

The Global Eminent Life: Sixth-Century Collected Biographies from Gregory of Tours to Huijiao of Jiaxiang Temple

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Sanctity and the holy have been useful concepts for scholars seeking to compare religious cultures. This paper seeks to extend the project of comparisons by investigating the organisational contexts that produced collected biographies about holy women and men. It focuses on case studies from Latin and Byzantine Christianity and Buddhist China in the sixth century CE to highlight useful similarities in the authors' conceptions of their work in the face of fluid traditions and contested religious environments. It also sketches some of the ways in which manuscript production and library organisation helped to generate the texts we have. Without consideration of these organisational factors, it is argued, the traditional project of comparing holy figures is on uncertain ground.

Keywords: collected biographies, hagiography, manuscripts, libraries, Gregory of Tours, Gregory the Great, John of Ephesus, Cyril of Scythopolis, Baochang, Huijiao, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Christianity.

What might comparative and global histories add to our understanding of biographical and hagiographical collections of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages? Such a question ought to come naturally to researchers dealing with biographical writings from the period. Peter Brown's seminal work on the holy man as a specific type of character with social functions came out of efforts to think comparatively and anthropologically about the imaginative spaces of different societies. When he came to reflect on the ways in which Latin and Greek Christianities gradually ›parted ways‹, he focused on examples of the holy, ›like an ultra-violet light which enables us to see differing structures in one and the same crystal.¹ It is an approach that has been highly influential. At the same time, however, comparisons of the holy have not always extended as thoroughly into comparisons of the literary and organisational processes that produced the sources for studies of the holy. It is increasingly desirable to establish stronger ground rules for doing so, in order to avoid comparing phenomena without fully understanding what produced them.

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1 Brown, *Eastern and Western Christendom*, 175. His classic studies of the holy man as a type are Brown, *Holy Man*, and Brown, *Exemplar*. For critical assessment, see the essays in Howard-Johnston and Hayward, *The Cult of Saints*.

A significant influence on such a project is the rise of the new global histories that have started to reshape studies of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. To read Johannes Preiser-Kapeller's recent *Jenseits von Rom und Karl dem Grossen* (2018) is to discover a world of networks and connections – many, of course, indirect – that force us to reconsider how developments in different parts of Afro-Eurasia affected matters elsewhere, sometimes at great distance.² Mobility was more important than often thought, and ideas and practices could hardly remain static in such an environment.³ At the same time, we do not have to rely solely on fully integrated systems to make comparison meaningful if we have the right terms for investigation.⁴ Chris Wickham, in his 2004 Reuter Lecture, argued that what we need are well considered grounds to ensure that we are not comparing and contrasting at random.⁵ In socio-economic studies, one might insist on similar population sizes or economic structures. In politics, one might study types of organisation. For my present purposes, for reassessing holiness, it is useful that the sixth century witnessed the production of ›collective biographies‹ in different Christian and Buddhist communities, produced in institutional settings with strong connections to both lay and religious audiences.

By ›collective biographies‹, I mean to invoke a relatively loose category of writing. It is one in which authors sought to explore their worlds – here, specifically religious worlds – by compiling life stories and anecdotes about a few or more different figures. The words used to describe these texts naturally vary, from *vita* and *historia* in the Latin tradition (with similar terms employed in Greek and Syriac) to 傳 (*zhuan*, ›biography‹) in China – all of which loosely evoke variable practices of telling and organising stories rather more than they denote fixed genres in the modern sense. Modern scholarship on Christianity and Buddhism often employs the term ›hagiography‹ to capture the nature of such texts, although such a term is anachronistic and reflects our efforts to articulate the discourses and practices of writing about holy people more than the authors in the past.⁶ If we accept that there are good grounds to compare these discourses and the practices involved in the ways that they intersect with religious, social, and political thought, however, we can begin to analyse literary thought worlds that allow us to highlight the ideals and structures involved in ways that illuminate telling similarities and differences.

The underlying ideas of ›holiness‹ will necessarily not always be absolute. An important problem with the use of the term ›hagiography‹ is that it carries the cultural baggage of specifically Christian institutions of sanctity which would later involve formal processes of canonisation.⁷ Early medieval holiness was rarely so formal – not that it always was in later centuries – with biographical commemoration in particular open to a wide spectrum of

2 On interconnectedness, see also Moore, *A Global Middle Ages?*

3 An important study here remains McCormick, *Origins*.

4 Instructive recent collections include Drews and Oesterle, *Transkulturelle Komparatistik* and Hovden, Lutter and Pohl, *Meanings of Community*.

5 Wickham, *Problems*, 13.

6 On the problem with Latin hagiography, see Lifshitz, *Beyond Positivism and Genre*, especially 98. On Byzantine hagiography, see Hinterberger, *Byzantine Hagiography*. Similar issues are involved for Buddhism in China, as much biographical tradition had its roots in Chinese literature as much as *avadāna* or other Buddhist texts: Kieschnick, *Buddhism*, especially 535, and more generally Twitchett, *Chinese Biographical Writing*.

7 See Vauchez, *La sainteté*.

impressive individuals, whether they attracted cultic devotion or not. Mahāyāna Buddhism had similar issues with ideals about Bodhisattva, the special individuals who had achieved enlightenment and who could inspire others.⁸ One could read the theory in Lotus sūtra but, when it came to lived example, people could walk the paths to different extents and still be worthy of being promoted as inspirational figures.⁹ Buddhism and Christianity both required that people argue the case for seeing people as holy. At a theological level, Christian saints and Buddhist Bodhisattvas could seem different while often fulfilling similar functions.¹⁰ At the level of a biography, it is particularly important that, Buddhist or Christian, lived examples were put forward to embody spiritual ideals within the world, sometimes regardless of imperfection. Study of the processes behind creating collected biographies will help us to analyse not just ideals of sanctity, but also how these ideals became historically grounded and effective.

