties, motivations, actions, and subsequent effects are clearly articulated:

This same venerable man, when he had lived to an old age as an example for others to follow, his Archdeacon, inflamed by the ambition to become Bishop, desired to kill by means of poison. He corrupted the mind of the cup-bearer so that he would offer a drink of wine mixed with poison. At the dinner hour, this boy, seduced by money, offered to

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<sup>39</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues* 2.14, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 182.

the Bishop as he reclined to eat that poisoned wine which he had received of the Archdeacon. At once, the venerable Bishop said “Drink that yourself, which you offer to me.” The boy trembled, knowing himself to be discovered, and preferred to die by drinking it himself, rather than bear the sins of such a horrible crime as murder. As he was bringing the cup to his own mouth, the man of God restrained him, saying: “Do not drink it. Give it to me, and I will drink it. Go and say to him that gave this to you: I will drink the poison, but you will not be Bishop.” Having made the sign of the cross, the Bishop drank the poison safely, and at the same time but in another location the Archdeacon died, as though the poison had passed through the mouth of the Bishop to the flesh of the Archdeacon. Although he lacked physical poison to bring about his death, still in the sight of the eternal judge he was killed by the poison of his malice.<sup>40</sup>

A number of elements here appear to echo Benedict’s encounters with his rebellious monks and with the evil priest Florentius. The Archdeacon, here unnamed, wants to procure something that Sabinus has (the Bishopric), just as Florentius wished to be praised for his own style of living, and resented Benedict’s reputation. The poison is once more concealed in wine rather than consumed in an open challenge format. Once the poison has been dispatched, the ill intent rebounds on the perpetrators and they die, at some distance from the holy figure.

However, in this instance, the *Dialogues* are quite explicit about the mechanism of that comeuppance—the Archdeacon is killed by the “poison of his own malice.” This is already a more nuanced formulation of the poison trial in that two persons effectively undergo the trial, one who drinks a “physical poison” and survives, and one who consumes a metaphorical poison and perishes, both of whom have had their claims adjudicated by the “everlasting judge.” The

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<sup>40</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues* 3.4.3-4, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 274-276. “Huius autem venerabilis viri, cum ad exemplum vitae sequentium in longum senium vita traheretur, eius archidiaconus, ambitione adipiscendi episcopatus accensus, eum extinguere veneno molitus est. Qui cum vini fusoris eius animum corrupisset, ut mixtum vino ei veneni poculum praeberet, refectionis hora, cum iam vir Dei ad edendum discumberet, ei praemiis corruptus puer hoc, quod ab archidiacono eius acceperat, veneni poculum obtulit. Cui statim venerabilis episcopus dixit: ‘Bibe tu hoc, quod mihi bibendum praebes.’ Tremefactus puer, deprehensum esse se sentiens, maluit moriturus bibere quam poenas pro illa tanti homicidii culpa tolerare. Cumque sibi ad os calicem duceret, vir Domini conpescuit, dicens: ‘Non bibas. Da mihi, ego bibo. Sed vade, dic ei qui tibi illud dedit: Ego quidem venenum bibo, sed tu episcopus non eris.’ Facto igitur signo crucis, venenum episcopus bibit securus, eademque hora in loco alio quo inerat archidiaconus eius defunctus est, ac si per os episcopi ad archidiaconi viscera illa venena transissent. Cui tamen ad inferendam mortem venenum quid corporale defuit, sed hunc in conspectu aeterni iudicis venenum suae malitiae occidit.”

cup-bearer, as well, is twice described as having been “corrupted” by the Archdeacon, as though he, too, has ingested something nefarious, and is himself a form of concealment—described as a “puer,” this familiar and innocuous-seeming figure disguises ill-intent rather like the wine conceals the poison.

This version of the trial fuses the two pieces of precedent established by Benedict and John the Evangelist: like Benedict, the blind Sabinus recognizes the hidden danger in the vessel of wine; like John, he consumes the poison without injury.

### **3.iv.b Sabinus in the Ninth-century *Vita, Inventio et Translatio***

What, then, do the later recensions do with this precedent? The ninth-century anonymous *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* builds on the foundation provided by the *Dialogues* by recounting the saint’s death and posthumous miracles, culminating in the first of multiple translations in the itinerary of this coveted regional holy figure. This text has been dated to the early ninth century based on both colophon information and on references to specific rulers; Jean-Marie Martin has forwarded the narrow window of 806-817, the regnal years of Grimoald IV, as the most likely context for the work.<sup>41</sup> Other scholars have noted the importance of Sabinus to regional claims to power, patronage, and ties between Canosa and Rome in the period.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the medieval evidence for the circulation of the *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* centers largely on Apulian and Roman manuscripts. Of the 11 examples catalogued by the Bollandists, five are from the eleventh century (the earliest in evidence) and all

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<sup>41</sup> Jean-Marie Martin, “Note sur la *Vie* de saint Sabin de Canosa et le prince de Benevent Grimoald IV,” *Vetera Christianorum* 24, (1987), 399-405.

<sup>42</sup> The most complete set of studies can be found in *La tradizione barese di s. Sabino di Canosa*, ed. Salvatore Palese. (Bari: Edipuglia, 2001). See in particular Gioia Bertelli, “Le reliquie di s. Sabino da Canosa a Bari: tra tradizione e archeologia,” 57-78.

are Italian in provenance.<sup>43</sup>

The anonymous *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* does not introduce more miracles performed by Sabinus in his lifetime, but elaborates somewhat on the two sourced from the *Dialogues*. The anonymous author has provided details including speech and names not present in the *Dialogues*, which is credited by name as the primary source of the account along with “other written documents” and the memory of trustworthy men. Bari specialists Ada Campione and Vincenzo Recchia assume now-lost written sources for these expanded details;<sup>44</sup> to my mind, such phrases are so commonplace that other written sources are possible but not necessary to explain the elaboration on the poison trial.

The most important alteration, in the context of reading innovations in the poison trial against the grain of poison discourses more generally, is that of the mechanism by which the Archdeacon, here named Vindemius, persuades the cup-bearer to poison Sabinus:

When the Bishop Sabinus was advanced in years, the aforementioned Archdeacon, impelled by a wicked spirit of pride, set himself against his bishop, to obtain the episcopate. He therefore called the small child who was accustomed to present Bishop’s cup at the time of the meal, and with a diabolical mouth he spoke to him, saying the following: “I am amazed how the old man suffers the burdens of age with equanimity. He would have greater honor if he would withdraw from life quickly. Oh, if only the Bishop had such a one, who could help accelerate the end of his body at the opportune time!” At these words, his childish heart began to soften, and he followed the malicious plan of the Archdeacon, so far as mixing the poison given to him by

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<sup>43</sup> BHL 7443. Two of the catalogued manuscripts are held at the Vatican (Vat. lat. 7810 and Vat. lat. 1197), and one each in Naples, Rome, and Benevento.

<sup>44</sup> Most of the Italian literature is on the context for the re-written life and the potential sources of information. Vincenzo Recchia sees a distinction between two sections of the anonymous work, one based closely on Scriptural passages and on the miracles outlined briefly by the *Dialogues*, and a more recent accounting of posthumous miracles, which he attributes to a second hand that reflects more oral than literary characteristics. Vincenzo Recchia, “Reminiscenze bibliche e «topoi» agiografici negli «Atti» anonimi di San Sabino Vescovo di Canosa,” *Vetera Christianorum* 4 (1967), 151-184. See also Ada Campione, “Note sulla Vita di Sabino di Canosa: inventio e translatio,” *Vetera Christianorum* 25 (1988), 617-639 and “La Vita di Sabino vescovo di Canosa: un exemplum di agiografia longobarda” in *Bizantini, Longobardi, Arabi ed Ebrei in Puglia nell’alto medioevo*, XX Congresso Internazionale di Studi del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Altomedioevo, (Spoleto, 2012), 365-403.

Vindemius with the wine and offering it to the Bishop to drink.<sup>45</sup>

There is a distinct difference between the motivations of the cup-bearer in the *Dialogues* version of this episode, who is persuaded by the promise of reward or recompense to perform the deed (“*praemiis corruptus puer*”) and the presentation in the ninth-century anonymous *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus*; indeed, an entirely new speech has been introduced to explain exactly how Vindemius has persuaded him “with a diabolical mouth” (“*diabolico ore*”) to do something that, on the surface, appears charitable. The alteration does not seem to be made out of a perceived logical necessity, as the poison trial functions perfectly well in its original form in the *Dialogues*. The alteration instead demonstrates the adaptability of the poison trial and the apparent cross-fertilization of parallel trends in poison discourse.

This emphasis on persuasive speech, and particularly persuasive speech that prompts ill action, suggests that the anonymous author of the *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* connected the poison trial with the commentary tradition surrounding Mark 16 (see Introduction). In particular, the author appears to be reading against the commentary tradition established by Gregory the Great in his magisterial collection of Gospel homilies. Gregory’s gloss of the Mark text broadens the scope of interpretation for the miracles described therein, in order to make space for a non-literal or spiritual sense. Followers of Christ, according to Gregory, now perform “spiritually that which had previously performed corporeally.” The spiritual reading means that “drinking something deadly” may be interpreted as “listening to

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<sup>45</sup> AASS Feb IX, 326. “Itaque cum idem venerabilis Antistes provectae esset aetatis, praefatus Archidiaconus maligno instigatus superbiae spiritu, totum se contra Episcopum ad adipiscendum episcopatum dedit. Puerum itaque, qui refectionis tempore Episcopo poculum tradere solitus erat, accersivit, cumque his verbis allocutus est, diabolico ore sic dicens: Miror quomodo aequo animo diuturna suffers onera senis. Si vita discessisset, protinus honoratior habereris. O si talem habuisses Episcopum, qui episcopatus sui terminos celeri corpore, opportuno tempore visitare potuisset! Ad haec verba puerilia corda coeperunt mollescere, et Archidiaconi maligno consilio obedire, intantum ut venenum a Vindemio sibi traditum vino misceret, et ad bibendum Episcopo praeberet.”

malicious counsel”: “And when they hear poisoned counsels without being dragged into evil deeds, is that not drinking a deadly beverage, but without hurting them?”<sup>46</sup> Thus persuasive speech, and particularly persuasive speech that is intended to prompt wicked action, becomes itself an act of poisoning, and the figure able to resist such corruption is undergoing a kind of poison trial. This particular gloss is adopted by Bede and appears in a number of influential ninth-century commentaries, including those of Hincmar of Rheims and Remigius of Auxerre. No direct manuscript link is strictly necessary to suggest that the anonymous author of the ninth-century recension is engaging with a concomitant strand of poison discourse and incorporating the spiritual reading of Mark 16 alongside the more literal demonstration. There is a clear thematic pairing that suggests a recognition that these two forces—poisoned speech and a poisoned cup—belong in the same conversation.

The version of Sabinus’ poison trial in the anonymous *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* is refined and enriched against this backdrop. The “puer” in this version “drinks poison” in that he is revealed as one who listens to bad counsel and follows through with “evil deeds.” His poison trial, played out along the spiritual lines of Gregory’s gloss, is then thematically underscored by the more literal encounter Sabinus has with the poisoned chalice. As in the *Dialogues*, Sabinus exhibits a double discernment—he can see both the poison in the vessel before him, and the deception in the other vessel, the boy. As before, he drinks without harm and the ill-intent rebounds on the perfidious priest:

When the time of the meal came, the boy held the cup stained with poison to the Bishop. The Bishop said to him, “Drink that which you have brought me—for I know what lurks in the cup.” The boy was immediately alarmed, realizing that he must know the truth, and because he was not able to bear the face of the holy man, quickly asked if he

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<sup>46</sup> e.g., Bede, *In Marci euangelium exposition* 4.16, ed. David Hurst. CCSL 120 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1960; reprint 2001): “et dum pestiferas suasiones audiunt sed tamen ad operationem prauam minime pertrahuntur mortiferum quidem est quod bibunt sed non eis nocebit.”



might kill himself, propelling his hands to his mouth to drink the poison. To this the Bishop said, “Give it to me, most faithful child. God forbid! God forbid! lest that unworthy priest be allowed to determine the end of a life by means of poison. I will drink it, but he whom it pleased to do this awful deed, he will never become bishop.” So saying, he took the cup and drank the poison. But a wonderful and astonishing miracle occurred. For when he drank the poison, the wretched Vindemius, who was dwelling in a village three miles distant from the holy servant of God, died on the spot. And he who desired to kill the holy man was murdered by his own malice; and though he had wanted to kill with poison was killed by the poison of his own wickedness.<sup>47</sup>

While the overall outline hews closely to the precedent, the author of the anonymous *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* makes two other alterations of note that emphasize the abilities of the holy figure. The first highlights Sabinus’ discernment with explicit dialogue.

Where in the *Dialogues* Sabinus’ awareness of the poison is simply implied by his directive to the boy (“Bibe tu hoc, quod mihi bibendum praebes”), the later recension both inherits this language and expands on it with the additional speech “I know what lurks in the cup” (“Bibe tu, quod mihi porrigis; scio quid in illo latitet”). The added language echoes Benedict’s second miracle, in which Gregory insists that Benedict is aware of the “lurking” danger (“sed eum, quae pestis lateret in pane, non latuit”). The emphasis performs similar work as the subsequent revisions of Benedict-related material, in that it refines and highlights Gregory’s fundamental preoccupation with privileged interior vision. The second alteration in the ninth-century *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus* is that Sabinus does not make the sign of the cross before he drinks unharmed. This is carried over into the eleventh-century verse life but is not

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<sup>47</sup> AASS Feb IX, 326. “Nam cum reficiendi hora aduenisset, puer ex more poculum veneno maculatum Episcopo nisus est tradere. Cui Episcopus, Bibe, inquit, tu, quod mihi porrigis; scio quid in illo latitet. Puer mox quod fecerat, in lucem cognoscens deductum, pertimuit; et quia sancti viri vultum ferre non poterat, citius se necare quæsiuit, manu ad os, vt biberet venenum, iniiciens. Ad hæc Episcopus, Mihi, ait, præbe, fidelissime puer. Absit, absit, vt in conspectu, licet indigni Pontificis, veneno quis extrema finiat vitæ. Ego bibam; sed ille, [tamen ebibit,] qui hoc flagitium perpetrare voluit, Episcopus non erit: statimque poculum arripiens, venenum bibit. Sed mirum et stupendum miraculum contigit. Nam cum ipse biberet venenum, miser Vindemius, qui in Tertio vico tribus milliariibus a sancti Dei famuli distanti erat habitaculo, defunctus est. Et qui d sancto viro necem tradere cupiebat, ipse malitia sua peremptus est; dumque vellet necare veneno, nequitiae suae veneno necatus est: e propinare voluit, et propinatus est.”

replicated elsewhere, and so its importance should not be overstated. The effect is to foreground the powers of the physical body of the saint alongside his power to uncover deception.

The most important departure from Gregory's account of Sabinus included in the ninth-century text is the introduction of thematically resonant persuasive speech as the mechanism of corruption. This is underscored at the end of the section of the text concerning the poison trial, when the author returns to the idea of what Vindemius *did* say versus what he *should* have said:

O unlucky Vindemius, more wretched than all, to you were entrusted the precepts of God; to you was given the Gospel so that you might preach it to all. Did you not used to say often in public, he who prepares a trap for his neighbor, will fall into it himself? [Ecc. 10, 8] Thus it happened to you, oh unlucky one, that which you were professing to do to in order to "care" for another! <sup>48</sup>

Vindemius engaged in deceptive rhetoric in a manner that, in the end, demonstrates his hypocrisy in multiple ways. He misunderstood and consequently misrepresented the Gospel he was meant to be preaching, or else he would have understood the trap he was setting for himself. Had his speech been limited to preaching rather than persuasion to ill-action, he would have lived. The ninth-century anonymous author takes seeming pleasure in the irony of Vindemius dying as though he had consumed poison through Sabinus' lips—he is himself saved from the indignities of old age, as he professed to wish to do for Sabinus.

### **3.iv.c. Sabinus in the Eleventh-century Verse Life**

The final piece of evidence in the process by which the virtues expressed in the *Dialogues* version of the poison trial are refined and emphasized is the eleventh-century verse life catalogued by the Bollandists as the *Carmen auct. Iohanne archidiac. Barensi* (BHL 7444).

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<sup>48</sup> AASS Feb IX, 326. "O infelix et omnibus deterior Vindemi, tibi scilicet credita sunt Dei praecepta; tibi Evangelium traditum est, ut omnibus euangelizares. Numquid non publica voce canere solebas, Qui parat proximo suo foveam, incidit in eam? Hoc tibi evenit, infelix, quod aliis cavere praedicabas."

The author, identified as archdeacon John of Bari,<sup>49</sup> is also credited with a prose *Historia inventionis S. Sabini episcopi Canusini* (BHL 7445), which recounts the miraculous discovery of the relics of Sabinus below the altar of Bari Cathedral in 1091, despite the long-standing understanding that his relics were to be found in the church at Canosa. The re-centering of the cult of Sabinus around Bari followed closely on the 1087 translation of the relics of St. Nicolas of Myra to Bari, and the rising fortunes of Bari in the recently-conquered Norman Apulia.

The text itself is very different in structure and form compared to earlier versions of Sabinus' life, which provides opportunities to parse the choices of narrative emphasis made to accord with the choices of style. Italian scholar Vito Sivo has placed the verse text in the genre of metric periphrastic hagiography in the vein of the verse *Life of Martin* by Venantius Fortunatus and verse hagiographies by Alcuin of York.<sup>50</sup> Whatever his model, John of Bari has chosen four specific episodes from the ninth-century life of Sabinus to highlight in 44 couplets in epanaleptic form. The first two vignettes are posthumous healing miracles from the *vita*. The second two are the miracles first recounted in the *Dialogues*—Sabinus encountering King Totila, and his poison trial.

In telling these two miracles of discernment, John has preserved details from the ninth-century recension, including the name of the wicked Archdeacon and his method of corruption.

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<sup>49</sup> The author identifies himself as “John” in the final lines of the text (“roga pro me dicante Iohannes”). Archdeacon John of Bari is more well-known as the author of one of two very important accounts of the translation of St. Nicholas to Bari which was used by Orderic Vitalis in his *Ecclesiastical History*. See Marjorie Chibnall, “The translation of the relics of Saint Nicholas and Norman historical tradition,” in *Le relazioni religiose e chiesastico-giurisdizionali: atti del Congresso di Bari, 29–31 ottobre 1976* (Rome, 1979), 31–41.

<sup>50</sup> Vito Sivo, “Giovanni Arcidiacono e il culto di San Sabino: La Vita metrica (BHL 7444)” in *San Sabino: uomo di dialogo e di pace tra Oriente ed Occidente : anno Domini 2002 : atti del Convegno di studi in occasione del XII centenario della traslazione del corpo di San Sabino e per i 900 anni di dedicazione della Chiesa Cattedrale di Canosa : Canosa, 26-27-28 ottobre 2001* (Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2002), 25-39.

The epanaleptic form requires repetition of the first three or four words of the couplet as the last three or four words of the couplet, which allows for the highlighting and inflection of specific phrases and ideas. The poetic paraphrase also allows John of Bari to streamline the account into what he considers the essentials, and in doing so selectively highlights specific themes:

Vindemius, his mind having been stained by ambition,  
     stains that of the simple young boy.  
 An innocent one, wickedly deceived by false words,  
     whose simplicity was wickedly imposed upon.  
 This boy, too trusting, prepared the wine,  
     He mixed into the cup a deadly poison, the too-trusting boy.  
 Behold—the boy attendant comes in his accustomed manner;  
     The boy comes holding the drink of death—Behold!  
 He stands before the Father, as though seeing no evil in the wine—  
     in order to give it to him, he stands before the Father.  
 But that man saw in the interior, that which did not appear on the outside.  
     The liquid which the vessel held, he saw internally.  
 The Bishop said to the boy, who still held the cup before him,  
     the trusting one who did an evil thing, the Bishop said to the boy:  
 “This drink, faithful child, which you hold out to me,  
     This you give to me, faithful child, is lethal.  
 But give the cup to me: I will not die of poison;  
     Give the cup to me, that this old man might drink.”  
 He took and drank the poison that had been put in the cup, and  
     with a body uninjured, he took and drank it.  
 Vindemius instantly died, as though he himself had drunk it,  
     Vindemius, who was a long way away from there, instantly died.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> AASS Feb. IX, 329-330. *Carmen auct. Iohanne archidiacon. Barensi* (BHL 7444):

Vindemius maculat mentem prius ambitione,  
 Simplicis et pueri Vindemius maculat.  
 Qui male decipitur verbis fallacibus insons,  
 Simplicitate sua qui male decipitur  
 Credulus hic nimium confecit vina, veneno  
 Pocula miscet atro credulus hic nimium.  
 Venerat ecce puer solito de more minister;  
 Mortis habens potum venerat ecce puer.  
 Quem tenet ante Patrem, quasi non mala vina videntem  
 Ut sibi porrigeret, quem tenet ante Patrem.  
 Sed videt interius, quod non foris ille videbat,  
 Vas quod habet liquidum, sed videt interius.  
 Praesul ait puero, qui pocula substinet ante,  
 Qui male fidus erat, Praesul ait puero:  
 Hoc bibe, fide puer, tu quod mihi porrigis ipse,  
 Lethum, quid mihi das, hoc bibe fide puer.

The emphasis is squarely focused on representation, deception and insight in terms that reflect the broader discourse of poison language developed in previous recensions. The poet has clearly been influenced by the anonymous *Vita, Inventio et Translatio S. Sabini Episcopus*' recounting of the mechanism by which the young child is convinced to be party to the deception. Although no explicit persuasive dialog has been maintained, the boy, whose youth and innocence are continuously emphasized, is described as being "deceived by false words." Even more tellingly, where the original *Dialogues* text employs "corrumpere" to describe both the status of Vindemius and then the boy himself, John has chosen "maculare"—both terms imply a kind of contamination, but "maculare" has the added specificity of a discoloration or a stain, as though one substance has been added to another. This term appears in a slightly different context in the ninth-century material, where it described the poisoned chalice itself ("poculum veneno maculatum"). John of Bari thus expresses in a short-hand manner the figurative conflation of poisoning events developed in the earlier works.

A similar emphasis and refinement of focus can be seen in lines that deal with insight. John of Bari continues the campaign begun by the ninth-century recension of making Sabinus' discernment less implied and more explicitly known. Where the ninth-century text added an explicit acknowledgement of privileged knowledge ("I know what lurks in the cup"), John has described in detail the mechanics of this insight: "But that man saw in the interior that which he could not see externally/The liquid which the vessel held, he saw internally" ("Sed videt interius,

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Sed mihi da potius: nolo moriare veneno;  
Ut bibat iste senex, sed mihi da potius.  
Sumpsit, et inde bibit, fuerat quod vase venenum,  
Corpore nec laeso sumpsit, et inde bibit.  
Vindemius moritur mox ut bibit iste venenum,  
Qui procul hinc aberat Vindemius moritur.

quod non foris ille videbat/ Vas quod habet liquidum, sed videt interius”). The emphasis is clearly on Sabinus’ ability to see through false appearances, with an added linguistic ambiguity that highlights the connection between the interior of the object (that he saw internally) and the interior of the saint (he saw, internally). This is reinforced both by contrast with the boy’s described posture in offering the cup (“He stands before the Father, as though seeing no evil in the wine”) and by the omission of another miracle of privileged knowledge. Sabinus does not predict Vindemius’ comeuppance, which has the effect of downplaying one exhibition of prophetic ability while emphasizing another that is more closely focused on uncovering deception rather than showcasing knowledge of unknowable things.

Collectively, these three recensions of Sabinus’ life represent a different trajectory of distillation than the material surrounding Benedict; Sabinus in the *Dialogues* already seems to exhibit the discernment that the later material labors to attribute to Benedict. Rather, the recensions do two things. They become increasingly explicit about the mechanics of that discernment, dwelling figuratively and literally on sight and blindness and emphasizing to an increasing degree Sabinus’ interior recognition of the hidden poison. They also expand the interpretive scope of the trial and provide multivalence by framing the Archdeacon and the boy, in turn, as in a non-literal sense undergoing the trial themselves, such that their failure highlights Sabinus’ success. The later recensions in particular expand on the initial framework of the *Dialogues* by layering contemporary poison discourse from the exegetical tradition on top of the hagiographic narrative.

### **3.v. Benedict and Sabinus as Exempla**

Benedict’s profile as saint and monastic founder is perhaps unparalleled, such that it would seem to me surprising not to see Benedict and his poison trials invoked as examples.

Indeed, Peter Abelard compares his experience to that of Benedict in describing his troubles with brothers in a new monastic foundation, who appear to have taken inspiration from Benedict's murderous monks and tried to poison Abelard. Sabinus presents something of a different case—most of the evidence is limited in regional scope. On the other hand, Sabinus' experience is fairly straightforward as a poison trial, as the saint uncovers and then physically drinks poison unharmed. Indeed, two examples from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries serve to demonstrate that Sabinus functions as a known and useful precedent.

This utility is particularly evident in the way that the *Dialogues* account of Sabinus' trial is used in later centuries as explanatory precedent for similar miracles performed in monastic settings. Gerald of Wales (c.1146-1223) illustrates this in a passage of his *Gemma Ecclesiastica* concerning potential eucharistic pollutants. Following sections discussing whether or not water ought to be mixed with eucharistic wine and whether or not priests ought to listen to profane singing, Gerald takes up the question of what ought to be done if "spiders, flies, or other unclean things" should fall into the consecrated wine (see Chapter 4). After briefly discussing various such incidents and their outcomes, Gerald concludes that while one should not be so proud as to expect a miracle, if one ingests poison with an abundance of faith, it will not be harmful. In justifying this position, he refers not to Mark 16 nor to John the Evangelist, nor to one of the recent cases he has just described, but to the *Dialogues*: "Just in this way, by means of faith and great trust Sabinus, Bishop of the city of Canosa, who had long lost the light of his eyes from old age, willingly drank a poisonous drink extended to him and was uninjured, just as it is written in the *Dialogues* of Gregory in this manner..."<sup>52</sup> That Gerald of Wales has chosen the poison trial of

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<sup>52</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Gemmae ecclesiasticae*, ed. J.S. Brewer, *Giraldi Cambrensis opera* II (London: Longman 1862), 1.19. "Sicut ex fide et fiducia magna Sabinus Canusinae urbis episcopus, qui longo jam senio oculorum lumen amiserat, venenatum poculum ei porrectum sponte bibit illaesus, sicut in Dialogo Gregorius scribit in hunc modum."

Sabinus as the archetype most suited to this intellectual problem rather than that of the more universally famous John indicates how clearly it functions as a useful conceptual category—in his introductory summary, Gerald has condensed the trial to the most resonant elements. Sabinus, whose discernment is encapsulated and implied in the information about his blindness, actually drank poison, willingly, and unharmed as a function of his great faith. Neither Benedict nor John share this exact combination of attributes.

