From the Holy Land to the Cloister: The Decline of Female Ascetic Pilgrimages in the Early Medieval West (c. 350-615)

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From the Holy Land to the Cloister: 
The Decline of Female Ascetic Pilgrimages in the Early Medieval West 
(c. 350-615) 

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the mobility of ascetic women from late antiquity through to the early Middle Ages with a particular emphasis on the practice of pilgrimage. As seen in multiple primary source documents, religious women from the West were journeying to the Holy Land and beyond from the fourth through to the early fifth centuries. This practice, however, is mentioned remarkably less in accounts of religious women north of the Alps in the late fifth century onwards. Evidence of women undertaking pilgrimages to the Holy Land is sparse while their male counterparts continued to make such journeys. Although the monastic rules that cloistered women certainly did have an impact on the movement of religious women in the early medieval West as other scholars have argued, there are a variety of external and non-religious factors that also contributed to the decline of female ascetic pilgrimages. This thesis will aim to give a more complete answer to this decline by focusing on the functions that religious women played in their communities, which effectively bound them to those same communities. Due to a lack of source material, the main focus of the early medieval period will be in Gaul, which will provide a case study for understanding the roles that religious women played in society within the context of early Merovingian politics and economy. I will argue that the changing image of female sanctity from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages reflects the social, economic, and political transformations that were occurring from late antique Roman society to early medieval Frankish society, thus resulting in a different model for women to follow as well as a different focus in the *vitae* of early medieval religious women.
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INTRODUCTION

The fourth century marked a period in Christian Late antiquity when ascetic and monastic practices began to filter into the West and take their own shape.\(^1\) During this time, religious men and women travelled from all around the Roman Empire to the Holy Land as a sign of their devotion to God.\(^2\) The practice of asceticism offered women unprecedented autonomy outside their households, thus enabling them to travel to the Holy Land and beyond as a form of religious devotion. The rise of female ascetic pilgrimages runs parallel to the development of monastic communities for women in the West.\(^3\) For this reason, pilgrimage provides a helpful reference point for the processes involved in the institutionalization of female monastic communities and the increasing regulations imposed on these communities. The growth of monasticism, however, does not adequately explain the lack of female ascetic pilgrimages to the Holy Land in the early Middle Ages. Why, after a century in which female pilgrims were commonly praised for their ascetic travels, did pilgrimages become increasingly rare in the late fifth century?


No study to date has targeted the decline of female pilgrimage as a topic worthy of investigation; scholars have instead tended to interpret that it reflected the misogyny of the Church leaders intent on restricting and regulating the expression of female piety, particularly concerning claustration. For Sylvia Schein, “the institutionalization of the Church fostered a climate for the removal of ascetic women from public life, from male space into their closely geographically defined space—the monastery.” Silvia Schein’s study focused mainly on the Late Antique perceptions of female sanctity in relation to pilgrimage, and her explanation for the decline in pilgrimage focuses only on monastic rules and anti-pilgrimage rhetoric.

Maribel Dietz likewise concludes that the growth of monastic rules was the most powerful force in eliminating pilgrimage as monastic practice for men and women. Many other scholars have concentrated on monastic rules and the general enforcement of enclosure in female monastic communities in the West to investigate their effect on monastic experience. Diana Webb has compiled and translated a set of Carolingian legislation and canon law documents that point to a systematized policy of enclosure for female communities; these laws, however, only begin in the eighth century, which leaves at least two centuries of restricted movement unaccounted for. It would seem then, that scholars have attributed ecclesiastical authority over female monastic communities as the only explanation for the

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5 Sylvia Schein, “The ‘Female-Men of God’ and ‘Men who were Women’. Female Saints and Holy Land Pilgrimage during the Byzantine Period,” 34.
6 Schein, “The ‘Female Men of God’ and ‘Men who were Women,” 16-17.
9 Diana Webb, Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West, 30-33.
decline of pilgrimages. Although certain monastic rules for female communities certainly did
play a role restricting the mobility of religious women from the fifth century onwards, I will
argue that they do not provide a full answer.

The lack of centralized ecclesiastical authority over the new kingdoms in the West
allowed for diversity of ascetic and monastic practices in the fifth and sixth centuries. Many
religious women during this period did not live in formal monastic houses, and even for those
who did, strict enclosure was not always imposed. Albrecht Diem demonstrates that
monastic rules were by no means stable and persistent within the development of western
monasticism. The cloistering of some female monastic communities, therefore, did not
restrict the mobility of all religious women. Since monasteries were still in their developing
stages, it is not surprising that the lack of a standardized lifestyle allowed religious women
more freedom from enclosure. Moreover, the fact that there are no more accounts of women
going on pilgrimages to the Holy Land does not necessarily mean that women no longer went
to the Holy Land, but rather, that the bias of male authors, who transmitted these saints’ lives,
chose not to write about women as pilgrims. Furthermore, a large portion of the population
had still not converted to Christianity, which ensured that the church concerned itself more
with the conversion of pagans than ordering the lives of those who were already devoted to
the faith. A full-scale standardization of monastic practice did not occur until the eighth-
century Carolingian reforms and strict active enclosure was only universally applied on

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10 For more on ecclesiastical authority during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, see Conrad Leyser, Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000); Philip Rousseau, Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

11 In the seventh century, Donatus of Besançon’s rule for nuns explicitly refuted the need for complete clausstration. Et licet sanctus Caesarius proprie Christi, ut estis, virginibus regulam dedicasset, vobis tamen ob immutationem loci in nonnullis conditionibus minime conveniret. “And it is proper that Saint Caesarius, on account of Christ, had dedicated a rule to virgins, like yourselves, nevertheless, on account of their perseverance of place (i.e. enclosure), it is, under no conditions in the least, suitable for you.” Donatus of Besançon, Regula ad virgines, MS. M. BSB Clm. 28118, folio 196v. See also Donatus of Besançon, “Regula ad virgines” in Patrologia Latina 87, 273.

convents in 1298 by Boniface VIII. In order to understand fully the restrictions placed on women in the early Middle Ages, it is necessary to go back to the origins of female ascetic practice in the West and trace the increasing trend towards monasteries in the early medieval period.

In the western empire, ascetic communities comprised of women began to emerge in the late fourth century, thus enabling women to dedicate themselves to God and retreat from their traditional social duties. Susanna Elm has expertly illuminated the origins and development of female ascetics and their communities in her study, *Virgins of God.* Elm demonstrates how the Church Fathers and other ecclesiastical men influenced the development of female asceticism and their communities, but more importantly, the extent to which women were able to shape their own lives. The ascetic women of Rome, such as Marcella, Paula, and Fabiola, provide a glimpse into the growth of ascetic practices and the establishment of proto-monastic communities. Many of these Roman ascetics are our primary examples of women who journeyed to the Holy Land in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, making Susana Elm’s study of them integral to the discussion of the control these women exerted over their own lives. Gillian Cloke’s book on the *topoi* of the gender-ambiguous titles bestowed on late Antique women demonstrates that such titles allowed women to assert their own authority and power because of their “male” spirituality. Joyce E. Salisbury has similarly focused in on religious women in Late antiquity with a particular interest in the contention between ascetic women and church authority. Her book traces the connection between women and the flesh from early Christian thought and the influence this

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13 Schulenburg, "Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100)," 51-2.
had on the lives of ascetic women who challenged the system imposed by the Church Fathers. All of these studies demonstrate that the religious women of late antiquity were able to exercise a certain amount of unprecedented freedom. Despite the attempts of ecclesiastical men to dictate their lives, these women still went on pilgrimages to the Holy Land and were even lauded by contemporary ecclesiastical men for their ascetic traveling.

As the prominence of ascetic women in early medieval sources shifted north of the Alps in the fifth century, the women of late antique Rome tend to be omitted from studies of early medieval ascetic and monastic women.\(^\text{18}\) In many ways, this omission makes perfect sense—these wealthy Roman women lived in a world still firmly planted in antiquity while the Gallic women a century later were embedded in a significantly different social, political, and economic structure. It is, nevertheless, important to establish some continuity between the pioneering ascetic women of late antiquity and their female successors north of the Alps.

The common thread that connects these women through the centuries was the model they provided for their ascetic path to God. Giselle de Nie has demonstrated that Venantius Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours, both writing in the sixth century, used the ascetic women of Rome along with other women from early Christianity as models for the saintly women from Gaul they wrote about.\(^\text{19}\) Isolating the women of late antiquity from those in the early medieval period underestimates the influence they had on their successors. Furthermore, this periodization inhibits a deeper understanding of the continuity and change in the

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\(^{18}\) Examples include, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100)"; Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society ca. 500-1100, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998); Lina Eckenstein, Women Under Monasticism: chapters on saint-lore and convent life between 500 A.D. and 1500 A.D., (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963) all of which establish this time frame when dealing with early medieval women in monastic communities. The exception to this is Jo Ann McNamara’s ambitious synthesis of religious women from its origins to the present, see: Jo Ann McNamara, Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

development of female monastic communities in the West and the models of female sanctity that emerged from these early religious women.20

Historians of early medieval female monastic communities have all commented upon the cloistered nature of these communities. Jo Ann McNamara saw a distinct shift towards cloistering women in the fifth century, which she claims “could only tend toward misogyny among influential men directed towards women.”21 While this shift may have begun in the fifth century, as McNamara states, it was certainly a very long process that many scholars do not see fully developed until the eighth-century Carolingian reforms.22 Due to the lack of centralized authority and organization in the early medieval church, Lisa Bitel argues that women were given more freedom in their monastic practices in the sixth through ninth centuries.23 This, however, did not alter the fact that male ecclesiastics were constantly attempting to encroach on female authority in their respective communities in order to establish male authoritarian regulations for female monastic behavior.24 According to these scholars, then, there was a long period from the fifth to ninth centuries where female practice experienced both relative independence as well as submission to male ecclesiastical authority. Therefore, the contention between religious women’s autonomy and ecclesiastical regulation seems only to reflect previous debates in late antiquity.

20 The segregation of the ascetic women in Rome from the Merovingian monastic women seems to defy the periodization of Late Antiquity (3rd-8th centuries) put forth by Peter Brown. See Peter Brown, The World of Late Antiquity, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); Peter Brown, The Making of Late Antiquity, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Indeed, Julia M. Smith has pointed out that the study of Late Antiquity and Gender, both of which saw an increase in scholarship in the 1970’s, can and should be combined to get a better understanding of this transitional period. See Julia M. Smith, Introduction to Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900, eds. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. Smith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-19, esp. 1-2.


22 Lisa M. Bitel, Women in Early Medieval Europe: 400-1100, 149; Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100)," 56-61. Serious attempts to cloister religious women begin the eight century, see Diana Webb, Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West, 31-33.

23 Lisa M. Bitel, Women in Early Medieval Europe: 400-1100, 96. It should be noted, however, that by the seventh century in Gaul, monasticism certainly becomes a much more popular and common form of renunciation, which is why I have chosen to restrict my study to the beginning of the seventh century. This still does not mean that enclosure was universally applied in these monasteries.

24 Lisa M. Bitel, Women in Early Medieval Europe: 400-1100, 136.
In order to tackle this large gap of uncertain ecclesiastical authority, there are two points to keep in mind about this scholarship on early medieval religious women. First, the works of these groundbreaking scholars were shaped by an increasing focus on women’s history and an advocacy for gender equality in their own times.\(^{25}\) The burst of feminist scholarship in the 1980s was a progressive step towards the study of history and the inclusion of women therein, but their conclusion that claustration demonstrates the misogyny that the male clergy felt towards women must be taken within the context of the time in which they were writing. While male ecclesiastics certainly did impose claustration on women, women also consciously did the same.\(^{26}\) The increasing restriction of female mobility in the early medieval period is much more complex and needs to take into account a variety of factors in addition to monastic rules. Secondly, McNamara comes at the question of enclosure from the relative freedom of fourth century consecrated women, while Bitel and Schulenburg both analyze the fifth through ninth centuries from the perspective of the eighth-century reform movement, resulting in a considerable amount of anachronism on both sides of their accounts. As these scholars come from separate perspectives, they are no doubt seeing very a different phenomenon emerge.

In order to understand fully the restriction in mobility of religious women, it is necessary to analyze female ascetic and monastic practice from its origins in late antiquity to its development in the early medieval period. This continuity will break down the barrier of periodization and bring forth a more nuanced account of the diverse ascetic practices in the century following the dissolution of the Roman Empire, which was then followed by the


\(^{26}\) There is evidence that many of the female monastic communities in the West voluntarily chose monastic rules that implemented complete enclosure without exterior male influence. One example is the Merovingian saint, Radegund, who used Casarius’ *Rule for Nuns* in order to protect her monastery’s financial resources and institutional independence; see William Klingshirn, “Caesarius’s monastery for women in Arles and the composition and function of the ‘Vita Caesarii,’” in *Revue Benedictine* 100, (1990), 441-481, esp. 476.
increasing prevalence of female monasteries. For the sake of brevity, however, I will end this study in the early seventh century—a pivotal moment for monastic development in Gaul. Up to the end of the sixth century, we have accounts of saintly women who lived ascetically, but not within a monastery. After the seventh century, however, monasteries became the standard form of renunciation. 27 Although independent ascetic practice among women may have persisted, there is very little evidence surviving of it from the seventh century onwards. This reflects the bias of the clergy in selecting appropriate models of sanctity that they wished to promulgate through the writings of saints’ lives, or *vitae*. But this also reveals a general decline in the popularity of non-monastic forms of renunciation. The early seventh century was the beginning of a new influence in monastic culture and development—Saint Columbanus. 28 Having arrived the Gaul in the last decade of the sixth century, he sought the patronage of the upper classes for the construction and sustenance of monasteries in the region of Austrasia. These monasteries all adhered to his rule, *The Rule of Columbanus*, which was heavily influenced by Irish monasticism. This Hiberno-Frankish monasticism altered the construct of monasticism in Gaul from independent ascetics and urban monastic communities to rural monasteries. It is for this reason that I have chosen to end this study before the Columbanian influence can be seen on the Gallic ascetic and monastic construct.