The Ebb and Flow of Comparative Studies

Comparative work on saints and hagiography has a mixed recent history.¹¹ In the mid-1980s, there was something of a boom in efforts to acquire new insights into the sociologic importance of saints, and to see how saints compared across time and space. The Stephen Wilson-curated *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History* (1985), for instance, brought together essays from Évelyn Patlagean on Byzantine saints and social history and Pat Geary on rituals, to Marc Gaborieau on Muslim saints in Nepal and northern India. This was followed three years later by *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions* (1988), edited by medievalist Richard Kieckhefer in collaboration with George D. Bond, a scholar who has long worked on Buddhism in Southeast Asia. This was a volume that, as the title suggests, provided sketches of how the figures of saints looked in different world religions, with a chapter on each – often sketching the theories of sanctity more than the lived practice. Saints looked, for a moment, to be something that would bring studies of different cultures closer together, even if the mechanics of writing and organising stories remained at best secondary. Everybody, it seems, read Peter Brown's work on holy men and cults as their starting point. But in the 1990s there seemed to be a turn away from this trend in scholarship on Latin Christendom, and comparative studies became less prominent.

One reason for the retreat from comparison is simply a shift in the scales of analysis. One could unfairly frame this as the age-old trend towards scholars knowing more and more about less and less. It was, however, more sophisticated than that. On the late antique and early medieval West, there was a necessary procession of deep case study histories, such as Máire Herbert's study of Insular Columban hagiographical tradition in 1988, or Thomas Head's account of hagiography in the diocese of Orléans in 1990.¹² These effectively marked a

8 On the variety of saints in Buddhism, see Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India*.

9 Benn, *Burning for the Buddha*, 50-52.

10 Lopez Jr, Sanctification, 177-178 and 206-207; Augustine, *Buddhist Hagiography*, 5-6.

11 Palmer, *Early Medieval Hagiography*, 3-4, 75, and 80-83.

12 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*; Head, *Hagiography*. On the analytical shifts involved, see Smith, *Early Medieval Hagiography*, 70-72.

shift away from large-scale typologies towards microhistories and *Historismus*, usually with a marked increase in attention to issues of text and transmission. Text was and is political, depending on the context.¹³ Such moves were not intended as a reaction against the models from sociology and indeed many, such as Poulin's 1975 study of Carolingian Aquitaine, were intended to provide the case studies to inform comparative studies for future generations.¹⁴ For Poulin, at least, those comparative studies were quickly shaped by the project *Les sources hagiographiques narratives composées en Gaule avant l'an mil* (SHG), which also saw Martin Heinzelmann, François Dolbeau and, later, Monique Goulet pursuing greater depth of philological analysis across more case studies from throughout the Frankish kingdoms. The intellectual, social and political complexities involved in writing, rewriting, and circulating hagiographical texts were increasingly laid bare.¹⁵

At the same time, the influence of Brown was felt in Buddhist studies with some similar consequences. In 1994, Koichi Shinohara argued that, going forward, Brown's critique of popular religion and his emphasis on functionalism had much to offer scholars studying the sixth-century *Gaoseng Zhuan* 高僧傳 (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*) by Huijiao 慧皎 (497-554). In particular, he argued, it was time to challenge positivistic readings of the past to understand the logic and function of religious belief and practice. Nevertheless, he concluded: ›[we need to look] closely at medieval China itself, rather than on any comparison between Chinese and Western holy men as discrete and comparable categories‹, because function revealed itself in context rather than in comparative outline.¹⁶ John Kieschnick made a notable contribution here with the 1997 book *The Eminent Monk*, which used *Gaoseng Zhuan* along with the later expansions and revisions *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* 續高僧傳 (*Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*) by Daoxuan 道宣 from the mid-seventh century and *Song Gaoseng Zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (*Song Biographies of Eminent Monks*) of 988 by Zanning 贊寧 to explore asceticism, thaumaturgy and scholarship in the early medieval Buddhist monastic imagination. At the same time, however, Kieschnick received just criticism – which he accepted – for a tendency to collapse the distinctions between mentalities and realities, with stories simultaneously representing ideals and real practices.¹⁷ There were, of course, similar critiques made of Brown's oeuvre.¹⁸ It is entirely possible that stories could operate on two levels at the same time, as Jamie Kreiner has recently reinforced with her study of Merovingian hagiography as political discourse.¹⁹ The trick is always to find some kind of external point of reference and analysis to ensure that one is not simply imposing modern preconceptions about where the difference might lie.²⁰

13 See also here the comparative study of hagiographical discourse across Wood, *Missionary Life*.

14 Poulin, *L'idéal sainteté*, 24.

15 Dolbeau, Heinzelmann and Poulin, *Les sources hagiographiques*; Heinzelmann (ed.), *L'hagiographie*; Heinzelmann and Goulet (eds.), *La réécriture hagiographique*; Goulet, *Écriture et Réécriture*; Heinzelmann (ed.), *Livrets*.