A slightly different aspect of this legacy can be seen in another invocation of Sabinus in the thirteenth century. This example highlights two things: first, that John the Evangelist, Benedict and Sabinus are part of the same conceptual category and form a fundamental trio of the poison trial as conceived by medieval authors; second, that the narrative details of Sabinus' trial have an evocative power that seems out of proportion to his regional influence. The source in question is a short section of one of the great collections of exempla compiled for preaching by the Dominican Etienne de Bourbon (c. 1180-1261). In his *Tractatus de diversis Materiis Praedicabilibus*, in the section concerning the efficacy of the sign of the cross to save individuals from many kinds of peril, Etienne provides three pertinent examples of the sign of the cross used to defend against poisoning:

“It frees from poison.” It is that which serves and frees from death and poison—in the miracles of John the Evangelist it is said that when a poisonous drink was given to him which had killed two others, by making the sign of the cross, he drank it uninjured.

Also, in the life of the Blessed Benedict, it is said that certain monks had chosen him to be their abbot, and to enclose them with regular observance, until certain among them gave poison to him, when, the sign of the cross being made, the vessel was shattered by its strength and the poison shed forth.

“Recall Sabinus and the archdeacon.” Also, according to the Dialogues VII, it is said that when Sabinus had already lost the light of his eyes due to age, then his archdeacon, desiring the episcopate, arranged it so that he be given a poisoned drink by a young boy. [Sabinus], having said to the boy, “That which you give to me, drink yourself,” stopped the boy from drinking, who on account of great shame desired to die and had



carried the drink to his mouth, saying, “I will drink the poison which you give to me, but your master will not be bishop.” With the chalice accepted, and the sign of the cross made, he drank, which did him no harm, but suddenly that archdeacon was killed as though he had imbibed the poison through the bishop’s lips.<sup>53</sup>

The very grouping of these three as exempla supports the thesis that the poison trial has emerged as a consciously grouped category of miracle, but the difference in the level of detail provided for each saint by Etienne is suggestive. John the Evangelist’s trial is described without any illustrative context other than that which seems to verify the deadliness of the poison. Benedict’s example is his first trial only, presumably as it most clearly highlights the power of the cross and its explosive effects, communicated in a compact summary. Sabinus receives considerably more detail and a citation, either because Etienne presumes his case is less well-known than those of John or Benedict, or because the narrative details and the thematic richness lend themselves most obviously to the needs of someone seeking an exemplum.

To conclude, I forward one more piece of evidence of the conceptual spread of the poison trial as pertaining to Benedict. In the framing of this chapter, I have treated Desiderius’ illuminations depicting the parallel between Sabinus and Benedict as proof that the poison trial existed as a conceptual category worth being highlighted, in spite of Sabinus’ relative lack of

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<sup>53</sup> Etienne de Bourbon, *Tractatus de diversis Materiis Praedicabilibus* 2.5.8, ed. Jacques Berlioz and Jean-Luc Eichenlaub. CCCM 124 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 165. “‘Liberat a veneno.’ Item, quod liberat et servat a morte et veneno, in miraculis Iohannis evangeliste dicitur quod cum datum fuisset ei venenum mortiferum de cuius potu duo mortui fuerunt, facto signo crucis, bibit illaesus. Item, in Vita beati Benedicti dicitur quod cum quidam monachi eum in abbatem elegissent, et artaret eos ad regule observationem, dum quidam eorum venenum propinaret ei, facto signo crucis, virtute eius vitrum frangitur et venenum effunditur. ‘Nota de Sabino et archidiacono.’ Item, Dialogis, VII, dicitur quod cum Sabinus iam prae senio lumen oculorum amisisset, quidam archidiaconus eius, ambiens episcopatum, fecit ei per puerum dari poculum venenatum. Qui cum diceret puero: ‘Hoc quod mihi das, bibe tu’, et puer prae verecundia magis vellet mori quam non bibere, cum haberet poculum ad os, prohibuit, dicens: ‘Ego venenum quod mihi das bibam, sed dominus tuus episcopus non erit.’ Qui, accepto calice, facto signo crucis, bibit, quod nihil ei nocuit, sed statim archidiaconus ille mortuus est ac si per os episcopi venenum bibisset.”

importance to the narrative included in Desiderius' collection. Perhaps a more illuminating kind of image to demonstrate how the poison trial emerges as a particularly useful element of Benedict's legacy comes from a later reflection of the tradition. This takes the form of a formula for invoking the protection of Benedict, and appears to apply the exegetical tradition of interpreting "drinking a deadly thing" as "listening to malicious counsel":

Crux sacra sit mihi lux	Let the holy cross be to me a light
Non draco sit mihi dux	Let not the snake be to me a leader
Vade retro satana	Get behind me, Satan!
Numquam suade mihi vana	Never suggest false things to me
Sunt mala quae libas	These things that you pour out as an offering are evil
Ipsa venena bibas	You ought to drink those poisons yourself

The origins of this formula are occluded by later practice; indeed, it is ultimately inscribed on a medal dedicated to Saint Benedict and promoted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

However, it is possible that the formula is known as early as the twelfth century, and certainly by 1350, as it appears in an illuminated Pauper's Bible from Austria:



Image 5. Benedict's prayer. Biblia pauperum, Cod. Guelf. 35a Helmst., fol. 1r. Courtesy of the Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel.

In the image, a monk (identified as "religio") confronts a winged, monstrous figure (identified as the "figura mundi"). This personification of "worldliness" offers the monk a chalice. Barely legible below the monk's banner are lines from the formula *Crux sacra sit mihi lux*. That a saint should be invoked as a form of protection is of course not innovative; that the formula for invoking Benedict, in particular, should highlight one specific miracle to represent the battle of the spiritual man against worldly pitfalls, combined with the image of said personified world offering to him a chalice, is remarkable. While the formula has obscure roots, it must to some extent be attributed to the growing interest in poison trials and the distillation of meaning surrounding Benedict's experiences that can be seen in the texts of Vat. lat. 1202 and those of similar provenance.

### **3.v. Conclusion**

That Benedict's poison trials influence the nature and purpose of this hagiographical trope is beyond doubt; no other saint, by nature of his fame in the monastic society that valued and recreated stories of holy individuals, or by nature of the unique prominence of his hagiographer, set quite as many precedents or so influenced the course of monastic literature. It is likewise clear that the evolution of the poison trial into an explicit test of discernment ought to be attributed to Gregory's personal preoccupations, rather than be understood as emergence of a self-evident function of the trope itself. The afterlife of this innovation, and the proliferation of abbots, bishops, and ascetic monks who subsequently unknowingly confront poisoned chalices, demonstrates exactly how important the precedent is. However, the process undertaken by individuals like Paul the Deacon and the poets of Monte Cassino, that of sifting through Gregory's text and highlighting, inflecting, and re-interpreting the relative importance of the

poison trials from within the corpus of miracles in the *Dialogues* must be likewise responsible for the version of the poison trial that emerged into the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

In the literature around Sabinus, on the other hand, there is a rather different relationship between the development of the poison trial (within the limited extant examples) and the impact Sabinus has on the broader poison trial tradition. Although the primary sphere of production and innovation around Sabinus appears to be Canosa and Bari, Sabinus has a more geographically vast legacy attributable to the importance and circulation of the *Dialogues*. The form of Sabinus' poison trial, combining as it does the juridical aspects of John the Evangelist's with both discernment and other strands of poison discourse embraced by Gregory, functions as an inspiration and exemplum for later trials.

Together, the poison trials of Sabinus of Canosa and Benedict of Nursia mark a pivotal step in the possibilities of the trope as a tool of generating certainty in the face of ambivalence. Because the test has become one of uncovering hidden truths, it can be applied in contexts like that of Benedict or Sabinus to vindicate an individual in the face of detractors, or can be applied to any contest in which the discernment of a holy figure is needed to provide a clear settlement.

## Chapter 4: The Flourishing of the Poison Trial

### 4.i. Introduction

This dissertation has thus far argued that the hagiographic poison trial developed in the fertile mix of specific influences—the early Christian employment of rhetorical poisons in moments of epistemic crisis, the legitimization by means of the liturgy of the example set by John the Evangelist, the intellectual preoccupations of Gregory the Great and the extension of the poison trial into a test of discernment—and has now reached the point at which the various strands appear to merge into something like a consistent and legible *topos*. This chapter traces the expansion of the trope in medieval hagiography, as medieval biographers adapt it to yet new uses while still retaining elements of the fundamental character developed in other contexts.

The taxonomy of precedent established in the last two chapters makes a distinction between the Johannine and Gregorian model. The first is suited to an open forum of contest between major opposing forces, and particularly between Christians and non-Christians. The second model foregrounds interior knowledge and creates a structure in which hidden motives can be revealed and uncertainty resolved. Both versions of the trial are epistemologically self-validating in that they set and then meet their own criteria for victory. The holy lives that form the subject of this chapter draw from both models, some with clear patterning on one only, and some demonstrating clear influence from both. This taxonomy of source material must now be augmented a taxonomy of use.

The most basic of these uses is straightforward *imitatio*. Most saintly miracles to some extent function on inherited tropes to make authenticating claims; the point of recording and circulating hagiographies is to make a case for the power, legitimacy and worthiness of a saint to be venerated as such, and this is often performed through the conscious invocation of previously acknowledged and honored acts. Where poison trials have been treated in the historiography, this is the level on which they have been primarily presumed to function— hagiographers are making a case for particular legitimacy by demonstrating their subjects to have performed an act reminiscent of John or Benedict, in the same way that any miracle with hagiographic precedent might be said to do. There is no doubt that this recognizable inheritance plays a significant role in the function of the poison trial to perform legitimizing work. It does not always function *only* on this register, however, and simplistic readings can lead historians to simultaneously over-interpret and under-interpret the use of a poison trial. I argue that this has been the case with discussions of the poison trial in the life of Patrick of Ireland.

A poison trial can also be a consciously-employed hermeneutic that performs a more complicated kind of legitimization, based on layers of accrued meaning incorporating discernment and holy privilege, that recognizes two competing and plausible claims to truth and unambiguously renders judgement in favor of one. There are two distinct uses of note within this broader function that form the taxonomy suggested by this chapter. The first is a strategy of self-authentication in a context of an uncertain or fraught biographical tradition, as in the case of competing legends of Saint George of Cappadocia in insular monastic contexts. As in the case of the *Passio/Virtutes Iohannes*, there is a clear grappling with aspects of the hagiography previously condemned as heretical, resulting in an attempt to bring George's experience more closely in line with the Johannine precedent. The second application of the poison trial in this

juridical function looks not inwards at individual saintliness, or backwards at hagiographical tradition, but extends the logic of the trial to some external social problem. The poison trials of Samson of Dol and Æthelwold of Winchester illustrate this capacity to adjudicate peripheral conflicts using the medium of saintly bodies.

I conclude the chapter with an analysis of a sub-genre of the saintly poison trial that is both squarely within the tradition of holy poison-drinkers and that exists as a parallel innovation. In this sub-genre, reformers and founders of new monastic orders encounter a poisonous creature that has fallen by accident into communion wine. I argue that this important difference in intent serves to combine aspects of the earlier meaning generated by poison trials while also specifically confronting other kinds of contested truth-claims, including the nature of the Eucharist itself and the validity of reformist preaching.

#### **4.ii. Inheritance and Overinterpretation: David of Wales and Patrick of Ireland**

The first use of the poison trial is to invoke the memory of Benedict, Sabinus, or John, in order to demonstrate a similar kind of holiness by corollary of miraculous behavior. To say that a miracle functions primarily to place one saint in a direct relationship with another is not to rob it of meaning or importance. Hagiographies are never value-neutral compositions, and the campaign for holiness is still part of a larger project—a campaign for the influence of a cult or pilgrimage site, campaigns for ecclesiastical or regional independence, claims of historical precedence or priority, or any of the manifold ends that hagiographies could be composed to promote. The distinction I am making is one of the specific locus of that importance—does the poison trial primarily serve to speak to a virtue of the saint, or to solve some other external problem of ambiguity? Does the specific form of the trial, whether in the Johannine or Gregorian

mode, accrue specific virtues to the saint in question? Mapping the function of a poison trial along this spectrum helps to distinguish which holy virtues are being invoked in each case of imitation. Because it has not been fully treated as a topos, studies of hagiographies that involve poison trials tend to limit interpretation entirely to tracing holy genealogies of influence, but without gradation, occasionally imputing every virtue associated with a trial without reference to the actual elements being invoked. I treat two examples of this function of the trial to demonstrate this distinction and suggest that there is a certain danger of overinterpretation.

#### **4.ii.a The Life of David of Wales by Rhygyfarch**

A suitable example of *imitatio* following this distinction comes from the eleventh-century life of Saint David by Welsh hagiographer Rhygyfarch. The hagiography itself comes from a particular moment post-Conquest in which the Welsh church was asserting independence by establishing a long and independent tradition in terms of both liturgy and holy figures.<sup>1</sup> Thus the miracles and relationships of David, a sixth-century bishop, became part of a project beyond that of establishing the cult of a specific saint. Nonetheless, the poison trial in the life of David by Rhygyfarch is entirely focused on making specific claims about David by association with the sources of imitation—in this case, elements of John’s, Benedict’s and Sabinus’ trials are all reassembled into a combination that serves primarily to demonstrate the privileged sanctity of a true disciple of Christ per Mark 16.

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<sup>1</sup> See esp. Sarah Zeiser, “Bragmaticus omnibus brittonibus: David, Sulien, and an Ecclesiastical Dynasty in Conquest-Era Wales,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 31 (2011): 305-320. John Reuben Davies, “Some Observations on the ‘Nero’, ‘Digby’, and ‘Vespasian’ Recensions of Vita S. David” in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, eds. J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007): 156-160.



Although specific details are clearly evoking the experiences of Benedict and Sabinus, I classify this trial as primarily Johannine because of the crucial distinction between known and hidden poisons. David is not called upon to discern the poison himself; rather, an angel appears to his disciple Aiden, who has gone to Ireland to found his own monasteries, and warns him of a plot afoot to poison David. Aiden sends one of his own monks, who is aided by the angel to miraculously cross the sea to Wales, to get the message to David on time. Like John, then, David enters his encounter with the full knowledge of what he is facing. Like Benedict and Sabinus, he encounters his poison in the context of a meal; like Benedict, the chosen vehicle for the poison is bread:

They took their places together at table in the refectory, joyfully giving thanks to God. When they had said grace, the servant who had been accustomed to serving the father got up and placed the bread made with poison on the table (the cook and the steward had agreed to this plan). And Scuthín (who also had another name, Scolanus) got up and said, “Today, brother, you shall not wait upon the father: I shall serve.” The servant, being conscious of what he had done, withdrew, confused and stupefied with fear. And holy David took the poisoned bread: dividing it into three parts, he gave one of them to a little dog that stood just outside the door. Immediately, as it tasted the mouthful, the dog died a miserable death, for all its hair fell out in the twinkling of an eye, its bowels ruptured, and its skin was broken all over. When they saw it, all the brethren were astonished. Holy David sent the second part to a crow that was on its nest in an ash tree between the refectory and the river, on the south side. As soon as it touched it with its beak, the crow fell down dead from the tree. Holy David held the third part in his hand; he blessed it and ate it with thanksgiving. All the brethren looked at him with wonder and amazement for about three hours; but undaunted, he confidently preserved his life unharmed and no sign of the deadly poison appeared. Holy David told the brethren about all the things that had been done by those three men. The brethren all rose up and wailed, and they cursed those deceitful people – the steward, the cook, and the servant – and unanimously condemned them and their successors, saying that they should never have a place in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies, eds. and trans., “Rhygyfarch’s Life of St David,” in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, eds. J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007): 133-134: “Peractis autem Paschalis festivitatis solemnibus, sanctus pater David agius refectorium ad prandium una cum fratribus petit. Cui obvius factus est quondam discipulus eius Scutinus. Narratisque omnibus que erga eum gesta fuerant et que de illo angelus mandaverat, pariter in refectorium discumbunt leti gratias Deo agentes. Finita oratione, assurgens diaconus, qui patri ministrare

There are telling details that demonstrate that Rhygyfarch is consciously weaving the literary tradition of John with that of the *Dialogues*. The influences from Sabinus are that the plotters have corrupted the saint's usual server, whose dismay at having the plot uncovered underscores the fact that all parties are now aware of the stakes. The involvement of a crow, and indeed the obedience of all of the animals used as proofs of toxicity, is suggestive of Benedict's experience, as is the implication that the monks are targeting their own abbot in retribution for dislike of their austere manner of living. The influences from John are primarily the proofs of both efficacy of the poison—the efficacy of John's poison is demonstrated on condemned prisoners just as David demonstrates the stakes to the watchers with the aid of the dog and the crow—and of his miraculous survival, as in each case, a period of three hours of observation elapse to demonstrate that the saints have emerged unaffected by their experience. As in all three experiences, David performs the sign of the cross before ingesting.

The evocative connections to John appear to have been evident to Gerald of Wales, re-writing the life of David in the late twelfth century. In addition to a number of edits to the *dramatis personae* (Scuithín/Scolanus, in particular, is re-cast as the temporally improbable

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consueverat, panem veneno confectum mense inponit, cui cocus et economus consenserant. Scutinus autem, qui et Scolanus aliud nomen habens, se erigens, 'Hodie,' inquit, 'nullum, frater, patri ministerium adhibebis. ego enim impendam.' Diaconus autem confusus abscedens, facti conscius, hebetans dirigit. Accepitque David agius panem illud venenosum, dividensque in tres partes, unam dedit canicule foris stanti iuxta ostium, statimque ut morsum gustasset misera morte vitam finivit. omnes enim pili illius in ictu oculi ceciderunt, ita ut viscera eius foras erumperent, corio passim infracto, stupueruntque fratres omnes illud videntes. Misitque David agius alteram partem corvo, qui erat in nido suo in fraxino, que erat inter refectorium et amnem ad australem plagam, moxque ut rostro tetigit exanimis de arbore cecidit. tertiam vero partem David agius in manu sua tenuit, et benedixit comeditque eam cum gratiarum actione, inspexeruntque in eum cuncti fratres miro modo stupentes quasi per tres horas. Ipse autem, nullo mortiferi veneni signo apparente, intrepidus vitam servavit incolumem. Nuntiavitque David agius fratribus suis omnia, que ab illis tribus predictis viris facta fuerant. Surrexeruntque fratres omnes, et planxerunt, maledixeruntque illos viros dolosos, economum scilicet et cocum et diaconum, dampnaveruntque eos et successores eorum, ex uno ore dicentes nunquam habituros eos partem regni celestis in eternum."

ninth-century Bishop Swithun of Winchester<sup>3</sup>), Gerald inserts a short passage immediately after David's poison miracle to recount how David, in the process of copying the Gospel of John, finds his work completed in gold by the hand of an angel. The interpolation both underscores the theme of heavenly messengers having a particular relationship with David (Gerald preserves the role of angelic intercessors in warning "Swithun" about the poisoning attempt) and highlights the connection between John and David.<sup>4</sup>

There is nothing in the context of the poison miracle in either version to suggest that anything other than David's holy body is on trial, or that the outcome is anything other than vindication against his detractors. Neither Gerald of Wales nor Rhygyfarch make an explicit claim to the interior and privileged vision of Benedict and Sabinus in discerning their own traps, but their solutions equally redound glory on their subject—and not just David, but a network of his disciples have privileged information delivered directly by divine messenger. The clear combination of Benedict, Sabinus, and John serves entirely to place David squarely in their company as poison-resisters and true disciples of Christ.

#### **4.iii.b. The Life of Patrick of Ireland by Muirchú**

An example of overinterpretation, of imputing patterns where they do not exist, occurs in the scholarship on the life of Irish patron saint Patrick. The seventh-century *Vita Sancti Patricii* by Muirchú has been extensively studied for its insight into early Irish Christianity and to trace its relationship to contemporary hagiography. Its relationship to the apostolic *passio* tradition,

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Bartlett, "Rewriting Saints' Lives: The Case of Gerald of Wales" *Speculum* 58 (1983): 598-613.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald of Wales, *De Vita S. Davidis*, 5. *Giraldi Cambrensis opera* III, ed. J.S. Brewer (London: Longman 1862), 392.

and particularly its relationship to the extracanonical life of John, has been established by both Aideen O’Leary and Thomas O’Loughlin.<sup>5</sup> O’Loughlin has connected the text to both the Johannine and Gregorian traditions in an article promisingly entitled “Muirchú’s Poisoned Cup: A Note on Its Sources.” However, the labeling of this particular example as a “poison” trial is perhaps a case of overinterpretation; while I agree that there are important similarities to John’s contest with Aristodemus, there are likewise important differences, not least of which is the *absence of an explicit poison*. O’Loughlin takes this important similarity and extends it to connect Patrick to the virtues of *all* poison trials, including those which, to my mind, it does not in fact invoke.

The incident appears in a sequence of contests with the king and his magicians in which the holy power of Patrick is pitted against the powers of the pagans. Having bested the magicians in a manner both physically destructive and deadly by summoning an earthquake, Patrick joins them at a meal:

As they feasted, that *magus* Lucetmail, who had been part of the nighttime conflict, at that time was motivated by the death of his associate to contend with Saint Patrick, and in order to begin the suit, with all the others looking on, he poured out something from his own vessel into the drink of Patrick to test what he would do. Seeing what kind of test it was, Saint Patrick, with everyone watching, blessed his drink; and the liquid turned into something like ice, and when the vessel was upended only a drop came out, that which the druid had introduced; and he blessed the cup again, the liquid reverted to its usual character, and all were amazed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, “Muirchú’s Poisoned Cup: A Note on Its Sources,” *Ériu* 56 (2006): 157-162; Aideen O’Leary, “An Irish Apocryphal Apostle: Muirchú’s Portrayal of Saint Patrick,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 3 (Jul., 1996): 287-301.

<sup>6</sup> *Muirchú’s Life of Patrick* I.20, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 92. “Caenantibus autem omnibus ille magus Lucetmail, qui fuerat in nocturna conflictione, etiam in illa die sollicitus est extincto consocio suo confligere adversus sanctum Patricium, et ut initium causae haberet, intuentibus aliis inmissit aliquid ex vasse suo in poculum Patricii, ut probaret quid faceret. Vidensque sanctus Patricius hoc probationis genus uidentibus cunctis benedixit poculum suum et versus est liquor in modum gelu et converso vasse cecidit gutta illa tantum quam inmisserat magus, et iterum benedixit poculum, conversus est liquor in naturam suam et mirati sunt omnes.”

Translator and editor Ludwig Beiler inferred that the material slipped into Patrick's drink was a poison, rendering the sentence "he put a drop [of poison] from his cup into the goblet of Patrick." There is no hint of a named deadly substance in the Latin edition, which simply describes how "intuentibus aliis inmissit aliquid ex uasse suo in poculum Patricii." I think this is a case of the precedent over-informing the interpretation—because of the structural similarity to John's contest with Aristodemus, a vignette that is clearly functioning as a similar kind of trial of power between Christians and non-Christians has been overwritten with details from that precedent that are unwarranted in the present circumstance. There is no implication in the text that the substance that has been added is of any kind of threat to Patrick; rather, in the context of the miracles that follow having to do with altering the form of matter (snow summoned and then sublimated; fog descended and dispersed), the feat of removing part of a blended liquid via transmutation into ice bears more resemblance to these latter miracles than to John's open encounter with Aristodemus. Had Muirchú intended to describe a trial in the manner of an ordeal that pits the physical body of the saint against pagan villainy, there is no reason to assume he would not have done so explicitly; indeed, the chapter concludes with Patrick voluntarily stepping into a bonfire that ultimately leaves him unscathed but which incinerates his opponent.

O'Loughlin has gone a step further to argue that the incident in Muirchú's *Vita Patricii* has influences from not only the *Virtutes/Passio Iohannes* tradition of the life of John but also from the Gregorian model of sanctity displayed by Benedict and Sabinus. He has overstated the influence from Sabinus and Benedict in that Patrick's trial, strictly speaking, isn't one of discernment of a hidden poison (or of any poison at all), nor, consequently, one that demonstrates that "he has the spirit of prophecy and also the calmness of soul that places him

above envy and jealousy.”<sup>7</sup> Patrick’s enemies are not jealous in the sense that Sabinus and Benedict’s monastic adversaries are jealous of holy success, nor is the detection of falsehood any part of Patrick’s feat. As in the case of John, the very public aspect of the contest is perhaps the fundamental point, and one which Muirchú makes clear by reiterating at each step that there are many witnesses to the proceedings. Lucetmael mixes liquid from his own goblet into Patrick’s “intuentibus aliis” (with everyone looking on); Patrick performs his part “uidentibus cunctis” (with everyone watching); and “mirati sunt omnes” (all are amazed) at the outcome. The emphasis is on public display, not interior vision. There is no suggestion of surreptitious delivery, or of one substance masquerading as another—all see the magician challenge Patrick, and all see Patrick’s response to the challenge. Consequently, it is hard to read this as proof of “the spirit of prophesy” in quite the same way as Benedict and Sabinus, or to see the adversaries as direct parallels.<sup>8</sup> If there is a parallel with Benedict, it is that of mastery over the natural world—just as Benedict removes his poisoned vessel by commanding a raven to take it far away, Patrick exorcises his unwanted liquid by changing the state of matter from liquid to solid and back again. In the context of similar miracles of mastery over weather and earth, it seems more to demonstrate a certain holy privilege over the state of nature than a particular formulation of discernment and interior vision.

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<sup>7</sup> O’Loughlin, “Muirchú’s Poisoned Cup,” 162.

<sup>8</sup> O’Loughlin creates explicit parallels that seem to me to stretch the definition of “discernment”: “The saint knows what is happening (in Patrick’s case he can see that this cup is a test) as he has the spirit of prophecy, he blesses the cup or loaf, and then by some means the poison is rendered harmless (the Patrick incident differs from the others in that he is able to remove the poison from the wine). In all this, the saint is calm and tranquil, is above envy and is under divine protection. As Florentius is to Benedict, and as the archdeacon is to Sabinus, so Lucet Máel is to Patrick.” O’Loughlin, “Muirchú’s Poisoned Cup,” 161.

This matters because both of O’Loughlin’s conclusions are rendered suspect—both what kind of saintly attributes are rendered to Patrick by the comparison, and what values this demonstrates in the intellectual context of the hagiographer:

First, what Muirchú wanted to show about Patrick was that he could pass a particular kind of test as a saint: he has the spirit of prophecy and also the calmness of soul that places him above envy and jealousy. These are specific qualities of holiness that both he and Gregory would have been familiar with from their reading of John Cassian. Second, by the time Muirchú was writing the Gregorian models of sanctity were more widely diffused among writers in Ireland than has hitherto been recognized.<sup>9</sup>

Muirchú may certainly be influenced by John Cassian, and Gregorian models of sanctity may have been part of the intellectual sphere in which he wrote, but neither are demonstrated by Patrick’s poison trial, and the specific kind of sanctity attributed to Patrick by the comparison is of a different kind than that of a Benedict or Sabinus. This distinction matters because we must be able to see when these virtues *are* imputed, when the trial is performing other kinds of adjudicating work, to be able to read the fine variations of meaning therein.