I will use the practice of ascetic pilgrimage to illustrate both the continuity of ascetic and monastic development as well as the changes that did occur in the fourth through early seventh centuries. Religious women were no longer depicted in early medieval saints’ lives to have gone on pilgrimages despite the precedent established in the fourth and early fifth centuries by ascetic women. While the infrastructure of the Roman Empire, which had aided


the flourishing of pilgrimage in late antiquity, had declined in after the dissolution of the Roman Empire, Ora Limor demonstrates that travel to the Holy Land was still undertaken in the seventh through ninth centuries despite the Arab conquest.\textsuperscript{29} Although travel was no longer accessible through Byzantine territory, pilgrims nonetheless sailed along the coast to Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{30} We also have evidence of Anglo-Saxon nuns going to Rome on pilgrimage in the eighth century in the \textit{Letters of Saint Boniface}.\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, Michael McCormick has revealed that monastic women from the Frankish kingdoms can be found in \textit{Charlemagne’s Survey of the Holy Land}, a ninth-century investigation of properties in the Holy Land.\textsuperscript{32} Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, therefore, was still occurring in the early medieval period, but it seems to have died out in the late fifth through early eighth century.\textsuperscript{33} Therefore, there must be other factors that contributed to the lack of female pilgrimages to the Holy Land from the mid-fifth to seventh centuries. This study will seek to discover these other factors and contextualize them with the development and institutionalization of monasteries for women in the early medieval West.

This paper will be divided into two major parts: \textit{The Rise of Ascetic Pilgrimages in the Late Antique West} (c. 350-450) and \textit{The Decline of Pilgrimages in Early Medieval Gaul}


\textsuperscript{33} It is impossible to conclusively determine whether this means that women were not going on long-distance pilgrimages (c. 450-700) or if there were just no records of it. My paper does not focus on dealing with this issue, but it is still important to acknowledge this differentiation.
Part One will describe the rise of ascetic communities in the West by analyzing the female ascetics of Rome. First, I will roughly outline of how their communities emerged and the devotional practices that they were engaged in. Second, I will focus on the model of sanctity that was applied to them by their biographers. This will help determine the reasons for which late antique ascetic women were lauded, but also the extent to which this model permitted them to have more freedom in their lifestyles. This model will be especially useful to compare to the model of female sanctity that developed in Gaul a century later. Lastly, we will turn to the women who went on pilgrimages to the Holy Land and beyond and how this was seen a common and commendable form of ascetic devotion by their biographers.

Part Two: The Decline of Pilgrimages in Early Medieval Gaul (c. 450-615) will analyze the ascetic and monastic practices in the West by shifting the focus to Gaul where monasteries for women become the most evident in the source material. First, I will outline what female saints’ lives can tell us about ascetic and monastic practices in Gaul. From there, I will argue for the continuity of monastic practices from late antique Rome and demonstrate that the women of Gaul did look back to the ascetic women of Rome as models for their own devotional practices. Although there are certainly many more continuities between their practices, we notice that there is a sharp decline in female ascetic pilgrimages. The following sections, Spiritual Mothers and Peacemakers, will argue that the cause of this decline was not due to monastic rules, but rather due to the social, political, and economic climate of Gaul after the dissolution of the Roman Empire.

Spiritual Mothers will examine the transforming model of female sanctity in which direct and active care towards their communities and monasteries was seen as a more commendable feature than the late antique model of individual ascetic feats. In early medieval Gaul, the vitae of saintly women exemplify those who cared for their community by
feeding, washing and healing the sick and poor. Instead of being rewarded for their personal spiritual accomplishments, they were lauded for the care they demonstrated within Gaul. Due to this transformed model of female sanctity, charity and benevolence funneled the vast wealth of these royal holy women towards their immediate communities rather than for their personal spiritual gain. It is not that these women did not have the funds to travel, but rather that they were rewarded in sanctity if they used their money for the good of their monastic houses and communities. Especially during the tumultuous time of barbarian conquest and Frankish dynastic squabbles, women and children often sought refuge in such communities. A consecrated life allowed women protection from marriages that were either unwanted or violent. The female saints who founded such monasteries had to use their wealth to build and sustain these communities in order to provide for the influx of religious women who otherwise had no means to sustain their own lives independently.

Peacemakers will focus on how these religious women involved themselves in the politics of the realm. The sixth century was a period of immense political strife within the Merovingian dynasty. The division of the kingdom into four separate kingdoms in 511 AD fuelled dynastic warfare and family feuds. During this time, religious women with royal or aristocratic ties acted as peacemakers both within their family and between other kingdoms. As daughters, mothers, and wives of kings, their fates were inextricably tied to that of their family’s despite their renunciation of worldliness. Unlike the women of late antiquity who left their families behind, the women of Merovingian Gaul played a vital role in the political

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sphere of the kingdoms. Focusing on the interior rather than abroad, these women were tied to the land not because of ecclesiastical authority, but royal authority.

It is important to keep in mind that all these women, both in the fourth and the sixth century, exerted a considerable amount of agency. Although this agency may have manifested itself in different ways, early medieval women were hardly the subservient cloistered women they are made out to be. Abbesses could decide what monastic rules their communities would follow and even exert power contrary to their local bishops. Women could still be seen outside the cloister, traveling around the kingdom, yet their purpose was no longer a great pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In their roles as spiritual mothers for their community and peacemakers for the realm, they entwined themselves in the secular affairs. It is unfair to suppress these women under the same monastic rules that the Church attempted to impose upon them in later centuries.

Before we begin, it is necessary to lay down some of the terminology and time frames that I am using. I use the term “religious women” to encompass all women who have renounced the world for a life dedicated to God. This includes both ascetic and monastic women. I use “ascetic women” for those who practice asceticism as a devotional discipline either independently or in groups. The use of “monastic women,” however, refers only to women who live within a monastery. I have tried to avoid calling those who live communally in private homes as monastic women since their practice was neither regulated nor institutionalized within that home. Monastic women, however, can also be ascetic women, as asceticism refers to the practice rather than the living situation. The second point to clear up is the use of the terms “late antique” and “early medieval.” There is a considerable amount of overlap between these two terms of periodization and every scholar describes them

differently. Late antiquity is typically used to describe the transformation from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages, roughly assigned by Peter Brown to the third through eighth centuries.\textsuperscript{38} The way I will use these terms, however, will be in line with the categorization of these women in scholarly work. The women from 350 to 450 are predominantly studied by late antique historians and referred to within the context of the Roman Empire. The study of women by early medieval historians typically begins in the year 500. These women are often called early medieval women and placed within the context of the rising barbarian kingdoms. Although this system is not perfect and does lend itself to periodization, it was the only way to provide a descriptive title with adequate historiographical reconnaissance to differentiate between the vastly different political, social, and economic environments of these two periods.

One last word on the nature of my main sources—saints’ lives—will be beneficial as well. The term hagiography, now commonly used to define a source genre, was originally coined to categorize the study of saints’ lives.\textsuperscript{39} The original audience of a saint’s life was intended to see these accounts as history, as demonstrated by their Latin title, \textit{vita}, meaning “life.” Yet, these should not be considered as biographies of people, but rather biographies (if one can use the term) of saints, who transcend humanity with their deeds.\textsuperscript{40} In the early twentieth century, the use of saints’ lives as tools for the study of history was frowned upon,


\textsuperscript{39} I have tried to use the term \textit{vita} (\textit{vitae} pl.) or “saints’ lives” to describe the written accounts of the saints rather than “hagiographies,” which, as René Aigrain reminds us, refers to the scientific study of saints’ lives. René Aigrain, \textit{L’hagiographie: Ses sources, Ses méthodes, Son histoire}, (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 2000), 7.

\textsuperscript{40} Although I have use the term biography and biographer to describe these sources in this study, I do so with the understanding that these are “saintly biographies” rather than biographies in the modern sense. Therefore, I consider these saints’ lives as biographies of a saint as they were seen in the pious imagination of their believers, not as true accounts of their lives. Because these saints’ lives all partake in a common saintly biographical genre, they are formulaic and borrow heavily from past saints’ lives. For more on the differentiation between biography and hagiography and the formulaic nature of saints’ lives, see Robert Bartlett, \textit{Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 504-46, esp. 518-35.
particularly after Hippolyte Delehaye’s work *The Legends of the Saints*. The belief that saints’ lives were unsuitable for historical study persisted among scholars until 1965 when it was redeemed by Frantisek Graus’ work: *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger*. Although most scholars now acknowledge that hagiography can be a useful tool to study medieval history, Delehaye’s work still cautions scholars to treat these texts with reserve when extracting historical information. Robert Bartlett demonstrates that saints’ lives had clear didactic purposes in providing examples for future generations to follow while persuading the readers that the saint deserved recognition. At times, the authors of these texts had ulterior motives such as enforcing claims to property and status or promoting their own individual agendas. All of these factors must be taken into consideration when reading these texts, as they are rarely straightforward, unbiased accounts of a life.

With this present study, I do not presume to claim that any of the deeds or events in these saints’ lives are either fact or fiction. If possible, I have corroborated my evidence with other primary sources such as Gregory of Tours’ *History of the Franks* and Fredegar’s *Chronicle*. For the purpose of this study, however, the factuality of hagiographies is of less concern to me than the possibility of its factuality. By this, I mean that any saint’s life had to be written in such a way that the saint’s actions would seem convincing to the audience. The deeds that saints performed in these accounts, whether miraculous or mundane, had to be recognizable and credible to the audience. Therefore, saints’ lives were created by a specific society as much as they were by the author. As such, the actions and events presented as facts can be mined for the values of that same society. Although saints’ lives are formulaic,

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42 Frantisek Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger; Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit*, (Prague: Nakladatelství Československé akademie, 1965).

absorbing themes and motifs from previous lives, what they selected from those past texts still had to be relatable to the time in which they were writing. Therefore, when I attempt to extract the roles that religious women played in their society, they can be asserted as a reflection of what the society in question thought to be credible and true, regardless of the factuality.
PART ONE
The Rise of Female Ascetic Pilgrimages in the Late Antique West (c. 350-450)

By the late fourth century, the Mediterranean had already witnessed the rise of various monastic communities for men and women throughout the provinces of the Roman Empire. This movement began in the eastern half of the Empire in the late third century, when men and women, such as the renowned anchorite Saint Anthony, retreated into the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia to live a solitary life of reflection and harsh asceticism. These men and women, whose stories are recorded in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, were monumental in the development of ascetic practices that would eventually sweep through the Mediterranean world and beyond in the following centuries. The individual asceticism that characterized the Desert Fathers, however, was not the only way in which men and women renounced the world. Ascetic practices performed communally in monasteries also developed during this period. In the fourth century, Pachomius established the first monastic house for men at Thebaid in Egypt. These monasteries still adhered to the basic idea of solitude in the desert, yet instead did so communally so that the monks could better support one another.

This ascetic movement also began to appeal to women. Inspired by her brother Pachomius’ devotion, Maria retreated to the desert where she created a monastery for women close to that of her brother. The creation of a female monastery may have been a solution to a growing problem with asceticism—what to do with female relations when a man decided to

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enter into a monastery? The regulation of visitations in Pachomius’ rule suggests that some of the women in Maria’s monastery were related the men in Pachomius’ monastery, thus supporting this theory. Pachomius did not simply impose the rule from his monastery onto that of Maria’s, but instead created a monastic rule that was viewed as more applicable to women. It is in this rule for women that we see a stricter stipulation of enclosure, which suggests an early differentiation between male and female monastics.  

Macrina the Younger, Basil of Caesarea’s sister, also founded a monastic house for women in the mid-fourth century. Likewise, her monastery adhered to a monastic rule specific to women, created by her brother. The increasing number of women interested in asceticism soon became apparent to the Church, which sought to find some way to control these new communities. By 375, the “virgins of God” were officially recognized as an order within the Church in order to envelop their jurisdiction over this expanding practice.

By the mid-fourth century, monastic practices began to trickle through to the West, particularly in Rome and other cities around the Mediterranean. Although variant forms of asceticism had long been practiced in the West, communal asceticism, organized in houses or monasteries, only filtered through after the development of Egyptian monasticism and the arrival of the Life of Saint Anthony in the West. Athanasius spent two years in exile in the West where he introduced the Life of Saint Anthony. Ten years later, Augustine heard of Saint Anthony through his friend Ponticianus. Evagrius of Antioch likewise wrote out a Latin version of the Life of Saint Anthony in the third quarter of the fourth century, which compelled his friend, Jerome, to go to the Syrian Desert and live as a hermit. Jerome soon discovered that he was not suited for the eremitic lifestyle and returned to Rome where he

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48 Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism, 46, 52-3.
49 Elm, Virgins of God, 39- 77.
50 Elm, Virgins of God, 140.
51 Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism, 59-60.
sought the patronage of aristocratic women, for whom the tales of desert hermits and the monasteries aroused a special interest.52

In the late fourth century, women began to create or join ascetic communities throughout the Roman Mediterranean. For these women, an ascetic lifestyle was an attractive prospect as it permitted them to evade familial obligations, such as marriage.53 Ascetic practices were predominantly located within the household, and as groups of women began to live together, this began a form of proto-monasticism in which women lived communally but without any formalized oversight or regulation. Marcella (325-410) opened a monastic community in her villa on the Aventine Hill in Rome. Jerome, closely affiliated with Marcella, wrote a letter to a Gallic mother and daughter living ascetically in their home making it probable that there were other ascetic and monastic women in Gaul as well.54 Egeria, a pilgrim from Spain, was likely to have been a part of some form of a monastic house before her pilgrimage in the last decades of the fourth century.55 By the early sixth century, monasteries for women could be found in the Roman provinces of Gaul.56 The institutionalization of monasticism in the West, however, was sporadic and unsystematic. Particularly in areas such as Gaul, which experienced the collapse of central government,
there was a substantial diversity of monastic practices.\textsuperscript{57} Even after the creation of convents, many religious women remained in their own household while still engaging in ascetic practices with no uniform or universal rule.\textsuperscript{58}

Running parallel to the development of asceticism and monasticism among women in the West was the practice of ascetic pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Ascetic pilgrimage began to gain popularity in the mid-third century, when religious men and women journeyed to Palestine, Syria, and Egypt to visit biblical sites and the desert hermits who had initiated their ascetic practices.\textsuperscript{59} Although the emergence of pilgrimage did provoke a great deal of criticism against itinerancy among the clergy, it remained a popular devotional practice for religious men and women in the fourth and early fifth centuries.\textsuperscript{60} Yet, while men continued to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land throughout the early medieval period, there are no records of women on pilgrimages in the late fifth through early seventh centuries.\textsuperscript{61} The most striking aspect of this decline is the fact that ascetic pilgrimages were incredibly popular

\textsuperscript{57} Conrad Leyser, \textit{Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great}, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 42.

\textsuperscript{58} Griffe, \textit{La Gaule Chrétienne à l’Époque Romaine}, 348-9.


among the religious women of late antiquity, and even, as one scholar has gone so far to say, a part of their monastic identity.\textsuperscript{62} Often as an initiation into their ascetic life, ascetic pilgrimages became a characteristic feature of monastic practice in the West among women.\textsuperscript{63} Religious women from the West were renowned for their promotion of Holy Land pilgrimage by building monasteries and pilgrim hostels throughout the Holy Land and Egypt.\textsuperscript{64} Part One will begin with the household monasticism in the late fourth century, best characterized in Rome, and the devotional practice of pilgrimage to set up the scene for its eventual decline, which will be discussed in Part Two.