16 Shinohara, *Biographies of Monks*, 497.

17 McRae, *The Eminent Monk*, 127.

18 Cameron, *Holy Man*, 34; Hayward, *Demystifying*, 126-128.

19 Kreiner, *The Social Life*, 140-142.

20 Palmer, *Early Medieval Hagiography*, 65-66.

Efforts at comparing Buddhist and Christian traditions have remained limited. The most sustained was by Samuel Lieu in 1984, which principally focused on accounts of the holy in Huijiao's writings and those of near-contemporary writers in Byzantine Christendom. It provides a teasing sketch of some potentially interesting similarities and differences. Huijiao's holy men were more likely to give in to human failings such as engaging in sexual activity, but were less likely than Byzantine saints to engage in battles with spirits and demons (because such battles were not really part of Mahāyāna Buddhism). Writers in the Byzantine world were less likely to celebrate bodily self-sacrifice resulting in death, even though one might expect more parity given the traditions about martyrdom in Christianity and self-immolation in Buddhism.²¹ Perhaps surprisingly, given the writings of some saints, few Christian hagiographers were celebratory of intellectual achievement – something that feels starkly exposed when placed alongside Huijiao's stories about monks writing and translating thousands of scrolls. Lieu argued these observations needed to be read in relation to some critical differences in writing and audience: Christian hagiography, whatever its variability, was more recognisably coherent as a body of works than Buddhist hagiography, and that might itself be connected to the fact that Buddhism did not have the kind of monopoly on religious and intellectual life that Christianity had in Byzantium (or Gaul for that matter), with both Confucianism and Daoism still influential.²²

As global history, comparative history, and transculturality come back onto the agenda, it is essential to have methodological clarity about how to deal with comparative observations – or, at least, clarity of purpose. Global histories driven by fashion alone, without strong questions, will not do. Lieu's study, valuably, was a means to highlight the different positions of Christianity and Buddhism within Byzantine and Chinese society.²³ Notably, it sidestepped the problem of having one-dimensional or static views of either society under scrutiny by paying close attention to the multiplicity of voices evident even within a single source.²⁴ When we are not seeking to explain the influence of one culture on the other, one can be freed to examine the ›functional equivalence‹ of the concepts and processes involved in the production of hagiography.²⁵ But if the turn to deep case studies taught the importance of the determining influence of historical context, we have to be careful not to confuse comparison and ahistorical abstraction, as Shinohara warned. There are practical limits, of course, as we cannot research every angle of every text in every language globally, even with increases in collaborative work. For my present purposes, I offer simply some exploratory first thoughts about similarities and differences across cultures in the way that collected biographies were produced and conceptualised at a mostly organisational level. To do this, I will move in turn from authorial intentions, to issues of intertextuality, to the more institutional contexts of copying and organising the texts involved.

21 On the longer history, see Benn, *Burning for the Buddha*.

22 Lieu, *The Holy Men*, 121–122. For the complex interactions between Buddhism and other religions and practices in China, see Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, especially 288–320 on the polemics and misrepresentations evident in the biographical and other sources.

23 Lieu, *The Holy Men*, 147.

24 On this problem, see Höfert, *Anmerkungen*, 25; Rothe, *Konzeptualisierungen*, 52.

25 Rothe, *Konzeptualisierungen*, 51.

The Sixth-Century Texts and their Intentions

The first point about the collective biographies we need to recognise is that they are each highly distinctive and even their authors' efforts to capture universal principles were shaped by their local situations. From the Latin West, we have two principal collected biographies that represent radically different literary-theological ventures: the seven books of miracles and one on the lives of the Fathers by Bishop Gregory of Tours (bishop 573-594) and the four books of the *Dialogues on the Italian Fathers* by Pope Gregory the Great (pope 590-604). These came out of markedly different situations. Gregory of Tours was from an old Gallo-Roman aristocratic family in the Auvergne and, after an education that included time studying with his uncle, Bishop Nicetius of Lyon (d. 573), he became bishop of Tours and highly politically active during civil war between Merovingian kings.²⁶ The cult of St Martin of Tours became important to his efforts to develop his position in his episcopal city and to educate his flock, peers, and kings.²⁷ Gregory the Great, on the other hand, was from a senatorial family in Rome and had been a papal envoy to the imperial court in Constantinople before becoming pope. His high-level, cross-cultural career drew him into debates about the efficacy of saints' cults across the Mediterranean.²⁸ The hagiographical projects of the two Gregoryses, by their very nature, were as much theological and polemical as they were efforts to describe the past. What constituted Christian belief and practice was rarely stable, unquestioned, or uniform – not least with the strength of Arian Christianity in Spain and Italy – making each effort to describe it an exercise in argument, not just description.²⁹ Both Gregoryses felt this acutely, surrounded by vestiges of old Christianity, new, post-Roman political realities, and the challenges posed by heresy, paganism, secular practice, and all the grey areas in between. What united them in spirit was a sense that writing about saints was a coherent and pointed thing to do.³⁰ In outline, much of this was familiar to eastern Christian writers. Cyril of Scythopolis (d. ca. 558) wrote in the deserts of Palestine to defend the monastic authority and practices of the network of institutions (κοινόβια and λαύραι) established by Euthymius and Sabas – but also in a history framed by opposition to Monophysitism and Origenism.³¹ John of Ephesus (d. ca. 588), on the other hand, wrote about the history of his own monastic network precisely to defend his communities' commitment to Monophysitism through personal meditations on asceticism – although, in his case, mostly while based in Constantinople and with imperial favour until the death of Emperor Justinian I (d. 565). Many of the subtle differences in style and representation in the work of Cyril and John can be explained by their different agendas in using biographical writings as polemics and meta-treatises.³²

26 See now the essays in Murray, *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*.

27 Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles*.

28 Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult*, and Lake, *Hagiography*.

29 Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 15 and *passim*.

30 Gregory of Tours, *Vita patrum*, ed. Krusch, 212-213; Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, pref., ed. De Vogüé, 2. 12-18.