#### **4.iv. Self-authentication in the insular tradition of George of Cappadocia**

The first function of the trope applied as an adjudicating hermeneutic is that of self-authentication in the context of a fraught tradition, such as one in which the historical orthodoxy of the life of the saint is in question. The poison-trial of George of Cappadocia the clearest reflection of the apocryphal tradition of John adapted to this purpose. The treatment of George’s poison trial by Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955-c. 1010) and his subsequent use of the trial in contemporary hagiographical projects demonstrates the utility of the trial in the face of competing claims to truth.

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<sup>9</sup> O’Loughlin, “Muirchú’s Poisoned Cup,” 162.

The medieval insular tradition of George of Cappadocia can be divided into two major parts. The famous princess-rescuing and dragon-fighting George, renowned in chivalric literature, does not begin to emerge in the medieval West until the twelfth century, as the result of a complex and much-debated process involving military saints evoked in the time of Crusade and contact with Georgian and other Eastern hagiographic traditions.<sup>10</sup> The dragon-less George is an earlier tradition, appearing in Coptic, Syriac and Latin manuscripts from the fifth century. It dwells on George's virtues as a martyr of uncommon suffering and merit. The earlier, dragon-less tradition is the primary subject of this section, particularly in the use and adaptation of the George narrative in the context of tenth-century Benedictine reform.

This earlier tradition is itself widely variable, although significant taxonomic work was performed by John Matzke in 1902 to trace families of manuscripts into what he terms, somewhat misleadingly, as "apocryphal" and "orthodox" strands—but which more recent scholarship, following Hippolyte Delehaye, has reclassified as "first" and "second" legends based on chronology rather than any presumption of relative historicity. The primary distinction between the two is the degree of suffering undergone by George. In both cases these are extreme, although the "second" family is a shorter and somewhat toned-down accounting of George's experiences. Both versions detail an inventive and staggering range of tortures inflicted on George as a result of his profession of Christianity; he is flayed, he is quartered, he is filled with molten lead, he is fitted with heated iron boots, his body is suspended on barbed hooks, he is left in a kiln for multiple days, he has nails driven into his skull and his skull crushed by a hammer,

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<sup>10</sup> See discussion of origins in Jonathan Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 36-42.



he is roasted and stewed on multiple occasions, he is entombed, and he is decapitated.<sup>11</sup> Along the way, he performs resurrection, conversion and healing miracles. The version that emerges in Latin from the ninth century, and that which forms the basis for the manuscript known to Ælfric, is a somewhat abbreviated version of the “first” legend.<sup>12</sup>

The variations are the result of an attempt to curtail the extreme drama and violence of the George narrative, in response to condemnations and the uncertain standing of the authenticity of George miracles despite evidence of his popularity even before the sixth century. The fifth-century Gelasian Decrees call out the legends surrounding George specifically as particularly pernicious examples of heretical attempts to mislead through engaging stories. Some stories are not suitable on account of their unknown authorship and their apparent lack of historicity: “because even the names of those who wrote them are not known...for instance the legends of Cyricus and Julietta, like Georgius and the sufferings of others like these, which appear to have been composed by heretics.”<sup>13</sup> This caution does not seem to have stopped versions of the George narrative from being copied, although it did appear to prompt a certain amount of caution in compilers of martyrologies, particularly reflected in the restraint of Bede and those that amended and expanded his work.<sup>14</sup>

As with other hagiographical traditions, even those explicitly condemned can find their way into authoritative standing through long-standing use or conferred acceptance. Something of

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<sup>11</sup> John E. Matzke, “Contributions to the History of the Legend of St. George with Special Reference to the Sources of French, German, and Anglo-Saxon Metrical Versions.” [I] *PMLA* 17 (1902): 468-476.

<sup>12</sup> Matzke, “Contributions,” 466 and 492.

<sup>13</sup> Every scholarly discussion of Ælfric and George hagiography discusses this point. See Good, *The Cult of Saint George in Medieval England*, 25-28; Joyce Hill, “Ælfric, Gelasius and St. George,” *Mediaevalia* 11 (1985): 2. *Decretum Galasianum* I.IV, PL 59:160-1. “[Q]uia et eorum qui conscripsere nomina penitus ignorantur ... sicut cuiusdam Cyrici et Iulittae, sicut Georgii aliorumque eiusmodi passiones quae ab hereticis perhibentur compositae.”

<sup>14</sup> Hill, “Ælfric, Gelasius and St. George,” 2.

the kind occurred in in the treatment of George by insular Benedictines in the late tenth century. Ælfric, compiling the Old English *Lives of Saints* for use in the reformed monasteries, had a somewhat ambivalent position on the historicity of George. His preface to the verse life of George both acknowledges its dubious reputation, and purports to separate the true from the false:

Heretics have written falsehoods in their books  
about the holy man who is called George.  
Now we will tell you that which is true about him,  
that their error may not secretly harm anyone.<sup>15</sup>

In her work on the early insular hagiography of George, Joyce Hill makes the case that Ælfric's willingness to include the extravagantly gory and uncertainly orthodox passion of George in his *Lives of Saints* can be attributed to his trust in his Latin source material, a hagiographic collection that he had known at Winchester before he moved to Cerne Abbas.<sup>16</sup> The authority of this source thus comes from the inherited weight of "venerable age, orthodox authorship and monastic tradition."<sup>17</sup> Hill herself, however, seems unsatisfied by this explanation, as Ælfric deviates from his source material and is at odds with the custom of the reformed community at Winchester in a number of other ways, most notably in his refusal to compose a homily for the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. If the customs of the community in which he resided are sufficient to explain his acceptance of the George narrative, this does not explain Ælfric's rejection of other, similarly suspect hagiographic and apocryphal traditions. As Hill reflects, "It is in fact difficult to determine on what ground the church based its distinctions between

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted from Hill, "Ælfric, Gelasius and St. George," 2. Ælfric, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, trans. Walter Skeat, Early English Text Society Original Series I.82 (London, 1885), 307.

<sup>16</sup> Joyce Hill, "St George Before the Conquest," *Report of the Society of the Friends of St. George's and the Descendents of the Knights of the Garter* 6 (1986): 291.

<sup>17</sup> Hill, "Ælfric, Gelasius and St. George," 2.

orthodox (canonical) and unorthodox (apocryphal) narratives of St. George, and why any one narrative, such as that familiar to Ælfric, should have achieved so high a level of respectability that it could confidently be regarded as thoroughly orthodox.”<sup>18</sup>

I argue that a potential avenue for understanding this seeming inconsistency rests in the epistemologically self-validating power of the poison trial. It seems possible this particular recension of the George narrative “achieved so high a level of respectability” because it is primarily patterned on the life and miracles of John (see Chapter 2), including a lengthy and elaborate poison trial. That Ælfric is alive to the underlying logic and language of poison trials is evident from his very concern about and framing of the George narrative, in his preface quoted above. The potential for error to be conveyed “secretly” through holy narratives echoes the warning (also noted in Chapter 2) of Pope Leo concerning apocryphal narratives about apostles: “For although there are certain things in them which seem to have a show of piety, yet they are never free from poison, and through the allurements of their stories they have the secret effect of first beguiling men with miraculous narratives, and then catching them in the noose of some error.”<sup>19</sup> Even though Ælfric does not use the terms specifically, the premise of salubrious content hiding noxious error is squarely addressed.

The poison trial of John forms the pattern for the poison trial of George in the version of the narrative known to the tenth-century insular Benedictines. Ælfric’s George is in for his share of unpleasantness, but his sufferings are refocused around three vignettes that are very evocative of John—George is challenged to openly pit the power of Christ against the power of pagan

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<sup>18</sup> Hill, “Ælfric, Gelasius and St. George,” 5.

<sup>19</sup> Leo Magnus, Letter 15.15, *NPNP* 12. “Quamvis enim sint in illis quaedam quae videantur speciem habere pietatis, numquam tamen vacua sunt venenis; et per fabularum illecebras hoc latenter operantur ut mirabilium narratione seductos, laqueis cujuscumque erroris involvant.” PL 54:1239.

demons in a poison trial, he emerges from a cauldron of boiling material unscathed, and he ultimately pulls down the pagan temple. Ælfric's familiarity and comfort with the extracanonical narratives about John is clear from his sermon for the December feast of John in the *Catholic Homilies* (see Chapter 2). Perhaps Ælfric is not drawing authorization from the fact of the Benedictine manuscript tradition itself, but from the authorizing qualities of the tropes contained therein. Specific and not insignificant details differ between the two hagiographic traditions—John is immersed in boiling oil, and George in lead; John pulls down the temple of Artemis and George of Apollo, etc.—but the commonalities are clear, and none the more so than in George's poison trial.

George is confronted with a poisoned chalice after he proves impervious to a first, significantly condensed sequence of tortures, to which he is subjected after refusing to sacrifice to pagan gods and instead dispensing his worldly goods among the poor. The emperor, identified as “Dacian,” seeks someone to demonstrate a yet greater supernatural power to that evinced by George. The stakes of the trial are once more laid out explicitly—the magic-wielder (“Athanasius”) admits that defeat in this contest would invalidate the source of his own power and validate that of George:

Datian answered Athanasius thus,  
“Canst thou extinguish the Christian's sorcery?”  
Then the sorcerer answered Datian thus.  
“Bid the Christian man come to me,  
and may I be guilty if I cannot  
totally extinguish his magic by my sorcery.”<sup>20</sup>

The point is reiterated immediately afterwards, with Dacian's injunction to George that he must “overcome his magic, or let him overcome thee, /either let him undo thee, or do thou undo him.”

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<sup>20</sup> Ælfric, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, trans. Walter Skeat, EETS OS 82 (London, 1885): 311-313.

While it is clear from any number of commonalities of setting and miracles that John provides the template for this version of the miracles George, the salient distinction between a Johannine trial and a Gregorian trial is the overtness of the challenge. George's poison trial follows the Johannine mode of transparent stakes. Athanasius both places a deadly substance in a vessel and dedicates it to demons, not once, but twice:

Athanasius then speedily took  
a great bowl, filled with a noxious draught,  
and dedicated all that drink to the devils,  
and gave it to him to drink, but it hurt him not.  
Then said again the magician, "Yet one thing I will do,  
and if that hurt him not, I will submit to Christ."  
He took then a cup, with a death-bearing drink,  
and cried aloud to the black devils,  
and to the foremost devils, and to the most powerful,  
and in their names enchanted the fearful drink,  
and gave it to the Lord's saint to drink;  
but the fiendish liquor harmed him not a whit.<sup>21</sup>

The invocation of demons to aid in the power of the poison is certainly an embellishment on John's trial with Aristodemus, and in this particular case it perhaps sheds more light on the logic of the trial as the pitting of two sources of miraculous power against each other than it does on medieval representations of pagan magic. It is clear that the invocation is meant to increase the efficacy of whatever substance is in the cup to begin with, but it is likewise clear that from George's perspective, it functions as a poison like any other. The sorcerer Athanasius makes good on his promise and converts to Christianity, and is promptly beheaded by a frustrated Dacian.

The Latin source used by Ælfric in his project of vernacular translation is most closely represented by the Cotton-Corpus Legendary (BL MS Cotton Nero E.i). In this text, there is no

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<sup>21</sup> Ælfric, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, trans. Walter Skeat, 313.

mention of any other substance in the cup. Ælfric renders the substance as “bealwe” (evil/deadly) and “cwealm-berum drence” (a death-bearing drink). In Ælfric’s Latin source material, the power of the chalice is entirely demonic—first, Athanasius “invocavit nomina demonum” (fol. 204v), and when this fails to achieve the desired effect, he simply “invocavit nomina demonum fortiorum.” Ælfric has placed a more literal poison into his translation of the trial. There is another strand of this manuscript family predating the Cotton-Corpus Legendary, represented by St. Gallen Stiftsbibliothek MS Cod. Sang. 550 from the ninth century, which is yet more specific about the actual mechanics: although only poisoned once, in this version, the poison quite specifically comes from “venenum aspidum.” I do not suggest that Ælfric was aware of this other manuscript tradition; rather, I suggest that having recognized the Johannine pattern and finding the narrative of George acceptable as a consequence of that recognition, Ælfric brought George’s trial still closer into line with that precedent.

One final data point in the hagiography of George supports the idea that there is a gravitation towards a more explicit poison trial in the George tradition. This point does not pertain to Ælfric’s influences and the subsequent uses in monastic hagiography, as such, but reinforces the general trend of the codification of poison trial narratives. By the time that George is incorporated into the vast hagiographical project of the *Legenda Aurea*, his passion narrative has merged with the tale of the dragon and the princess not well-known in England until at least the twelfth century. George’s sufferings have been still more pared down compared to the earliest known variants, but the poison trial remains in its entirety, mostly as it was known to Ælfric:

Dacian, seeing that he was not able to overcome [George] with punishments, summoned a magician to him and said “The Christians make fun of our magical arts and torments, and slight the sacrifices to our gods.” Said the magician, “If his arts are not able to be overcome, I will be beheaded.” Thereupon he injected his sorcery by

means of invoking the names of his gods, and mixing poison into wine, he handed it to George to take. When, however, the man of God made the sign of the cross and drank he experienced no injury. In return, the magician mixed an even stronger poison than before, which the man of God with the sign of the cross drank in its entirety without any injury.<sup>22</sup>

A similar amendment is likewise present in Jacobus de Voragine's closest source material, the *Abbreviatio in Gestis et miraculis sanctorum* of Jean de Mailly. The *Abbreviatio* dispenses with the invocation of demonic names entirely, reporting simply one "calicem plenum veneno" and a second "calicem fortiori veneno repletum." Jacobus de Voragine, like Ælfric, seems to find the explicit inclusion of a *venenum* natural, perhaps not out of any doubt that a substance imbued with demonic power would be deadly, but to accord more closely with the language of the trials of Benedict and John.

The treatment of the poison trial in the life of Gregory of Cappadocia, both in the hands of Ælfric and in the subsequent tradition, demonstrates the self-authenticating function of the trial. In a text with an uncertainly orthodox genealogy, the presence of the trial serves to stabilize and legitimize the life of George, such that it survives a number of "taming" recensions and survives to be combined with the later, competing tradition of the dragon-fighting George. Recognition of the parallels with John gradually led to a migration of the language to follow the Johannine model yet more closely.

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<sup>22</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Maggioni (Florence: SISMEL Edizioni Del Galluzzo, 1998), 444. "Videns Dacianus quod eum penis superare non posset, quendam magum accersivit eique dixit: 'Christiani suis magicis artibus tormenta ludificant et deorum nostrorum sacrificia parvipendunt.' Cui magus 'Si artes eius superare nequivero, capitis reus ero.' Ipse igitur maleficiis suis iniectis et deorum suorum nominibus invocatis venenum vino immiscuit et sancto Georgio sumendum porrexit. Contra quod vir dei signum crucis edidit haustoque eo nihil laesionis sensit. Rursum magus priore fortius venenum immiscuit, quod vir dei signo crucis edito sine laesione aliqua totum bibit. Quo viso magus statim ad pedes eius cecidit, veniam lamentabiliter petiit et se christianum fieri postulavit: quem mox iudex decollari fecit."

#### **4.v. Poison trials applied to external problems: Samson of Dol and Æthelwold of Winchester**

Self-authentication in the face of an uncertain orthodoxy is the first of the two adjudicating functions of the trial in the later period; the second, to which I now turn, is the use of a poison trial to weigh not the sanctity of an individual, but to use that sanctity as the medium through which to resolve some external contest involving two plausible claims to truth. In both the life of Samson of Dol, monk of Brittany, and the life of Æthelwold of Winchester, reforming monk-bishop, the poison trial is used to settle problems or otherwise justify decisions with social and political repercussions.

##### **4.v.a. Samson of Dol**

The anonymous life of Samson of Dol demonstrates how the poison trial can be adapted to adjudicate peripheral conflicts. Of the two poison trials encountered by Samson in the Gregorian style, one is a clear extension of the logic of adjudication that extends beyond competing ideas of holiness and virtue to encompass political contests and intrigue. The exact chronology and context of the life of Samson of Dol, monastic founder and early witness to the development of connections between Cornwall and Brittany, is hard to pin down. An early historiographic and paleographic tradition places it in the early seventh century, while the other extreme in the potential date range places it in the ninth century as part of a dispute over the independence of Dol as a bishopric from that of Tours.<sup>23</sup> Its chronological relationship to the

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Fawtier, *La vie de S. Samson. Essai de critique hagiographique*, Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études (Paris: Champion, 1912) is a proponent of the later Carolingian context; other editors Duine, Mabillon, and Taylor prefer a significantly earlier seventh-century placement. Ian Wood prefers a middle ground of the late seventh to early eighth century in "Forgery in Merovingian Hagiography," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter*, Monumenta Germanica Historica Schriften 33, (Munich, 1988) 5:369-84. For the debate on the dating see also Joseph-Claude Poulin, "La Circulation de l'information dans la Vie ancienne de s. Samson de Dol et la question de sa datation" in *St. Samson of Dol and the Earliest History*



seventh-century *Life of Patrick* is less interesting than the difference in the presentation of the poison trial represented within it, as the experience of Samson of Dol closely parallels that of Sabinus of Canosa and Benedict as presented in the *Dialogues* (see Chapter 2). The parallel is not exact; Samson is not yet either Bishop nor reforming abbot when his opponents attempt his death. Samson's victories, as cast through the poison trials, are nonetheless attempts to adjudicate opposing claims using the holy body of the saint. In this, there is a clear imprint of the poison as trial of discernment modeled by the *Dialogues*.

Samson, after a childhood heralded by miraculous and worthy doings, is accepted by his mentor St. Eltut into his monastery. His appointment as deacon is accompanied by the persistent apparition of a dove, and his insight into matters biblical make him a favorite of Eltut. At the same institution reside two of Eltut's nephews, one a priest, and the other a cellarer. The brothers, expecting through their familial ties to inherit the monastic foundation, form an envious dislike of Samson and plot to remove him from their path. As in John's trial, the poison is first tested on an unwitting bystander. As in Benedict's first trial in the *Dialogues*, the envy provoked by Samson's virtue results in a conspiracy of multiple parties against him. As in both Benedict and Sabinus' experience, the poison is administered in a subversive manner that takes advantage of the usual customs of the foundation:

It was a custom in the constitutions of this monastery to bruise herbs from the garden, such as were beneficial for the health, in a vessel and to serve it out in small quantities to the several brothers in their porringers by means of a small siphon for their health's sake, so that when they came in from saying terce they found the mixing vessel already prepared with garden herbs. Now the cellarer, having accepted the counsel of his wicked brother, mixed the vessel with poison for St. Samson along with its antidote, bruising a kind of lime tree that he might give it to him to drink. And that he might learn to what extent it was likely to prove fatal he gave a little of it to a cat in milk. And it came to pass that, when it drank it in milk, it gave a headlong spring and forthwith

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*of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales*, ed. Lynette Olson. *Studies in Celtic History* 37 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), 37-82.

was dead. Now when the cellarer saw this he was highly pleased, and doubted not that when St. Samson had drunk from this vessel he would straightway take his departure from this world.<sup>24</sup>

The cellarer has no need to sweeten a bitter chalice, since the deception here is that poisonous herbs have taken the place of customary ones, but the method of something life-destroying masquerading as something life-giving is consistent. Samson's ability to see through this kind of deception derives explicitly from privileged knowledge: "while St. Samson was at prayer, forthwith the Spirit of God revealed to him these things and the evil of late wrought against him." Armed with this knowledge, Samson knowingly consumes the poison—but here the logic of Mark 16 is explicitly cited and wielded against the danger contained in the vessel:

Nevertheless, trusting in the promise of the Lord, mindful of the word of the Gospel where Christ says concerning His faithful who trust in Him, "Of they shall drink," He says, "any deadly thing it shall not hurt them," and so on, he entered the refectory exceedingly glad, the more so because he was himself the steward of this monastery. And so, blessing the vessels for the brothers and making the sign of the cross on his own, without any wavering of mind he drank it dry and never felt even the slightest headache from it.<sup>25</sup>

The outcome of this trial is likewise familiar—one of the offenders suffers a demoniac possession and fits at the following day's Eucharist, and Samson is called upon to heal him. All of the monastic brothers acknowledge Samson's virtue and superiority, and the hidden desire of the cellarer and priest to inherit the monastery is acknowledged openly and disavowed.

The influence of the *Dialogues* is even more clear in Samson's second poison trial—like Benedict, he has two—which reads like a pastiche of Benedict and Sabinus' experiences of discernment. Here, however, the two competing claims to truth are political in nature and concern the proper settlement of rulership in Brittany. Samson is asked by suffering residents of

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<sup>24</sup> *Life of Samson of Dol*, trans. and ed. Thomas Taylor (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

the region to petition King Childebert to release lands denied to their rightful inheritor, who is being held captive. The queen coerces him into sharing food and drink with them, and prepares a poisoned chalice. The framing is not unlike that of Sabinus with Totila, but the sequence of events strongly evokes Benedict's first, most famous poison-related miracle of the offending glass that shatters with the sign of the cross:

Then St. Samson, not with a ready will but for convention's sake, consented to partake of food with them; but the wicked queen, at the devil's bidding, caused them to mix poison in the glass for him and ordered it to be carried by her servant to St. Samson as he sat near the king. And so, as the king received his own cup and St. Samson made the sign of the cross upon it, the servant brought before him the glass with the poison intended for him; then he, surely inspired by God, having placed the sign of the cross on the hand of him who held it, split the glass wherein was the evil thing into four parts and, spilling the wine over the cup-bearer's hand, crashing cut it to the bone, while many looked on. St. Samson, however, as if in a very friendly manner, said, "It is not meet that a man should drink this cup." And when he had made the accustomed sign on the wounded man's hand he was made whole in the presence of them all.<sup>26</sup>

The king is impressed by this display of virtue and is inclined to accede to Samson's demands, but the queen places two further trials on the body of the saint—one involving an unbroken horse, which Samson rides without problems, and one involving a rampaging lion, which falls dead at his feet. Samson's political point is carried and the imprisoned heir is released from captivity and restored to his lands.<sup>27</sup>

Given Samson's previously established ability to drink poison in the manner of Mark 16, and in the context of the trilogy of miracles placing the saint's body in danger, the point of the second poison trial is perhaps to create an explicit parallel to Benedict, lending more credibility to Samson's future career as founder of monasteries. In the immediate context, however, the poison trial is clearly adapted to an adjudication of political claims—Samson is functioning as a

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<sup>26</sup> *Life of Samson of Dol*, trans. and ed. Taylor, 55.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-58.

proxy for the claims of the disinherited son to his own lands, and his discernment and the miraculous neutralization of the danger convinces all but the queen, who forces Samson to demonstrate his virtue twice more in a manner that secures him future political benefits, in the form of privileges and grants of land, from the impressed king.

Samson of Dol is thus instructive in two ways. His experiences demonstrate an early and obvious adaptation of the precedent established by Benedict/Sabinus, and an early correlation of the saintly poison trial with the text of Mark 16. His experiences also demonstrate an extension of the logic of the trial to a contest not limited to a question of saintly virtue or religious competition, but in which the competing truths are overtly political claims.

#### **4.v.b. Æthelwold of Winchester**

Another example of the trope employed to adjudicate an issue beyond the bounds of individual sainthood comes from the tenth-century context of the English Benedictine reform, and is used to justify the outcome of a competition between secular clergy and monks in the sphere of Winchester Cathedral. The *vita* of Saint Æthelwold exists in two very closely related forms from the late tenth century, composed by two of Æthelwold's own pupils, Wulfstan and the now-familiar Ælfric. The two texts are close enough for one to be an expansion or abbreviation of the other, and their probable chronological spread is less than a decade; although debate about the exact relationship continues, editors Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom have convincingly argued for Wulfstan's prior authorship and have established 996 as the *terminus post quem*, which was the year of the translation of the body of the saint.<sup>28</sup> I

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<sup>28</sup> Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St Æthelwold*, eds. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991): xiii.

follow their lead in primarily treating Wulfstan's *vita*, but the argument will not suffer for the substitution of Ælfric, since the poison trial appears in near-identical form in each.

Although Æthelwold's poison trial owes a lot to the Gregorian model, Wulfstan is not simply invoking the precedent of a hagiographical heavyweight. He is campaigning for the legitimacy of one of the primary actions of the reform movement in tenth-century Benedictine circles—the widening of the sphere of monastic activity and privileging of monks, even in non-monastic arenas like cathedrals, at the expense of the secular clergy. The conflict is simultaneously a theological controversy over issues including clerical celibacy and simony and a political controversy over issues of land tenure and royal patronage. The elements of the trial participate both in the established tradition of the trope, pertaining to the physical body of the saint and his sanctity, and demonstrate how the trial is simultaneously used in a more complicated project of adjudication.

Taken out of the broader context, Æthelwold's poison trial itself can certainly be broken down into components that fit amongst the emerging taxonomy of precedent cases. Like Samson, Benedict and Sabinus, he is poisoned in the context of a meal; like Samson's hagiographer, Wulfstan invokes the text of Mark 16 explicitly to explain the mechanics of the trial. Like all of his antecedents, Æthelwold's holy body is vindicated by his victory over the poison:

It was Aethewold's custom, after eating three or four morsels, at once to drink a little. On this occasion he drank, quite unawares, all the poison brought to him in a goblet. His face instantly grew pale, and his innards underwent terrible torture as the poison took its toll. However, he managed with an effort to rise from the table and make his way to his bed. The poison crept through all his limbs, threatening immediate death. But he eventually took thought and began to reproach himself, saying to his heart: "Now where is your faith? Where are the thoughts of your understanding? Is not Christ's promise in the Gospel true and trustworthy: 'And if believers drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them'? He who spoke these words is surely here in his godhead, even if he is absent in the body. He without a doubt, he can rid you of this virulent poison, for he can always do all." The faith kindled by these and similar words overcame all the deadly draught he had taken. The pain caused by the raging of the

poison was banished, and he got up, departing to the hall with a cheerful face and showing absolutely no sign of pallor to those who looked at him.<sup>29</sup>

Treatment of this passage in the historiography either treats the attempted poisoning as a straightforward historical event,<sup>30</sup> or highlights imitation and continuity with other saintly poisonings; editor Michael Winterbottom finds the language reminiscent of that used by Sulpicius Severus in his life of St. Martin, when Martin accidentally ingests hellebore and feels the toxic effect on his insides.<sup>31</sup> The more obvious parallel with Benedict himself receives surprisingly little treatment, given Æthelwold's project of instituting something akin to the Rule of Benedict.