Chapter 1: The Emergence of Ascetic Communities in Rome

“At the time no great lady in Rome knew anything of the monastic life, nor ventured to call herself a nun.”

Jerome, Epistle 127: On Marcella.

Thus wrote Jerome of Marcella in 412 after her death. As a wealthy Roman aristocrat, Marcella, pioneered the practice of ascetic renunciation and monastic living among women in the West. Although monastic communities were already well established in the Eastern deserts, the practice of asceticism and communal living had not filtered West until the late fourth century when Marcella, forsaking her worldly possessions, retreated to the service of God. We learn from Jerome that Marcella came from a noble and ancient Roman lineage, but was orphaned after the death of her father and then left to widowhood after seven months of marriage. Suitors lined up to marry this young widow, but Marcella rejected all advances and decided to devote herself to a life of poverty and chastity.

Marcella had learned about the ascetic lifestyle from exiles from the eastern half of the empire, including the future Pope Athanasius, who had all fled to Rome to escape the Arian persecutions in the East. From these men, she heard tales of the desert ascetic Anthony, and the Pachomian monasteries at Thebaid, particularly, “the discipline laid down there for virgins and widows.” Rejecting the world after the death of a husband became a common enough practice during Marcella’s lifetime that she was able to keep a small community of ascetic women living in her villa on the Aventine hill before moving to her larger countryside villa just outside Rome. Jerome describes the community and its significance to the increasing trend of a monastic vocation as follows,

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68 It is also likely that the community of believers that gathered together after the ascension of Christ in The Acts of the Apostles was influential here, since they also lived in common and sold all their possessions, which they donated to the needy. Acts 2.42-47. For more on Jerome’s circle of Roman noblewomen see Peter Brown,
A farm near Rome was your monastery, the country being chosen because of its loneliness. You lived thus together for a long time, and as many other ladies followed your example and joined your company, I had the joy of seeing Rome become another Jerusalem. Monastic establishments for women were founded in many places, and the number of monks in the city surpassed all counting.⁶⁹

Monastic communities began to gain popularity after Marcella’s initial retreat in the area around Rome. This process, however, was gradual and unsystematic since it is not until the early sixth century that we will begin to see monasteries established specifically for women in the Latin West. It is important to note, however, that becoming an ascetic in the late antique Roman Empire was almost exclusively an upper-class phenomenon.⁷⁰ While Christianity offered the method by which these women could attain some independence, these women were only able to take advantage of this opportunity because of their wealth.

We have no evidence that these monastic communities in Rome lived under a specific monastic rule. At this early stage in monastic development, it is likely that they adapted their lives in a similar fashion to the monasteries in the East—a strict regimen of fasting, prayer, and scriptural reflection. The women within Marcella’s community were closely affiliated with Jerome, who wrote to these virgins and widows to aid them in their asceticism. Although their devotional practices, focused around scriptural study, were already well in place before Jerome’s arrival in 382, almost everything we know about these women is due

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⁷⁰ Due to a troubled economy in the West, a small percentage of local landowners were able to amass an incredible amount of wealth by buying up cheap land. This new oligarchic system in provinces expanded the elite class of Rome to the provinces of Gaul, Spain, and beyond, making it possible for the local elite to participate in this largely upper-class phenomenon. See Averil Cameron, The Later Roman Empire: AD 284-430, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 117-8, 127; Peter Brown, The World of Late Antiquity, (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 34-41.
to the various letters Jerome wrote about them.\textsuperscript{71} Therefore, to reconstruct their basic monastic practice it is helpful to turn to Jerome’s writings.

Initiation into ascetic practice was seen as a physical, moral, and spiritual transformation. These women were expected to relinquish their wealth by donating it to the poor and thereafter commit themselves to almsgiving.\textsuperscript{72} Any visible signs of wealth or status were to be shunned as they donned the simple woolen garments of the lower classes.\textsuperscript{73} They were not to adorn themselves with jewelry or style their hair in any way.\textsuperscript{74} Often, they were exhorted to wear veils to cover their heads.\textsuperscript{75} Just as these aristocratic women altered their physical appearance to indicate their new life, they were also expected to transform into moral and spiritual models for the Christian community. When Jerome wrote to the virgin Eustochium on her entrance to the religious life, he described it as a spiritual metamorphosis:

As soon as you resolve to hear the wisdom of the true Solomon, and come to Him, He will avow to you all His knowledge; He will lead you as a king to His chamber; your colour will be miraculously changed, and to you the words will be fitting: “Who is this that goeth up and hath been made white?”\textsuperscript{76}

Eustochium’s spirit, now white and pure, was an indication of a moral transformation following the guidelines of true Christian behavior. Avoiding vainglory was the main warning Jerome had for Eustochium, perhaps due to do her highly lauded virginal status.\textsuperscript{77} Asella, another young virgin of Rome, was seen as a model for her gravity.\textsuperscript{78} In his epitaph for Fabiola, Jerome lauds her for her humility, faith, and lack of arrogance.\textsuperscript{79} Similarly, Paula

\textsuperscript{71} For more on the Aventine circle and their biblical study before Jerome see Hinson, “Women Biblical Scholars in the Late Fourth Century,” 319.


\textsuperscript{73} Jerome, \textit{Select Letters of St. Jerome}, Ep. 77 (p. 311); Ep. 38 (p.165).

\textsuperscript{74} Jerome, \textit{Select Letters of St. Jerome}, Ep. 77 (p. 311); Ep. 38, (p.163).

\textsuperscript{75} Jerome, \textit{Select Letters of St. Jerome}, Ep. 22 (p. 111); Ep. 38 (p.163).


\textsuperscript{77} Jerome, \textit{Select Letters of St. Jerome}, Ep. 22 (p. 113).


\textsuperscript{79} Jerome, \textit{Select Letters of St. Jerome}, Ep. 77 (p. 321)
was characterized according to her humility, chastity, compassion, generosity, and lack of envy.  

Their ascetic devotional practices were meant to mirror their personal transformations. Strict dieting and fasting were considered to nourish their souls as they attempted to detach themselves from all earthly pleasures. Particularly for virgins, abstaining from gluttony was “the only way of preserving chastity.” Marcella was said to have fasted, “but in moderation; and she abstained from eating meat.” Paula was commended for her lack of indulgence and vigorous fasting. Jerome urged Eustochium to eat simple foods, and refrain from meat and wine and to “let [her] fasts be of daily occurrence.” Yet, sometimes fasting was taken to the extreme, as was the case with Paula’s eldest daughter, Blesilla, who died from starvation. Paula occupied herself with manual labor and was frequently admonished by Jerome for her lack of care for “her poor old, broken-down, and frail body.” When such ascetic practices became too rigorous, as in the case of Blesilla, the Christian ascetic community came under fire by the Roman aristocracy.

The main focus of an ascetic life was scriptural study and prayer. E. G. Hinson has proposed that these women looked to Origen as a model for biblical scholarship. Marcella was said to have an “ardent love for God’s scripture” and spent all her visits with Jerome questioning him about Scripture in order to solidify her faith. Paula became renowned for reading the Church Fathers in Greek along with her excellence in reading the scriptures in

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81 Jerome, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, Ep. 22 (p. 75-7);
87 Perhaps as a result of Blesilla’s death, Jerome was forced to leave Rome in disgrace. Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 61. Andrew Cain, however, argues that Jerome was forced to leave Rome after he was convicted of legacy-hunting and sexual impropriety. Andrew Cain, “Jerome’s Epitaphum Paulae: Hagiography, Pilgrimage, and the Cult of Saint Paula,” in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18:1 (2010), 108.
Hebrew. Jerome was deeply impressed by Fabiola who studied the prophets, gospels, and psalms with such “fervor and zeal.” Jerome urged Eustochium to “read often and learn all you can” and “let sleep steal upon you with a book in your hand, and let the sacred page catch your drooping head.” Every moment of their existence they were supposed to have their minds focused on God either through physical discomfort or scriptural study.

It is useful to compare the ascetic lifestyle outlined above to the functions wealthy Roman women served in society. Gillian Clark has provided a synthesis of the roles of women in traditional Roman society in the empire summarized here. A wealthy girl’s education would include spinning, weaving, and sewing both to supplement the household economy, but also as a symbol of traditional household devotion—a marker of a proper upbringing. Girls received a basic education so that they could read, write, and take part as an overseer of the household. Once they reached puberty, they would be married off to a husband, typically around the age of fourteen. Due to high mortality rates and the large age differences between young brides and their husbands, it was not uncommon for a woman to marry multiple times until her own death. It was vital for a father to marry his daughter off as soon as possible so that she could bear many children and still have the opportunity to remarry if her husband preceded her. Although the daughter’s consent was always necessary for a marriage, there was little she could do unless she had grounds for refusing the marriage. A match was considered good if it was in the interest of the family, yet these marriages still did have the potential for affection and happiness. By the late empire, the most common form of marriage was *sine manu*, which kept the daughter under the *patria potestas* of her father rather than transferring her under the legal power of her husband. This was done in order to facilitate divorce if the marriage was unhappy—which became increasingly common in the

93 The following paragraph is indebted to Gillian Clark, “Roman Woman,” in *Greece & Rome* 28, n. 2 (1981), 193-212.
late empire. Consequently, such a marriage did give women more agency and freedom than in an indissoluble marriage. Once married, Roman women would then be occupied running the household, hosting and attending dinner parties, visiting friends, and enjoying other excursions to the theater or market. In these activities, they were very much engaged in public life as a symbol of decorum and proper Roman social behavior. Generally, this was the extent of their roles outside the private household. Although they certainly had interests outside the household, they acted within their families to affect the male-dominated social system.⁹⁴

In contrast, the monastic vocation created a new niche where these late antique women could exert some power in the public realm of society. To do so, however, reconfigured some of the traditional structures of Roman society. “In those days,” Jerome relates on Marcella, “no highborn lady at Rome had made profession of the monastic life, or had ventured—so strange and ignominious and degrading did it then seem—publicly to call herself a nun.”⁹⁵ Marcella suffered through the “slander-loving community” of Rome that defamed her for her religious profession.⁹⁶ Perpetual chastity and a religious vocation was not a novel thing in the Roman world; for centuries, the Vestal Virgins were honored for their virginity and devotion to the Roman deities.⁹⁷ Yet, it would also seem that the increasing number of wealthy and marriageable women, who had given up their traditional familial and societal duties as daughters, wives, and mothers, would have put some strain on the Roman aristocracy. In making a vow of chastity, these women would have begun to diminish the pool of prospective upper-class marriages and the amount of wealth passing through generations. Virgins were typically married off as soon as possible to improve family

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⁹⁴ Gillian Clark, “Roman Woman,” 193-212.
⁹⁶ Jerome, Select Letters of St. Jerome, Ep. 127.3.
⁹⁷ Brown, Through the Eye of a Needle, 271.
standings, but a vow of chastity put a permanent hold on family assets. Families were now being cut off from the possibility of future generations and, most importantly, inheritances.

The institution of the Roman *domus*, which molded the traditional roles of a woman in her society, is integral to understanding the disruption of social values precipitated by asceticism. The *paterfamilias*, the eldest male of the family, headed the *domus*—or household. The *paterfamilias* was the moral figure of the household who exerted entire power over the household within the limits of the law. Since the face of the *domus* was both private and public, one sphere could influence the other. For this reason, the disobedience of a dependent towards the *paterfamilias* could also reflect badly on him in the public realm where he garnered political, economic, and social authority. As such, it was conceived as a social failure for the *paterfamilias* when his children or dependents went against social traditions. With the advent of asceticism, aristocratic Roman households were still predominantly pagan and certainly very conservative. The actions these women took to convert to Christianity and devote themselves to asceticism had a profound effect on the social standing of their parents, who were now considered to be faulty in their roles as *paterfamilias*.

Late Roman law granted a widow more agency in making her own legal decisions and dispensing of her own property. Widows under Roman law were *sui iuris*—in possession of independent legal power—if their fathers were no longer living. It is for this reason that the ascetic women of late antiquity were often widows—they had more freedom to make such a

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98 Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 270.
99 When exerting power outside the private household, the head of the family (he who owned the property) took on the identity of *dominus*. In many cases, women could achieve this position if they owned property, but overall, access to power outside the household was only attainable by men. Kate Cooper, “Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure, and Private Power in the Roman “Domus,” in *Past & Present* 197, (Nov. 2007), 3-33, esp. 6-7.
100 Kate Cooper, “Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure, and Private Power in the Roman "Domus,’’ 3-33, esp. 3-9.
decision.\textsuperscript{101} On the other hand, younger girls were typically married off before they reached a high enough level of maturity to decide to undertake a religious life. Since younger women were traditionally married to older men, however, they were typically widowed early, which permitted them to then pursue a religious vocation instead of remarry.\textsuperscript{102} In the legal records that survive, there is no evidence that religious women had a male relative or legal tutor in their transactions. Furthermore, these records indicate that women had full possession of their property and a “remarkably wide radius of legal action.”\textsuperscript{103} When Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, Paula, and Fabiola all decided to enter into a religious life they presumably had control of their wealth and were, therefore, able to liquidate their family properties and use the money for their own purposes.\textsuperscript{104}

Despite the increasing popularity of asceticism, these women nevertheless shocked the upper classes of Rome. As we learn from Jerome, “no other women in Rome caused scandal except Paula and Melania, who by despising their wealth and deserting their children, lifted up the cross of the Lord as a standard of religion.”\textsuperscript{105} Andrew Cain has described Paula as “a counter-cultural icon who defied the contemporary senatorial norms of property succession and preferred to disperse her vast wealth to the poor, even if it meant robbing her children of their inheritance.”\textsuperscript{106} After Fabiola gave away all her possessions to the poor and built an infirmary and a hostel in Rome, she was said to have “robbed her own children,” and

\textsuperscript{101} Women were allowed to remain single after Constantine’s law of 320 AD repealed past marriage penalties from Augustan marriage legislation. Cameron, \textit{The Later Roman Empire}, 128.

\textsuperscript{102} Cloke, \textit{This Female Man of God}, 49-51.

\textsuperscript{103} Elm, \textit{Virgins of God}, 250-1.


\textsuperscript{105} Jerome, \textit{Select Letters of Jerome}, Ep. 45 (p.183)

was “harshly rebuked” by her relatives for doing so.\textsuperscript{107} Peter Brown, however, has warned historians to proceed with caution when considering the financial ramifications produced by these ascetic women. So long as movement of property and inheritances was not blocked from one generation to the next, much of the Roman aristocracy did not mind the concept of an ascetic virginity or widowhood. Widows or virgins who made vows of chastity could have relinquished their claims of inheritances to protect the interests of their family members as Paula did with her son Toxitius.\textsuperscript{108} Regardless of the financial provisions these women may have made, however, they were still left with a considerable amount of money, which allowed them to support the poor of their community, found monasteries, and spend their fortunes on travel expenses to the Holy Land.