31 Casiday, *Translation*, 3-7; compare Flusin, *Miracle et histoire*, 9.

32 On the differences between Cyril and John, see Harvey, *Asceticism*, 135-145.

One sees no less anxiety about religious change and history in Buddhism at this time. In eastern China in the sixth century, three notable collections of biographical stories were produced. Of these, *Mingseng Zhuan* 名僧傳 (*Biographies of Famous Monks*) by the monk Baochang 寶唱 has mostly been lost to us, despite it having been produced at the important Jiankang temple in Nanjing, the capital of the Liang emperor Wu 梁武帝 (d. 549). Emperor Wu was a significant and highly controversial promoter of Buddhism in southern China who even proclaimed himself a Bodhisattva,³³ and Baochang's work seems to pertain to Emperor Wu's project.³⁴ Certainly, the great Sengyou 僧祐 (d. 518) included biographies as part of his efforts to devise an authoritative Buddhist canon of texts at this time in his *Chu Sanzang Jiji* 出三藏記集 (*Collection of Records Concerning the Chinese Buddhist Canon*).³⁵ *Mingseng Zhuan* was quickly superseded by a second work, *Gaoseng Zhuan* by Huijiao, who was based further south at Jiexiang temple on Mt Kuaiji (modern Shaoxing).³⁶ Huijiao was a renowned teacher, contemplative, and collector of books. He seems to have taken exception to something about Baochang's work as he made a famous dig at the transience of fame compared to the modest timelessness of eminence in the ›postface‹ to the text:³⁷

Compilations of earlier times have spoken excessively of famous monks. But fame is the guest of reality. If men carry out hidden brilliance, then they are eminent but not famous; when men of little virtue happen to be in accord with their times, then they are famous but not eminent. Those who are famous but not eminent are, of course, not recorded here.

Huijiao's work was no small undertaking, comprising 257 biographies and a list of 259 further biographies for reference, all across fourteen scrolls or *juan* 卷, with biographies organised into ten thematic categories.³⁸ A third, shorter text, *Biqiuni Zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (*Traditions of the Nuns*), has survived. This is often attributed to Baochang, although the attribution is not attested until a catalogue compiled by Zhisheng 智昇 in 739, the *Kaiyuan Shijiao Lu* 開元釋教, and there are serious doubts about Zhisheng's accuracy on this point.³⁹ Nevertheless, it

33 Janousch, *The Emperor*; Janousch, *The Asoka of China*.

34 To complicate matters, one of the principal accounts of Wu's activities is the biography of Baochang in Daoxuan, *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan*, T.2060.50, 426-427, which itself is highly polemical: *Strange, Representations*, 83-89.

35 See Link, Shih Seng-Yu. On the formation of the Chinese canon, see Fang, *Defining the Chinese Buddhist Canon*, and the literature there cited.

36 Wright, *Biography and Hagiography*, especially 384-387 on Huijiao's motivation. In addition to Huijiao's own testimony, there is a brief biographical entry in Daoxuan, *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* 6, T.2060.55, 471, but that mostly draws on Huijiao's words.

37 Huijiao, *Gaoseng Zhuan* 14, T.2059.55, 419a22-25: 自前代所撰多曰名僧。然名者本實之賓賓也。若實行潛光則高而不名。寡德適時。則名而不高。名而不高本非所紀。 Translation adapted from Wright, *Biography and Hagiography*, 407-408. See also Daoxuan's comment on the relationship between *Mingseng Zhuan* and *Gaoseng Zhuan*: Daoxuan, *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* 6, T.2060.50, 471b23-26.

38 Huijiao, *Gaoseng Zhuan* 14, T.2059.55, 418c24-26. These are translators of scripture/sūtras 譯經 yijing, expounders of righteousness 義解 yijie, monks of miraculous spirit 神異 shenyi, practitioners of meditation 習禪 xichan, experts in the vinaya 明律 minglu, those who give up their bodies 遺身 yishen, chanters of scripture/sūtras 誦經 songjing, those bringing happiness and merit 興福 xingfu, masters of scripture/sūtras 經師 jingshi, and leaders of chanting 唱導 changdao.

39 De Rauw, Baochang, 215-218. Zhisheng, *Kaiyuan Shijiao Lu* 6, T.2154.55, 537c28.

does seem to have been composed in the region around Nanjing in the early sixth century, to judge by the geographical focus of most stories – again, often highlighting conflict between Buddhist and Daoist figures, or the ways that monastic practices clashed with standard social practices.⁴⁰

A natural place to start for establishing baselines for comparison between biographies is with their prefaces. It is in these that the authors might reveal something of the circumstances in which they came to write or appeal to the different traditions they used or to which they believed they were contributing. A central issue in all the texts is that of providing exemplars for behaviour. In *Biqiuni Zhuan*, the author raises the issues by reference to Yan Hui 顏回, the famous favourite disciple of Confucius (itself an interesting cultural reference in a Buddhist work): ›the person who looks to Yan will also be the companion of Yan‹.⁴¹ The stories of the nuns were therefore put forward as 則 – a character that could represent both ›models‹ and ›rules/norms‹ – so that readers could be inspired to find perfection. Cyril of Scythopolis set out his account of Euthymios no differently, in order to offer the stories ›as a common benefit, image and model [ὄφελος καὶ εἰκόνα καὶ τύπου] for those hereafter who wish to take thought for their salvation‹.⁴² Gregory of Tours, too, thought the singular life of the saints (*vita sanctorum*) ›encourages the minds of listeners to betterment‹ (*etiam auditorium animos incitat ad profectum*).⁴³ If holy people were exemplars, it was because their stories had been captured as narratives that showed principles in action.