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<sup>29</sup> Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St Æthelwold*, eds. Lapidge and Winterbottom, 35: "Erat namque ei moris statim post tres aut quattuor offulas modicum quid bibere; bibitque nesciens adportatum sibi venenum totum quod erat in calice, et statim in pallorem facies eius inmutata est et viscera illius nimium vi grassantis veneni cruciabantur. Surrexit autem vix a mensa exiens ad lectulum, serpsitque venenum per omnia membra eius, iam instantem minitans sibi mortem. At ille tandem recogitans coeptis exprobrare semet ipsum, dixit ad animum suum: 'Ubi est modo fides tua? Ubi sunt cogitationes sensus tui? Nonne verba Christi vera sunt et Fidelia, quibus in evangelio pollicetur dicens: "Et si mortiferum quid biberint credentes, non eis nocebit"?' Ipse procul dubio, ipse hoc veneni virus in te evacuare potest qui semper omnia potest. His et huiuscemodi verbis accensa fides in eo omnem letiferum haustum quem biberat extinxit, furentisque veneni dolore fugato surrexit, abiens ad aulam hilari vultu, nulla penitus signa palloris se intuentibus ostendens, nec quicquam mali suo venefico reddens sed ei quod deliquit ignoscens."

<sup>30</sup> Emblematic treatment by D. J. V. Fisher, "The Anti-Monastic Reaction in the Reign of Edward the Martyr," *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 10, no. 3 (1952): 264.

<sup>31</sup> Compare Sulpicius, "sed cum vim veneni in se grassantis vicina iam morte senisset, immense periculum oratione repulit statimque omnis dolor fugatus est" with Wulfstan, "in pallorem facies eius inmutata est et viscera illius nimium vi grassantis veneni cruciabantur." I personally see very little that could be called imitation here, other than the use of "grassor" to describe the internal spread of the toxin. In her 2007 dissertation on the utility of doubt in Anglo-Saxon hagiography, Sarah Joy Adams finds this attribution equally unsatisfying and makes the same argument I make here—Æthelwold's experience is meant as a broader justification not limited to imitation: "Wulfstan may have taken the idea of the saint surviving poison from Sulpicius Severus's *Life of St. Martin*, but he has expanded and shaped it to be not only a recognizably generic *imitatio*, but one which speaks directly to the controversies surrounding Æthelwold during his life." Sarah Joy Adams, "Wonder, Derision, and Fear: The Uses of Doubt in Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2007).

The differences of note are that Æthelwold's test is not, strictly speaking, a test of discernment—he does not know that the poison is present until he ingests it, and he consequently does not neutralize the threat with the sign of the cross before safely drinking. Rather than a test of interior vision, this is a test of active faith. Wulfstan emphasizes the genuine danger of Æthelwold's physical body, both through his physical suffering and through his visual pallor, which also serves as proof of his victory when his healthy color returns and can be externally verified. Æthelwold seemingly has both more vulnerability and more agency, in that meditation on the precepts of Mark 16 is presented as a means of actively neutralizing the poison that has been ingested, and holiness is thus a function of sufficiently demonstrated faith. These interesting variations make a slightly different case for holy virtue, but they still serve the function of vindicating holiness at the individual level.

The true utility of the poison trial in the life of Æthelwold is not simply imitation and reflected holiness. On a larger scale, the placement and broader context of Æthelwold's trial is performing a rather different kind of justification. At stake in Æthelwold's trial is the form of religious life in the sphere of Winchester, and the fundamental legitimacy of some of the financial aspects of the English Benedictine reform movement. Wulfstan's hagiographical project is one of reflecting on the legacy of the saint in a context of backlash against the changes wrought by that legacy, and the poison trial performs a very specific kind of legitimizing work in that context.

The political environment of Æthelwold's reforming work is thus crucial to the application of the poison trial in his hagiography, as is the context in which his hagiographer is making a case for the legitimacy of the reform. Often correlated with a parallel reformist movement on the continent intended to curb the practices of simony and clerical marriage, the

Benedictine reform movement in England, in particular, cannot be disentangled from a broader campaign to consolidate royal power and create political unification under the rulership of King Edgar.<sup>32</sup> The work of the three luminaries of the insular Benedictine reform of the tenth-century—Saints Æthelwold, Dunstan and Oswald—is thus fundamentally tied to the expansion of royal patronage and the endowment of lands and monasteries at the expense of existing landowners and secular clerics. The repercussions of this process can be seen in the anxious clarification of these privileges in cartulary collections (and the occasional forgery).<sup>33</sup> From a primordial institution at Glastonbury, under these three reformers the monastic expansion led to royally-endowed foundations at Abingdon, Ely, Peterborough, St. Albans, and others. The ordination of Æthelwold and Dunstan as bishops—and, ultimately, archbishops—led to the English phenomenon of the monk-bishop and a conflict between secular hierarchies and monastic hierarchies.<sup>34</sup>

Æthelwold’s monastic-episcopal endeavors centered around Winchester; after serving as the first abbot of the re-founded abbey of Abingdon, Æthelwold was consecrated as the bishop of

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<sup>32</sup> See in particular Martin Ryan, “Conquest, Reform and the Making of England,” in *The Anglo-Saxon World*, eds. Nicholas Higham and Martin Ryan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 284-322; Rebecca Stephenson, *The Politics of Language: Byrhtferth, Ælfric, and the Multilingual Identity of the Benedictine Reform*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). Especially illuminating is Stephenson’s introduction, “The Literary Context of the Benedictine Reform.” Foundational to this field is Eric John, “The King And The Monks In The Tenth-century Reformation,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 42, no. 1 (1959): 61-87.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Keynes, “Church Councils, Royal Assemblies, and Royal Diplomas” in *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, eds. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Brian W. Schneider (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 17-185. Discussion of Abingdon and Winchester’s privileges begins on p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> There has been some debate about how to categorize this conflict in its various stages, and whether or not one can speak of a true “anti-monastic reaction,” as such, or whether regional political factionalization in the succession crisis following the death of Edgar can primarily explain actions taken against monasteries. On this, see in particular Fisher, “The Anti-Monastic Reaction,” 254-270 and Shashi Jayakumar, “Reform and retribution: the ‘anti-monastic reaction’ in the reign of Edward the Martyr” in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, eds. Stephen Baxter, Catherine Karkov, Janet L. Nelson, David Pelteret (London: Routledge, 2009): 337-352.



Winchester with the direct support of his former pupil King Edgar. Having successfully implemented a strict monastic observance at Abingdon, modelled on the Benedictine observances at Fleury, Æthelwold turned to the reform of the sphere of Winchester, and sought to elevate the religious life of the cathedral to the austere heights of his monastic foundation. Æthelwold offered the resident clerics the choice of departure or remaining, but in a monk's habit. With either choice, they would yield their incomes and private homes in the close to the communal holdings, thus massively shifting the economic incentives and making independent family living impossible. He repeats the process at the New Minster, and the episcopal sphere is thus entirely populated by monks he has trained at Abingdon—and likewise do they have fiscal control over the environs.

Wulfstan takes great care with the legitimization of this process in Æthelwold's life, validating the expulsion with three primary strategies: royal authority, a divine sign, and most importantly by virtue of placement and elaboration, a poison trial. That Æthelwold is acting with King Edgar's full support is re-iterated twice in close succession—Wulfstan notes first that the project is undertaken “with the permission of King Edgar” (“data licentia a rege Eadgaro”), and then elaborates that “The king also sent with the bishop one of his agents...who used the royal authority to order the canons to choose [to leave or stay as monks].”<sup>35</sup> This proxy authority is the royal presence at a distance, and the legitimacy of the endeavor is undergirded by this source of approval. That God, too, signs off on the project of improved monastic discipline is clear from a divine sign, reported immediately after Wulfstan has laid the groundwork of royal dispensation. As the monks from Abingdon approach, they hear the secular clerics speaking the words from

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<sup>35</sup> The agent in question is Wulfstan of Dalham, well-known from contemporary charters. See Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St Æthelwold*, eds. Lapidge and Winterbottom, 32 n. 2.

Psalm 2: 11-12: “Serve ye the lord with fear, and rejoice unto him with trembling. Embrace discipline, lest at any time the Lord be angry, and you perish from the just way.” This serves as a clear sign that “their journey had been speeded by the Lord and that it was God’s will that this psalm had been sung.”<sup>36</sup> Wulfstan even suggests that the psalm was an acknowledgement that the secular clerks had lost any desire to serve God. Both strategies of justification are employed before Wulfstan describes the actual expulsion of any individual from the Old Minster.

The expulsions of the secular clergy from Winchester occurred in 964. Wulfstan composed his *vita* in the 990s. In the intervening period, a number of important crises occurred to reshape the legacy of Edgar’s royal patronage of the Benedictine project. The first, the death of Edgar in 975 and the resulting succession crisis, threw the redistribution of lands and properties into monastic hands into question. Those disadvantaged by the gifts made to monastic and episcopal foundations sued for their restitution and according to some sources, the secular clerics made some attempt to recover their positions and privileges.<sup>37</sup> In the *vita* of Æthelwold’s fellow reformer Oswald, hagiographer Byrhtferth of Ramsey claims that the death of Edgar had ripple effects across both religious and secular life but was a great opportunity for one group in particular: “The great king died on 8 July [975]; at his death the commonwealth of the entire realm was shaken: bishops were perplexed, ealdormen were angry, monks were struck with fear, the people were terrified, and the secular clerics were made happy, because their time had come.”<sup>38</sup> There is some evidence that reversals occurred to restore secular clerics and ealdormen alike to their positions and property; there is likewise evidence that the Benedictine

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<sup>36</sup> Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St Æthelwold*, eds. Lapidge and Winterbottom, 31-33.

<sup>37</sup> Shashi Jayakumar, “Reform and retribution,” 340-45.

<sup>38</sup> Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgbwine*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122.

establishments supported by Edgar became specific targets during the political factionalism that followed his death.<sup>39</sup> The royal-monastic alliance was significantly undermined, a reality reflected in monastic chronicles by a certain anxiety to have endowments and privileges codified and a by a growing distrust of the stability of royal patronage.<sup>40</sup>

The post-Edgar backlash against Benedictine foundations, such as it was, was most strongly felt in regions north of Winchester,<sup>41</sup> and there is no evidence provided by Wulfstan that the conflict was felt in the Old or New Minster, or even by Abingdon. While Æthelwold lived, no secular clerics were reinstated nor monks expelled. The second crisis moment thus arrived in 984 with the death of Æthelwold. The royal succession crisis was resolved with the accession of the youthful Æthelred; once Æthelwold died, Æthelred followed a policy of retaining for his own use properties that had been granted by his father to Abingdon and Winchester.<sup>42</sup> According to the *Abingdon Chronicle*, “Æthelred, when he received the power of governing and commanding, committed himself to the advice of vicious men and did many things for pleasure. Up to this point, he was unsafe to the church of Abingdon because of the advice of vicious men. Whatever his father had devoutly conferred upon Abingdon from his own demesne possessions, Æthelred

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<sup>39</sup> Fisher, “The Anti-Monastic Reaction,” 255.

<sup>40</sup> “Evidence of this new anxiety concerning the limits of royal protection survives in the sequence of post-975 lawsuit records preserved in the *Libellus Æthelwoldi episcopi* and the *Liber Eliensis*. In these records, the king’s death signals not just a corrosion of civil governance generally but also a deterioration of legal protection for monastic establishments in particular.” Andrew Rabin, “Holy Bodies, Legal Matters: Reaction and Reform in Ælfric’s ‘Eugenia’ and the Ely Privilege,” *Studies in Philology* 110, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 229.

<sup>41</sup> Jayakumar, “Reform and retribution,” 340-342.

<sup>42</sup> The relationship between Æthelred, his advisors, and the monastic foundations changed dramatically multiple times: “upon the death of Æthelwold in 984, Æthelred took the reins of power himself and actively distanced himself from the policies of this ‘regency’... Æthelred and his advisors followed a policy of despoiling religious houses, particularly houses associated with Æthelwold and the Benedictine reform movement, including the Old Minster Winchester, Abingdon, Glastonbury and Rochester.” Levi Roach, “Penitential Discourse in the Diplomas of King Æthelred ‘the Unready,’” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 64, no. 2 (2013): 258–76.

irreverently restored to his [own] rights.”<sup>43</sup> The *Chronicle* notes a number of problems stemming from this degradation of the royal-monastic relationship, not least the suspension of the right to elect their own abbot, resulting in the installation of the brother of a royal advisor as abbot. As a result of this abbot’s actions, many goods of the monastery were lost and its reputation suffered.<sup>44</sup>

The situation at Abingdon and Winchester had been somewhat recovered by 996 when Wulfstan wrote his *vita*. Æthelred had undergone a change of heart around 994 and restored lands to Abingdon and Winchester: “he acknowledged that he had erred gravely in taking back these things. Then he provided that the church’s possessions which to this point had been held back would be restored by condign payment.”<sup>45</sup> The *Abingdon Chronicle* includes a particular detail that implies that there had been some backsliding in terms of simoniacal practices—there is insufficient detail to suggest the complete resurgence of secular clergy, but the text does emphasize that Æthelred’s restitution included “a charter of liberty... in which he interdicted with perpetual anathema every simoniacal follower to be found around this place.”<sup>46</sup> In the immediate context of Wulfstan’s authorship of the *vita*, then, Abingdon and Winchester were just emerging from a period of turmoil and relative economic precarity stemming from an unstable relationship with royal authority, in which the fault lines ran between reformed institutions and aristocratic and well-connected individuals, including secular clerics.

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<sup>43</sup> trans. Darryl Dean James, “A Translation and Study of the ‘Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon’” (PhD diss., Rice University, 1986), 183.

<sup>44</sup> “In quo distrahitur rerum abbatiae copia, tepescit de intus ac de foris praedicandae gratiae fama.” *Historia Monasterii de Abingdon*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 357.

<sup>45</sup> James, “A Translation and Study of the ‘Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon,’” 183.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

This dissolution of the bonds between royal protection and monastic holdings meant that Wulfstan, in the 990s, needed some other more durable justification than historical precedent and the authority of King Edgar to justify the wholesale restructuring undertaken by Æthelwold back in the 960s. Such uncertain grounds—with two plausible correct courses of action—constitute exactly the problem that the poison trial is used to confront. That Æthelwold’s trial is meant to function in this manner is clear from its length, placement and framing. Of the three justificatory strategies (royal authority, divine sign and poison trial), the trial is the longest and the most detailed. The placement, too, is suggestive. In Wulfstan’s account, Æthelwold’s poison trial occurs directly between the two separate expulsions and functions as the logical bridge between them. Only after Æthelwold has survived his ordeal, and after his campaign for monastic discipline has been endorsed via this meaning-laden miracle, does he continue his campaign with the Winchester New Minster.

Wulfstan frames the contest such that the stakes are not explicitly about fiscal or political privileges, but about virtue and manner of living, particularly that of the secular clerics. The scandalous behavior of the secular clergy in the literature of this period is described in a fairly stereotypical, manner—but as the reforming monks are the primary source of this writing, it is perhaps not surprising.<sup>47</sup> Certainly at stake in the conflict at Winchester are two particular practices—clerical celibacy and simony—from which any number of real and imagined vices might spring. Wulfstan castigates the secular canons of Winchester as total reprobates “involved in wicked and scandalous behavior, victims of pride, insolence, and riotous living to such a degree that some of them did not think fit to celebrate mass in the proper order. They married

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<sup>47</sup> See Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 94-95.

wives illicitly, repudiated them, and took others; they were constantly given to gluttony and drunkenness.”<sup>48</sup> Once Æthelwold has replaced the secular clerics of the Old Minster with monks, the clerics are out for revenge of a specific kind:

Later, after the brethren had begun to observe the rule of regular life in the Old Minister, and many flocked there to serve God, old men who had been professed, novices, and child oblates, the envy of the clerics caused the bishop to be given poison to drink when he was dining with guests in his own hall and showing them every kindness. The clerics intended, upon his death, to drive away the servants of God and regroup to form a new assembly, free to indulge their former shameful practices.<sup>49</sup>

The “envy” of the clerics is professed as a motive, reminiscent of Benedict’s experience with the envious priest Florentius in the *Dialogues*, but it is clear from the overall framing that the cases are not exactly parallel. In both cases, the point of contention is manner of living (reformed or licentious), but Benedict’s opponent was specifically envious of the praise accrued to Benedict’s virtue, and wished to have credit for virtue without having to live in a similar manner (“conversacionis illius habere appetebat laudem, sed habere laudabilem vitam nolebat”<sup>50</sup>). In Æthelwold’s case, there is a similar suggestion of clerical resentment, but the cause is not envy of personal virtue, but envy of situation. The true stakes are the practices of individuals living in the sphere of Winchester—should they be followers of the reformed monastic rule, or allowed to continue living in private houses near the Minster, with families and personal property?

Æthelwold survives his poisoning experience, as described above, and the plan is foiled. The impact of this is that the expelled canons are denied their prebends and their attempt to reassemble, ever: “By God’s miraculous power, the evil plan of the clerics was brought to naught; they saw their wickedness had no effect, and they were scattered through the different

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<sup>48</sup> Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of St Æthelwold*, trans. and ed. Lapidge and Winterbottom, 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, 160.

provinces of England till the end of their lives.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, in Wulfstan’s explicit framing, the contest of style of living has been adjudicated in Æthelwold’s favor. Only now, vindicated, does Æthelwold continue with his campaign and replace the secular clergy of the New Minster with Abingdon monks: “the eagle of Christ spread his golden wings, and with permission of King Edgar drove the canons from the New Minster, introducing there monks living according to the Rule.” Emphasis, once more, is on royal permission and style of living, but it is clear that the primary engine of justification here is the outcome of Æthelwold’s trial. On a broader scale, the trial also enables the campaign of land redistribution and the granting of privileges to the Benedictine reform institutions to continue, as immediately after, Wulfstan describes the granting of 600 additional hides (somewhere between 36,000 and 72,000 acres) of property to Abingdon, an elaborate document “sealed with gold leaves.”

The poison trial of Æthelwold, then, functions on multiple registers, both as imitation and justification of the saint as an individual, and as justification for a broader economic and political campaign that had introduced significant turmoil to the reformed institutions in the intervening years. Wulfstan employs multiple strategies of authentication, including repeated invocations of royal authority and divine signs, but ultimately the poison trial performs the most authenticating work, functioning as a fulcrum around which the continued expulsions of secular clerics hang in the balance.

The legitimizing work of the poison trial in these contexts thus expands beyond the individual virtue of the saint, either by sanctioning a fraught hagiographical tradition, or through the application of the poison trial to political conflicts external to individuals and their holiness.

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<sup>51</sup> Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of St Æthelwold*, trans. and ed. Lapidge and Winterbottom, 35.

#### **4.vi. Spider-Drinking Saints**

A final grouping of variations is that comprised of stories of holy figures consuming a venomous creature as part of the Eucharist. I believe these narratives both belong firmly within the tradition of other poison trials, and that they demonstrate sufficiently important innovations to form their own sub-trope. These accounts have a number of things in common: they uniformly appear in hagiographies from monastic communities; they involve the ingesting of a spider or other creature feared as poisonous; the act of consumption occurs invariably in the context of a Mass, such that the drinking of the consecrated (but contaminated) Eucharist is understood as an imperative; the subject of the trial survives and the poisonous creature emerges intact from their bodies to be witnessed by others. I think it is significant, in light of the authenticating work done by the poison trial in other contexts, that founding members of new monastic orders are particularly likely to encounter something unpleasant in the communion wine. Beyond such structural similarities, however, lies a variety of purposes and imputed lessons.

Perhaps the most important distinction between this form of the trial and those explored in the previous chapter is in the means of poisoning—both in terms of the physical agent, and what that implies for agency. The introduction of the poisonous creature shapes the trial into a public demonstration rather than an uncovering of hidden evil— something more in the mold of John than Benedict, with the Gregorian overtones of discernment as a marker of holiness stripped back in favor of other virtues to be highlighted. Likewise, poisonous creatures enter the chalices by chance, rather than by malice, thus removing a direct confrontation with an explicit opponent. Both of these important differences offer hagiographers a different vocabulary in which to express more communal experiences and emphasize other holy characteristics.



Despite these crucial differences, it is clear that these miracles are intended to be understood in the tradition of other holy poison-drinkers. This is signaled by citation of the Mark text as a means of explaining both the miracle and its import. For instance, in the twelfth-century *Tripartite Life of Robert of La Chaise-Dieu*, hagiographer Bernard of La Chaise-Dieu relates the experience of not Robert himself, but of another Bernard, described as “a brother of great simplicity and purity.”<sup>52</sup>

One day when he had celebrated Mass, a spider fell into the chalice of the Lord’s Blood. When he saw that, he didn’t know what counsel to follow, where to turn, or what to do. So he drank it all, and by God’s doing he felt no bad effects from it afterwards. When some days had passed, his blood was let. Those who watched saw that the spider came out of his arm with the blood. Because he loved Christ, because he believed Christ’s words, even though he drank something deadly, it could not hurt him.<sup>53</sup>

This experience has all the hallmarks of the genre—confronted with what is presented as a genuine dilemma that causes confusion and distress, the trust and faith of the celebrant is rewarded when the spider is eventually removed, in this case with the intervention of blood-letting that thematically echoes the eucharistic sacrifice. Members of the monastic community serve as witnesses, turning this into a communal experience of verification. In this instance, Bernard’s love of Christ and faith in His precepts is explicitly cited as the explanation for this miracle, with an abbreviated reference to the Mark text. Bernard’s other miracle recorded in the *Tripartite Life* immediately precedes his experience with the spider in the Blood, and likewise describes a eucharistic miracle. An unnamed celebrant has somehow misplaced the consecrated

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<sup>52</sup> *The Tripartite life of Robert of La Chaise-Dieu* 1.3. Robert himself does have something of a poison trial in the first book—he is able to sense that some eels being sold to the brothers are not fit for human consumption. This indicates to me that Bernard (the hagiographer) is steeped in traditions about the virtues of poison-discernment. *The Lives of Monastic Reformers 2: Abbot Vitalis of Savigny, Abbot Godfrey of Savigny, Peter of Avranches, and Blessed Hamo*, ed. and trans. Maureen M. O’Brien and Ronald Pepin (United States: Liturgical Press, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> *Tripartite life of Robert of La Chaise-Dieu* 3.14, ed. and trans. O’Brien and Pepin.

Host from the altar. Bernard, praying with clasped hands, discovers the Host in his entwined fingers. The pairing of eucharistic miracles is striking—one with the Body, and one with the Blood. Bernard’s simplicity and faith are rewarded by first being chosen as the one to reveal the re-discovered Host, and secondly by protection from contamination in the Blood.

This eucharistic context and the fact that the spider miracles are often part of a series of related miracles informs how they have been read in the scholarship—as above all else eucharistic miracles, in a vast tradition of miracles around this central act of Christian worship. I see immense value in this interpretation, but does not encompass the full range of meaning of such narratives. The spider miracles fit, to some extent, the second entry of Miri Rubin’s taxonomy of eucharistic miracles (“Some unusual behavior of natural elements, animals and humans, arising from awe of the Eucharist or from sheer proximity to it”<sup>54</sup>), although generally in such exempla it is the reverence of the elements or animal that serves as the foil for insufficient human devotion. The spider in the chalice is not performing this particular function, but rather providing a kind of villain for the Eucharist to vanquish.

Helen Birkett, in her study of hagiographer Jocelin of Furness, reads such miracles as having two separate purposes—first, “a basic didactic purpose,” to provide directions in the case of the wholly “practical problem of what to do if the sacrament becomes polluted.”<sup>55</sup> This interpretation reads the miracles as reflecting plausible scenarios in which poisonous creatures frequently find their way into consecrated chalices. Fear and uncertainty are common elements of the way holy figures react. Bernard of La Chaise-Dieu confronted his with a certain amount of

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<sup>54</sup> Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>55</sup> Helen Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives of Jocelin of Furness: Hagiography, Patronage and Ecclesiastical Politics*. (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2010), 261.

uncertainty (“he didn’t know what counsel to follow, where to turn, or what to do”)—but it does not follow from this that such hagiographical vignettes are intended to be primarily pragmatically instructive. Bernard’s uncertainty rather serves the purpose of highlighting his faith in Christ and the precepts of Mark 16—his despair and confusion mark the stakes of his choice, but do not necessarily indicate some dearth of instruction of what to do with a polluted Eucharist. Collections of canon law from Burchard of Worms in the tenth-century to Gratian’s *Decretal* detailed many such directions.<sup>56</sup> A priest who let a mouse nibble on the reserved sacrament had to do penance—he was not required to eat the mouse. Hagiographies surely have an instructive purpose, but it is hard to read them primarily as vehicles for communicating practical solutions to such problems—and indeed, when Gerald of Wales explicitly treats the problem of “what to do when a fly or spider falls into the consecrated wine,” he cites Peter Comestor as instructing the priest *not* to consume the chalice, so as not to commit the sin of pride in thus requiring a miracle of God. Peter Comestor instead counsels disposing of the tainted vessel in the *piscina*, the drain near the altar used to dispose of superfluous liturgical materials with proper reverence, and re-consecrating the chalice.<sup>57</sup>

Birkett’s second imputed purpose is that of upholding orthodoxy in the context of twelfth-century “disagreements over the nature and validity of the sacraments.”<sup>58</sup> She observes that eucharistic miracles increase in frequency in this period, particularly in Cistercian contexts

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<sup>56</sup> See Ian Levy, “The Eucharist and Canon Law in the High Middle Ages” in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, eds. Levy, Ian Christopher, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 399.

<sup>57</sup> “Et recte quidem videtur in tali casu sumendum non esse; dum enim habet homo quod aliud facere possit per humanum consilium, non debet se ex toto committere Deo; quia hoc est Deum temptare. Ipse autem potest vermem tollere, non ergo videtur totum haurire debere.” *Gemma Ecclesiastica* XLV, J.S. Brewer, ed., *Giraldi Cambrensis opera* II (London: Longman 1862), 122.