Although these religious women experienced a great deal of backlash from their families and members of their social class, they were nonetheless able to muster a considerable amount of freedom and public authority that had been previously unavailable to them. Roman society traditionally constrained women and left them “invisible and housebound.” A religious vocation granted these women access to the public sphere where they could travel, learn, and interact with men and women publically.\textsuperscript{109} In these early years of asceticism, women were freed from social traditions such as marriage and childbearing, which consequently gave them control of their own bodies.\textsuperscript{110} With their new roles as leaders for their communities, they were able to hold positions of influence that permitted them to deal with judges and other authorities.\textsuperscript{111} To be sure, the lifestyle they had now taken on was no simple matter; it required complete chastity, along with a regimen of strict fasting, constant prayer, and hours upon hours of devotional readings of scripture. Yet, despite such a

\textsuperscript{108} Brown, \textit{Through the Eye of a Needle}, 271-272.
\textsuperscript{111} Cloke, \textit{This Female Man of God}, 166, 182-5.
strict existence, ascetic women were no longer subject to the demands of their fathers or potential husbands.

These women were some of the Church’s strongest advocates for Christianization, yet their newfound public power was also seen to threaten the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The male clergy was the strongest advocate of female chastity and asceticism, but when these women began to wield a considerable amount of independence in their new roles, they threatened the Church’s control. This incited the clergy to write against these ascetic women in order to restrict and manage them. As Gillian Cloke argues, however, “the clergy’s attempt to restrict women’s activities did not come from misogyny, but theoretical views of womanhood from the bible.” Authors such as Tertullian, Ambrose, and Augustine wrote about the proper clothing and behavior of consecrated women while supporting their exhortations with biblical citations. In Jerome’s letter to Eustochium, he urges her to read Tertullian’s treatises on virginity, Cyprian’s De habitu virginum, and Ambrose’s De virginibus. There was certainly a pressure put upon these women to conform to the strict standards that the Church Fathers had set for them. More significantly, the clergy began to call for the complete enclosure of consecrated women due to their increasing of movement. A religious woman’s ability to travel independently clashed with the theological understandings that consecrated women embodied the purity and chasteness of God. If women were out in public or traveling abroad, the Church thought that its own integrity was threatened.

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112 Connor, Women of Byzantium, 16; Salisbury, Church Fathers, Independent Virgins, 5; Elm, Virgins of God, 166.
114 Cloke, This Female Man of God, 26.
Pilgrimage, which was seen as a worthy demonstration of faith, still caused some unrest when it came to women traveling abroad. In his *Second Letter to Virgins*, Athanasius wrote to a group of consecrated virgins who had gone on pilgrimage to the Holy Land to console them for the sadness they felt upon leaving the sacred center. Yet Athanasius then tells them,

> it behooves you to be enshrouded, separated, set apart, and withdrawn in every way, with a steadfast will, and to be sealed up, just as you were sealed by the Lord at the beginning as a servant.\(^{118}\)

Athanasius equates a virgin to the enclosed garden in the *Song of Songs* (4:12-14), and “that no one disturbs the sealed fountain or muddies the bright and shining waters of virginity.”\(^{119}\) In his letter to Eustochium, Jerome tells her “let foolish virgins roam abroad,” but for her part, Eustochium should “go not from home nor visit the daughters of a strange land.”\(^{120}\) Ironically Jerome ended up taking Eustochium and her mother Paula to the Holy Land on pilgrimage, directly conflicting with the advice he had previously given to her. It is possible that Jerome was speaking on two different levels—the ideal, theoretical one that followed the ideas of the Church Fathers, and the realistic, practical one that reflected the actions and mobility that was actually available to these women. Moreover, the fact that Jerome, a man of the Church, was accompanying them also might explain this discrepancy. Despite these patristic exhortations, the religious women of the fourth and fifth centuries still found ways to exercise their freedom—most notably expressed through their mobility.\(^{121}\)

When male authors wrote about these religious women, who did not fit into the theoretical ideal that the patristic authors had established, they applied masculine models of

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sanctity. These authors accentuated their “manly” nature, their extreme asceticism, and their scorn of wealth in order to demonstrate that they had surpassed their femininity. By presenting their subjects as “athletes of Christ” and “manly women,” these ecclesiastical men were bestowing the highest praise that a woman could achieve. Consequently, these authors were essentially legitimizing their more independent actions, such as pilgrimage, by commending these women with male sanctity. For a brief time, pilgrimages became a laudable activity for religious women, who otherwise would not have been permitted to travel without fathers or husbands. Although in theory female monastics were supposed to be considered equal to their masculine counterparts, men were still seen to have more spiritual power and authority by virtue of their gender. As the weaker sex, women were blamed for inciting lust in men through their inherent sexuality. Asceticism was seen as a way to dull the senses to prevent falling into lust and temptation. When Jerome praised Fabiola, he wrote that she was “forgetful of her sex, unmindful of her frailty.” Likewise, concerning Paula, Jerome exclaimed, “what astonishing passion and determination which one is hard pressed to find in a woman!” Paula too was, “forgetful of her sex and bodily weakness.” Described as surpassing their femininity, these women had attained the highest form of sanctity that they could hope to achieve as women.

It was only through asceticism that women could hope to transcend their feminine gender to attain a form of male spirituality and sanctity. In his treatise on virginity, Basil of Caesarea wrote that once a woman attained a mind free of desire and adopted a masculine

122 Schein, “The “Female-Men of God” and “Men who were Women,” 9.
123 Connor, Women of Byzantium, 21, 24; Elm, Virgins of God, 91, 262-9; Salisbury, Church Fathers, Independent Virgins, 26-7; Cloke, This Female Man of God, 181.
124 Schein, “The “Female-Men of God” and “Men who were Women,” 6.
125 Elm, Virgins of God, 77
126 Cloke, This Female Man of God, 28; Salisbury, Church Fathers, Independent Virgins, 23.
127 Salisbury, Church Fathers, Independent Virgins, 16.
129 Jerome, Jerome’s Epitaph on Paula, 14.3.
130 Cloke, This Female Man of God, 32-3.
appearance, voice, and comportment, they could live and be treated as their male counterparts. In the deserts of Egypt, a sixty-year-old Melania the Elder “scoffed at [her companion, Jovinus’] weakness.” She then asserted that she “[has] not yet made concessions to [her] bodily desires, nor [has she] used a couch for resting, nor […] ever made a journey on a litter.” By upstaging a man with her impressive steadfastness, Melania the Elder was able to prove that she has transcended the weakness of her feminine gender. Likewise, her granddaughter Melania the Younger was received by the holy men of Nitria “as if she were a man.” “In truth,” Gerontius states, Melania “had been detached from the female nature and had acquired a masculine disposition, or rather, a heavenly one.” It was through Melania the Younger’s various “manly deeds” that Gerontius, her biographer, was able to promote her holiness. Melania, like many of her contemporaries, distributed her wealth to the poor, went on pilgrimages, founded monasteries, and endured strict lives of ascetic practice. Furthermore, her ascetic trials were portrayed as “great combats” that Melania was able to overcome as an athlete of Christ. With many of the ascetic women who seemed to clash with perceptions of their gendered roles in society and religion, they were often written about as “manly women,” or “athletes of Christ,” in an effort to legitimize their holy actions, and consequently, their sanctity.

131 Basil of Caesarea, *De vera virginitate*, *Patrologia Graeca* 30, 708B, 18, as cited in Elm, *Virgins of God*, 120.
132 Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 55.2.
Chapter 2: Ascetic Pilgrimages to the Holy Land

“Paula sprouted wings and longed to set eyes on Jerusalem and the Holy Places.”
Jerome, The Epitaphum Sanctae Paulae

In the swiftly growing monastic communities of the West, we have accounts of a few monastic women who undertook pilgrimages to the Holy Land between 370 and 420. Paula and her daughter Eustochium, closely affiliated with Jerome and Marcella, arrived in the Holy Land in 385 and established a monastery for women in Bethlehem in 386. Fabiola, another widow from Jerome’s circle, traveled briefly to the Holy Land in about 395 to study Scripture. Melania the Elder, originally from Spain but residing in Rome at the time of her departure, journeyed to the Holy Land in 373 and founded a monastery with Rufinus on the Mount of Olives. Her granddaughter, Melania the Younger, made the same journey in 410 and eventually founded a monastery in Thagaste, near Carthage.

136 Jerome, Jerome’s Epitaph on Paula, 7.1.
137 Paula embarked on the religious life after the death of her husband and two children. Such bereavement and widowhood often initiated women into the ascetic practice. No longer tied down to a husband, yet with little desire to remarry, women such as Paula sought sanctuary in the arms of Christ. Paula left her remaining children behind with the exception of her daughter Eustochium and sped off to the Holy Land where she reunited with Jerome before traveling the eastern deserts. In 386 they finally settled in Bethlehem and founded two monasteries with Jerome—one for men and another for women. Jerome, Introduction to Jerome’s Epitaph on Paula: A Commentary on the Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae, 14-5. For more on Paula, her epitaph by Jerome, and her pilgrimage, see Cain, “Jerome’s Epitaphium Paulae: Hagiography, Pilgrimage, and the Cult of Saint Paula,” 105-139.
138 Fabiola came briefly to Jerusalem where she thoroughly impressed Jerome with her enthusiastic study of scripture (Jerome, Select Letters of Jerome, Ep. 77, p. 327). She had to cut her journey short when the Huns threatened to invade Jerusalem (Jerome, Select Letters of Jerome, Ep. 77, p. 329).
139 We know very little of Melania the Elder except that she was from one of the wealthiest families in Spain. She married at the age of fourteen and had one son, Publicola, before she was widowed. Leaving for Rome, where her newly deceased husband had properties, she raised her son until he had begun his senatorial career, after which she was free to retreat into an ascetic life. See Kevin W. Wilkinson, “The Elder Melania’s Missing Decade,” in Journal of Late Antiquity 5.1 (Spring, 2012): 166–184.
140 “Wounded by the divine love,” Melania the Younger “longed for bodily chastity” yet was forced to marry Pinian due to her senatorial status (Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 1). Throughout their marriage, Melania begged her husband to join her in the ascetic life, and, after the death of their two children, Pinian finally agreed. (Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 1-6). Both in their early twenties, they continued to live at home, chastely, in ascetic training. (Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 8). During their time in Rome, they helped the poor and needy, gave money to those in debt, and to slaves. (Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 9). Once they decided they were ready, they gave away the rest of their possessions and sailed for Africa just as Alaric and his Visigoth army descended on Rome in 410. (Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 19). Like their predecessors,
and 395, Poemenia traveled from Spain to Egypt and then on to the Holy Land. And lastly, Egeria recorded her three-year pilgrimage (c. 381-4) through Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in a collection of letters that survives today.

What spurred these women to travel across the Mediterranean and then spend months, and even years, visiting holy sites? As Silvia Schein has noted, pilgrimage was often an introduction into the ascetic life these women were about to pursue. Since many of them were widows, their pilgrimages were founded in their bereavement after the death of either their husbands or children. E.D. Hunt has remarked that, “such domestic tragedy fractured family bonds, and made possible the kind of social uprooting on which Melania [and other women] embarked.” “Taking every movable piece of her property,” Melania the Elder, “put it on board a ship and set off for Alexandria at full speed.” Her granddaughter, Melania the Younger, had lost two children with her husband Pinian before he finally agreed

Melania and Pinian visited holy sites and donated their wealth to the monasteries of the desert. Eventually they settled in Thagaste where they established two monasteries—one for women and one for men. (Gerontius, *Melania the Younger*, 22).

Palladius refers to her as “Poemenia, servant of God,” thereby suggesting a religious vocation of some kind (Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 35.14). From the few fragmentary sources that seem to mention her, Paul Devos has hypothesized that Poemenia was the daughter of emperor Theodosius I and his Galician wife, Aelia Flaccilla. We know little about her religious devotion except that she was strongly orthodox following the Nicene Creed. It is likely that her pilgrimage to the Holy Land took place sometime between 384 and 395. See Paul Devos, “La ‘sevante de Dieu’ Poemenia d’après Pallade, la tradition copte et Jean Rufus,” in *Analecta Bollandiana* 87, (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1969), 206-7.

Our knowledge of Egeria comes solely from a travelogue she wrote during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The dating of her journey is highly contested, Pierre Maraval, John Wilkinson, and Paul Devos all speculate that it occurred around 381-4; see Egeria, *Introduction to Journal de Voyage (Itinéraire)*, 38; Egeria, *Egeria’s Travels*, trans. with supporting documents and notes by John Wilkinson, 3rd ed., (Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1999), 9; Paul Devos, “Une Nouvelle Égerie,” in *Analecta Bollandiana* 101, (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1983): 49-53. George Gringras, however, provides a later date, sometime between 394 and 404; see Egeria, *Introduction to Diary of a Pilgrimage*, trans. and annotated George E. Gringras, (New York: Newman Press, 1970), 15. Since the content of her writings are focused almost exclusively on the sites she is visiting, they reveal very little about her. But, from the glimpses of information that she does provide, it is likely that she was a nun from Galicia or southern France and lived in a monastery; see Egeria, *Introduction to Diary of a Pilgrimage*, 11; Egeria, *Introduction to Journal de Voyage (Itinéraire)*, 19-21. Pierre Maraval brings up the possibility that Egeria might simply be a pious lady who will eventually evolve towards monastic life but yet is not yet a nun. See Egeria, *Introduction to Journal de Voyage (Itinéraire)*, 27. Hagith Sivan has similarly refuted many aspects of Egeria’s identity, status, and patrimony; see Hagith Sivan, “Who was Egeria? Piety and Pilgrimage in the Age of Gratian,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 81.1 (1988): 59-72.

Schein, *The “Female-Men of God” and “Men who were Women,”* 15.


to an ascetic existence. After a trial period in Rome, they finally left in 410 and sailed around the Mediterranean before establishing two monasteries in Thagaste, Egypt—one housing 80 monks and the other 130 virgins. After the death of her second husband, Fabiola sold all her goods and began her ascetic life in Rome, yet “Rome was not large enough for her compassionate kindness.” So Fabiola sailed around the Etruscan sea, before “suddenly, and to every one’s surprise, she sailed to Jerusalem.”