Many authors feared that, without written narrative, good examples would be lost altogether. The author of *Biqiuni Zhuan* justified their task on the basis that no one had compiled such a record before despite the existence of some fragmentary records.⁴⁴ John of Ephesus placed the importance of setting stories down for posterity squarely alongside the importance of imitation.⁴⁵ For him this had an important polemical angle, given how closely the stories were entwined with his own political situation with regards to the defence of the Monophysite community. Similarly, Gregory the Great stressed the value of committing his stories to writing, particularly because he feared that the miracles of saints were being forgotten at a time when the cult of saints faced strong criticism and therefore they needed a staunch defence.⁴⁶ The fear of loss combined with the opportunity to build upon wider traditions. Gregory of Tours, like his namesake, claimed to tell stories that had been hidden until his time, and thus he was able to increase the bulk of edificatory literature when there was still so much non-Christian literature by which to get distracted.⁴⁷ So too, in Jiexiang,

40 E.g. the story of Daorong 道容, *Biqiuni Zhuan* 1, T.2063.50, 936b12-26, in which the nun is instrumental in leading the emperor away from Daoist practice, or Tanhui 曇暉, who threatens to set herself on fire to avoid marriage, *Biqiuni Zhuan* 4, T.2063.50, 945c24-a01.

41 *Biqiuni Zhuan* T.2063.50, 934b10: 希顏之士亦顏之儔; compare Tsai, *Lives of the Nuns*, 15 and 115 n. 1 for different approaches to the translation.

42 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives*, ed. Schwartz, 8; trans. Price, *Lives*, 4.

43 Gregory of Tours, *Vita patrum*, ed. Krusch, 212.

44 *Biqiuni Zhuan* 1, T.2063.50, 934b25-29.

45 John of Ephesus, *Lives*, preface, ed. Brooks, 1. 2. See also the opening comments of his account of the ›five blessed patriarchs‹, *Lives*, ed. Brooks, 2. 684.

46 Dal Santo, *Debating Saints' Cults*, especially 37-66.

47 Gregory of Tours, *Gloria Martyrum*, preface, ed. Krusch, 37-38.

Huijiao was anxious that people were overlooking a significant amount of Buddhist teachings by focusing on only a limited selection of stories and texts from China and so he hoped, by looking further afield, his work would give a fuller introduction to what people needed to know to achieve perfection.⁴⁸ None of these enterprises were to do with vague ideas about preserving the past for posterity: these were efforts to harness a fleeting past for education and instruction.

The underlying point should be clear and familiar: writers in all these religious environments turned to saints and other holy people because they offered stories around which instruction and polemic could be built in a compelling fashion. Any and each of them could have focused on writing treatises and sermons. What their audiences wanted and responded to, however, was lived example – indeed, a point made explicitly by Gregory the Great.⁴⁹ Collected biographies offered a way of maximising coverage of themes deemed relevant by the authors. This was particularly important, as we shall see in the next section, because they were rarely able to develop stories in uncontested fields.

Landscapes of Intertextuality

By providing gateways to more substantial traditions, the authors of our collected biographies pointed towards the importance of intertextual readings of their works. Theirs were not texts that were supposed to be read in isolation, but which were rather supposed to be read as part of a fuller syllabus of sacred texts, treatises, and histories. Indeed, some of the scriptural and spiritual allusions only made sense in such deeper contexts. This can be one of the key reasons why simply abstracting ideas about holiness from hagiographies can be distorting. Moreover, as we have just seen, the written components that we are obliged to focus on in studies now were only ever one part of discourse about people and belief that cut across the textual and the oral.

In such an environment, it is important to remember the effect on stories of the landscape that recorded them. The author of *Biqiuni Zhuan*, for instance, described their sources in the absence of a proper collected biography as the testimony of wise men, eulogies, and the steles 碑 often inscribed with commemorative stories. One stele in particular is cited for the nun Sengjing 僧敬, erected by her disciples in 481 on what is now known as Purple Mountain, east of Nanjing; and that was written by the prominent scholar and bureaucrat Shen Yue 沈約 (d. 513), ensuring it had authority.⁵⁰ Such steles were part of a lively landscape, as Huijiao's tale of the monk Huida 慧達 (also known by his secular name Liu Sahe 劉薩河) suggests.⁵¹ After a vision of Hell, Huida set out on a penitential pilgrimage to find the legendary *stupa* and statues (塔 and 像) erected by King Asóka (d. ca. 232 BCE) to promote Buddhism.⁵² The settings of the story mean that it unfolds in an environment in which stories are literally part

48 Huijiao, *Gaoseng Zhuan* 14, T.2059.50, 418.

49 Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, pref., ed. De Vogüé, 2. 16. See Leyser, *Temptation*, 290-291, for the suggestion that he made this distinction to draw attention away from the cult of martyrs.

50 *Biqiuni Zhuan* 3, T.2063.50, 942b13. See further Tsai, *Lives of the Nuns*, 109.