<sup>58</sup> Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives of Jocelin of Furness*, 260.

like that of Jocelin of Furness, in which both the consequences of the great scholastic debates about the nature of transubstantiation, and the need to confront heretics denying the real presence, prompted a need for collections of instructive tales from which to preach and teach. Such miracles, then, “not only attested to the holiness of the text’s protagonist but, through expounding the properties of the consecrated host, upheld orthodox doctrine.” The evidentiary logic here seems somewhat inverted—a relatively minor miracle serving to validate the fundamental mystery of a sacrament—but the application is in keeping with other iterations of the poison trial, in which a contested item of belief or disagreement can be adjudicated by the removal of the pollutant. Jocelin himself explicitly declares his purpose to be “to confound the detestable error of heretics who deny the mystery of the Lord’s Body and Blood.”<sup>59</sup>

To Birkett’s example, I add Vitalis of Savigny (c.1060-1122), preacher and founder of Savigny Abbey and its eponymous monastic order. Vitalis’ experience follows the general trend (his spider emerges from his foot in front of a crowd of people to whom he is preaching, to the amazement of all) but in addition, hagiographer Stephen of Fougères, elaborates on the power of the Eucharist to overcome poison. Vitalis shows less overt distress and confusion over his plight than Bernard of La Chaise-Dieu, but still exhibits a fundamental helplessness: “One day when he stood at the sacred altar during the sacred mysteries, withdrawn from human gaze, a spider slipped down into the sacred chalice... He was not able to drive it away; a human hand could not help.”<sup>60</sup> Again, although not explicitly stated, Mark 16 seems to lurk behind the text, as, “armed with faith, he received it with the most holy sacrament and suffered nothing grim from it.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives of Jocelin of Furness*, 262.

<sup>60</sup> “The Life of Blessed Vitalis of Savigny,” trans. Sauvage, in *Abbot Vitalis of Savigny, Abbot Godfrey of Savigny, Peter of Avranches, and Blessed Hamo*, eds. Hugh Feiss, Maureen M. O’Brien, Ronald E. Pepin, and E. P. Sauvage (Collegeville, Minnesota: Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press, 2014), 76.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Stephen of Fougères then directly correlates the outcome to faith in the doctrine of the real presence: “Because he believed that he was truly receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, he trusted, not without reason, that such a great mystery could also overcome every poison.”<sup>62</sup>

Vitalis’ saintly powers seem almost incidental to the process. “Perhaps this happened to show Vitalis’ virtue,” Stephen suggests, likewise downplaying any amazement at Vitalis’ chosen course of action (“and what wonder [that he drank it]?”) in favor of the power of the Eucharist to overwhelm evil.

It is clear that these two cases speak directly to the salience of contemporary conversations about the exact nature of the Eucharist, and adapt the poison trial to focus attention on the power of the Blood of Christ. However, to say that the poison trial in this iteration *only* demonstrates the power of the sacraments is akin to reducing John or Benedict’s experience to the power of the sign of the cross—necessary, but insufficient to encompass the entirety of the multilayered edifice of meaning encoded in their experiences. In what follows, I offer a few more avenues of meaning for this variation of the poison trial, including the authentication of some contested or ambiguous aspect of a saint’s authority, and sanctity by proxy, in which some lesser member of a monastic foundation performs the miracle, thus rebounding glory on the whole foundation, and not just its holy focus.

#### **4.vi.a. Adjudication and vindication**

The first is a familiar use—the resolution of a contested claim or theological position, such that the placement of the trial in the hagiography serves to adjudicate ambiguity and vindicate the subject. In this sense, it has most in common with poison trials like that of

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<sup>62</sup> “The Life of Blessed Vitalis of Savigny,” trans. Sauvage, 76.

Æthelwold, discussed in a previous chapter. This example comes from the life of Norbert of Xanten, founder of the order of Premonstratensians, from the twelfth-century version of his *vita* known as the *Vita Norberti B*.<sup>63</sup> Norbert, itinerant preacher-reformer, founder of Augustinian communities and promoter of the *vita apostolica*, created sufficient resentment from the clerical institutions of northern France that he was denounced in 1118 at the Council of Fritzlar for the extreme nature of his preaching.<sup>64</sup> This resentment is part of a broader context of change in monastic living and the proliferation of new orders and eremitic movements in the twelfth century,<sup>65</sup> and the uncertainty wrought by individuals claiming preaching vocations, rejecting traditional monastic and secular clerical roles, inflaming the laity with a reformist fervor and collecting significant followings. Some, like Norbert, were supported in their activities—Norbert eventually returned to the established orders of the priesthood as an archbishop; others attracted calumny and were condemned as heretics. The line between the two was sufficiently fraught as to invite the use of familiar language of hypocrisy and false-seeming.

This is the context that informs the framing of Norbert's encounter with his spider in the *Vita B*. Norbert's preaching, according to the life, begins right after he has been ordained. Norbert has convinced the Archbishop of Cologne to ordain him deacon and priest simultaneously, and has spent a symbolic forty days at a monastery near Siegburg before returning to be a secular canon. In his first celebration of the Mass, Norbert takes the opportunity

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<sup>63</sup> For dating and provenance of *B* with relation to a presumably earlier *A*, see Theodore J. Antry and Carol Neel, ed. *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality*, ed. (United States: Paulist Press, 2007), 121-125. On the subject of Norbert and his preaching, see Donald Prudlo, *The Origin, Development, and Refinement of Medieval Religious Mendicancies* (Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 11-14.

<sup>64</sup> Carol Neel, "The Premonstratensian Project" in *A Companion to Medieval Rules and Customaries*, ed. Krijn Pansters (Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 195-198.

<sup>65</sup> Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism: A Study of Religious Communities in Western Europe, 1000-1150* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

to chastise his fellows for chasing “fleeting glory, blind ambition, transitory riches, momentary delight, uncertain security, vain joys [and] false prosperities.”<sup>66</sup> In the chapter house he confronts the dean to redress a general lack of discipline; when this fails to produce the desired crackdown, Norbert takes his fellows to task directly, “indicating each one by name, and declaring what, where, at what hour and with whom each man did or said what was not permitted.”<sup>67</sup> The collective response to this treatment is dismissive anger (and one of his fellow clerics spits on him). This lack of confidence and support, and particularly a clear lack of support for this style of preaching, sets up Norbert’s vindication. Although the angered brothers are not motivated to try to murder Norbert à la Benedict, the conflict assembles a fundamental opposition in need of resolution—is Norbert’s style of preaching valid?

That Norbert’s spider should be read as a poison trial and not primarily as a eucharistic miracle is evident from his hagiographer’s introduction of the miracle: “The Man of God Norbert, as mentioned above, was put to the test and through one incident found worthy in all areas.”<sup>68</sup> The terminology (“test”/ “found worthy”) is unusually explicit and indicates a self-awareness about the adaptation of poison trials into this form. The encounter itself follows established lines:

Sometime later he was wearing himself out by severe fasting and abstinence, pushing himself day and night with vigils and prayer. While he was celebrating Mass as customary in a certain crypt, a spider fell into the already consecrated chalice. When the priest saw it he was shocked. Life and death hovered before his eyes. The spider was large. What should the man do whose faith was now deeply rooted in the Lord? Lest the sacrifice suffer any loss, he chose rather to undergo the danger and consumed whatever was in the chalice.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Vita Norberti B: The Origins and Spread of the Premonstratensians*, trans. Theodore James Antry (De Pere, WI: St. Norbert Abbey, 1999), 10.

<sup>67</sup> *Vita Norberti B*, trans. Antry, 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

As in the case of Bernard above, Norbert's reaction to seeing the spider is one of confusion and fear. This, too, marks an interesting difference with earlier saintly poison-drinkers who drank with full awareness of the potential consequences—where George and John accept their poisons with perfect sangfroid, trusting in the efficacy of the cross and their faith, spider-drinkers broadcast doubt and fallibility, and the conviction that the choice to drink *could* conceivably result in painful death. The potential self-sacrifice is thus a conscious choice, a complete abnegation and surrender to the will of God. Although his faith is ultimately credited for the miracle, the primary virtue thus highlighted is respect for the consecrated chalice, at the price of assumed death: “When the sacrifice was finished he expected to die immediately. While he remained at his place before the altar he commended his awaited end to the Lord in prayer.” Norbert is immediately delivered from this fate, as, “when he was disturbed by an itching in his nose, he scratched it and suddenly he sneezed, expelling the whole spider.”<sup>70</sup> Sneezing as a method of expelling the contamination is, as far as I can tell, unique to Norbert, and perhaps speaks thematically to the thing which is in need of vindication—if Bernard's spider is used as a support of the holy Blood and was removed through bloodletting, there is a striking parallelism to Norbert's exuberant preaching being vindicated through the violent expelling of air.

Norbert's hagiographer credits two factors for this deliverance, which are his future importance as a preacher, and his demonstrated faith. The latter is clearly the basis of, and explanation for, the former: “Once again God did not want the death but the faith of his priest who he knew would be useful to him. This incident clearly showed how much faith Norbert had in the Lord as well as the Lord's kindness toward him.”<sup>71</sup> Mark 16 is lurking in the background

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<sup>70</sup> *Vita Norberti B*, trans. Antry, 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



but not explicitly cited; instead, the hagiographer meditates on merits of faith and patience, dwelling with emphasis on Norbert's unusual merits: "His faith... is so expressly commended before the other virtues that undoubtedly it was through his faith that he accomplished what he did."<sup>72</sup> Anyone who disbelieves such superhuman virtue "should immediately give credit to God who through grace gave Norbert faith and, through this faith, the ability to perform such deeds."<sup>73</sup> Thus does Norbert commence his career as itinerant preacher: "supported by the strength of faith, Norbert preached to everyone and announced the Word of God"<sup>74</sup> (the hagiographer wryly notes, "when convenient...and when inconvenient"). This faith is the bedrock of Norbert's authority and is established through his poison miracle.

His victory in the poison trial transfers to a victory in another contest that follows closely after in the *Vita B*, when, at the Council of Fritzlar, Norbert himself is accused of false-seeming and hypocrisy. His opponents charge that he wears the garb of a monk, although he belongs to no order, and hair-shirts, although he is a noble. Worst of all, he preaches without permission, and in his preaching, pretends an authority that he has not been granted. This is exactly the kind of anxiety over ambiguity encoded in poison language, and again his justificatory experience with the spider foretells his vindication at the council. Ultimately, Norbert receives explicit papal permission to continue his preaching mission and becomes a crucial figure of the twelfth-century reform movement and a founder of a new order. In the same manner that Æthelwold's experience shapes Benedictine monasticism in Britain, Norbert's encounter with a spider helps to uphold his reforming vision in the face of opposition and ambiguity.

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<sup>72</sup> *Vita Norberti B*, trans. Antry, 17.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4.vi.b. Communal sanctity

The final aspect of the spider-in-chalice variant of the poison trial that I would like to highlight is its fundamentally communal aspect. The Johannine and Gregorian versions of the poison trial squarely focus on their subjects, identifying and celebrating specific individual virtues or positions, in opposition to a clearly defined other party. There are often witnesses to the miracles, but these primarily provide a mirror for the subject. Spider stories offer the opportunity for a broader participation in the miraculous, as can be seen in the same life of Waltheof by Jocelin of Furness that Birkett uses in her characterization of these miracles as primarily eucharistic. The incident takes place at the Augustinian priory of Kirkham. In this iteration, the miracle is a two-person affair, although it follows the same basic pattern of fear, faith, and wonder:

One day when a canon of Kirkham had celebrated Mass in the presence and hearing of his prior Waltheof, a spider fell into the chalice encompassing the Lamb of God. The celebrant was struck with fear and horror at what could befall him. Standing rather still and not knowing what to do, he attracted the attention of the prior as best he could with a cough, and showed him what had happened. The prior, after considering for a short while, then enflamed with faith, poured forth a prayer and benediction, and instructed him to consume the spider with the holy drink, in the name of the Lord. The priest therefore obeyed the command of his Father, and, consuming what was in the chalice confidently and faithfully, felt no loss of health or nausea.<sup>75</sup>

Waltheof is clearly the primary focus of the narrative, but the actual miracle occurs in the body of the unnamed canon under the direction of the holy figure. Jocelin, explicitly invoking language of poison and honey, explains this first through the fundamental immiscibility of the

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<sup>75</sup> AASS 26, 255E. “Die quadam Canonicus quidam de Kirkeham cum Missam celebrasset in Prioris sui Waltheni praesentia et audientia, aranea quaedam in sanctum calicem circa Agnus Dei cecidit, metumque magnum et horrorem sacrificanti ob peracta, quae possent accidere, incussit. Stans itaque sacerdos et quid ageret ignorans, tussi ac sonitu, quo potuit, Priorem acquisivit, et quid contigerat, ostendit. Prior parumper secum deliberans, fusa oratione dataque benedictione, flamma fervens fidei, imperavit, ut araneam cum sacro libamine confidenter sumeret in nomine Domini. Sacerdos ergo imperio Patris paruit, et quidquid in calice continebatur fideliter et fiducialiter sumens nullam sospitatis jacturam vel nauseae provocationem sensit.”

bitter and the sweet: “The heavenly honeycomb could not pour forth gall, nor could poison be mixed with the divine nectar, nor ought the fruit of the bee have any share in that of the spider.”<sup>76</sup> This language engages directly with the tradition explored in Chapter 1, in which anxiety over the ability for something metaphorically sweet to cover that which is dangerous, but here offers a solution: the holy sacrament is not susceptible to this danger. No amount of poison can overwhelm its goodness.

The spider inevitably re-emerges, to the wonder of all witnesses, in the public setting of a post-prandial gathering: “When the canons were sitting the cloister after dinner, that same canon began to rub his finger, and a small black bump emerged on that digit. Suddenly the spider emerged alive from the ruptured skin, in the sight of all those sitting and marveling. At the command of the prior, the spider was burned in a flame.”<sup>77</sup> The canons debate the best explanation: “A friendly argument sprang up between the canons and the prior over that which had occurred. The prior attributed it to the obedience and faith of the canon; the canons, to the command, prayer and blessing of the prior.”<sup>78</sup> This split miracle offers the opportunity for Jocelin to highlight many virtues through a sort of ventriloquized miracle—Waltheof is the source of the fervent prayer and benediction, but the canon demonstrates faith in both his earthly and heavenly Fathers. The shared Mass, the repeated emphasis on the public context (“in the

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<sup>76</sup> AASS 26, 255E. “Non enim caelicus favus fel fundere, vel divinum nectar veneno misceri potuit, nec fructus singularis apis araneae participare vel communicare debuit.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 255F. “Unde Canonicis post prandium secum sedentibus in claustro, Canonicus ille residens digitum suum confricabat; et post modicam morulam tumor turgescens in digito apparebat: et ecce aranea, rupta cute, viva egreditur, et coram omnibus assidentibus et mirantibus, jubente Priore, flammis comburenda traditur.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. “Oritur dehinc inter Priorem et Canonicum satis amica altercatio super isto, quod contigerat, signo: Prior hoc deputabat obedientiae et fidei Canonici, Canonicus Patris praecepto, precibus, et benedictioni: ego vero hoc arbitror adscribendum utriusque fidei et devotioni, sed potissimum potentissimae divini Sacramenti virtuti.”

sight of all those sitting and marveling”) and the participation of the whole community in the debate together extend the umbrella of virtue over a much larger space than the poison trials undertaken by individuals, and rebounds virtue on the whole Cistercian project as a result. This, I think, is the other primary takeaway from the spider-in-chalice miracle in the life of Waltheof; indeed, there is not a single reference to the doctrine of real presence in the immediate context, although certainly Jocelin returns to the inviolable power of the Eucharist as the final moral of the story as he weighs in himself: “I consider this to be ascribed to both faith and devotion, but above all to the power of the most powerful divine sacrament. For it was not fitting that either a deadly manna should pour forth from the angels, nor should the danger of death proceed from the cup of life.”<sup>79</sup>

I have proposed three different modes of adaptation of the spider-in-chalice version of the poison trial: per existing scholarship, hagiographers can frame the trial as reacting to contemporary concerns about the substance and theology of the Eucharist, as in the case of Jocelin of Furness’ life of Waltheof and Stephen of Fougères’ life of Vitalis of Savigny. Another avenue is the vindication of an individual facing a controversy and the clarification of ambiguous positions, as in the case of Norbert of Xanten, accused of fanaticism and hypocrisy by his peers. A final shape into which we can see the trial molded is that of shared communal experience and thus shared virtue; the holy figure’s abilities and attributes redound on the entire community as the trial is transformed into one in which many can partake simultaneously.

Evidence that this sub-genre stands alone as a hagiographical tradition is contemporary awareness of the trope. Such awareness appears in the *Gemma Ecclesiastica* of Gerald of Wales

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<sup>79</sup> AASS 26, 255F. “Non enim debuit vel decuit Angelicum manna manare mortiferum, nec ex vitæ poculo progredi mortis periculum.”

(c. 1146-1223) in which he cites the advice of Peter Comestor on the subject of flies and spiders in the eucharistic wine. Despite this counsel not to follow such example, Gerald then collects and summarizes a handful of recent saintly spider stories that have come to his notice, before connecting them to the experience of more traditional poison-drinkers Sabinus of Canosa and William of York (see Chapter 5). This suggests both that the phenomenon is ongoing in his lifetime, and that it has already been acknowledged as a kind of miracle that bears resemblance to the poison trials of the past. The other evidence for self-awareness comes from the late thirteenth-century life of the Franciscan Francis of Fabriano. Francis is unlucky enough to encounter not a spider, but a scorpion, in his chalice, and, in good form, “hesitated briefly, wondering what he should do.” Francis has, however, precedent that he can follow—and thus realizes that “according to the principles governing previous instances of this peril, he should be able to turn aside the evil.” Trusting both in the text of Mark 16 and in the power of this precedent, “without fear or dread he swallowed the creature.” His confidence contrasts markedly with the fear and uncertainty of his forefathers, but underscores the understanding that Francis is following an established precedent. This confidence is rewarded when the scorpion emerges from a fissure in his right arm, with the moral that “he who undertakes respect of the divine, will be plucked from all peril; and he in whom God is honored, will be honored himself by God.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> AASS 91D. “Dum aliquando in ecclesia S. Francisci Fabriani rem faceret divinam, et Sanguinem sumere intentaret; ecce videt in calice aliunde dilapsus scorpionem. Haeret paulisper, quid agat, considerans. Potuit juxta regulas, in his periculis praescriptas, malum avertere: sed dum recordaretur Christi doctrinae et datae discipulis fidei illis verbis, Si mortiferum quid biberint, non eis nocebit; absque timore et horrore deglutivit animalculum. [Mar. 16, 13] Expleto sacrificio jussit ad se vocari qui venam secaret, misso nuntio Andrea Andreutii Vanni. Venit ille, Angelus nomine, et invenit in choro orantem atque illa proferentem verba, Auxilium meum a Domino, qui fecit caelum et terram. In cellam recedenti venam dexteri aperuit brachii, ex qua mirabiliter scorpio prodiit vivus, absque ullo sancti viri dolore. Ita qui honorem curant divinum, a cunctis eruuntur periculis: et qui quod Dei in seipsis est honorant, etiam illi a Deo facti honorabuntur a Deo.”

#### 4.vii. Conclusion

A hagiographical poison trial is always used to prove or demonstrate something. What, exactly, is in need of proving can vary as hagiographers adapt the trope to their needs. In doing so, they have a number of variables with which to play taken from the precedents set by Benedict, Sabinus and John. Whether or not the holy figure is aware of the poison ahead of time, per John, or discerns or comes to know of it in some other manner shifts the emphasis on holy virtues. Æthelwold, ingesting poison unknowingly, puts his own faith on trial. Samson of Dol and David of Wales have their privileged insight highlighted by divine messages. The spider-drinking saints shift the locus of the miracle from the holy body to the virtues of the eucharistic wine, while still retaining the personal validation implied in Mark 16. The accidental nature of the spider-cups introduces a new and interesting variation, in that it removes the valence of jealousy or deception inherent in poisonings attempted by individuals while still accruing associated virtue to the participants. The similarities between the two attempted poisonings of Samson of Dol and those in the *Dialogues* are certainly intended to cast Samson in the mold of Benedict and thus validate his activity as a monastic founder, but the poison trial can also take advantage of the very nature of the adjudication implied within it to address conflicts external to the holiness of the saint.

The placement of the trial between a contest and its outcome suggests that the result has been divinely adjudicated via the body of the saint, or using the discernment and privileged wisdom implied in the ability to see through plausible lies. Such contests can be directly related to the activities of the holy figure in question, as in the case of Æthelwold and his reforms or Norbert and his problematic preaching, and thus vindicate individuals in the face of their

detractors. They can likewise pertain to wholly external contests of interest to the hagiographer, as in the case of the inheritance crisis adjudicated by Samson of Dol. The poison trial can also be used to justify the hagiographical tradition itself when that tradition is the cause of anxiety or conflict, as in the case of George of Cappadocia, the recensions of whose history demonstrate an intentional conflation with details from the life of John. The trial is thus support for any number of truth claims, and an independent signifier in its own right.

As the logic of Mark 16 becomes more and more explicitly wielded in such texts, there arises an interesting consequence of such self-awareness: is a holy figure subjected to a poison trial demonstrating his faith and adherence to biblical precept by drinking the chalice, or is he rashly and impertinently forcing a miracle? The anxiety over this possibility raised by Gerald of Wales prompted him to investigate a number of such cases, including those in which individuals emerged from the trial with the verdict rendered against them. This is the subject to which we now turn.

## Chapter 5: Failures of the Poison Trial

### 5.i. Introduction

This chapter considers medieval failures of the poison trial and construes “failures” in two separate senses. Individuals who “fail” the poison trial, in that they reportedly drink poison and consequently die, demonstrate nonetheless that the trial is employed as a conscious hermeneutic in order to identify those whose positions or persons are consequently invalidated. This is the case in the first two examples under consideration here—the first is from the *Historia Francorum* of Gregory of Tours (d. 594), in which the daughter of Theodoric of Italy kills her Arian mother by means of communion wine, explicitly invoking the text of Mark 16. I also consider the treatment of the prophet Muhammad in a number of twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources, including the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani* (c. 1142), the *Historia Orientalis* of Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), and the *Legenda Aurea*, all of which include a narrative of the Prophet surviving a poisoning attempt in a manner similar to the Christian saints and all of which insist that Muhammad ultimately died from poison. Both cases, that of the Arians of Italy and that of Muhammad, appear to be self-aware but inverted employments of the logic of the poison trial.

I also refer to the “failure” of the poison trial in a case in which this logic is applied, but is stretched to the breaking point in the face of narrative elements and the rhetorical needs of the authors. This is the case of the twelfth-century archbishop Saint William of York, whose death under mysterious circumstances—after a long and bitter contest over his appointment—creates



conflict between the needs of the hagiographer and the recognition of the valences of poison-drinking by holy figures. Chronicles, hagiographical materials and liturgical resources relating to William of York all demonstrate a grappling with the ideas of vindication, martyrdom and discernment in the context of a quickly-canonized saint who is, nonetheless, also said to have died from poison.

Both of these categories of “failure”—concerning both individuals who themselves fail, and the application of the trial in a context that requires the hagiographer to reframe or unmake the fundamental elements of the inherited framework—serve a similar purpose in the overall argument of this dissertation. Both function as further evidence that there is a continuity in the application of poison discourse per Mark 16, and that the authors who employ them are aware of the precedents and build on the interpretive framework established around saints like John and Benedict. In the cases of Muhammad and William of York, the need to grapple with the implications of that precedent seems to shape the writings.

The cases under consideration in this chapter span from the sixth century to the thirteenth, which means that individual uses interact differently with the development of the trial that I have attempted to trace in earlier chapters. Gregory of Tours is one of the earliest contributors to this tradition under study here, and there is no way to establish with certainty his exposure to either the *Moralia in Job* or the *Dialogues*<sup>1</sup> (see Chapter 3) or to the coalescing of the poison trial tradition around John the Evangelist (see Chapter 2). The twelfth- and thirteenth-century material, and particularly the *Legenda Aurea*, more clearly engage with the corpus of poisoned saints.

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<sup>1</sup> The relative chronology of the work of the two Gregories is a subject of debate; *Dialogues* editor de Vogüé proposed that Gregory the Great was familiar with the work of Gregory of Tours, and Gregory of Tours specifically describes Pope Gregory in Book Ten of the *Historia Francorum*. See de Vogüé, “Grégoire le Grand, lecteur de Grégoire de Tours?” *Analecta Bollandiana* (1976) 94:3-4, 225-233.

What this chapter does not consider are cases in which successful poisonings are framed not as theological trials, but as political assassinations or similar crimes—that is to say, not everyone who is reputed to have died via poison is therefore “failing” the poison trial, nor does death by poison in such contexts necessarily bear the same valence as it does within the structural confines of the trope. Political assassinations and other poison-related murders have been covered most extensively by Frank Collard in *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*.<sup>2</sup> Collard’s work covers the legal and sociological realities of crimes committed by poison, and while many of the themes translate to the context I am concerned with here—hypocrisy, secrecy, potentially unknown information—they are treated very differently by the legal framework as by the religious. The poisonings under consideration in this chapter are framed in a specific and legible manner, using inherited language to make a claim about miraculous behavior. Individuals who fail the trial are still evaluated against established claims about the meaning of poison-drinking.