While bereavement may have played a role, these women were driven by an intense curiosity and piety fueled by their new ascetic vocation. Pilgrimage was seen as a way to “reinforce faith and fulfill a deep spiritual need.” With the financial means and newfound independence they had attained, women such as Paula and Melania the Younger had a deep thirst to experience the biblical sites that defined their piety. It was Melania’s “desire to worship at the Holy Places” that eventually led her to Jerusalem after seven years in Thagaste. According to Jerome, Paula “eagerly desired to venture out—alone and (if such even had been possible) with not a single person by her side—to the desert inhabited by Antonies and Pauls.” In the end, Paula traveled with Jerome and her daughter Eustochium as companions. Paula “toured the sites with such zeal and enthusiasm that she could not be torn away from the first ones except that she was hastening on to the rest.” Although Paula’s pilgrimage was certainly a religious undertaking, her curiosity and excitement to explore the sites went further than devotional practice. After some time in Bethlehem, Paula

151 Gerontius, *Melania the Younger*, 34.
and Eustochium wrote a letter beseeching their friend Marcella, who still resided in Rome, to come see the wonders of the Holy Land that they had discovered.\textsuperscript{155}

Egeria’s unique catalog of experiences as a pilgrim offers valuable insight into the motives of religious women without the filter of a male author. Although we know very little about Egeria personally, she does mention that she embarked on her pilgrimage after the “many holy monks who came from there to Jerusalem to visit the holy places in order to pray there … spoke in detail about that region” and “stirred in [her] a great desire to take upon [her]self the trouble of going there.”\textsuperscript{156} Pilgrimage for Egeria was in large part due to a “desire to travel” and visit the holy places so that she could have the opportunity to pray at each site mentioned in the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{157} At every stop she made, one of the holy monks or priests guiding her would read the relevant passage of Scripture and afterwards they would take communion.\textsuperscript{158} Although now composed as a travelogue, Egeria’s writings were initially letters that she sent back to her fellow sisters so that they could envision the sites of the bible.\textsuperscript{159} Egeria’s excitement seeps though each page as every site is filled with awed descriptions of the landscapes, people, and practices. For her, and many of these women, pilgrimage was more than an escape from a previous life or and initiation into a new one; it was an aspect of devotional practice based in a curiosity to travel and physically experience the landscape of the bible.

Once in the East, Melania the Elder, Paula, Eustochium, Melania the Younger, and Egeria all spend a great deal of time on the road traveling to different sites. In the fourth century, travel was either overland on foot, donkeys, camels, carts, or carriages or by sea in cramped boats. The empire’s infrastructure had paved main roads that were twenty feet wide,

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\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{155} Jerome, \textit{Select Letters of St. Jerome}, Ep. 46.
\item\textsuperscript{157} Egeria, \textit{Diary of a Pilgrimage}, 10 (p. 65), 2 (p. 50), 4 (p. 54), 7 (p. 60), 17 (p. 75).
\item\textsuperscript{158} Egeria, \textit{Diary of a Pilgrimage}, 3 (p. 52), 4 (p. 54),
\item\textsuperscript{159} Egeria, \textit{Diary of a Pilgrimage}, 5 (p. 57).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
marked with milestones, and systematically placed rest houses and post-stables.\textsuperscript{160} Yet, as many of these women prove, ascetic travel was not about comfort. Melania the Elder claims not to travel on a litter, rest on a bed, or wash herself.\textsuperscript{161} Once in Palestine and Syria, Paula used a donkey to travel and slept in a cell despite being offered better accommodations.\textsuperscript{162} In Bethlehem she was renowned for never bathing and for eating much less than was necessary for sustenance—possibly resulting in her early death.\textsuperscript{163} When Melania the Younger finally arrived in Jerusalem, she was so poor from her vast donations of money that she almost enrolled herself in the church’s poor register for alms.\textsuperscript{164} Egeria too, remarks that parts of her journey were on donkeys and other animals while steeper terrain was often on foot.\textsuperscript{165} At the impromptu stops out in the desert, there were not hostels or rest stops so it is probable that she would have been sleeping in a similar fashion to the hermits that lived there.\textsuperscript{166} As a devotional practice, ascetic pilgrimages were meant to be arduous and uncomfortable. These highborn ladies of the Roman aristocracy actively found ways to make their journeys more difficult in order that their attention remain focused on God. By traveling in such rugged conditions, their biographers were able to fit them into the paradigm of “manly women,” thus legitimizing their apparent freedom of mobility.

While on their pilgrimages, they were rarely alone as travel was extremely dangerous. The roads in the desert were often fraught with robbers.\textsuperscript{167} Through the more remote and dangerous desert terrain, Egeria mentions that Roman soldiers had to accompany her for

\textsuperscript{160} Wilkinson, Jerusalem Pilgrimages, 30-1. Egeria often mentions the conditions of roads and the prevalence of resting stations, Egeria, \textit{Diary of a Pilgrimage}, 6 (p. 59), 7 (p. 60), 9 (p. 64), 10 (p. 66-7), 18 (p. 76), 19 (p. 77).
\textsuperscript{161} Palladius, \textit{Lausiac History}, 55.2.
\textsuperscript{162} Jerome, \textit{Jerome’s Epitaph on Paula}, 7.2-3, 9.2.
\textsuperscript{163} Jerome, \textit{Jerome’s Epitaph on Paula}, 21, 28.
\textsuperscript{164} Gerontius, \textit{Melania the Younger}, 35. Peter Brown speculates that this was more of an attempt to relive the poverty of the first Christians rather than a true lack of money as they would eventually donate vast sums of money to the monks of Egypt and build a monastery in Jerusalem within the next few years; see Brown, \textit{Through the Eye of a Needle}, 300.
\textsuperscript{165} Egeria, \textit{Diary of a Pilgrimage}, 3 (p. 51-2), 6, (p. 59), 11 (p. 67-8).
\textsuperscript{166} Egeria, \textit{Diary of a Pilgrimage}, 3 (p. 51), 4 (p. 55-6).
\textsuperscript{167} Wilkinson, \textit{Jerusalem Pilgrims}, 36-7.
Pilgrims often traveled in groups and were led by guides, often Christians and Jews, who knew the terrain and could point out the sites. Egeria constantly mentions the holy monks who guided her and “continually pointed out … each place.” Group travel was the most common and often included only men. Egeria “set out from Jerusalem in the company of holy men, who were going there to pray, and who generously agreed to offer [her] their company on [her] journey.” Far out in the deserts of Egypt, Melania was accompanied by two men after Silvia’s departure. Under any other circumstance, this would have been shocking, yet Melania was portrayed scolding Jovinus for his weakness—it was her manly disposition that saved her what would have otherwise been a scandal. Paula, Eustochium, and Jerome were accompanied by “many virgins” on their pilgrimage around the East. The presence of anonymous women indicates that other religious women were certainly traveling around even if they are not mentioned in the historical record. The women whose stories were immortalized in the writings of their close male friends were part of the wealthiest classes of the Roman world, but there were certainly many more religious women with some means traveling around the Holy Land. For every Paula, we can suppose that there were many other religious women, such as Egeria, who had the finances to travel but were not necessarily high-status enough to have their biographies written.

One of the most prevalent aspects of pilgrimages was not the places they went to, but the people they met. Melania the Younger met bishops Augustine, Alypus, and Aurelius in

168 Egeria, Diary of a Pilgrimage, 7 (p. 60), 9 (p. 64).
170 Egeria, Diary of a Pilgrimage, 1 (p. 49), 5 (p. 56).
171 Egeria, Diary of a Pilgrimage, 13 (p. 70), 10 (p. 65).
172 Palladius, Lausiac History, 55.1.
173 Jerome, Jerome’s Epitaph on Paula, 14.4.
174 This paper is not concerned with the places they went to and their veneration to holy sites, but rather the interactions and agencies these women demonstrate on pilgrimages. For an in depth discussion on location and devotion, see E.D. Hunt, Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312–460, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); and Georgia Frank, The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
Africa, as well as bishop Cyril and the renowned abba Nestoros in Alexandria.\textsuperscript{175} In Jerusalem, Melania would only see “the holy and highly reputed bishops … so that she might spend the time of their conferences inquiring about the divine word.”\textsuperscript{176} Paula, too, visited important bishops around the Mediterranean including Epiphanius of Cyprus and Paulinus of Antioch.\textsuperscript{177} Egeria’s travelogue is filled with bishops who welcomed her on her journey and discussed Scripture with her.\textsuperscript{178} In large part, their fame and class connections aided them in procuring an audience with high-status men, but their ability to meet them as equals and engage in conversations about Scripture did run against traditional Roman gender expectations.

Most significant was the desire among female pilgrims to visit the hermits of the Egyptian deserts, who were famous for their ascetic feats and renunciation of the world. These holy men were attempting to get as far away as possible from women, the origins of temptation, in their desert retreats. The \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum} contains numerous stories of hermits taunted by lust and temptation in their cells.\textsuperscript{179} Having women follow them out into the desert was certainly not part of their plan and many hermits refused to meet with those women who had trekked to visit them. One of the few things we know about Poemenia was that she traveled to the Nitrian desert to meet the famous John of Lycopolis. The desert hermit refused to see her but gave her advice on her travel plans—advice that Poemenia refused to take and soon regretted.\textsuperscript{180} A few of our pilgrims, however, were not only received by the desert hermits but lived with them for some time. When Melania the Elder sailed East, she went to Mount Nitria where she met a half-dozen holy men and “spent half the year with

\begin{footnotes}
\item[175] Gerontius, \textit{Melania the Younger}, 20, 34.
\item[176] Gerontius, \textit{Melania the Younger}, 36.
\item[178] Egeria \textit{Diary of a Pilgrimage}, 8 (p. 63), 14 (p. 71), 19 (p. 77), 20 (p. 81, 83-5).
\item[180] Palladius, \textit{Lausiac History}, 35.14
\end{footnotes}
them, making the rounds of the desert and seeking out all the holy men.”  

181 Pretending to be a slave, she served these men in humility as part of her ascetic practice.  

182 In Egypt, Melania the Younger “toured the cells of the holy monks and very faithful virgins,” before going to the cells of Nitria where her grandmother had gone some decades before her.  

183 Paula visited the Nitrian desert where she was welcomed by “countless throngs of monks.”  

184 Egeria’s journey is littered with accounts of meeting ascetics in the deserts of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Mesopotamia, many of whom invited her into their cells and gave her gifts.  

185 The fact that the desert hermits received these women meant that they were seen to have transcended their gender as “manly women.” Therefore, it was through their male sanctity that they were given such liberties and independence to go where they wished and meet who they pleased.  

Within an ascetic vocation and with the finances and connections to travel, these women were able to cover huge distances and meet some of the most renowned bishops and hermits of their age—all of which would have been impossible had rules of enclosure been truly established in the West. As mentioned above, the clergy was attempting to restrict the movement of religious women and enclose them in order to preserve their purity—a purity that became symbolic of the church’s integrity. Yet, women were seen outside their monastic households or communities as much as they were seen inside. In fact, the few glimpses we do get of complete enclosure were decisions made by the women themselves as part of a rigorous ascetic practice. When residing in Thagaste for seven years, Melania the Younger locked herself up in a cell where she had a chest made to lay in.  

186 It is unclear how long she remained in the cell, but she eventually left to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After visiting the Egyptian deserts, she returned to Jerusalem where she had herself enclosed in a

181 Palladius, Lausiac History, 46.2  
182 Palladius, Lausiac History, 46.3  
183 Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 37, 39.  
184 Jerome, Jerome’s Epitaph on Paula, 14.  
185 Egeria, Diary of a Pilgrimage, 4 (p. 55), 5 (p. 58), 10 (p. 66-7), 11 (p. 67), 12 (p. 68), 19 (p. 77), 20 (82-3), 21 (p. 85), 23 (p. 87).  
186 Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 22, 32.
cell once more for fourteen years, before traveling once again to Constantinople, Caesarea, and Bethlehem.\textsuperscript{187} When Paula arrived at Jerusalem, she stayed in a cell at her own request as a test of ascetic strength.\textsuperscript{188} Remaining enclosed was not symbolic of their purity and restricted mobility but a testament to their extreme ascetic trials. Emulating the cells of the hermits in the deserts they had visited, these women chose to remain enclosed to test their faith. Melania the Younger, who “was zealous to surpass everyone in asceticism,” and Paula found ways to make their lives physically difficult to prove their devotion. These rigorous activities helped to promote them as “manly women”—not to legitimize their claustration.

One of the most enduring marks these women left on the landscape of the Holy Land was their founding of monasteries. Melania the Younger founded a double monastery in Thagaste and then another monastery for ninety virgins in the Holy Land.\textsuperscript{189} For her convent, Paula “took the many virgins from the upper, middle, and lower classes whom she had gathered together \textit{from different provinces}.”\textsuperscript{190} It is impossible to know which provinces these women came from, but it is possible that some may have been arriving from the West on their own initiation into the religious life. If so, this further demonstrates that female religious travel that was occurring in the late fourth and early fifth century. Melania the Elder and her friend Rufinus built two monasteries at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, one of which supported fifty virgins. For twenty-seven years, Melania and Rufinus resided together using their private funds to entertain visitors, including “bishops, solitaries, and \textit{virgins who visited them}, coming to Jerusalem to fulfill a vow.”\textsuperscript{191} It is possible that some of the virgins who came to visit Melania the Elder’s monastery had traveled from the West as well. Since they were regarded as virgins, typically used to signify a consecrated woman or a woman who had chosen to live in chastity for God, it is likely that they were on their own pilgrimages.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[189] Gerontius, \textit{Melania the Younger}, 41-2.
\item[191] Palladius, \textit{Lausiac History}, 46.5-6. Emphasis mine.
\end{footnotes}
These women created rules for their monasteries that reflected their own lifestyles and the tenets of asceticism that they thought were important to uphold. The most important aspects of Paula’s monastic rule were prayer, scriptural study, and manual labor—all reflective of Paula’s own practices.  

“Segregation from men was a policy so strictly enforced that she kept the women even away from eunuchs so as not to give any ground to slanderers, who are wont to criticize holy people as a means of reassuring themselves in their own moral failings.” Yet this segregation was based on the mistrust of outside judgment, not in the questioning of female virtue as many patristic authors promulgated. When Melania the Elder founded her second convent in the Holy Land, “her whole concern was to teach the sisters in every way about spiritual works and virtues,” and to “guard the holy and orthodox faith without deviation.” On her deathbed, Melania asked her virgins to study scripture and remain obedient to the lord priest, who happened to be Gerontius, her biographer.  

The inclusion of such an exhortation reminds us that the accounts of these women’s lives were all done for a very specific purpose—in writing Melania’s vita, Gerontius had the opportunity to shape her words for his own use. Furthermore, the Latin manuscript of the Life of Melania the Younger contained an extra scene omitted from the Greek manuscript in which the nuns of Melania’s monastery attempted to visit her deathbed but instead received a vision of Melania warning them not to leave their cloister. This anecdote goes against all of Melania’s actions during her lifetime and was likely to have been added at a later date to put an end to female ascetic traveling.  