51 Huijiao, *Gaoseng Zhuan* 13, T.2059.50, 409b14-26.

52 On the legends about the relics of Asóka as part of a Buddhist apologetic to prove the ancient presence of Buddhism in China, see Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 277-280, and Janousch, *The Asóka of China*, esp. 255-256 on questioning what it had to do with Liang Emperor Wu.

of the public religious landscape as inscriptions and images. Huida's discoveries became the sites of temples and, in turn, the temples became places that lay people could come to hear the stories and learn more about Buddhist teachings.⁵³ But this left plenty of scope for contesting stories. Daoxuan, in the seventh-century *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan*, acknowledged Huijiao's version of events briefly, but recounted instead the story by Yao Daoan 姚道安 he had found on a stele that focused on Huida's activities further north.⁵⁴

Such memorial environments were important in Christian traditions too. Religious spaces in Gregory the Great's Rome had had a hagiographic overlay at least since Pope Damasus used monumental *elogia* to celebrate the city's martyrial past, notably at the shrine of St Agnes.⁵⁵ Indeed, we have long recognised that there was an intimate connection between tombs, *laudatio funebris*, liturgical performance, and biographical composition across the Christian world.⁵⁶ Gregory of Tours' four books *De virtutibus s. Martini* are the most overt example, because they focus almost exclusively on relating miraculous events at the shrine of St Martin itself, creating a close bond between story and place – indeed, Gregory's story and Gregory's place. Certainly, Gregory expected many of his stories to be used in church settings, as he refers to using hagiographic texts in readings.⁵⁷ But the stories were also the products of both reading and conversation, as he sought to augment the stories he had read with the stories people told him as he or his sources travelled.⁵⁸ Where there were no written stories to appeal to, the pressures could be different. John of Ephesus stressed repeatedly that he was the principal source, the eyewitness, for many of the stories he told, because his testimony was the tangible factor that might give them authority.⁵⁹ In the story of Abraham and Maro, he does refer to written record and claims ›not to repeat in writing what I have only heard‹ about the miraculous as it was, by definition, hard to believe.⁶⁰

The second principal stream of textual competition came from existing compositions. Indeed, some aspects of their work only function properly in relation to texts they expect the audience to have engaged with in another time or place. Gregory of Tours, again, provides the most pronounced example of intertextuality. The first chapters of *De virtutibus s. Martini* outline the history of writing about St Martin by other writers to which he felt he was adding.⁶¹ Sometimes the complementary nature of the project is more implicit, such as in *Gloria martyrum*, when he tells a miracle story from the sepulchre of St Dionysius of Paris without any context, as if he expected the audience to know who Dionysius was and

53 Shinohara, *Two Sources*, 121-122.

54 Daoxuan, *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* 25, T.2060.50, 645a29. Shinohara, *Two Sources*, 171; Wu, *Rethinking Liu Sahe*, 33-34.

55 Trout, *Damasus*, 517-518; Trout, *Re-Staging Roman History*.

56 Heinzlmann, *Neue Aspekt*; Palmer, *Early Medieval Hagiography*, 25 and 34-35.

57 Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus s. Juliani*, ch. 16, ed. Krusch, 129; *De virtutibus s. Martini* 2. 29 and 2. 49, ed. Krusch, 170 and 176.

58 For an indicative list of Gregory's oral sources, see Kurth, *De l'autorité*, 143-145.

59 John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 1. 2-3 and 109; 2. 618; 3. 158. At one point John refers to a previous history of the persecution of the Amidenes (*Lives*, ii. 607).

60 John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 1. 71-72. He also declines to talk about Bar Nbyl because he lived before his time, in *Lives*, 1. 5-6.

61 Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus s. Martini*, 1. 1-3, ed. Krusch, 136-139.

why he was important.⁶² In that case, he made further reference to Dionysius's importance as one of the founding seven bishops of Gaul in his *Libri decem historiarum* (which itself might show knowledge of the *Passio Dionysii* in circulation), so we cannot assume that he was being vague simply to promote St Martin in the face of distant rival cults.⁶³ For some authors, it does not seem that they had specific texts in mind in quite the same way. Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, for instance, do not, on the whole, directly build on specified written traditions about saints. Indeed, the opening gambit from his literary collocutor Peter is that he is vaguely aware of eminent men but cannot think of any recent stories of the miraculous in Italy, and that is the initial gap in Peter's knowledge Gregory attempts to address. His stories, particularly about St Benedict of Nursia, do reveal a strong familiarity with the habits of writing about saintly figures, just as one might expect from someone who lived in the hagiography-rich world of Rome.⁶⁴ What we might call hagiographies may have been endlessly flexible in terms of their literary form, but there was a sufficient repertoire of conventional aspects, from disciplined Christian living to challenging pagan authorities, that one could employ to make any character look recognisably holy.

Huijiao's *Gaoseng Zhuan*, partly by virtue of its great length, stands out in this context. In studies comparing his work to fragments of the *Mingseng Zhuan of Baochang* or to other extant works, scholars have repeatedly concluded that he was heavily dependent on his source material.⁶⁵ Indeed, it was integral to both projects that they should bring together available stories. Often, Huijiao simply altered emphasis in stories, if he did much at all – partly because it was more traditional to insert personal comments and judgements into Chinese historical writing.⁶⁶ But, as we know from studies of hagiographic *réécriture* in the Latin tradition or metaphrasis in the Greek, such moves are never neutral.⁶⁷ Huijiao's account of Tanchao 曇超, one of the meditation masters, transforms a story about a monk preaching to dragons to end a drought into a biography to give it a wider character – relevant, according to Shinohara, to explaining the spread of Buddhism in southern China through the movement of holy figures.⁶⁸ On a different note, his account of Kumārajīva, the important fifth-century translator, retained a scandal about the learned man recorded by Sengyou: that he was ordered by Emperor Yao Xing 姚興 to go and live with concubines (妓女) to pass on his seed – a scandal, according to Yang Lu's recent analysis, that tainted Kumārajīva's reputation and which therefore allowed Huijiao to explore the complexities of agency.⁶⁹ In a world of many competing stories, the most subtle of retellings can be highly revealing.