### **5.ii. Death in the Arian Eucharist**

The earliest example of a failure of the poison trial that functions in this manner comes from Gregory, Bishop of Tours, known for both his *Historiae* and an equally extensive series of contemporary miracles.<sup>3</sup> The ten books that comprise his historical writings were dubbed by their

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<sup>2</sup> Collard discusses saintly poisonings in his work, along with the use of “poison” in the context of heresy—although he is less interested in the meaning of poisonings in the hagiographical context, observing that “the crime itself matters less than the symbolism of a type of murder committed by enemies of the Faith.” I fundamentally agree that poison becomes a symbolic shorthand with respect to those who commit such crimes; I disagree that this is where the symbolic importance ends. Collard, *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> For a general overview of Gregory’s work in his cultural milieu, see in particular Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Carolingian readers as the *Historia Francorum*. Of the ten books, the first four recount events that preceded Gregory's life, drawing on sources like Jerome's version of Eusebius' *Chronicle*, Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the *Chronicle* of Sulpicius Severus and other accounts of early Christian history and martyrdoms. Much of this text recounts the dangers and persecutions posed by Arian Christians in Gaul and Spain, and the eventual triumph over the Arians after the conversion of Clovis. Clovis' conversion and subsequent campaigns against the Arian Visigoths and Ostrogoths form a through-line of the text, and this rhetorical stance against Arians continues long after Arianism in fact poses any real danger.<sup>4</sup>

This is the context in which Gregory includes a poison trial, as an anecdote in Book III intended to demonstrate the villainy and impiety of the neighboring Arians of Italy. The case is perhaps unique in that it is the only poison trial of this genre that I have encountered involving women, although the poisonous, assassinating woman is a well-established presence in other kinds of literature. The women in this instance are the sister of Clovis, married to king Theodoric of Italy, and her daughter Amalasantha. In Gregory's telling, conflict arises between these two women when Amalasantha insists on taking for a husband a slave named Traguilanis, instead of the royal son her mother had chosen for her.<sup>5</sup> Amalasantha and Traguilanis flee together but are chased by an army and caught. Traguilanis is put to death and Amalasantha returned to her mother's house. In retaliation, Amalasantha plots to kill her mother, a deed made possible by the specificities of the Arian communion: "Now they belonged to the Arian sect, and as it is their

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<sup>4</sup> See Edward James, "Gregory of Tours and 'Arianism'" in *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* ed. Cain and Lenski. (Ashgate, 2009), 327-348. See also Avril Keely, "Arians and Jews in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours," *Journal of Medieval History* 23:2 (1997): 103-115 and Andrew Cain, "Miracles, Martyrs, and Arians: Gregory of Tours' Sources for His Account of the Vandal Kingdom," *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 59, No. 4 (Nov., 2005): 412-437.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* 3.31, trans. Ernest Brehaut (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), 68.

custom that of those going to the altar the kings receive one cup and the lesser people another, she put poison in the cup from which her mother was going to receive the communion. And she drank it and died forthwith.”<sup>6</sup> Arianism not only provides the practical opportunity to perform the poisoning without it becoming a mass-murder, but also is described as the only condition under which such a poisoning would have been effective. Gregory takes the opportunity to clarify, using the text of Mark 16:

There is no doubt that such harm is from the devil. What shall the wretched heretics answer to this charge that the enemy dwells in their holy place? But as for us who confess the Trinity in one similar equality and omnipotence, even if we should drink a deadly draught in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the true and incorruptible God, it would not do us any harm. The Italians were indignant at this woman, and they invited Theobad, king of Tuscia, and made him king over them.<sup>7</sup>

Gregory has framed this version of the poison trial with two tautological but mutually supporting biblical logics; if evil can be performed, it is because the “enemy” is present at the Arian altar, and that had their theology been sound, the attempt would have failed. It is significant in this context that the Mark text has been expanded and the terms clarified—in lieu of “si mortiferum biberint, non eis nocebit” (if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them), Gregory has specified, “nos vero Trinitatem in una aequalitate pariter et omnipotentia confitentes, etiam si mortiferum bibamus, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sanctu, veri atque incorruptibilis Dei, nihil nos nocebit” (But as for us who confess the Trinity in one similar equality and

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* 3.31, trans. Brehaut, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* 3.31, trans. Ernest Brehaut, 69. “Erant autem Ariana secta viventes. Et quia consuetudo eorum est, ut ad altarium venientes, de alio calice reges communicent, et de alio populus minor, venenum in calice illo posuit de quo mater communicatura erat. Quo illa hausto, protinus mortua est; non enim dubium est tale maleficium esse de parte diaboli. Quid contra haec miseri haeretici respondebunt, ut in Sancta eorum locum habeat inimicus? Nos vero Trinitatem in una aequalitate pariter et omnipotentia confitentes, etiam si mortiferum bibamus, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sanctu, veri atque incorruptibilis Dei, nihil nos nocebit. Indignantes ergo Itali contra hanc mulierem, Theodadum regem Tusciae invitantes, super se regem statuunt.” PL 71: 264.

omnipotence, even if we should drink a deadly draught in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the true and incorruptible God, it would not do us any harm). That is to say, in this case the true followers that are indicated in the Mark text are specifically those of a Trinitarian orthodoxy. Even though Amalasantha is not approaching the poisoning as a theological contest in the manner of John the Evangelist—indeed, she is as implicated in the evil herself, also being an Arian, and her motivations are clearly rooted in revenge—Gregory has framed the poisoning in such a way as to not only discredit the character and the rule of the Ostrogoth Italian family via scandal, but to frame their deaths as the direct effect of their heresy. It is seemingly irrelevant to the preceding narrative, but Gregory has turned this moment into a poison trial that frames failure in the familiar terms of Mark.

The tale of Amalasantha and the Arian communion is perhaps the most straightforward “failure” of the poison trial imaginable—Gregory employs the language of Mark 16 to demonstrate how the true followers of Christ can be distinguished by means of ingesting a deadly thing, but simply in the negative.

### **5.iii. The Death of the Prophet Muhammad**

The second account of an individual failing the poison trial is by no means as straightforward. This case concerns the prophet Muhammad as reflected in Christian texts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This scholarship is vast; see in particular the work of John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the European Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially chapter 6, “Muhammad, heresiarch,” 135-171. See also Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Suzanne Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Katharine Beckett, *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Matthew Dimmock, *Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Svetlana Luchitskaja “The image of Muhammad in Latin chronography of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,” *Journal of Medieval History* 26:2 (2000):115-126.

There are a number of ways in which impressions of Islam and Muhammad were refracted in the Latin tradition, ranging from travel accounts of pilgrims to the explicitly polemic religious attempts to engage with what was predominantly characterized as a form of Christian heresy. Byzantine writers through the ninth century provide the foundations of the information that would eventually become the eleventh- to thirteenth-century proliferation of writings about the life of Muhammad. These writings form what John Tolan has termed “anti-hagiography,” in that they rely on the tropes of Christian sainthood and resonant symbolism to depict Muhammad as a false prophet, and to explain how he led his followers into error.<sup>9</sup> This lens is particularly visible in the kinds of miracles the authors recount in order to explain away.

It is not my intention to suggest anything new to this field of research or to ventriloquize established scholarship. Rather, the utility of this example is to suggest that the poison trial is particularly well-suited to “anti-hagiography” and to demonstrate that the patterns of sanctity established by the trope are strong enough to actively shape writings and presentations of Muhammad in Christian Europe. Muhammad’s case is also useful in that it combines the more abstract anti-heretical language of poison and error with the application of the logic of the poison trial to someone whose role as a prophet—whose sanctity—is being assessed and denied by Christian authors. In the three brief examples I treat here, the twelfth-century *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani*, the early thirteenth-century *Historia Orientalis* of Jacques de Vitry, and a lengthy digression within the *Legenda Aurea*, Muhammad is described as having had an

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<sup>9</sup> John Tolan, “Anti-Hagiography: Embrico of Mainz’s Vita Mahumeti,” *Journal of Medieval History* 22 (1996): 25-41. See also Tolan, “European accounts of Muhammad’s life” in *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*, ed. Jonathan Brockopp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 226-250. Kenneth Baxter Wolf instead employs the term “counterhistory,” borrowed from Amos Funkenstein, in “The Earliest Latin Lives of Muhammad: Texts and Contexts” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. M Gervers and R.J. Bikhazi (Toronto: PIMS, 1990), 89-103.

encounter with poison that resembles those in the hagiographical record explored in previous chapters. In each case, the authors must negotiate the sequence of events such that Muhammad's claim to the status of prophet or saint on the basis of poison-drinking is invalidated.

The first example of such theorizing on the comparison between Muhammad and the poison-drinking Christian saints comes from the group of materials translated or composed at the behest of Peter the Venerable, known as the *Corpus Clunaicense* (c. 1142).<sup>10</sup> The corpus includes a text known in Latin as the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani*, or the Latin translation of the "Apology of Al-Kindi" attributed to Petrus Alfonsi (d.1140). This document purports to be a translation from an Arabic source in which two interlocutors explain the tenants of Islam and Christianity to each other.<sup>11</sup> This source places Muhammad's poisoning in the context of the Christian tradition of poison-drinking, making sure to emphasize not only how Muhammad failed the test, but how his deed parallels but falls short of similar contexts in Christian history. The text thus references both Mark 16 and 2 Kings 4:38-41 in which the prophet Elisha, eating with his compatriots, notices that a poisonous herb has been included in the stew. He warns his fellow diners and removes the danger. This is, as the author/translator takes pains to point out, not the case for Muhammad:

It is also said that when the Jewish woman Zaineb, wife of Zelem, placed poison on a roasted sheep, the shoulder joint of the sheep spoke to him and said: "Do not eat me, because I am prepared with poison" and so he did not wish to eat it; however, Elbereu, the son of Mazuz, ate it instead, and died. I would like to know whether he alone, out

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<sup>10</sup> See, among many, James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); Dominique Inga-Prat, *Order and Exclusion: Cluny and Christendom Face Heresy, Judaism, and Islam, 1000-1150* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 323 et passim. A very useful list of references can be found in Michelina Di Cesare, *The Pseudo-historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 84.

<sup>11</sup> For arguments on the dating and authorship of the Arabic, see P.S. van Koningsveld, "The Apology of Al-Kindi" in *Religious Polemics in Context: Papers Presented to the Second International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (Lisor) Held at Leiden, 27-28 April, 2000* (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2004), 69-92. Van Koningsveld proposes the ninth century as the most likely century of authorship.

of all those who were with him, heard the voice of the shoulder joint. If he alone heard it, why did he allow his companion to eat? If, however, they all heard it, the marvel is that he dared to eat at all, unless he had such strength of belief in the prophet's ability to resurrect the dead. Even Elijah brought back the widow's son, and the son of the Sunnamite—whose bones, at a touch from Elijah on this dead body, were set up on their own feet. This whole thing we can find written in the Old Testament, and in this even the Jews, although hostile, agree with us. Or, if he was a prophet, why did he not trust in the great prophetic power to resist poison, as when, in the aforementioned text, the sons of the prophets had eaten a deadly herb but with the benediction of Elisha came to no injury? Likewise, Christ the Lord in the Gospels says to his disciples that if they drink any deadly thing, it would not hurt them [Mark 16]. This sign, which is just one amongst other miracles, is truly illuminating—it allows the poor, the humble, the fishermen, and all the humiliated people of this world, kings, princes, philosophers, rich men, powerful men, and all peoples of all lands, nations, languages, tribes—the mighty, the wise, the proud—both those who are honored and those who are held in contempt in this world; all are led to faith and to the worship of the one true Christian faith. These are the true signs of the prophet.<sup>12</sup>

The speaker attempts to make sense of the speaking lamb according to the formula of comparable poison trials, both explicitly named, like that of Elisha, and implicit, like those that invoke Mark 16. The text grapples with that, exactly, the take-away about Muhammad should be. Was the miracle that the lamb spoke to everyone, which would lessen Muhammad's role in the

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<sup>12</sup> This is my translation; since beginning this project a new and undoubtedly superior translated edition has been published by Dumbarton Oaks as *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 51, ed. and trans. Julian Yolles and Jessica Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018). *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani*, ed. Michelina Di Cesare, *The Pseudo-historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin*, 133-134: "Item dicit quod, cum Zaineb iudea, uxor Zelem, filii Muislim iudei, in ove assa venenum sibi apposuisset, scapula ovis locuta sit ei: Noli me comedere, quia veneno confecta sum, et ipse noluit comedere; comedit autem inde Elbereu, filius Mazuz, et mortuus est. Vellem scire utrum ipse solus an omnes, qui cum eo aderant, vocem illius scapule audierint. Si enim ille solus audivit, quare socium suum inde comedere permisit? Si vero omnes audierunt, mirum est quod ille comedere ausu fuit, nisi forte de suo propheta sperans quod etiam mortuum resuscitare potuerit. Resuscitavit enim Helias filium vidue. Et Heliseus filium Sunamitis, et ossibus Helisei tactum cadaver mortui stetit supra pedes suos, quod totum in veteris testamenti scriptura reperitur, in qua nos et iudei, licet inimici, concordamus. Aut si propheta erat, quare non confidens de virtute prophetica venenum etiam contempnebat, cum constet in supra dicta scriptura filios prophetarum herbam mortiferam comedisse sed Heliseo benedicente in nullo laesos fuisse? Christus quoque Dominus in evangelio suis discipulis dixit quod, si mortiferum quid biberint, nichil eis noceret. Qui tam in isto quam in ceteris miraculis adeo claruerunt ut eos licet pauperes, humiles, piscatores et per omnia huic mundo despectos, reges, principes, philosophi, divites, potentes, omnes denique terrarum populi, nationes, lingue, tribus, fortes, sapientes, fastum, delicias, honores et quaecumque in mundo sunt contempnentes, ad fidem et cultum unius vere christiane fidei sequerentur. Haec sunt signa veri prophete."



affair and deny him special discernment? If the lamb spoke only to Muhammad, why did he not tell anyone? If he did, and others ingested the poison anyway, does this imply faith in his powers of resurrection? In this rendition, the fact that Muhammad's compatriot died is itself damning when read against the subtext of John the Evangelist, whose ability to resurrect the person who had tested the efficacy of the poison is a fundamental component of the episode. The gloss on Mark 16 also implies that this ability to consume poison is part of a larger process of vindication and conversion, meant to demonstrate to "all peoples of all lands" what constitutes true prophetic power. Even if Muhammad did discern the poison, this miracle was not made known in such a way as to frame Muhammad's power for others to see. The speaker thus finds him wanting when compared to Elijah, Elisha, and the disciples of Christ.

The account in the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani*, while explicitly invoking Mark 16, is an imperfect analogue for poison trials in the Christian hagiographical tradition, since part of Muhammad's failure is that he neither withstands the poison nor makes his knowledge of it known. However, it is sufficiently similar that some clarification seems to be in order—one later text that includes details from the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani* demonstrates a need to insist that Muhammad's apparent ability to discern poison was neither a consistent gift nor could it, in the end, save him from death. Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), Bishop of Acre and participant in the Fifth Crusade, includes such clarification in the history of Islam he includes in the *Historia Orientalis* section of his *Historia Hierosolymitana*.<sup>13</sup>

They say also that when the poisoned meat of lamb was placed before him, the lamb spoke to him and said: "I have poison within me, beware and do not accept me as food."

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<sup>13</sup> The likely dependence of the *Historia Orientalis* on the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani* has been established; see Jean Donnadiu "La représentation de l'islam dans l'Historia orientalis. Jacques de Vitry historien," *Le Moyen Age* 114:3 (2003) :487-508, where Donnadiu notes that "le texte partage avec l'*Apologie d'al-Kindi* des informations communes au sujet de Mahomet, mais surtout il a utilisé une documentation circulant au début du XIIIe siècle dans les milieux savants chrétiens, documentation héritée de la tradition polémique byzantine."

His companion, however, who was seated beside him at dinner, partook of the lamb and lost his life to its poison. Even so, eighteen years later Muhammad was given poison secretly, and died from it, for this pseudo-prophet could not predict his own death.<sup>14</sup>

Description of the death of Muhammad is one of the avenues open in the campaign of “anti-hagiography.” Etan Kohlberg has grouped deaths in the Latin sources into three broad categories—one involving Muhammad devoured by pigs (sometimes while drunk), and another involving a convoluted tale of the angel Gabriel and a predicted resurrection after three that did not come to pass, after which time the prophet’s decaying bones are consumed by dogs. The final category is that of those who report that Muhammad died of poison, whether or not it is associated with the incident with the lamb.<sup>15</sup> Jacques de Vitry appears to suggest that the poisoning events are not related, as the details of the first poisoning are abbreviated but consistent with what is presumably his source, the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani*. However, Jacques de Vitry is also at pains to eradicate any potential resonance with Christian saints who survive similar encounters, immediately specifying that the second poison was administered to Muhammad “secretly,” and that he was caught unawares by it—these are crucial

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Orientalis* 1.5: “Asserunt etiam quod cum venenum in carne agnina aliquando sibi fuisset oblatum, agnus loquutus sit ei dicens: ‘In me habeo venenum, cave ne me sumas in cibum.’ Socius autem eius qui cum eo in mensa sedebat ex eo comedit et vitam veneno amisit. Ab illo tamen die post annos decem et octo Mahometus, veneno sibi occulte dato, interiit, nec tamen mortem suam pseudo-propheta praescivit.” *The Pseudo-historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin*, ed. Michelina Di Cesare (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 225.

<sup>15</sup> See esp. Etan Kohlberg, “Western Accounts of the Death of the Prophet Muhammad” in *L’Orient dans l’histoire religieuse de l’Europe: L’invention des origines*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and John Scheid, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 165-95. Kohlberg’s account of the Islamic sources that include poisoned lamb stories is incredibly useful, as is the genealogy and catalogue of Latin sources that mention this tradition. I have omitted Matthew Paris as functionally redundant to Jacques de Vitry, but the comparison performed by Kohlberg makes it clear that the death of Muhammad is evolving and fertile soil for the polemicist. The relationship between poison and the Jewish woman who is said to dispense it in a number of Arabic sources is also profitably explored by Kohlberg.

ingredients of the poison trial, and the fact that Muhammad did not have knowledge of *this* poison disqualifies him from the status of prophet according to this logic.

The *Historia Orientalis* carries on to describe Muhammad's marital practices and sundry other offenses before eventually returning to dwell at length on the death of the prophet. Jacques de Vitry clarifies, again, that poison is that which ultimately causes Muhammad's death, before concluding with the story described above, in which Muhammad unsuccessfully predicts his own resurrection.<sup>16</sup> The clarification that immediately follows the account of the poisoned lamb ("even so, eighteen years later Muhammad was given poison secretly, and died from it, for this pseudo-prophet could not predict his own death") is consequently narratively out of place, and the quick addendum to the apparent miracle, despite the break in the narrative, seems to demonstrate an urgency and a need to deny Muhammad's poison-sensing abilities in the immediate context in which they seem to appear.

It is apparent that the tradition of poison-drinking saints is tacitly or explicitly providing a scaffolding of thought that structures the ways in which Muhammad's experience with the speaking lamb is understood. This scaffolding is also apparent in a source much discussed in earlier chapters—the great collection of holy lives compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, known as the *Legenda Aurea* (c. 1260). The treatment of this "failure" of the poison trial in the *Legenda Aurea* is particularly useful as a comparison because the hagiographical collection contains numerous other examples of saintly experiences with poison—his familiarity with the trope is not in question, and thus his treatment of Muhammad is instructive. The presentation of the life

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Orientalis* 1.7, *Pseudo-historical Image*, ed. Di Cesare, 233. "Cum autem annis quadraginta miserabilem vitam Mahometus protraxisset et, morte sibi imminente, veneno se oppressum sensisset, dixit cognatis et amicis: 'Quando me mortuum videritis, corpus meum nolite sepelire. Scio enim corpus meum post triduum in celum esse deferendum.'"

of Muhammad in the *Legenda Aurea* is also significant in that, in treating Islam as Christian heresy, it brings together multiple strands of poison discourse. Muhammad is guilty of mixing evil with good, but is not himself able to discern evil when it appears.

Muhammad's life appears in the *Legenda Aurea* in a section of the hagiographic collection that begins as a life of Saint Pelagius, a fourth-century pope, but which quickly segues into an extended digression that covers some seven hundred years of history (it is consequently labeled "the History of the Lombards" in many editions). As part of this lengthy digression, Jacobus includes an overview of the life of Muhammad and the basic tenets of Islam, as refracted through a number of intermediary Christian sources. As Stephano Mula has pointed out, given the circulation of the *Legenda Aurea* in the thirteenth century and beyond, this odd section perhaps forms the most-widely accessible information about Islam known in Christian Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Familiar strategies used to uncover heresy and expose perversions of Christian belief are employed against the things known or believed about the life and teachings of Muhammad. Their fundamental purpose is to explain how things that appear to be plausible, miraculous, or otherwise persuasive are in fact chicanery. The casting of Muhammad in the role of a magician or a trickster who relies on dark arts and slight-of-hand is a consistent thread in the genre<sup>18</sup>; if anything, the representation in the *Legenda Aurea* is tame in that Muhammad relies on somewhat

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<sup>17</sup> Stefano Mula, "Muhammad and the Saints: The History of the Prophet in the Golden Legend," *Romance Philology* 101:2 (2003): 175-188. John Tolan and Stephano Mula have done the work of uncovering Jacobus' sources for this part of the narrative. Chief among them are the c. 1110 *Dialogi contra Iudeos* of Petrus Alfonsi, who is also associated with the Latin translation of the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani*. Other sources for Jacobus' thoughts on the life of Muhammad come from Hugh of Fleury's *Chronicon* and Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*, the latter of which also seems to depend on the *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani*. See Mula, 177-178.

<sup>18</sup> John Tolan makes the connection to anxiety over the signifiers of truth in the twelfth century: "This newfound fascination with a largely imaginary trickster Muhammad reflects not only a growing concern with Islam but also growing uncertainties as to how to distinguish 'real' reform from heresy in the turbulent spiritual atmosphere of the twelfth century." Tolan, *Saracens*, 137.

simple deceptions. What is consistent is that the “tricks” of Muhammad in *Legenda Aurea* rest on established iconography and traditional signifiers of truth, causing just the kind of epistemic uncertainty that a poison trial is designed to remove.

This pattern is evident from the introduction of Muhammad (here called Magumeth) as a “false prophet and a sorcerer.” His success in leading Saracens to error is attributable the fact that he was tutored in deception by “a very famous cleric, who was angry because he had been unable to obtain the honors he desired in the Roman Curia.” This disappointed cleric obtained a number of followers and wanted to instate Magumeth as their leader, using a ruse to convince the followers to place their trust in Magumeth:

He then put seeds and the like into Magumeth’s ear, and trained a dove to pick them out. The dove because so accustomed to this that whenever it saw Magumeth, it lighted on his shoulder and thrust its beak into his ear. Then the cleric called the people together and told them that he would put over them the man whom the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, would point out. He secretly released the dove, which flew straight at Magumeth, perched on his shoulder, and put its beak to his ear. Seeing this, the people thought it was the Holy Spirit descending upon him and bringing him the words of God. In this way Magumeth deluded the Saracens.<sup>19</sup>

The iconography of this pseudo-miracle is designed to take advantage of a known framework of prophetic knowledge, as Jacobus takes pains to demonstrate how it falsely constructed as a sign. Jacobus then neatly ties this into Magumeth’s other deceptive tactics—he “drew up his own laws, into which he inserted certain things from the Old and New Testaments.” This is a familiar move (see Introduction) performed by heretics—to obscure something destructive by giving it the patina of biblical truth. He thus makes what is poisonous palatable by surrounding it with innocuous material:

The false prophet also taught, blending truth with error, that Moses was a great prophet but Christ a greater, the highest of all prophets, born of the Virgin Mary by the power

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<sup>19</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 756.

of God without the seed of man. He also said in his *Alcoran* that when Christ was a child, he created live birds out of the slime of the earth. But then Magumeth mixed in some poison, teaching that Christ had not truly suffered or risen from the dead: it was some other man who looked like Christ who had done this, or at least had died.<sup>20</sup>

The invocation of this particular strand of poison discourse—that of using unexceptionable ideas as a vehicle for destructive ones—in the vein of Gregory the Great frames the larger stakes of the poison trial that Magumeth undergoes. If the poison trial evolves to identify and celebrate saints who can see through the deception inherent in such rhetorical poisonings, Magumeth’s role as a purveyor of poison and the self-supporting logic of the poison trial requires that he be outed as someone of only seeming virtue and prophetic ability. He is someone who is both a deceiver, and ultimately himself deceived. Consequently, the poison trial comes as the last in a series of miracles that are reportedly attributed to Magumeth. Jacobus reports that “they say that the poisoned flesh of a lamb was once set before him. The lamb spoke to him, saying: ‘Beware and do not eat me, because I have poison in me.’”<sup>21</sup>

Despite the exotic flavor of the speaking food, it is hard to imagine that the parallel with the other poison trials collected by Jacobus in the *Legenda Aurea*, including those pertaining to Benedict, John, and Patrick, could have escaped him. It is incumbent on Jacobus, therefore, to make clear that the analogy is faulty—and so the segue into the life of Muhammad ends with the abrupt and somewhat anti-climactic “yet after many years poison was given to him and he perished.”<sup>22</sup> Jacobus ventures no further into Muhammad’s death, and indeed immediately afterwards returns to the purported subject of the section, the Lombards (“But now let my pen

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<sup>20</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 575.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 573. “Venenum insuper sibi in carne agnina oblatum fuisse dicunt. Agnus autem ei locutus est dicens: cave, ne me sumas, quia in me habeo venenum.” Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Graesse (repr. Osnabruck: Zeller, 1969), 831.

<sup>22</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 573. “Et tamen post plures annos veneno sibi dato interiit.” Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Graesse, 831.

turn again to the history of the Lombards...’’<sup>23</sup>). There seems to be no need of pigs, angels, dogs or drunkenness, or any of the other stories about the death of Muhammad related in his sources, to drive home the message—Muhammad was reputed to have been able to discern poison, but ultimately failed at this test. Muhammad himself mixed metaphorical poison in with other teachings, and his ability to distinguish truth and falsehood, and thus the reliability of things said about him, is denied as a consequence of his inability to consistently discern poisons hidden in other matrices.

The three examples explored here are not representative of the depiction of Muhammad in Latin sources, but they are indicative of three distinct ways to grapple with a specific tale about Muhammad that comes into conflict with established patterns of sanctity. The *Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani* demonstrates a recognition of the stakes of the tale, juxtaposing it against Elisha and Mark 16 and weighing the poison miracles in each. Jacques de Vitry in the *Historia Orientalis* both recognizes the implications and works to immediately counter any interpretation of the tale that accords Muhammad this particularly loaded form of discernment, by both interrupting the narrative to clarify and by returning to reinforce the idea that Muhammad died by poisoning. The treatment of Muhammad in the *Legenda Aurea*, in the same collection as other saintly poison trials, integrates the fundamental anxiety about false-seeming communicated through poison language with a denial of Muhammad’s ability to discern and withstand poison himself. In all three cases, Muhammad “fails” the poison trial; in the second two in particular, Muhammad “fails” by fulfilling the terms of the trial and dying after ingesting “some deadly thing.”

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<sup>23</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 573.

#### 5.iv. The Poisoning of Saint William of York

I have framed the “failure” of the poison trial in the cases of Mohammad and the Arian communion as one of a direct application of the fundamental structure of the trial, but one which proceeds with an ultimately unworthy participant. The experience of Saint William of York is not such a case. The “failure” in this context is a failure of the logic of the trial itself. Those who campaign for William’s saintliness seem to be aware of the precedent set by previous hagiographers and thus grapple with the need to vindicate William, while also recognizing the popular belief that William died by means of poison. In order to square this circle, they are forced to essentially invalidate the trial while also acknowledging and employing its terms.

The death and posthumous negotiations over the reputation of Saint William of York thus provides a case which demonstrates both the usefulness and the logical limits of the poison trial. The story is documented in multiple contemporary and near-contemporary sources, from court and chancery documents, papal records, and private correspondence. A particularly fiery account derives from the letters of Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153). Gerald of Wales (d. 1223), John of Hexam (d. 1209), and William of Newburgh (d. 1198) also include the protracted contest in their respective chronicles. The basic narrative of the conflict surrounding the 1140 election of the archbishop of York has been thoroughly reconstructed by Christopher Norton and David Knowles.<sup>24</sup> William FitzHerbert was a younger son, cousin (via his illegitimate mother’s side) to King Stephen, whose father served as a senior advisor and treasurer to Henry I, and who through

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Norton, *St. William of York* (York: York Medieval Press, 2006). I have relied more closely on Norton, especially where he amends the chronology presented by Knowles in “The Case of Saint William of York,” *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 5:2 (1936): 162-177. Knowles published additional information in the same volume as an Appendix (pp. 212-214). See also Adrian Morey, “Canonist Evidence in the Case of William of York,” *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 10:3 (1952): 352-353 and D. Baker, “Viri religiosi and the York Election dispute,” *Studies in Church History* 7, ed. Cuming and Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).



these connections secured a position in the ecclesiastical court of York as treasurer, which he held until the contested elections of the 1140s.<sup>25</sup> The broad strokes of this conflict, which embroiled kings, popes, Cistercian luminaries and a healthy contingent of men who were later canonized as saints, are that William was first appointed, then denied, and then finally re-appointed to the archbishopric of York.