In most cases, accounts of saints were done in order to promote a specific model of female sanctity and ascetic behavior, but, at times, ulterior motives can be seen, as is the case with The Life of Melania the Younger.

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193 Jerome, Jemone’s Epitaph on Paula, 20.4.
194 Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 42-3.
195 Gerontius, Melania the Younger, 65.
196 Salisbury, Church Fathers, Independent Virgins, 95.
The lack of standardization in late antique ascetic practice allowed women to undertake long-distance pilgrimages to the East as part of their devotion. Pilgrimage to the Holy Land and beyond became a characteristic feature of female ascetic practices in the late antique Mediterranean. Accounts of these women who exerted such apparent liberties were written and preserved because they were able to fit within the model of sanctity that had been established in the late antique period. Yet within a century, female ascetic pilgrimage met a serious decline in the West. The religious, political and economic changes that occurred during the dissolution of Roman power and the rise of barbarian kingdoms had a formative influence on the devotional practices of the religious women of West. Records of religious women on long distance pilgrimages became virtually nonexistent in the historical record.

Although the increasing institutionalization of monasticism certainly aided in altering the devotional practices that their predecessors had established, monastic regulation is not the only reason why ascetic pilgrimages declined in the early Middle Ages. In the sixth century, women were living ascetically in a variety of manners: as recluses, within their homes, or with other women in household communities. Since this process was rather unsystematic, it was difficult for the Church to get a strong hold over its expansion and regulation. For this reason, ascetic women could create the rules that they would live by and chose the extent to which enclosure would play in their devotional practice. If the women did choose to enclose themselves, it was often an ascetic feat done by their own choice. Fasting, prayer, and scriptural reading remained the most uniform practices among monastic women in the West due to its strong precedent in the East, but the rest of their lives were up to their own interpretation, within reason. Part Two will explore these factors with the aim to create a more comprehensive understanding of the role of religious women in their communities and the effects that ecclesiastical authority and monastic regulation had in limiting the mobility of religious women.
PART TWO
*The Decline of Ascetic Pilgrimages: Early Medieval Gaul (c. 450-615)*

The collapse of centralized government in the provinces of Italy, Spain, and Gaul weakened the failing Roman Empire, thus opening the field for conquest. During this century of transformation, the empire lost its political supremacy to the invading Germanic tribes. The Franks solidified their power north of the Loire by the end of the fifth century, yet due to the divided nature of the kingship, issues with succession, civil wars, and other internal disputes plagued the Frankish kingdoms. Particularly in the north, which experienced the most visible urban and economic decline after the Roman Empire, provincial society became the base of sixth-century politics, economy, and administration. Urban centers were left behind and those that did survive often did so because of their ecclesiastical importance. Although trade remained active, production and aesthetic complexity of pottery and wares decreased in the industries. Climate changes further diminished agricultural productivity and led to a general impoverishment of all levels of society. While the new barbarian kingdoms took over political, social, and cultural structures, the Church was able to rise up and secure its power as the last Roman social institution and a stronghold of Roman culture. As Peter Brown comments, “the local church became the ‘fixative’ that held whole

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197 Under Clovis, who came to power sometime between 474 and 491, the Franks began to a series of attacks against the Goths on the Loire frontier in the 490s. An alliance with the Burgundian kingdom in the southeast aided Clovis in his conquest of Aquitaine against the Visigoths in 507. Afterwards, Clovis turned to the northern Gallic provinces to consolidate Frankish power in his own hands. His death in 511, however, divided his newly formed kingdom among his sons—Childebert, Chlodomer, Chlothar, Theudoric. Following in Clovis’ footsteps, his sons continued to expand throughout Gaul by defeating the Thuringians and Saxons in the north, and the Burgundians, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths in the south. In 524 Chlodomer was killed in a battle against Burgundy, which provided Chlothar the opportunity to take over his brother’s kingdom. By 558, Chlothar succeeded Theudebald and Childebert and was able to unite the Merovingian kingdoms once more before his death in 561. Once again, the kingdom was divided into four by Chlothar’s sons. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 303-310; Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 41-56; Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, v. 2, trans. and introduction by O.M. Dalton, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), IV.22


199 Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 481.

200 This occurred especially in southern Gaul. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 353.
populations in place” during the fifth century. Gaul took center stage for the prominence of the Church since the Frankish kingdoms under Clovis converted to Catholic Christianity, rather than the Arianism of the other barbarian kingdoms.

Gallic monasticism was born during the same century of political, cultural, and economic transformation. The fifth- and sixth-century Gallic Church was divided between the north—based around Tours and Saint Martin’s cult—and the Rhone valley, home to the monasteries at Marseille and Lérins. For the most part, institutionalized monasticism was located in the south due to the influence of John Cassian, while the north saw a predominance of individual ascetics and ascetic communities. From the time of Saint Martin, ascetic wandering was seen as the biggest problem in the Gallic church. Cassian, a monk who had traveled to the Egyptian deserts, attempted to institutionalize monastic practice in Gaul. In his Institutes (420-4) and Conferences (426-8), Cassian promoted communal monasticism and stabilitas loci—staying in one place—through monastic rules in order to preserve the integrity of the original desert hermits. His writings heavily influenced the Gallic church, especially in the south where Gallo-Roman elite culture and society survived in cities like Arles, Marseille, and Lérins. Fifth-century Gallic monasticism was dominated by Cassian’s monastery at Marseilles and the monastery of Lérins, located on a small island just off southeastern France, founded by Saint Honoratus. Yet despite these developments in

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202 Halsall, Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 307; Peter Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom, 87-89.
203 For a brief introduction into monastic development in the West, see Marilyn Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism, 82-110.
204 These “two monastic cultures are seen as operating in quite separate spheres of emphasis,” until the arrival of Saint Columbanus in the seventh century. Conrad Leyser, Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 41.
206 Rousseau, Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian, 185-226; Leyser, Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great, 35-46.
207 Brown, Through the Eye of a Needle, 411-432; Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom, 64-7.
southern Gaul, household monasticism seems to be the most common form of renunciation among women.\textsuperscript{209} In 407, Jerome wrote a letter to a consecrated mother and daughter living together at home in Gaul, which was likely to be the predominant practice at this time.\textsuperscript{210} It was not until the early sixth century that the first convent for nuns was created by Caesarius of Arles for his sister.\textsuperscript{211} By the late sixth century, female monastic houses could be found in all the major cities of central Gaul—Amiens, Autun, Auxerre, Chartres, Poitiers, Sens, and Tours.\textsuperscript{212}

Scholars have tended to attribute ecclesiastical authority over female monastic communities as the only explanation for the decline of pilgrimages.\textsuperscript{213} Examples of strict enclosure in the sixth century, however, come predominantly from the influence of Caesarius’ *Rule for Virgins*, which in turn influenced later monastic rules and ecclesiastical statutes.\textsuperscript{214}

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\textsuperscript{212} Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 107.


\textsuperscript{214} For more on Caesarius’ rule and the purpose of a monastic enclosure, see Donald Hochstatler, “The Meaning of Monastic Cloister for Women According to Caesarius of Arles,” in *Religion, Culture, and Society in the Early Middle Ages*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Board of the Medieval Institute, 1987), 27-40. Aurelianus, bishop of Arles in the mid-sixth century, wrote a *Rule for Virgins* which was heavily influenced by Caesarius’ call for enclosure. Aurelianus of Arles, *Regula ad virgines*, MS. M BSB Clm. 28118, f. 193-6; see also Hope Mayo, “Three Merovingian Rules for Nuns,” (PhD-thesis, Harvard University, 1974), 69-71. Microfilm. Adalbert de Vogüé and Joël Courreau indicate statute nineteen in The Council of Orléans (549) as one such example; see Caesarius of Arles, *Oeuvres Monastiques*, 81-83. This statute distinguishes between monasteries that enclose nuns and those that do not. The section of the statute that is relevant here is as follows: *quaecumque etiam puellae seu propria voluntate monasterium expetunt seu a parentibus offerrentur, anum in ipsa qua intraverit veste permaneat. In his vero monasteriis, ubi non perpetua tenetur inclusae, triennium in ea qua intra reverentin veste permaneat et post modum secundum statua monasterii ipsius, in que elegerint permanere, vestimenta*.
Caesarius also mentions that the nuns were permitted to provide a meal for visiting religious women, *religiosa feminae*, which demonstrates that, although St. Jean imposed claustration, they were aware of other religious women who were not cloistered and had the ability to travel. This is evident in the late fifth through sixth centuries, where a diversity of monastic situations existed for these women. In fact, there are more references to ascetic women living in their households similar to the ascetic household that characterized Marcella’s community in Rome. Genovefa, Chlothild, Monegund, and for a time Radegund, all lived ascetically either alone or with a small group of companions. Variations between ascetic lifestyles and even monasteries only confuse the idea of imposed claustration. Although certain monastic rules for female communities did play a role in restricting the mobility of religious women from the fifth century onwards, they were neither uniform, nor universal in their application. Between the ascetic women of Rome in the early fifth century and the predominance of monastic communities in the seventh century, there is a century and a half in which rules of claustration were not an issue for many religious women and yet we find no long-distance

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215 *Convivium etiam his personis, hoc est episcopis, abbatibus, monachis, clericis, saecularibus viris, mulieribus in habitu saeculari, nec abbatissae parentibus, nec alciuis sanctimonialis numquam, nec in monasterio, vel extra monasterium praeparetis. Sed nec episcoapo huius civitatis, nec provisiori quidem ipsius monasterii convivium fiat. De civitate vero nec religiosae feminae, nisi fore sint magnae conversationis et quae monasterium satis honorent; et hoc rarissime fiat. Caesarius of Arles, Regula ad virgines, MS. M BSB Clm. 28118, f. 188, XXXVI.*


217 The institution of Caesarius’ rule is certainly the reason why Rusticula, a nun at Arles, never went on a pilgrimage. Some scholars have argued that the rule of enclosure was used as a protective defense during the turmoil of the sixth century; see Schulenberg, ”Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100),” 52-3; Jo Ann McNamara, “Living Sermons: Consecrated Women and the Conversion of Gaul,” in *Medieval Religious Women*, v. 2 *Peaceweavers* (Cistercian Series: 72), eds. Lillian Thomas Shank and John A Nichols, (Cistercian Publications, 1987), 27. A century later Donatus of Besançon’s rule for nuns explicitly refuted the need for complete claustration, which demonstrates the variability in monasteries. *Et licet sanctus Caesarius proprius Christi, ut estis, virginibus regulam dedicasset, vobis tamen ob immutationem loci in nonnullis conditionibus minime conveniret. “And it is proper that Saint Caesarius, on account of Christ, had dedicated a rule to virgins, like yourselves, nevertheless, on account of their perseverance of place (i.e. enclosure), it is, under no conditions in the least, suitable for you.” Donatus of Besançon, Regula ad virgines*, MS. M. BSB Clm. 28118, folio 196v. See also Donatus of Besançon, ”Regula ad virgines” in *Patrologia Latina* 87, 273.
ascetic pilgrimages. During this period, female ascetic practices were diverse and unregulated since many religious women did not live within a monastery. It was not until the seventh century that monasteries become the main form of worldly renunciation. Short-distance pilgrimages to local shrines were becoming increasingly popular in the fifth-century among lay and religious alike. Yet, the long-distance pilgrimages to the Holy Land that defined the religious women of late antique Rome are virtually nonexistent in early medieval saints’ lives. What follows here is an exploration of the social, economic, and political factors that contributed to this decline in female ascetic pilgrimages in the West.

As religious women became increasingly important to their immediate society, their ability to go abroad decreased, thus resulting in the decline of female ascetic pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Part Two will be separated into three sections. First, I will introduce the religious women in an effort to demonstrate the diversity of ascetic lifestyles practiced in early medieval Gaul. Next, I will address how religious women acted as spiritual mothers for their communities in a society that had become impoverished by climate changes, a changing economy, and warfare. Their roles in this transformed society made them indispensable to their immediate communities. Lastly, I will focus on the involvement of religious women in the political realm as peacemakers, which further explain their ties to Gaul. Throughout this study, I hope to demonstrate how the roles women played in their communities and in the realm coincide with the decline in long-distance pilgrimages.

\[218\text{For example, St. Martin’s shrine at Tours. Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom, 79.}\]
Chapter 3: Ascetic and Monastic Women in Gaul

“Living [in Trier] with her [aunt] monastically, she learned the holy Rule. Thus having been taught herself, she might give instruction to other nuns.”

Saint Glodesind, Virgin of Metz in Belgica Prima

These words point to the beginning of a new age in female asceticism that developed in the sixth century. As monastic houses for women became increasingly prevalent over the course of this period, they became regulated by the church. Monasteries, however, were not the only way religious women were living in sixth-century Gaul. There was a variety of living situations and ascetic practices in the late fifth and sixth centuries, but also an increasing trend towards the institutionalization of monasteries in response to the lack of regulation and uniformity. From the vitae that survive, we can reconstruct the unregulated ascetic and monastic practices that were common during this period and discern the extent to which they reflect the practices of the ascetic household communities of late antiquity as outlined in Part One.

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220 Because of the geographical specificity of our sources, it is useful to think of this present study as a case study for early medieval religious women. This by no means insinuates that what we find in Gaul is universal in the West, but it can, nonetheless, help us achieve a more determinate picture. If the well-documented women of Gaul were not recorded to have gone on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, it is likely (although not certain) that a similar decline is occurring in Italy and Spain. Secondly, these accounts of Gallic women are by no means a complete picture of all religious women in Gaul—they are merely the top echelon of social and religious culture. There are many more unnamed women who were apart of this religious movement who go remain virtually invisible in the historical record. It is therefore important to keep in mind that, much like the accounts of late antique women, these vitae were written for very specific purposes. These are not factual biographies meant to convey the life-story of these women, but rather narratives composed to promote the ideals that these religious women were supposed to embody. Often formulaic, saints’ lives as an entire genre are to be treated with great reservations when being mined for information concerning the lives and beliefs of their characters. Yet despite these technical difficulties, saints’ lives can still supply important insight into the ideals of female sanctity and proper behavior. Such ideals can in turn inform us about the social, political, economic, and religious realities that either supported or undermined these women’s quest for sanctity. While every piece of information in these vitae should be critically analyzed, it is unlikely that, had any of these women gone on pilgrimage, no trace would have been left in these accounts. If these women, many of whom came from the wealthiest families of the realm, were unable to go on pilgrimages, it is unlikely that any other women would have had such resources. Moreover, to attract absolutely no attention for such an impressive task in any surviving texts only decreases the probability of pilgrimages among religious women. For more on the use of vitae in historical study, see Introduction (p. 14-5).
Is it realistic to establish some continuity concerning the development of female asceticism and monasticism between the budding household communities of fourth-century Rome and the women of Gaul who lived a century after? Although there were female ascetics in Gaul as early as the fourth century after the advent of Saint Martin of Tours, female monastic communities were not established until the early sixth century in southern Gaul. Since southern Gaul was a region closely tied both religiously and culturally to the Christian Mediterranean, it is expected to find monastic development arrive there sooner. This is by no means to say Marcella’s household community in Rome was the direct influence on Caesarius of Arles’ foundation of a monastery for his sister. Instead, Marcella’s community in Rome and Caesarius’ monastery at Arles demonstrates a larger movement in favor of communal monasticism for women in the western Mediterranean that began to supersede individual asceticism. Marcella’s community is one of the first examples of such a development, but by no means the only one as Egeria, too, was likely a part of a similar monastic community. Marcella’s community in Rome offers a reference point to track the gradual incorporation of communal monasticism among female ascetic practices in the West. This inclination towards communal monasticism was then taken up in Gaul by Caesarius of Arles, and afterwards by other women who renounced the world, but still sought the protection and security of a communal lifestyle.