62 Gregory of Tours, *Gloria martyrum*, c. 71, ed. Krusch, 85-86; Palmer, *Martyrdom*, 165.

63 Gregory of Tours, *Libri decem historiarum*, 1. 30, ed. Krusch, 22; *Passio ss. Dionysii, Rustici et Eleutherii*, ed. Krusch, 101-105. The point stands for other saints mentioned in passing by Gregory that it would be odd for us to assume he thought he was the only source for information on the saints given the wealth of other Merovingian hagiographical material available: see Heinzelmänn, *L'hagiographie mérovingienne*.

64 Dufourcq, *Étude* 3, 286-296 (the *Dialogues* complementing martyrs' stories) and Boesch Gajano, *La proposta agiografica*, 660-661 (the *Dialogues* competing with martyrs' stories). Gregory could not escape martyrs' cults either way: Leyser, *Temptation*, 306-307. For wider context, see now Lapidge, *The Roman Martyrs*.

65 Wright, *Biography and Hagiography*, 410.

66 Wright, *Biography and Hagiography*, 388.

67 Goullet, *Écriture et Réécriture*; Resh, *Towards a Byzantine Definition*.

68 Huijiao, *Gaoseng Zhuan* 11, T.2059.50, 400a06-b02; Shinohara, *Biographies of Monks*, 492.

69 Huijiao, *Gaoseng Zhuan* 3, T.2059.50, 332c12; Lu, *Narrative and Historicity*, 27-31.

The Organisation of Knowledge

The question of intertextualities opens up issues about how people organised their stories at institutional levels. The organisation of knowledge is no neutral matter, as Michel Foucault and Rosamond McKitterick have stressed in their different ways.⁷⁰ At its most innocent, knowledge is power. But, as we know from recent experience all too keenly, control of knowledge and access to it can be as powerful if not more so. Stories about holy people did not just exist: they had to be copied, archived, and encountered. This was essential to the way that they operated in relation to each other.

Gregory the Great's famous exchange with Eulogius of Alexandria might highlight some sixth-century issues across Greek and Latin cultures. Eulogius had requested the deeds (*gesta*) of the saints in one volume, which he claimed Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) had collected. Gregory responded that he was not aware of this kind of compilation, at least not made by Eusebius. He checked both the archive (*archivium*) of his church as well as the libraries (*bibliothecae*) of Rome – an action that highlights both the polycentric nature of access to books in Rome and, in the case of the archive, the multipurpose use of some places where one might find them. Gregory could find, he admitted, ›a few copied together in a single volume‹ (*pauca quaedam in unius codicis volumine collecta*) – which, from Gregory's description, is what we might identify as a martyrological calendar rather than collected biographies per se.⁷¹ What this might suggest is that it was more common to find texts in small booklets or even scroll-format than in the large-scale legendaries familiar from later periods, particularly once we remember how short many of the stories were.⁷² Gregory of Tours, for instance, told a story about a cleric in Autun having access to a ›papyrus volume‹ (*volumen carteam*) of miracles which he placed over his eyes to have his sight miraculously restored.⁷³ Roman libraries often stored such bookrolls in niches in walls, with one recently discovered in Cologne possibly able to hold up to 20,000 volumes.⁷⁴ But nearly all such volumes are now lost to us. Aside from the problem of preserving papyrus in damp Northern Europe, the move to a more extensive use of codices and parchment significantly rationalised such collections as new albums of texts were compiled. In writing long-form collected biographies, the two Gregories were engaged in relatively unusual projects, but ones that fitted within growing trends in Christian book production.

Within a Chinese library, books in multiple scrolls was what was expected. What we have for them that we often lack for early Christian libraries are bibliographic guides to collections (*mulu*). Notable examples include Daoxuan's *Datang Neidian Lu* 大唐内典录 for the new monastery of Ximing 西明 in the seventh century, or, again, Zhisheng's *Kaiyuan Shijiao Lu*, which sought to define a canon of Buddhist texts. By including texts such as *Biqiuni Zhuan*, *Gaoseng Zhuan*, and *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan*, and even specifying how many scrolls they came in,

70 Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*; McKitterick, *Carolingians*, especially 210.

71 Gregory, *Epistolae*, 8. 27, ed. Norberg, 2. 549.

72 On this early manuscript history see Philippart, *Les légendiers* and the survey of extant booklets in Poulin, Libelli.

73 Gregory, *Vita patrum*, 8. 12, ed. Krusch, 251.

74 Schmitz, *Ausgrabungen*, 89-91 gives an initial sketch of the finds, although he has not yet published his estimate of 20,000 scrolls, reported by Flood, ›Spectacular‹. My thanks to Daniel Brown for bringing the formal report to my attention and obtaining a copy for me. For comparison, see Tucci, *Flavian Libraries*, 307-308. On storage in Roman libraries, see Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries*, 180-197.

these too became part of a canon of texts any good library should have.⁷⁵ These bibliographic guides could then, in turn, become guides to organising a library. Carefully piled-up bundles of scrolls from the famous Dunhuang library cave, for instance, were found with labels that corresponded to entries in *Kaiyuan Shijiao Lu*, presumably so that they could be navigated more easily.⁷⁶ No copies of collected biographies were found at Dunhuang, but it does seem that their collection overall was far from comprehensive.⁷⁷ Even if the Dunhuang cave is not representative of other libraries – particularly, say, those in more richly-endowed imperial centres – the *mulu* tradition suggests a more programmatic approach to finding a place for biographical collections than one sees in Byzantine or Latin circles. But then perhaps it had to be: the Buddhist canon ran to thousands of manuscripts in a way that no Christian library in the sixth century had to contend with.⁷⁸