In part, the conflict arose from the recent installation of Cistercian monks at Fountains Abbey, after a conflict with traditionalist Benedictines necessitated their removal from St. Mary's Abbey in 1132.<sup>26</sup> York was the site of flourishing monastic foundations, such that the secular clerics at the cathedral were often outnumbered in number and influence by the abbots and priors of the diocese. Of particular strength were the Cistercians at Rievaulx, founded in 1131, the first abbot of which was the former secretary of St. Bernard of Clairvaux himself.<sup>27</sup> The reformist turmoil in the church was also evident in Rome, where in 1139 the Second Lateran Council was convened to heal the breach of a decade of papal schism and to codify canons including clerical celibacy, free elections, and, crucially, to insist that monastic foundations be allowed to participate in the election of their bishop. This background is pivotal to understanding the forces wielded in the conflict over the election of the new archbishop of York in 1140.

William was not the first choice. Two elections over the course of 1140-1141 yielded one

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<sup>25</sup> Norton, *St. William of York*, 5-7. See also the Appendix for Norton's genealogical table. William's political connections became more fraught in 1135 with the death of Henry I. Stephen of Blois was crowned by one faction, and the claims of Henry's daughter, the Empress Matilda, and of her husband Geoffrey of Anjou were supported by another faction, including her uncle, King David of Scotland. York was caught in the middle of this conflict and was Scottish in its sympathies. As York defended its claims against Canterbury, it also enforced its claims to primacy in the north, including lands within its episcopal sphere of influence that fell along a constantly fluctuating border with Scotland. See Norton, 78.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> See Emilia Jamroziak, *Rievaulx Abbey and Its Social Context, 1132-1300: Memory, Locality and Networks* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

Benedictine abbot, vetoed by the Pope for refusing to give up his abbacy if he were consecrated archbishop, and one Augustinian prior, vetoed by King Stephen because he was the stepson of David of Scotland. The third election yielded William FitzHerbert, then treasurer of York Minster. William received approval from Stephen, whose father was William's mother's half-brother, but was immediately opposed by a wide variety of interested individuals, including the archdeacons of York, plus the heads of the influential foundations at Rievaulx and Fountains.<sup>28</sup> These individuals accused William of simony and asserted that King Stephen had unduly interfered, and the matter was referred to Rome. Pope Innocent II's judgement was that if a certain number of witnesses to the election were prepared to swear an oath that all had been properly conducted, William would be consecrated.

The necessary oaths were sworn, and William was consecrated in September 1143, but before he could be invested with the pallium, Innocent II died. Neither his successor, Celestine II, nor Lucius II, lived long enough to settle the matter. Bernard of Clairvaux began a fiery letter campaign, attempting to block the appointment.<sup>29</sup> The next pope, Eugenius III, was a Cistercian. Bernard got his wish: the election of William FitzHerbert was officially overturned. Between 1147 and 1153, Henry Murdac, abbot of Fountains Abbey and hand-picked choice of Bernard of Clairvaux, served as Archbishop of York. Finally, after fourteen years of expectation and disappointment, William entered York Minster to celebrate mass as bishop on Trinity Sunday, May 30, 1154.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Norton, *St. William of York*, 80-81.

<sup>29</sup> Editions of the letters pertaining to the contest over York can be found in Charles Talbot, "New Documents in the Case of Saint William of York" *The Cambridge Historical Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1950): 1-15.

<sup>30</sup> Norton, *St. William of York*, 80-90.

Eight days later, however, William was dead. He had contracted a fever on the very day of his first mass and taken to his bed. Immediately, rumors began to circulate that William had been poisoned, and that the poison had been administered by means of the communion wine at his first, and ultimately only, mass at York. The accused poisoner was Osbert of Bayeux, one of the archdeacons who had initially opposed his first election. There was no satisfactory outcome to the trial, which was moved from the jurisdiction of the king to that of the archbishop's successor, and which was ultimately appealed to Rome.<sup>31</sup>

The ingredients are thus all assembled for a contest in which a poison trial would prove useful. Rival factions argued over the merits and worthiness of a proto-archbishop, who was variously accused of simony, unchaste living, and leveraging undue political influence in ecclesiastical affairs. The context of reform echoes other applications of the poison trial in which bishops and abbots are confronted by scheming underlings or other candidates for their position, and their survival vindicates either a particular conception of monastic or secular life, or the individual himself. The language of poison threads throughout the conflict, wielded by both sides. William's *vita* describes Osbert the archbishop in standard terms of toxic hostility, even if it does not go so far as to accuse him of the poisoning: "but rapacious envy, that lethal root of schism...brought forth into the election toxic branches."<sup>32</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux writes of Henry as "our common plague."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Norton, *St. William of York*, 146: "The case seems to have dragged on into the papacy of Alexander III (1159-81) and the final outcome is not clear. Osbert seems to have been deprived of his archdeaconry in 1157 and to have lived out his life as a minor lay baron, while continuing to call himself archdeacon."

<sup>32</sup> "Sed livor edax, letalis scismatum radix...in electione suos ramos protulit toxicatos." "Vita Sancti Willelmi Auctore Anonymo" in *The Historians of the Church of York and Its Archbishops, II*, ed. Raine (London: Longman, 1879-94), 270.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter 360, as quoted from Knowles, 172, n. 41: "Laboravimus, quantum potuimus, adversus pestem commune."

William's case is different from those discussed in previous chapters in that the campaign for William's reputation and status as a holy poison drinker is made outside of his *vita*, which makes no mention of the accusation or attempts any justification for it. William simply dies of fever after eight days.<sup>34</sup> His defenders are therefore left with the task of explaining how someone who was rumored to have died from a poisoning could have been a saint. Chronicler William of Newburgh (d. 1198), writing some years after the affair, offers a number of attempts to reconcile these ideas. His primary course is to deny that the rumors of poisoning had any truth to them at all:

Then William, who was judiciously governing the church which had been restored to him shortly after Easter week, and who with his innate gentleness was a burden to no-one, was racked with fever a few days after Pentecost and snatched from this life. The death of this most gentle pastor brought great grief to clerics and laity alike. His unexpected departure caused many to believe that he had been poisoned by an agent sent in by his opponents or striving on their behalf, and that from it he had drunk a deadly poison which was, dreadful to relate, mixed with the drink of life. But this is no more than the belief of certain people which they wantonly spread abroad as the undoubted truth.<sup>35</sup>

William of Newburgh appears to have interviewed individuals who had been present at William of York's death, or had contact with someone who had been. These sources include an eye witness who was near enough to see whether or not the Eucharist had been tampered with:

To cut the matter short, in the course of time when the rumor was prevalent, I thought I should ask a distinguished old man under oath about this matter. He was a monk of the monastery at Rievaulx, and by then he was ill and close to death. At the time he had been a canon of the Church of York, and a friend of the archbishop. He firmly replied that this was an utter falsehood, a mere belief entertained by certain persons; for as he had been there in attendance on the archbishop when the crime was allegedly attempted, and there was no way by which any malevolent person could have crept

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<sup>34</sup> "Vita Sancti Willelmi Auctore Anonymo," ed. Raine, 277-278. "Cum igitur die nono corporis sui dissolutionem imminere sentiret, catenis carnis, quasi quibusdam vinculis diruptis, vale dicto fratribus, laeto, ut dicitur, vultu, spiritum Domino reddidit laetioem."

<sup>35</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, ed. and trans. Patrick Gerard Walsh and M.J. Kennedy (Wiltshire: Aris and Phillips, 1988), 114-115.

between wholly reliable attendants to venture such a deed.<sup>36</sup>

This “distinguished old man” also introduces another line of defense for William. He reports that a rumor was spread, in which William refused to act to deal with the effect of the poisoning once it had been discovered—but he introduces this idea primarily in order to refute it. William of Newburgh reports that this witness declared it “also untrue ... that [William of York] was unwilling to take an antidote at the urging of friends who believed that the malice of enemies had perpetrated an assault on him. To lend force to this supposition of falsehood of theirs, they state that William said that he would not adulterate the heavenly antidote with a human one.”<sup>37</sup> This apparently falsely-reported discussion nonetheless follows the logic of earlier trials, which instruct that the consecrated host is sufficient to remove the deadly effects of poison (e.g., the *vita* of Vitalis of Savigny, discussed in Chapter 4, who consumed his poisoned communion wine “because he believed that he was truly receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, and he trusted, with good reason, that such a great mystery could also overcome every poison.”<sup>38</sup>) William of Newburgh’s source, however, seems to think that trusting in such a miracle would be presumptuous, despite the lengthy tradition of holy poison-drinkers, and that William of York would not have been so foolish: “But he was a wise man, and divine authority had taught him that he should not put God to the test. So we must not believe that he spoke or acted in this way.”<sup>39</sup> That is to say, the proof of William’s saintly perspicacity is that he did NOT know the poison was present before drinking it, and having discovered it, he would never have willingly refused an antidote. Trust in the precepts of Mark 16 would demonstrate not faith, but

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<sup>36</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, trans. Walsh and Kennedy, 114.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>38</sup> “The Life of the Blessed Vitalis of Savigny,” trans. Sauvage, 77.

<sup>39</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, trans. Walsh and Kennedy, 115.

presumption. Indeed, William of Newburgh has another source who claimed to have attended William of York as he was dying. This source insists that William *did* in fact take life-saving measures, an act which William of Newburgh notes with approval: “moreover, I heard Symphorianus, a cleric of his household, who had been in his service for a considerable time and had attended him devotedly in his illness, say that he took the antidote at the persuasion of friends, which is precisely what a wise man should be thought to have done.”<sup>40</sup> These possibilities are at odds with each other, but in both cases, William of York’s virtue, it seems, was in *not* trusting in the logic of the poison trial to vindicate him.

Gerald of Wales (d. 1223) also discusses the event in his *Gemma ecclesiastica*, in the context of other saintly poisonings and with robust knowledge of the precedent of saintly poison trials. Gerald’s account of William of York appears in the course of a discussion of what to do if a venomous creature should fall into the Eucharist during mass (see Chapter 4). He recounts a number of miracles in which priests survived such encounters with spiders, most of which miraculously emerge from the priest’s body after some elapsed time. He also recounts a rumor that monks near Tours had successfully poisoned their abbot in this manner.<sup>41</sup> It is in this context that he recounts the death of William of York, although some of the supporting details are noticeably different. The most important change is that in this telling, William was aware of the poison in his chalice and consumed it anyway. Gerald of Wales uses William’s death to attempt to make sense of the seeming inconsistency of poison in the wine of the mass being able to kill

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<sup>40</sup> Symphorianus also gives evidence for the poisoning itself, although this appears to contradict what William of Newburgh is trying to convey about the unsubstantiated nature of the claims: “I heard Symphorianus also say that the friends who were there tended to believe that he had drunk some deadly poison especially because his teeth, previously white, had begun to turn black in that final misfortune.” William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, trans Walsh and Kennedy, 115.

<sup>41</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Jewel of the Church*, trans. John Hagen (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 94-95.

some individuals, but not others. To do so, he must simultaneously reinforce the logic of the trial and offer an equally pious solution for those who drink and die:

How unsearchable are the works of God! What did not harm one killed another, even though both consumed it out of great faith. Perhaps it was necessary that one die in order that evil might not corrupt his mind. So it happened to William [fitzHerbert], bishop of York, who willingly drank the poison placed in the chalice and immediately died. They say that the Lord afterwards proclaimed the bishop's merits through signs and miracles. For another, perhaps it was necessary that he live. In both cases, consideration was given to the person's salvation.<sup>42</sup>

William, by this reasoning, is more useful for his posthumous miracles and was consequently allowed to die. The suggestion that William's death in this manner was necessary for his salvation, or that it somehow prevented evil from "corrupting his mind," remains unelaborated by Gerald. He is, however, also interested in the problem of presumption and the implications of forcing God's hand by expecting a miracle:

But it does seem prudent in such cases not to drink the wine. While a man has something he prudently judges he is able to accomplish, he ought not to throw his care so completely on God, for that is presumption. While God is indeed able to remove the danger, it does seem that the priest should not drink it at all. Because there were steps in the temple by which He was able to come down from the pinnacle, was not Christ unwilling, for the sake of our instruction, to throw himself down, lest He tempt God?<sup>43</sup>

William's case seems to have been recognized in both chronicles as a poison trial, but the recognition that he did not survive has forced the chroniclers to reframe the problem. William *could* have been saved—the communion wine *could* have overcome the poison—but it did not, in order to achieve some greater purpose. William is not consequently condemned by this reality, but rather praised for refusing to require a miracle of God. Some sleight of hand is required in order to make the reframing plausible. William of Newburgh insists that the saint was acceding to the advice of friends in taking an antidote, which demonstrates neither a lack of faith nor a

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<sup>42</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Jewel of the Church*, trans. John Hagen, 94-95.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

presumption that he would be provided with a miracle. Gerard of Wales suggests that the death served a higher purpose by providing the necessary step to bring about the posthumous miracles. Both seem to recognize the preconditions in which poison trials function in the hagiographical tradition, and find means to sidestep them.

The result of these rhetorical gymnastics can be seen in one last source, a hymn composed for the octave of William's feast day, as celebrated in York by the end of the thirteenth century and as represented in liturgical materials composed for the use of York. The hymn recounts the basic narrative of William's travails, before elaborating on his death and the lessons it provides:

Felled by liars  
from his clerical office,  
waiting for seven years,  
free to contemplate;  
Great evil often offers an  
opportunity for great good.

When his situation changed,  
again he petitioned Rome,  
and no one opposed him.  
Reestablished as bishop of York,  
none of a great multitude was injured  
when the bridge collapsed.<sup>44</sup>

During the octave of Pentecost  
certain malicious enemies  
amongst the peaceful,  
so as to deprive that celebrant of life  
placed aconite in the chalice.

That drink and that bread,  
by which all poison is extinguished  
were poisoned by an impious person;  
The prelate embraces both,

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<sup>44</sup> This is a reference to William's only miracle while he lived; on his grand entrance into York, the crowd who gathered to see him were too numerous for the bridge. When he heard it had collapsed, William prayed for the safety of the people and none died.



and through one is killed  
while through the other he lives.

He lives, though indeed he died,  
though not affected in the same way  
by the wine and by the bread.  
His body dies on account of the wine,  
while his soul is nourished by the bread.

He drank the deadly poison  
and with brief tears  
earned eternal laughter;  
He undergoes the best of deaths,  
as he is himself both the sacrifice  
and consecrator of it.

Oh William, martyr of Christ,  
through that which you drank  
from the life-giving chalice,  
you brought comfort to a sorrowful world.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *AH* 40.225, York use.

Fraudulenter qui cassatus  
Ab honore praesulatus,  
Latensque septennio,  
Vacat contemplationi;  
Magnum malum magni boni  
saepe fit occasio.

Statu causae reformato,  
Romam petit iterato,  
Nullis adversantibus.  
Eboracum praesul redit,  
Pontis casus nullum laedit  
De tot turbae millibus.

In octavis Penthecostes  
Quidam malignantes hostes  
In eum pacifice,  
Et ut ipsum privent vita  
Celebrantis achonita  
Propinat in calice.

Toxicatur a prophanis  
Ille potus ille panis  
per quem perit toxicum.  
Ambo praesul amplexatur,  
Ut per unum moriatur  
Et vivat per reliquum.

Virus bibit nocuum

The hymn adopts the justification of Gerald of Wales, in that the death of William is cast as a greater good—this is clear from the opening stanzas, which present William’s first failed attempt at gaining the archbishopric as part of the greater plan for his martyrdom: “great evil often offers an opportunity for great good.” The most explicit concession to the precedent of poisoned Eucharists comes in strophe five: “That drink and that bread, by which all poison is extinguished, were poisoned by an impious person.” There is an acknowledgement here that the power of the host is to mitigate or to otherwise overpower any adulterating substance, but that this power has not functioned here as it should. The ongoing distinction between the poisoned wine and the bread of the Eucharist is a useful metaphor for the distinction the hymnodist is making between bodily and spiritual death. The poison may have worked on his body, but it ensured the life of his soul. This recasting of terms of victory offers no clear resolution to the contest; William’s vindication must come in the form of martyrdom and posthumous miracles, rather than through a clearly articulated divine judgement rendered through his survival.

Over the course of the development of William’s cult, it is clear that individuals who wrote about the saint had to grapple with the inherited tropes of poison trials. By the logic of

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risumque perpetuum  
brevi merearis lacrima,  
Mortem subit optimam  
dum sacrando victimam  
fit et ipse victima.  
Vivit moriturque quidem,  
Sed non agunt circa idem  
Fermentum et azima.  
Corpus obit prae fermento,  
Azimorum alimento  
Vegetatur anima.  
O Willelme, martyr Christi,  
Per eundem quem bibisti  
Salutaris calicem,  
Fer solamen mundo tristi.

Mark 16, William had been proven unworthy, if not for his sainthood, certainly for his office of archbishop. The task of massaging the narrative into a logically consistent vindication of William, in the hands of William of Newburgh, Gerald of Wales, and the York hymnodist, yielded a number of solutions: deny the poisoning outright, turn it into a virtue (a lack of presumption), or attempt to reframe the terms of the trial such that death by poison constitutes martyrdom and eternal life. In attempting the latter two, the poison trial as it had been established over the preceding centuries had to be dismantled. William failed his own poison trial, but the poison trial itself also failed in its primary function.

#### **5.v. Conclusion**

Although I have grouped them collectively as “failures,” the cases of the Arians, Muhammad, and William of York are clearly different in an elemental way. Poison and death in the first two cases perform the same essential function as the miraculous survival of Saint Sabinus of Canosa—they distinguish the true followers of Christ in the manner described in Mark 16, albeit from the negative perspective. William’s death through poison, on the other hand, is itself turned into a martyrdom, a necessary event for the good of all, even as it acknowledges a certain friction with the hagiographical tradition. There is a clear awareness, particularly in the case of Muhammad and to a lesser extent in that of William, of the precedents established by figures like John and Benedict, and consequently a legible attempt to confront the implications if Muhammad *could* detect hidden evils in the manner of a Christian saint, and if William could *not*.

The breakdown of the poison trial in the case of William of York does not serve as some sort of major inflection point in the use of the trial in hagiography, after which its logic cannot be

invoked; the *Legenda Aurea* is itself roughly contemporary with the York hymnodist, and its robust representation of poison-drinking saints must certainly outweigh any slight dent in the framework delivered by the treatment of William of York. On the other hand, William's experience posed a sufficient enough problem to Gerald of Wales that he treated William alongside other more miraculous accounts of tainted Eucharists, and ultimately advised that despite the numerable miracles, it is better not to consciously engage in a poison trial for fear of presumption ("While God is indeed able to remove the danger, it does seem that the priest should not drink it at all"). The attempt to frame a situation through which divine judgements could be in all cases made visible in the world has indeed failed.

## Conclusion

I have made one overarching claim: that medieval poison metaphors both encode and provide the tools for attempting to decode epistemic instability. Human beings, according to the medieval hierarchy of intellect, are creatures of fallible understanding, and that understanding is particularly susceptible to subversion by resemblance to perceived truth. Hidden and corrosive, poisons represent the stakes of error. At the same time, and by virtue of the medieval understanding of Mark 16, poisons represent the possibility of certainty—those who are immune to their effects are positively identified by Christ himself as holding an authoritative position in a manner that attempts to legibly decode divine judgement in the world. Both elements are necessary to give hidden poison metaphors the self-justifying power they have in the hands of medieval thinkers. When it is applied, the poison trial is powerful because it is seemingly self-verifying. The very concern over legitimacy and truth expressed in poison language, when combined with Mark 16, provides the mechanism for meeting its own standards of proof. Perhaps the best example of this is in the contrast between the expressions of doubt over the safety of apocryphal lives and the inclusion of poison trial narratives in the traditions of John the Evangelist and George of Cappadocia. The fear that deleterious material could be smuggled in alongside the edifying is directly counteracted by the act, within the narrative itself, of removing or surviving problematic material mixed in with the apparently good. Once begun, the scaffold of precedent continues to reinforce itself, even as it is overlain with new meanings. Ultimately, however, this attempt at establishing a legible theodicy is itself ultimately unsuccessful, as the case of William of York demonstrates. Even as later authors acknowledge the important

precedents of John the Evangelist and Saint Benedict, they reveal disquiet over the implication that such trials insist on a divine verdict and reflect not faith but presumption, for, in the words of Gerald of Wales, “How unsearchable are the works of God!”<sup>1</sup>

The first chapter established the utility of the image of poison obscured by honey to convey anxiety over signifiers of truth. Building on classical precedent, theologians grappling with questions of authority and verification employed such language to express concern over the misuse of such signifiers as scripture, conciliar and doctrinal language, and individual virtue. Even as such figures as Irenaeus, Ignatius, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, John Cassian, Athanasius, and Vincent of Lerins were actively working to establish the borders of orthodoxy, they encoded in metaphors of poison concealed by honey the concern that the tools with which they were attempting to establish those very borders were flawed and prone to abuse. The consistent use of this metaphor in the works of influential fathers of the church made this language available to those who followed in the medieval period and shaped the way that they wrote about deception and uncertainty.

In Chapter 2 we saw how poison-chalice iconography became central to representations of John for reasons internal to the liturgical commemoration of his feast day, and in doing so made the poison trial, as narrated in extrabiblical source texts, valid hagiographical precedent. Because the open confrontation between John and Aristodemus is not one that foregrounds discernment, John’s trial contributes to the epistemic value of the poison trial by making a different kind of authenticating claim, by way of John’s status as author and recipient of privileged insight. The poison trial speaks to the themes of his incorruptibility and virginity, while encapsulating ideas of martyrdom and Christ-like suffering. The connection between

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Jewel of the Church* 1.19, trans. Hagen, 94.

drinking both the “water of wisdom” and the poison of the trial and his exile on Patmos endows the iconography of the poisoned chalice with these semiotic values, and becomes an authenticating signal in its own right. This process is visible in the way that generations of theologians and compilers of liturgical materials fill in perceived thematic gaps with details of John’s encounter with Aristodemus from the *Passio/Virtutes Iohannes* tradition, as when Haymo of Auxerre elaborated on the framework of a Bede sermon in a way that privileges poison drinking as representing the contemplative life. Aelfric, in his turn, amends the Haymo/Bede framework with yet more explicit quotations from the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition. The anonymous compilers of lectionaries and breviaries do similarly important work in selecting and glossing readings from the *Passio/Virtutes* tradition with psalms explicitly connecting drinking with authorship and apostolic authority. The precedent set by John the Evangelist thus informs the hagiographical trope in a number of ways. It models the way in which a contested hagiographical tradition can be legitimized, which makes this self-authenticating function of the trial accessible to later hagiographers grappling with fraught or condemned narratives. In doing so, it bridges the gap between some of the anxieties expressed in the first chapter (that beguiling stories of apostolic heroism might be a cover for pernicious untruths) and the function of the poison trial itself—that pernicious untruths cannot survive contact with holy bodies.

While John’s chalice itself is a truth-claim, the variations of the poison trial introduced by the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great demonstrate an adaptation into a trial of discernment. If the anxiety encoded in poison and honey metaphors is that there is no means of differentiating true from false from outward signifiers alone, the interiority and discernment demonstrated by Benedict of Nursia and Sabinus of Canosa provides a mechanism for identifying individuals who can reliably unravel such deceptive and ambiguous signifiers, in part as a result of Gregory’s

personal preoccupations with both interiority and the dangers of plausibility. From the framework provided in the *Dialogues*, subsequent generations of Benedictine poets elaborate on interior vision as a virtue communicated by the poison trial, and use it as a superstructure with which to both explore other thematically related miracles and to read them through the language of poison, deception and the triumph over something that appears good but masks ill-intent. This use provides the precedent for the trial in the context of monastic reform and inter-personal conflict, and vindicates the holy poison-drinker.

These two major precedents, Johannine and Gregorian, emphasizing different virtues but both making adjudicating claims, provide later hagiographers with a rich vocabulary. At their most basic, trials in eleventh- to thirteenth-century hagiography accrue the virtues and reflected glory of John or Benedict to the hagiographer's subject. Others use poison survival to vindicate their subjects—in the case of Norbert of Xanten, whose rigid asceticism and passionate preaching bears the hallmarks of potentially deceptive outward signs, his deliverance from a spider in his chalice demonstrates that his activities are fundamentally sound. Most interesting, to my mind, are the cases in which the poison trial applies its adjudicating logic to some larger contest external to the immediate consequence of the saint. In the life of Æthelwold, reforming bishop of Winchester, author Wulfstan uses the poison trial to achieve three major purposes—first, to highlight the individual faith and virtue of Æthelwold, who meditates on Mark 16 to rid himself of the toxic thing he has ingested; second, to justify the expulsion of the secular clerics from Winchester and the institution of a stricter observance; and third, to retroactively justify the entire campaign that aligned monastic interests with royal interests in the context of backlash to such changes nearly 30 years later. What I have termed the “flourishing” of the trial had two corollary effects—first, an explicit acknowledgement and citation of the Mark 16 text, and



second, self-conscious awareness of and ultimately concern about undertaking a trial that so many are known to have survived, on the fear that this would transform the act from one of privileged validation to one of impertinent pride and conceit by demanding a miracle.

Such self-awareness, and the concern over forcing a miracle of God, likewise informs the case that I have termed a “failure” of the trial, in that the needs of the hagiographer and the inherited understanding of poison-drinking come into conflict in such a way as to contort or sidestep that established tradition. William of York’s hagiographers, in trying to square the circle, highlight virtues such as his obedience and volition to be a martyr, both conceding that any adjudication that has been made has been made *against* their subject, while also insisting that death by poison was a positive in that it hastened William’s posthumous miracles. The trial itself has broken down attempting to reconcile these varied needs. Other “failures,” of course, are much more straightforward proofs that just as there are those who are vindicated via Mark 16, there are those whose death by poison invalidates any claim to orthodoxy. The insistence, in particular, that Muhammad ultimately died from poison after having survived an earlier attempt underscores how closely the trope had been tied to both saintliness and self-authorization.