The late antique religious women, who had been immortalized by Jerome, Gerontius, and Palladius, provided a model of religious behavior, and consequently a model of sanctity, that their successors in fifth- and sixth-century Gaul were meant to emulate.²²¹ This is most evident in the poems written by Venantius Fortunatus, a sixth-century poet and clergyman, who was a close friend of Radegund, one of the religious women we will be dealing with. In

²²¹ Manuscripts of these women’s lives and pilgrimages were being copied and preserved in monasteries throughout the Middle Ages. Some of which may have been copied or read by the nuns as is evidenced by the presence of the Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae in library catalogue of the monastery of Kitzen (c. 8⁰-9⁰ cen). Felice Lifshitz, Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia: A Study of Manuscript Transmission and Monastic Culture, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 196.
poem 8.1, Fortunatus draws direct parallels between Radegund to her late antique predecessors.

She, frugal in food, surpassing Eustochium, and, she, abstinent, surpassing Paula, 
She recalls the wounds, which the leader Fabiola healed
Reviving Melania in zeal, Blesilla in piety, 
Having the strength to rival Marcella in devotion, 
She restores Martha in obedience, and Mary in tears, 
She, ever awake, wished to imitate Eugenia, she wished to be like Thecla in suffering. 
Through these inclinations, she bears everything praised in these women:
I recognize these signs, which having been done previously, I now read.\textsuperscript{222}

In order for such a comparison to work, Eustochium, Paula, Fabiola, Melania, and Marcella all had to be ingrained in the minds of the poem’s readers. While this poem may have served to publicize Radegund’s sanctity, it was also intended to promote certain virtuous traits that other women should seek to follow. By choosing these women, some of whom had gone on pilgrimages, Fortunatus was establishing that these were the pillars of female sanctity that Radegund and others should seek to follow. Yet their pilgrimages, which take up a large part of their written accounts, are not mentioned. Instead, these women were remembered for other traits—fasting, healing, studiousness, piety, and devotion—which Fortunatus wishes future generations of religious women to follow. In another instance, Gregory of Tours mentions the pilgrimage of Melania the Elder, whom he praises for her goodness and holiness.\textsuperscript{223} The inclusion of an account of Melania’s pilgrimage in his \textit{History of the Franks} makes the lack of pilgrimage among Gregory’s female contemporaries all the more evident.

The \textit{vitae} written about these early medieval women provide insight into the roles that they played in their community and realm, thus providing an explanation for the lack of long-distance pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Moreover, these \textit{vitae} demonstrate a century and a


\textsuperscript{223} Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, I.40.
half of diverse ascetic practices. By the end of this period, however, it becomes increasingly clear that monasticism over individual or household asceticism was the favored form of ascetic renunciation. Genovefa (423-502) is an example of a woman whose ascetic life limited neither her mobility nor her interactions with society. Born into an aristocratic Gallo-Roman family in northern Gaul, she was present when the Franks migrated into the region and took over the government from the Gallo-Roman ruling class. As a young girl, she decided to devote herself as a virgin of God and was consecrated with two other girls by Saint Germanus of Paris. Since monastic communities for women did not exist in the north in the late fifth century, Genovefa was free to establish her own way of life based on the ascetic practices she had heard about. Without a monastic community, she continued to live with her mother at home for a while. It is unclear if and when she moved out, but she becomes increasingly surrounded by other virgins throughout her vita, which suggests that they may have been living together in a household community similar to that of Marcella in Rome.

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224 Lisa Bitel’s recent monograph provides insight into the processes of Christianization that occurred in France and Ireland in the fifth and sixth centuries by taking a close look at Genovefa’s promotion of Christianity (as well as Brigit of Kildare). Bitel demonstrates that Genovefa was attempting to create a Christian landscape with her building projects. Lisa M. Bitel, Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

225 Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, eds, Introduction to “Genovefa,” in SWDA, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 19. Martin Heinzelmann places Genovefa in an elite social class as well, but argues that her family was Germanic in origin rather than Gallo-Roman. He bases this argument from the Germanic origins of Genovefa’s name, which he believes makes it improbable that a Gallo-Roman family would name their child with a Germanic name despite the fact that both of her parent’s names, Severus and Gerontia, are Roman. Heinzelmann argues that Genovefa’s father was possibly a barbarian, possibly even Frankish, military officer in the Roman army, which is where he received his Roman name. Heinzelmann does make a good point in attributing her to a Frankish heritage when he explains Genovefa’s involvement in the royal court of Childeeric and her collection of a grain tax in the countryside. Although Genovefa’s repute in relation to Childeeric and Clovis I may have been solely from her saintly deeds and high status, a Frankish heritage would place her in a better position in the Frankish court. See Martin Heinzelmann and Jean-Claude Poulin, Les Vies anciennes de sainte Geneviève de Paris, (Paris: Champion, 1986), 81-103.


227 “The Life of Genovefa,” II.6, V.20, VI.27. It is likely that these women in northern Gaul were influenced by the same stories of the Desert Fathers (particularly Athanasius’ Life of Saint Anthony) that had been transmitted from the East to the West in the late fourth century (and influenced the late antique women of Rome to retreat to an ascetic life). Likewise, the community of believers that gathered together after the ascension of Christ in The Acts of the Apostles may have been influential here. They lived in common and sold all their possessions, which they donated to the needy. Acts 2.42-47.
Genovefa became renown for her aid to the poor and her intercession in the political affairs of the realm.

Chlothild (d. 544) is our first example of a Frankish queen whose conversion to asceticism did not interfere with her involvement outside the cloister in the politics of the Frankish kingdom. She was the daughter of a Gallo-Roman woman and a Burgundian king, and she married Clovis, the king of the Franks, in the late fifth century. Like Genovefa, she was never part of a monastic community. Much of her life was deeply entrenched in the secular world as a queen, but even after her renunciation she was never officially consecrated. After the death of her husband, she retired to an abbey at Tours where she lived in a very similar fashion to other female ascetics. She was venerated as a saint for her holy deeds both during her marriage and her religious retirement. As a queen, she was famed for her almsgiving, her beneficence towards the Church, and her conversion of Clovis to Catholic, rather than Arian, Christianity. As a widow, “she pursued good works in God’s service” including donations to the poor and funding building projects for churches and monasteries. The evolution of Chlothild’s vita is similar to those of the late antique Roman women, such as Paula and Melania the Elder, who only retreated to a religious life after the death of their husbands or children. Even though Chlothild was never strictly consecrated as a nun, she is included in this study because her ascetic practices conform to those of her contemporaries and recall those of her late antique predecessors.

Although brief, Gregory’s account of Monegund’s life (d. 570) demonstrates the continuing ambiguity of an unregulated ascetic life. Governed by no rule, nor any true monastic system, Monegund and her fellow nuns lived how they saw fit in Gaul. Fraught

228 Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, eds, Introduction to “Chlothild, Queen of the Franks” in SWDA, 38.
with sadness after the death of her two daughters, she enclosed herself in a cell within her and her husband’s home.\textsuperscript{232} She eventually fled to Tours, leaving her husband, and lived there with a few other \textit{monachas} until her death.\textsuperscript{233} Due to its association with Saint Martin, Tours became the spiritual center of northern Gaul in the fifth and sixth centuries and attracted ascetics who sought to emulate the saintly bishop. The presence of these ascetics often clashed with episcopal authority when competing for the devotion of the faithful.\textsuperscript{234} In the sixth century, Gregory of Tours began to write about these ascetics in his \textit{De vita patrum} in an effort to bring them under ecclesiastical authority in the historical memory.\textsuperscript{235} Monegund is one of the figures within this corpus, and, therefore adds another level of diversity to the religious women that comprise this present study.

One of the most renowned women of the sixth century, Radegund (c. 525-587), best exemplifies the roles of religious women in society and politics all while demonstrating the shift towards monasticism.\textsuperscript{236} Her life was recorded in two \textit{vitae}—one by her friend Venantius Fortunatus and the other by her fellow nun Baudonivia. From the Thuringian royal line, which the Franks obliterated by 531 in order to secure their power in the north, Radegund was taken into custody by Chlothar to be raised until she reached a marriageable age.\textsuperscript{237} As the queen of the Franks, she was already known for her ascetic inclinations,

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\textsuperscript{233} Gregory of Tours, “Monegund,” 5.  
\textsuperscript{234} Small pockets of \textit{praesentia}, the physical presence of the holy (i.e. relics and shrines), emerged outside the control of episcopal authority. Peter Brown, \textit{The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 88, 123.  
\textsuperscript{236} For an important study on Radegund and her life, see René Aigrain, \textit{Sainte Radegonde}, (Les Trois Moutiers, 1987).  
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“people said that the King had yoked himself to a monacha rather than a queen.”

Using her royal income, “she gave herself energetically to almsgiving,” and built hospices for needy women, both of which were likely part of general queenly duties. She also cared for shrines, visited holy men, donated her clothes to churches, and wore a hair shirt during the Quadragesima—all signs of ascetic practice. After her husband Chlothar killed her last surviving brother in 550, she fled to Médard of Noyon whom she begged to consecrate her as a nun. Reluctant to go against the wishes of his king, Médard refused. Radegund, however, resolute in her decision, “put on a monastic garb and proceeded straight to the altar” where she convinced Médard to consecrate her as a deaconess. Chlothar, for the most part, respected her decision and allowed her to pursue her ascetic practice at her villa in Saix, which was part of her dower. Sometime before 561, she built a monastery at Poitiers “by arrangement with the excellent King Chlothar,” and amassed “a great congregation of maidens for the deathless bridegroom Christ.” Similar to the other religious women of this period, Radegund was famed for her ascetic practices and her acts of charity, mercy, and miraculous healings. Yet her most enduring legacy, however, was the acquisition of a multitude of relics including a fragment of the True Cross.

238 Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 5. McNamara notes that monacha, used in both Monegund and Radegund’s life, was commonly used in the sixth century before it disappeared and was replaced by sanctimonial. The use of this word implies that by the sixth century there was a recognizable group of women who were separated by the rest of society for their religious vocation. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, eds. “Radegund, Queen of the Franks and Abbess of Poitiers,” SWDA, n. 45, 73.
241 Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 12. As a deaconess, Radegund may not have been bound by celibacy, which could have been the reason Médard of Noyon consecrated despite her marriage to Clothar. See Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” n. 53, p. 75. However, it is surprising that Médard of Noyon would have actually consecrated her as a deaconess as many Gallic Church Councils were forbidding the consecration of women as deaconesses, see Concilium Aurelianense A. 533, Concilia Aevi Merovingici, vol. 1, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, ed. Friedrich Maasen, (Hannover: 1961), 17, 18.
244 Baudonivia, “The Life of the Holy Radegund, Book II,” 13-14, 16-17. For Radegund and her collection of relics, see Baudonivia, “The Life of the Holy Radegund, Book II,” 13-14, 16-17. See also Isabel Moreira,
Deep in southern Gaul, Rusticula (c. 556-632) provides the balance for this study since she illustrates the enclosure imposed upon the monastery of St. Jean in Arles, founded by Caesarius in the early sixth century. The province of Provence was experiencing a very different phenomenon than the Frankish territories in the north. During the sixth century, Arles had been ruled by both the Visigoths and the Burgundians until it was absorbed in the Frankish kingdoms by Clothar. After Clothar’s death in 561, the kingdoms were once again separated and Arles was part of Guntram’s kingdom. This was a tumultuous and uncertain century for the people of Arles, many of whom were still, in large part, Gallo-Roman and participant in the Roman Mediterranean culture. It is within this context that Rusticula, a young girl of Gallo-Roman nobility, was taken into the monastery of St. Jean at Arles by the abbess Liliola. Rusticula conforms to the traditional monastic practices of southern Gaul—a focus on Scripture, regular offices of prayer, and daily chores, all heavily influenced by Cassian. She was elected abbess at nineteen and kept that position until her death. Yet even though she was living in an enclosed monastery, Rusticula was also depicted with a deep investment outside the cloister both in the care of her community and politics as will be demonstrated.


Adalbert de Vogüe and Joël Courreau date the establishment of this monastery between 508 and 512, see Caesarius of Arles, Oeuvres Monastiques, 21. William Klingshirn disagrees and dates it earlier to 506/7, see Klingshirn, Cesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul, 104-5. For more on Caesarius’ monastery for women, see Klingshirn, “Caesarius’s monastery for women in Arles and the composition and function of the ‘Vita Caesarii,” in Revue Benedictine 100, (1990), 441-481.


She had been abducted at the age of five by a suitor, Ceraonius, who hoped to inherit her fortune. The abbess of St. Jean, Liliola, interceded on her behalf “to have her enter the monastery enclosure.” Florentius, “The Life of Rusticula, or Marcia, Abbess of Arles,” in SWDA, trans. and eds. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 3.