Institutional settings can change texts, whether there is a programme or not. While Huijiao's *Gaoseng Zhuan* came to find a relatively stable 14-scroll format, recent discoveries of twelfth-century manuscripts in temples in Japan suggest other, earlier versions were available – one in ten scrolls, one of which included an earlier ›postface‹ than the standard version, in which Huijiao complained about his work circulating before he had found a definitive form for it.⁷⁹ Appeals to manuscript witnesses show that Daoxuan's work was not always quite as stable as the printed editions suggest either.⁸⁰ And so, perhaps, it always was before printed editions, when institutions and individuals were freer to tailor what they needed. While the oldest copy of John of Ephesus' work, from 688, is nearly complete, the second oldest extant copy was heavily edited and mixed with other material by its scribe, Simeon of Mar Solomon in Dulikh, in 875, for what he states was his own personal use.⁸¹ Cyril's work was often added to or excerpted in different ways.⁸² Gregory the Great's textual logic was mostly upheld in the surviving manuscript copies, but this did not stop some centres wanting copies of book 2 (the *Vita Benedicti*) only.⁸³ Gregory of Tours' hagiographical work survived in the full eight-

75 Daoxuan, *Datang Neidian Lu*, 2, 4, and 10, T.2149.55, 223b20, 263c21, and 331c07; *Kaiyuan Shijiao Lu*, T.2154.55, 481c13, and it has a separate entry alongside Daoxuan's *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan: Kaiyuan Shijiao Lu*, T.2154.55, 697c09-11. For context, see Chen, *The Revival*, 155-157 and Wang, *From Nālandā*, 217. Again, see Fang, *Defining the Chinese Buddhist Canon*.

76 Rong, *The Nature*, 251-252. Latin scrolls also had labels but without the overarching programme: Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries*, 183.

77 Rong, *The Nature*, 258-264 discusses the incomplete nature of the monastic holdings.

78 Wang, *From Nālandā*, 207, suggests that a single institute in seventh-century Chang'an 長安 had over 200,000 scrolls, making it ten times bigger than the Cologne library. Comparison with other libraries needs to take into account the volume of writing that a scroll or codex can convey – raw numbers about manuscripts can themselves be deceptive if fewer codices could contain more text than the scrolls.

79 Dingyuan, *Newly Discovered*, 141. Compare Huijiao, *Gaoseng Zhuan*, T.2059.50, 418a12.

80 Saitō, *Features*; Chen, *Manuscripts*.

81 The copy of 688 is London, British Library, Add. 14647, with the dating colophon on f. 171b. Wright, *Catalogue*, 3. 1094-1100 (no. 945); Brock and Van Rompay, *Catalogue*, 402-403; Hatch, *Syriac Manuscripts*, 95 with plate 44. Simeon's copy is London, British Library, Add. 14650 described in Wright, *Catalogue*, 3. 1103-1107.

82 Schwartz, *Kyriel*, 317-320.

83 Early examples include Orléans, Bibliothèque municipale 341 (289), St Gallen, and Stiftsbibliothek MS 552, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg lat 528.

book version he outlined himself, in a few manuscripts from the ninth century onwards (notably Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, lat. 2204 and Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 199). There are, however, also plenty of examples within Krusch's conspectus, sometimes of scribes omitting books that appealed to them less, or else copying only information on particular saints.⁸⁴ When one is dealing with living traditions, one has to expect that the organisation of texts will evolve over time according to the needs of other people. Institutional memory is not always more stable than oral legend.

Conclusions and Reflections

When we come to compare medieval religious cultures, it is important to understand what it is that we are seeking to compare and why. Focus on holy people and holiness has been valuable for medievalists seeking to understand concepts and institutions that seem similar in outline but which function differently across time, space, and culture. Sometimes, through analysing these, new points of connection are revealed; sometimes, particularly when no direct connection is evident, it is possible to see how different circumstances and contexts suggest other ways that things might work. As a historian who has worked on early Latin Christian hagiographical or biographical traditions, I was initially drawn to compare some of my material with Buddhist biographical traditions because I wanted to find sources and scholarship that had developed with different ideas, assumptions, and habits – not out of restlessness or a search for the exotic, but because it made me look back at familiar things from a different perspective with a heightened critical perspective. There are other routes that one could take.⁸⁵ But research is about questions and explorations, not about being right and doing things one way only.

In the case of the sixth-century collected biographies, one might be struck by the similar types of holiness. We know that there were different ideals about saints and about Bodhisattvas – from the miraculous to the learned – and that these could still generate similar exemplars of outward behaviour. If we want to understand why, we might also be led to wonder how cultures so far removed from each other could produce books that lent themselves to such comparison. This organisational level of text is often taken for granted. In terms of intellectual environment, it is striking that these works emerge where there are stimulating intersections of the monastic and aristocratic, where there is simultaneously political and religious uncertainty. All of the collections were written in environments in which the stories they told were actively being negotiated and contested through shifting textual and oral traditions, with each author responding to their unique situation by attempting to capture a universal holiness in story form that defended their particular ideals. The central feature of the eminent life, globally, is that for all its points of universality, it was constantly being rewritten and redefined to make it more effective.

84 Krusch, MGH SRM 1. 2, 12-25. To give a further example: no version of *Gloria confessorum* contains chapters 105-107 so we do not know if Gregory wrote the chapters but they were lost or whether he never completed the work.

85 Taking inspiration from sociology, one could look instead to Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts*, which highlights different ways that written and oral texts can be studied in cultural contexts, not just as abstract literary fragments and folklore.

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