This study has been ranging in its chronological scope and source-base, both by design and by necessity. The conceit of chapter division by conceptual saintly type (John, Benedict and Sabinus, insular poison-drinkers and spider-saints, failures) has allowed for one important thread of argumentation, that the two prototypical modes for poison drinkers are influenced by either the poison trial of John the Evangelist or the discernment-driven trials reflecting the preoccupations of Gregory the Great. Pursuing this organization has also allowed for diachronic analysis of how the meaning ascribed to the experiences of individual saints was embellished and enriched over centuries. However, it has perhaps suggested greater stability and continuity in the

trial itself than is warranted by the rich and diverse texts themselves, and it has potentially obscured regional or synchronic connections. There are a number of observations and inferences that might be made on this front, although any actual genealogy of influences would require a different kind of textual analysis than that I have performed here.

Although its origins can be hazily traced to the fourth century, the codification of bibliographical details of John the Evangelist and the inclusion of an apocryphal (or at least extrabiblical) event in the commemoration of John's December 27<sup>th</sup> feast day was a process that occurred over centuries. The distillation of the poison trial as a vehicle to describe his virtues and quasi-martyrdom coincided with the development of devotion to Saints Benedict and Sabinus, as the tenth-century hymnodists of St. Gall Notker and Ekkehard would undoubtedly have been influenced by the *Dialogues* and the life of the Benedictine founder. Whether or not the *Dialogues* themselves were influenced by the trial of John is less clear; I have suggested that Sabinus, in particular, reflects elements of the earlier tradition, but it is also plausible that Gregory's preoccupation with interiority and hidden rhetorical poisons visible in the *Moralia in Job*, in combination with the promise of Mark 16, justify an origin *sui generis*. Likewise, the liturgical and homiletic material framing John's trial as one that reinforces other themes of privileged wisdom and corporeal purity surely influenced and was influenced by other contemporary hagiographical projects—particularly as some of those projects had shared authorship. Ælfric, treating both John and George, may have accepted the poison trial of John as validation of the same miracle in a contested life of George, despite his expressed misgivings over provenance. Thus, while I have treated John largely independently, in reality the cross-influences are evident and important.

There is a strong geographical component that has been occluded by my structure, although I have attempted to highlight it at necessary junctures. The frequency of texts of insular provenance in this study is not simply an artefact of selection bias. Insular sources abound. Prayers to expunge poison, either to or purportedly composed by John, appear in a number of early compendia, including the *Book of Nunnaminster* and the *Book of Cerne*, and in explicitly medicinal texts like *Bald's leechbook* and the *Lacnuga*, all from the eighth to tenth centuries. I have highlighted lives of St. Patrick, St. David of Wales, and St. George of Cappadocia, all of whom are important foundational or patron saints. Poison trials were particularly important in the circle of tenth-century Benedictine reformers like Æthelwold, Ælfric, and Dunstan. Poison trial “failure” William of York had his deeds recorded and reflected upon by Gerald of Wales. Some of this concentration can be explained by larger trends of ecclesiastical and monastic influence in Europe between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Some can surely be attributed to authors with intellectual debts to each other, as in the case of the Benedictine reformers.

This study is neither exhaustive nor making any claim to an end-point at which hagiographers stopped valuing poison-drinking. I have omitted many saintly poison-drinkers as being thematically repetitive or otherwise ancillary to the argument pursued here. For example, St. Victor of Syria, who makes an appearance in Bede's *Martyrology*, has a brief and largely unelaborated experience amidst a list of extreme tortures in which, “ordered to drink poison, he did not die, but converted the poisoner to his faith.”<sup>2</sup> The parallels to John and George of Cappadocia are clear, but so little is made of the case that it can merely be corroborative of eighth-century exposure to such trials. A more interesting case belongs to Martin of Tours from the life by Sulpicius Severus. Martin, after an unsuccessful battle with Arians, and following

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Head, *Medieval Hagiography: an Anthology*, 185.

imperial persecution of his mentor Hilary of Poitiers, was driven into exile on an island on which he embraces life as an ascetic. In entirely unclear circumstances, Martin ingests a poisonous plant: “During that period he ate some hellebore [along with a meal], a plant said to be poisonous. But when he felt the power of the poison attacking him and death close at hand, he managed by his prayers to repel the danger threatening him and immediately all the pain left him.”<sup>3</sup> The mechanic of the poison trial is in play, although the agency is somewhat unclear—indeed, rather like the individuals I have dubbed “Spider-saints.” The juridical aspects of the experience, however, are very clear, as “not long afterwards...he learned that the emperor had now repented and had given St. Hilary permission to return from exile.”<sup>4</sup> The triumph over poison seems to correlate to the triumph of the maligned St. Hilary, and thus function as the vindication of a contested truth (the merit of Martin’s mentor, and by proxy the validity of their position on Arianism) via saintly poison survival. With neither poisoning agent nor explicit theorizing on the connection between the cause and effect, again Martin’s experience is suggestive evidence of an early fourth-century prototype but inconclusive. Later authors do not cite his example as they do John or Benedict, nor does the random ingestion of hellebore catch on as a saintly virtue.

William of York, whose experiences prompt his hagiographers to contort the logic of the poison trial past recognition, by no means causes any kind of rupture or represents any real end point. The incident causes Gerald of Wales to reflect on holy poisonings somewhat doubtfully,

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<sup>3</sup> “Life of Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus” in *Early Christian Lives*, trans. Carolinne White, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 141. “Quo tempore helleborum, venenatum, ut ferunt, gramen, in cibum sumpsit. Sed cum vim veneni in se grassantis vicina iam morte sensisset, immiens preiculum oratione repulit statimque omnis dolor fugatus est.” *Vita S. Martini*, 6.5-6. ed. Fontaine (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> “Life of Martin of Tours,” trans. White, 141.

and to recommend that anyone who suspects that their chalice has been contaminated should not attempt to force a miracle by consuming it. Thomas Aquinas, a generation later, repeats the advice, adding means to suitably and honorably dispense with the creature if it is only discovered after consecration.<sup>5</sup> However, Aquinas' contemporary, the Franciscan preacher Anthony of Padua, converted a group of heretics who attempted to poison him at a meal by discerning and consuming the trap, carrying on with the tradition without expressing any anxiety about it. There are almost certainly examples from the fourteenth century and later.

An avenue for potential future research would be to investigate the interpretation and reception of a related sign from Mark 16: the ability to pick up snakes and to purge their venom. There are suggestive parallels, particularly in cases in which the handling of snakes forms part of a trial setting (see, e.g. Saints Quiriacus, Simon and Jude in the *Legenda Aurea*). How might the “venom trial” function without the underpinning of epistemic anxiety expressed in the concealment of the danger?

I proposed to bring together a number of different strands of historiography, including exegetical work around Mark 16 and the reception history of this fraught “longer-ending,” work

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<sup>5</sup> “Objection 3: Further, it sometimes happens that a fly or a spider, or some other poisonous creature falls into the chalice after the consecration. Or even that the priest comes to know that poison has been put in by some evilly disposed person in order to kill him. Now in this instance, if he takes it, he appears to sin by killing himself, or by tempting God: also in like manner if he does not take it, he sins by acting against the church's statute. Consequently, he seems to be perplexed, and under necessity of sinning, which is not becoming.[...] Reply to Objection 3: If a fly or a spider falls into the chalice before consecration, or if it be discovered that the wine is poisoned, it ought to be poured out, and after purifying the chalice, fresh wine should be served for consecration. But if anything of the sort happen after the consecration, the insect should be caught carefully and washed thoroughly, then burned, and the “ablution,” together with the ashes, thrown into the sacrarium. If it be discovered that the wine has been poisoned, the priest should neither receive it nor administer it to others on any account, lest the life-giving chalice become one of death, but it ought to be kept in a suitable vessel with the relics: and in order that the sacrament may not remain incomplete, he ought to put other wine into the chalice, resume the mass from the consecration of the blood, and complete the sacrifice.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Q 83, A 6, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2013) 2517-2518.

on hagiography as a means of probing social and intellectual developments, work on poisons and their meaning in the medieval imagination, and work specifically on the application of such metaphors in anti-heretical discourse. In addition to my primary argument that the poison trial, as such, deserves to be viewed as a rich hermeneutic tool, there are two contributions that I intend this study to make to the other varied fields in which medieval ideas about poison have been discussed. The first is an added interpretive lens to the discussion of medieval heresy. The second is iconographic, especially as pertains to representations of John the Evangelist with his chalice.

First: to the well-established and thorough accounts of eleventh- to thirteenth-century heresy that note the prevalence and power of “poisonousness” in describing heretics, and which delve into the problem of false appearance and hypocrisy, I add the following observations. The anxieties expressed over the potential that heretics are both not outwardly identifiable, and that they cloak their doings under accepted hallmarks of truth, echo precisely the use of the image of poison concealed by honey explored in Chapter 1. As did the opponents of Jerome, Tertullian and Athanasius, heretics hide falsehood under Scriptural quotation, ascetic behaviors, and professions of faith. Indeed, poison and honey expressing this problem are present in the earliest account of eleventh-century heresy, from Paul of St. Pere de Chartres in 1022, of heretics in Orleans:

In the city there lived two clerks, Stephen and Lisois, who were widely famed for their wisdom, outstanding in holiness and generous with alms. Heribert sought them out and in a short time had become their docile disciple: intoxicated by them with a deadly draught of evil disguised by the sweetness of the holy scriptures, he was demented, ensnared by a diabolical heresy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert I. Moore, *Birth of Popular Heresy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 11. See also Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages: The Search for Legitimate Authority* (New York: Macmillan International, 1992), 276-7.

Even more straightforward is the warning in a homily by the twelfth-century English royal chaplain Radulfus Ardens: “Beware of false prophets! [...] For their trick is that they disguise themselves. The poisoner hides the poison in honey; the traitor, fraud in submissiveness; the hypocrite, ill-will in religiosity; the heretic, falsehood in truths... Any who demonstrate religiosity externally, but internally conceal heretical rapacity, in this way slaughter the souls of the simple.”<sup>7</sup> The language finds full expression in the descriptions of Cathars by Pseudo-Cappelli; again, the appearance of virtue, both in the form of persuasive words and admirable-seeming fasting behaviors, conceals ill intentions:

Because no truth adheres to the pernicious traditions of the heretics, they flavor them in consequence with a certain seasoning of simulated virtue so that the underlying poison is less perceptible through the pleasing sweetness of the honey... surely their religion is shown to be false when with unbridled tongue they utter poisonous words out of a pestilent heart. Bound by superstition, they insist dogmatically that all meat, eggs, fowl, or cheese are to be eschewed and that no man nourished by these foods can attain salvation. Now, in order to spread false doctrine under a veil of good works, they abstain from these foods at all times and, abstaining also in repeated fasts from wine, they crucify the flesh... For they are cunning serpents, hucksters adulterating wine, so that, with a show of simplicity, they proffer to unwary hearers a draught of death.<sup>8</sup>

These are well-known examples; I suggest that the language used within them should be read not as sign of any particular innovation or newly confronted problem. They fit into a long tradition and must be read against similar concerns expressed by the fathers of the church.

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<sup>7</sup> Radulfus Ardens, *Homiliae*, PL 155: 2010. “Attendite, id est attendentes cavete a falsis prophetis.... Proprium enim doli est se dissimulare. Veneficus sub melle tegit venenum; proditor, sub obsequio fraudem; hypocrita, sub religione malitiam; haereticus, sub veritate falsitatem. Cum autem hic, per falsos prophetas, quoslibet hypocritas, qui aliud occultant et aliud simulant, possemus intelligere, tamen de haereticis specialiter dictum est. Qui cum exterius simulent religionem, interius celant haereticam rapacitatem, per quam animas simplicium jugulare festinant.” For Radulfus generally, see Johannes Gründel, *Die Lehre des Radulfus Ardens von den Verstandestugenden auf dem Hintergrund seinen Seelenlehre* (Munich: Schönigh, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 306. See Dino Bazzocchi, *La Eresia catara: Saggio storico filosofico con in appendice Disputationes nonnullae adversus haereticos, codice inedito de secolo XIII della biblioteca Malatestiana di Cesena*, Appendix CLXXXVI-VII.

As such, and in light of the epistemic work performed by poison and the poison trial that I have explored, there must be a solution to the problem of false-seeming in the eleventh- to thirteenth-century anti-heretical contexts just as there is in the previous (and contemporary) hagiographic contexts. To highlight this parallel solution, I compare two contemporary accounts of problematic preachers. The first, discussed in the chapter on Spider-saints, is Norbert of Xanten, denounced in 1118 at the Council of Fritzlar for his itinerant preaching (In the words of the somewhat sympathetic *vita*, “They wanted to know why he had usurped the office of preacher and why was he wearing a religious habit although he was still living on his own and hadn’t entered religious life”). His poison trial occurs after he has worn himself out with an excess of zeal and has gained the resentment and distrust of his fellows, and his survival justifies Norbert’s preaching as valid. I compare the case of Norbert, carefully and properly adjudicated in a hagiographical poison trial, with that of Henry of Le Mans.<sup>9</sup> Henry entered Le Mans in 1116, just two years before Norbert was chastised by the Council of Fritzlar. Henry of Le Mans was another zealous preacher, ascetic in appearance, and thoroughly anti-clerical in his stance. The Le Mans chronicler complains that, like the Orleans heretics before him and like all heretics everywhere, he hid his heresy behind scripture: “He began to spread the poison of his heresy in remote areas, and tainted the church of God with the black ink of his wickedness. Adapting the history and word of the Prophets to his own ear, he propounded a perverse doctrine.”<sup>10</sup> Deceived by the protective cover of scripture, his auditors take in dangerous material: “His words stuck in

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<sup>9</sup> The case Henry of Le Mans has been thoroughly treated. Moore somewhat ironically calls it “canonical.” See Evans and Wakefield, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 107 et passim; Heinrich Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars in the High Middle Ages, 1000-1200* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 59-61; Robert Moore, *Christendom and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 38-41; Moore, *The War on Heresy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 111-123.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy*, 39.



the minds of people just as freshly taken poison when it has been forced into the limbs spreads its strength through the vitals and, with inexorable hatred of life, twists and bends to attack them unceasingly.”<sup>11</sup> The account of Henry of Le Mans, I believe, is structured like a poison trial. However, it relies on a few more interpretive layers than are necessary in hagiography, including the gloss on Mark 16 that interprets “drinking poison” as “withstanding problematic speech.” Norbert and Henry’s rough contemporary Bruno of Segni expands the text this way: “They drink a deadly thing, but it does not kill them; because, reading books of the pagans or the heretics, and often hearing the bitter, poisonous noise put forth in them, they turn a deaf ear to it, and think nothing of it.”<sup>12</sup> The poison trial, as such, then, occurs when the local Bishop Hildebert summons Henry to hear Henry account for himself—which is to say, he offers to drink his poison—and survives the experience unconvinced and untainted. The Bishop then challenges Henry to what might be better termed a “trial by tradition.” He invites Henry to explain his vocation, which he can’t, and when that fails, to sing psalms together: “indeed, Henry showed himself ignorant of the daily office. Then to make his ignorance absolutely clear, the bishop began to sing the usual psalms to the Virgin, and Henry knew neither the lines themselves nor the sequence.”<sup>13</sup> There is much to be said, and indeed has been said, about this interaction in terms of its contest between reform versus institution, but I think there is also an interesting structural reading to be made. Henry, the poison, is given to Hildebert. Hildebert effectively prays over the poison, and the poison is expelled from his cup, which is to say, his church and his city—for, embarrassed by

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted from Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Bruno of Segni, *Commentaria in Marcum*, PL 165: 332. “Bibunt autem mortiferum, sed non eis nocet; quia paganorum et haeticorum libros legentes, et amara venenosa convicia sibi illata saepius audientes, surda aure transeunt et pro nihilo ducunt.”

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy*, 38.

this experience, Henry “fled to disturb some other regions with his poisonous breath.”<sup>14</sup> I believe that the confrontation between Hildebert and Henry is structured like a hagiographical poison-trial, which authenticates the position of the bishop against anti-clerical sentiment when he “survives” uninjured. The influence of the exegetical tradition is clear in that the poison vector is speech. Obviously, not every account of medieval heresy that employs the language of hidden poison will include a handy confrontation in this manner, but I suggest that the epistemic certainty promised by the very premise of the trial, even if unrealized, informs many such accounts.

The second intervention is iconographic. Images of saints bearing poisoned chalices must be read in the larger context of meaning around poison drinking, discernment, and validating truth claims. Discussions of such images often start and end with the identification of the hagiographical tradition from which the image derives, or treat the chalice as a straightforward attribute for identification only. I contend that this is only half of the interpretive interest of poison-chalice iconography. As in the case of the illustrations of the *Dialogues* in Desiderius’ manuscript in honor of Benedict (Chapter 3), important linking between figures and ideas can be achieved iconographically. Extending the assessment of iconography of John the Evangelist already discussed (Chapter 2), I suggest one more important way in which using the poison trial as a lens through which to view medieval images can enrich our understanding. The poison chalice continued to be depicted well after the medieval flourishing of the trial. Dutch painter Hans Memling painted a number of chalice-bearing Johns, but he also depicted the chalice on its own, on one side of a diptych (now separated):

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted from Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy*, 38.



Image 6. Hans Memling, c. 1470, diptych. Left: Outside panel with chalice of John the Evangelist. Right: Inside panel of St. Veronica. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

On the obverse, exposed when the diptych would have been folded open, is St. Veronica holding the icon of the Holy Face. The pairing of these two images has puzzled many art historians working on the diptych; as the facing panel to St. Veronica is of John the Baptist, some mistake the chalice for an attribute of the Baptist.<sup>15</sup> Other hypotheses are that the outward-facing image, the chalice, was initially intended for some other work, presumably on the assumption that these

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<sup>15</sup> Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 428. See also Alexa Sand, "Saving Face: The Veronica and the *Visio Dei*" in *Vision, Devotion and Self-Representation in Late Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 27-83; Katherine Brown, *The Legend of Veronica in Early Modern Art* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2020); Jeffrey Hamburger, "Vision and the Veronica" in *The Visual and the Visionary. Art and Female Spirituality in Late-Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 317-82.

two ideas, the poisoned chalice and the Veronica, have no common thread to connect them.<sup>16</sup> I contend that they are a pairing that makes clear sense when read through the tradition of the saintly poison trial and the development of the chalice as John's attribute. Both images make ontological and epistemic claims about the nature of truth and verification. The Veronica, the cloth that legendarily received the impression of Christ's face on his way to the crucifixion, is a physical representation of Christ on earth, in the form of an icon that is also a touch-relic. Depictions of the Veronica thus blur the boundary between representation and reality, purporting as they are to be copies of art that is not made by the hands of an artist but which recreate the actual face of Christ. Art Historian Hans Belting describes the Veronica as an "imprint" that can be reproduced in the manner of a seal, and is thus "more authentic than any work of art, in that it did not rely on artistic imitation." Despite the mass-reproduction of the image, depictions of the Veronica purported to be a practically unmediated encounter with the face of God, and a physical, visible verification of the presence of Christ on earth. I contend that the chalice of John, in light of the tradition of authentication and adjudicating truth claims, is likewise a statement of verification. The chalice thus also performs the function of a seal, declaring, in the words of the response that accompanied lectionary readings of the poison trial, "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). In this light, the pairing is one of unimpeachable signifiers, as together the images suggest a meditation on the nature of proof and certainty.

These are two discrete ways in which I believe the hagiographical poison trial can enrich current scholarly conversations. Other fruitful directions might be to use the trope to more

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<sup>16</sup> John Oliver Hand, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Washington National Gallery of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 196.

closely track connections between hagiographical centers and reception histories, to investigate the crossover between liturgy and the use of John's anti-poison prayer in magico-medical contexts, or to investigate the use of poison-in-honey imagery in non-theological contexts involving deception, including medieval literature or political discourse.

## **Postscript**

When I began this project, the parallels between the medieval concerns and those of our current moment were not fully clear to me. I understood that something important was being expressed in the early Christian anxiety about the moving goal-posts of verification. I acknowledged that beyond the medieval world into the early modern and modern, the shared foundations, or at least consensus, of declaring something to be "true" were always subject to constant and historically meaningful change. The Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, post-modernism—each phase of the periodization of intellectual history marks an important shift in the common signifiers of truth.

Our current epistemic crisis seems to be viewable primarily in the terms we have invented to express our own lack of shared foundations: 2005 gave us Stephen Colbert's formulation of "truthiness," or the idea that something can "feel" emotionally true without necessarily being so; the 2016 Oxford Dictionary word of the year was "post-truth," a word that suggests a radical epistemological nihilism, and which reflects a general sense that political mendacity is on the rise. Other important recent usages include "fake news" and "alternative facts." Inherent in all of these terms of the last decade is an underlying struggle with the nature of knowledge, and a lack of a consensus from which to interpret and act upon information. What

constitutes a fact? What mechanisms are available to us to distinguish truth from nonsense, or worse, lies?

The problem is compounded by the advent of technologies that our current theories of knowledge and certainty cannot account for, and which cause us to question (as have many before us) the validity of our own perceptions. We often behave as though we still function in a world in which the empirical evidence gathered from personal experience and perception is an acceptable source of knowledge. Photographs are still accepted as courtroom evidence on the assumption that they are transparent representations of reality as it was in the moment of capture.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the explicative power of evidentiary mainstays like photography and video is being undermined by the growing sense that image, and, increasingly, video, is easily manipulatable and, thus, fundamentally untrustworthy. A flurry of recent articles on the AI-generated output known as the “deepfake,” a technology that can convincingly ventriloquize any source image into saying or doing something they did not say or do in reality, demonstrates this anxiety in both headline (“In the Age of A.I., Is Seeing Still Believing?”) and content: “In a world in which seeing is no longer believing, the ability for a large community to agree on what is true—much less to engage in constructive dialogue about it—suddenly seems precarious...the emergence of deepfakes will make it increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish between what is real and what is fake.”<sup>18</sup> If neither video nor photograph is free from rejection on the

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<sup>17</sup> Even skeptical theorizing on the ontological status of photography distinguishes photography from other pictorial representation as being somehow closer to the essential referent depicted therein. Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin, “On the Epistemic Value of Photographs” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 2 (2004): 197–210.

<sup>18</sup> Rob Toews, “Deepfakes Are Going To Wreak Havoc On Society. We Are Not Ready” *Forbes*, May 25, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robtoews/2020/05/25/deepfakes-are-going-to-wreak-havoc-on-society-we-are-not-prepared/>

basis of presumed compromise, what do we trust? Only things that happen directly in front of us? (Medieval thinkers are ahead of us on that one—your eyes can lie to you, too).

This is the modern version of the process I traced in Chapter 1—the ongoing realization that the current tools of certainty are failing. Modern *auctoritas*, once based on a shared acceptance of certain institutions, journalists or fields of expertise, has dissolved into partisan championship and partisan distrust. Video and photos are manipulatable. It is no wonder, therefore, that the language of poison to express this epistemic anxiety has resurfaced, as well. Pointing to the perverse incentive structure that encourages social media companies to promote doctored images and high-engagement content, a *New Yorker* interviewee declares that “the entire business model of these trillion-dollar companies is attention engineering. It’s poison.” References to epistemic poison in the cultural nervous system extend to concerns over “fake news,” as evident in a *Washington Post* opinion headline from October 2020, “No matter Who Wins the Election, Disinformation Will Still Poison our Democracy,”<sup>19</sup> and indeed as far back as 2016 a *Time* opinion piece offered “The Only Antidote to the Poison of Fake News.”<sup>20</sup> As the poison of concealed error had the potential to injure the social world of the past, the modern context has a similar metaphor for what epistemic uncertainty is doing to the body politic: “The marketplace of ideas already suffers from truth decay as our networked information environment interacts in toxic ways with our cognitive biases.”<sup>21</sup> Poison, in these publications, indicates some

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<sup>19</sup> Nina Jankowicz, “No matter Who Wins the Election, Disinformation Will Still Poison our Democracy,” *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/28/disinformation-election-qanon-democracy/>

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Nesbit, “The Only Antidote to Fake News,” *Time*, December 16, 2016.

<https://time.com/4605146/fake-news-antidote/>

<sup>21</sup> Chesney, Robert and Citron, Danielle Keats, “Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security” (July 14, 2018). 107 *California Law Review* 1753 (2019), U of Texas Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 692, U of Maryland Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-21, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3213954>.

destructive force working against the substance of our common intellectual life, and appears in the co-opting of some of the previously accepted vehicles for conveying information.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the close parallels in such epistemic problems, the prescribed antidotes to this threat to the body politic mirror the solutions assayed in the earlier context. The tools of verification enumerated by Vincent of Lerins in the fourth century have their modern rhymes, primarily in the form of asserting or re-asserting institutional authority. The 2016 *Time* piece suggests that “the only antidote to fake news poison is real news...curated by legacy media journalism, delivered by big platforms in a true partnership.” The reliability of such institutions should be overtly encoded and broadcast so that individuals may consume them in confidence, as Richard Hasen, author of a recent book evocatively titled *Cheap Speech: How Disinformation Poisons Our Politics — and How to Cure It*, suggests: “Journalistic bodies should use accreditation methods to send signals to voters and social media companies about which content is reliable and which is counterfeit. Over time and with a lot of effort, we can reestablish greater faith in real journalism, at least for a significant part of the population.”<sup>22</sup> An echo of another of Vincent’s tools, adherence to conciliar decree and the use of specific theological vocabulary to encode authenticity, appears in another suggested solution to our modern problems: using machine learning not to generate, but to detect so-called “deepfakes,” such that any video can be clearly and reliably labelled as being without manipulation, which is to say, within the bounds of orthodoxy.

These examples are intended to suggest that there is something enduring and deep-rooted about using poison metaphors to express epistemic uncertainty, but also to demonstrate that we

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Hasen, “How to Keep the Rising Tide of Fake News From Drowning Our Democracy,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/07/opinion/cheap-speech-fake-news-democracy.html>



are in the midst of the same problem that so engaged theologians and hagiographers of the past. The remedies suggested above to establish modern iterations of the shared grounds of truth seem doomed in the context of the long history of such metaphors; journalists may be able to generate signals of reliability, but the lesson from the medieval context is that there is no enduring way to make such signals invulnerable to abuse or corruption. An AI-based video certification approach is likewise flawed, as the data sets from which machine learning derives information are themselves vulnerable to manipulation, and just as they can be trained to be arbiters of truth, they can be mis-trained—appropriately, malicious tampering with this root data is known as a “poison attack.”<sup>23</sup> An AI-certified video is only as trustworthy as the data on which the neural network was trained. As in the first centuries of Christianity, even as the tools of authentication are generated, they are acknowledged as being vulnerable to misuse.

The hagiographical poison trial developed over time to confront this problem, built on a self-reinforcing edifice of authentication, and it ultimately did not provide sound or stable grounds for establishing epistemic certainty. It is, to say the least, sobering to realize that we, too, are entrenched in this very problem.

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel Woolley, “We’re fighting fake news AI bots by using more AI. That’s a mistake.” *MIT Technology Review*, January 8, 2020. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/01/08/130983/were-fighting-fake-news-ai-bots-by-using-more-ai-thats-a-mistake/>

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