In the province of Belgica Secunda in northeastern Gaul, Glodesind of Metz (d. 608) provides one last example of a late sixth-century woman before the shift towards Hiberno-Frankish monasticism with the influence of Columbanus, an Irish missionary saint in the late sixth and early seventh century.\footnote{Unlike the urban monasteries of Arles, Poitiers, and Metz, seventh-century monastic communities moved to the rural areas and followed forms of Colombian monasticism. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, eds, Introduction to "Glodesind, Abbess in Metz" in SWDA, 140.} Glodesind lived during the time of king Childebert II, which places her in the last quarter of the sixth-century. As the daughter of “noble duke Wintrio,” she came from an elevated socio-economic class. After a day of marriage, her husband was imprisoned and executed by Childebert, the reason for which was not recorded in any account.\footnote{“Saint Glodesind, Virgin of Metz in Belgica Prima,” in SWDA, trans. and eds. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 5-6.} Refusing her father’s wishes for her to remarry, she fled to Metz, setting “an example for future virgins by following Christ.”\footnote{“Saint Glodesind,” l.8.} Glodesind, veiled by an angelic apparition, was finally allowed to enter into the religious life with the support of her parents, who sent her to an aunt in Trier to be trained in a monastery. Afterwards, her parents funded the construction of her own monastery, Subterius, in Metz, which housed a hundred nuns. She lived for six more years “faultlessly showing others how to follow her example,” before she met an early death.\footnote{“Saint Glodesind,” l.10-13, esp. l.13.} Very little is said concerning her ascetic and monastic practices. She was trained according to the “holy Rule,” which she then instituted in her own monastery, but there is no indication which monastic rule was meant. What is clear, however, is that Glodesind was meant to be an example for other religious women to follow.

In outlining the monastic practices of these late fifth- and sixth-century women, it is evident that there was a great deal of continuity in devotional practice between the late antique and early medieval religious women. Upon entering their religious vocations, the queens, Chlothild and Radegund gave up their costly garments and jewelry in favor of
simpler garments made of wool or sackcloth. These women were lauded for their moral integrity and virtues as well. Although prescriptive, these virtues can indicate what was most valued by the society at the time. Charity is the most prominent virtues in these early medieval saints’ lives, which fits in with the number of references to monetary donations to the church and the poor. While Paula, Melania the Elder, and Melania the Younger were famous for transforming the landscape of the Holy Land with the building of churches, monasteries, the women of Gaul did the same within their own regions. Like the women of late antiquity, these religious women of Gaul followed a strict diet of simple food—bread, beans, legumes, and green vegetables, and they rejected meat and alcohol. Fasting, abstinence, and vigils were a large part of their devotional practices. They wore clothing, such as hair shirts and sackcloth, to increase their discomfort. It is difficult to discern what role scriptural study had in the lives of these early medieval women. Those who lived within monasteries, such as Radegund, Rusticula, and Glodesind might have had access to libraries. Radegund was certainly very learned; she wrote poems and read or was read to by her fellow

253 “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 11; Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 9, 13; Baudonia, “The Life of the Holy Radegund, Book II,” 4. Although many of the accounts do not mention any veil, the authors may have been assumed that a veil was taken up entering a monastic establishment of some kind. Later in her life, Genovefa bestows a veil on another virgin (“The Life of Genovefa,” VI.27), and Glodesind receives a veil from an angel to support her decision to become a nun (“Saint Glodesind,” I.10).
259 “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 11; Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 6; Baudonia, “The Life of the Holy Radegund, Book II,” 4, 8; Florentius, “The Life of Rusticula,” 7. Radegund was particularly renown for her bodily mortifications, including wearing “three broad iron circlets” that tore her flesh and burning a brass plate, which she then pressed to her body “so that her flesh was roasted through.” See Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 25-6.
nuns. Rusticula memorized the psalms and scripture at St. Jean in Arles, where scriptural study played a larger role due to the influence of Cassian and Roman elite culture.\textsuperscript{261} When these women did enclose themselves in cells, it was by their own volition just as it had been for Melania the Younger, who had enclosed herself in a cell at Thagaste a century before.\textsuperscript{262} Calling upon the tradition of the desert hermits who dwelled in their cells, enclosure was part of an ascetic feat—a complete renunciation from the world. This enclosure was temporary and the women themselves had the power to decide when they no longer wanted to remain in their cells. Genovefa enclosed herself in a cell but was seen traveling all around northern Gaul to Troyes, Orléans, and Tours afterwards.\textsuperscript{263} Monegund ordered a cell to be built for her after the loss of her two daughters, but when she desired to relocate to Tours, she did so on her own accord.\textsuperscript{264} Radegund was living as an ascetic far before she had founded her monastery at Poitiers. She traveled to Tours on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Martin before residing at her villa at Saix.\textsuperscript{265} Even after establishing her monastery at Poitiers, she traveled across Gaul on her way to Arles to ask for the Rule of Caesarius, which would subsequently impose enclosure in her monastery.\textsuperscript{266} Mobility was not

\textsuperscript{261} Florentius, “The Life of Rusticula,” 6.
\textsuperscript{262} Gerontius, \textit{Melania the Younger}, 22, 32.
\textsuperscript{264} Gregory of Tours “Monegund,” 2, 5.
\textsuperscript{266} Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, IX.40. We know that Radegund founded the monastery shortly after Chlothar’s death in 561, but she did not travel to Arles until after she acquired the relic of the True Cross, which scholars have dated to about 569. This leaves approximately eight years that the monastery might not have abided by strict claustration. Radegund traveled to Arles with Agnes, the abbess of Radegund’s monastery at Poitiers. On Radegund’s journey to Arles, see Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, vol. 2, trans. and introduction O.M. Dalton, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), IX.40. Aigrain speculates that Radegund and Agnes spent some time in at St. Jean in Arles observing the rule in action before returning home. The rule made its way back to Poitiers back separately (presumably after having been copied for that purpose) accompanied by a letter from Caesaria. Therefore, the rule was only formally instituted in Radegund’s monastery in 570. Aigrain, \textit{Sainte Radegonde}, 103-4. For the letter, see Caesaria II, “Caesaria the Insignificant, to the Holy Ladies Richild and Radegund,” in SWDA, trans. and eds. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 114-8.
an issue for these women. Therefore, if increasing regulation due to monastic rules were not the determining factors of late fifth- and sixth-century Gallic female asceticism and monasticism, the question remains, why did religious women stop going on pilgrimages?

What follow will be an analysis of the roles that these women played in late fifth- and sixth-century Gallic society. Despite the continuity in devotional practice from the fourth to sixth century, the early medieval *vitae* also emphasize different devotional practices, activities, and themes, all of which reflect the concerns of that society. From this, it is possible to discern the transformations that occurred in the society, economy, and politics of the Latin West after the dissolution of the Roman Empire. Consequently, these *vitae* also demonstrate the changing role of religious women, who now actively participated in Frankish politics and society. This active and direct preoccupation with local communities explains the reasons for which the long-distance female ascetic pilgrimages to the Holy Land declined in the early medieval West.
Chapter 4: Spiritual Mothers: the role of religious women in society

“Thus Saint Chrothilda, her life filled with these and other holy works, who was once a queen and then the handmaid of the paupers and servant of God.”

_The Life of Saint Chrothildis_ 267

In late antiquity, the religious women whose _vitae_ survive all fall into a model of female sanctity based on male spirituality. In these _vitae_, the ascetic women spiritually transformed into a male in order to demonstrate their sanctity, consequently legitimizing their more independent actions as women. The _topos_ of the “manly woman” survived in the sixth-century lives of Genovefa, Monegund, Radegund, and Rusticula. 268 When Genovefa decided to become a consecrated virgin, she was told by Germanus of Paris to “have faith, my daughter and act manfully.” 269 Gregory of Tours, who was incredibly learned in the late antique Christian tradition, says the following in his prologue to Monegund’s _vita_: “[God] provides not only men but members of the inferior sex who are not sluggish in fighting the good fight but full of manly vigor.” 270 Some scholars have argued that Fortunatus’ account of Radegund was based on the “manly woman,” or _virago_. 271 Rusticula’s biographer wrote that, “while she was on earth she could always triumph manfully against the Devil who attacked her incessantly.” 272 While these are all clear indications that the “manly woman” survived in the early centuries of the Middle Ages, they also demonstrate the formulaic nature of saints’ lives. The previous section analyzed the continuity of devotional practice and saintly virtues.

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270 Gregory of Tours, “Monegund,” 1.
271 Some scholars have seen a gendered difference between Fortunatus’ account, featuring male sanctity, and Baudonivia’s account, which attempted to overturn this model with a singularly feminine model; see Suzanne Fonay Wemple, _Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900_, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 181-7. This theory has been overturned and reanalyzed by Simon Coates with a compelling argument focused on overcoming the body rather than gender; see Coates, “Rendering Radegund?” 37-50. See also John Kitchen, _Saints’ Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender_, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 115-123 and 134-153.
expressed in the *vitae* of women from late antiquity to the sixth century. What follows here will be an analysis of how these late fifth- and sixth-century saints’ lives depart from their late antique predecessors. It is precisely within this period that we can see new values being stressed in these *vitae*, which point to a new model of female sanctity—spiritual motherhood.

In early medieval *vitae*, religious women are seen deeply invested and involved in caring for their immediate community both indirectly, through monetary donations, and directly, by feeding, clothing, and healing those in need. These early medieval women, therefore, demonstrate a shift from the “manly women” present in early Christian and late antique sources to the “spiritual mothers” that dominate early medieval saints’ lives. At times, Merovingian saints’ lives would depict a saint providing care for the outcasts of society in order to promote the social inclusivity that Christianity could provide. The importance of female saints acting as spiritual mothers to society becomes increasingly evident in their *vitae* since religious women began to look inwards towards their immediate communities in order to provide aid to those in need as well as in order to properly run their monasteries. Together, these responsibilities were time-consuming and expensive and there was little time or money left over for any of these religious women to go abroad. Therefore, as these *vitae* illustrate the shift from the individual ascetic feats of the fourth- and early fifth-century women to the communal, and therefore local, duties of early medieval religious women, they also elucidate one of the factors that may have contributed to the decline in ascetic pilgrimages.

To achieve saintly recognition for charity and care for the community, a sixth-century religious woman needed power, influence, and most importantly, money. As Jo Ann McNamara states, “no woman began a career of sanctity without the substantial material

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273 Giselle de Nie’s study focuses primarily on Radegund, so I will attempt to demonstrate here how her new model applies to the late fifth- and sixth-century women who constitute this present study; de Nie, “Consciousness Fecund Through God,” 101-161.

resources necessary to acquire a reputation for charity.\textsuperscript{275} Their wealth came from personal and familial funds, which fell to them after the death of their husbands.\textsuperscript{276} Therefore, after acquiring independent wealth through inheritances, according the Germanic custom, women could redistribute their personal wealth for the benefit of their community, thereby becoming recognized as saints.\textsuperscript{277} Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg argues that popular sanctity during this period was based on public activity rather than private, mystical, and charismatic traits.\textsuperscript{278} This popular sanctity required that religious women participate actively in the lives of the people within their community. Nobility was another requirement as it gave these women power and influence to effect change or acquire patronage.\textsuperscript{279} Consequently, the female saints we are dealing with here were all, for the most part, very influential, public, and active within their communities and beyond.

Although helping the poor through monetary donations were certainly a lauded action in late antique sources, care for the community did not often extend further than that. In contrast, early medieval \textit{vitae} present care for the community as a necessary requirement for any consideration of sanctity. Manual labor, providing food for the poor, washing and caring for the sick, and the working of miracles are all given special attention to in the lives of these women. For the women who were abbesses or foundresses of monasteries, this care for the community extended into the cloister where they were expected to provide for the welfare of their fellow nuns. Although some of these acts are certainly present in the late antique


\textsuperscript{278} Schulenburg, “Female Sanctity,” 105.

\textsuperscript{279} McNamara, “A Legacy of Miracles,” 41.
sources, they are neither as prominent nor as stressed upon as they became a century later.²⁸⁰

This expression of public action within the local community contrasts with the more personal acts of devotion, such as the scriptural study and pilgrimage that was celebrated in late antique sources. This means that by the late fifth century in Gaul, care for the community over ascetic individuality became the primary focus in the *vita* of religious women.

Manual labor and small chores are two such examples of the model of spiritual motherhood in these late fifth- and sixth-century sources. Genovefa could be seen “harvesting her crops,” just outside of Meaux.²⁸¹ Since she came from a family with a considerable amount of wealth, it is most likely that this is in reference to her family’s property, which had come under her care. As part of her ascetic practices, harvesting crops was an attempt to bring herself down from the nobility she was born into and take up a position of equality among her fellow workers as well as engage in arduous tasks of manual labor. Her work in the fields was more symbolic than anything else, as it probably did not contribute substantially to providing grain to her community. But even as a symbol, it demonstrates that there was a shift from monetary donations to active participation in community labor and sustenance.²⁸² Far down in the south of Gaul, after funding the building of a church, Rusticula also aided in its construction: “the blessed mother brought stones to the workmen with her own hands.”²⁸³ Once again, a religious woman is seen acting as an equal and active

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²⁸⁰ For a study on the traits from early Christian and late antique women that are present in late fifth and sixth century female hagiographies, see de Nie, “Consciousness Fecund Through God,” 101-161.


²⁸² Another example comes from Radegund, who would go to the holy shrines and oratories to care for them and replace the candles, which she had made “by her own hands.”²⁸² Thus, Radegund could be seen taking care of the spiritual well being of her greater community by caring for their shrines. The act of making candles operated in much the same way as Genovefa’s crop harvesting; it was a task that traditionally would have fallen far below the duties of a queen, yet became symbolic of her humility and magnanimity. Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 7.

participant in her community. Furthermore, manual labor, much like fasting, functioned as a spiritual task that focused one’s attention on God in reflection and contemplation.\footnote{284 The connection between work and meditation was made in many of the monastic rules of the early medieval period, including a sixth-century rule for nuns at the monastery of St. Mary in Arles. Aurelianus’ rule for the monastery of St. Mary in Arles was founded in the sixth century and was heavily influenced by Caesarius’ rule and monastery for women. Per totum diem cum operamini manibus meditatio sancta de corde noncesset: propter illud apostoli psalmis, hymnis, canticis, spiritualibus cantantes et psalentes in cordibus vestris domino. Aurelianus of Arles, Regula ad virgines, MS. M. BSB Clm. 28118, f. 194, XX.}

The procuration and preparation of food for the needy within the greater community is another trait that is stressed in these vitae. After two Frankish sieges of Paris, famine had set upon the city. In order to assuage the hunger within her community, Genovefa traveled the whole countryside to collect a grain tax from those who were not affected by the siege.\footnote{285 “The Life of Genovefa,” VII.34. Another example of food procuration comes from Rusticula, who caught a fish from the Rhone through the intercession of God to feed the hungry group she was travelling with. Florentius, “The Life of Rusticula,” 4.} She returned with “seven grain-laden ships,” which she had just saved by miraculous intercession from a storm.\footnote{286 “The Life of Genovefa,” VII.39.} After procuring grain for the starving people of Paris, Genovefa baked and distributed bread for the poor;\footnote{287 “The Life of Genovefa,” VII.40.} Radegund also baked bread for the poor:

“emulating Saint Germanus’ custom […] she ground fresh flour with her own hands,” and distributed offerings to each community.\footnote{288 Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 16. Another example includes Monegund, who was brought water and barley meal in her cell by a servant. She would then mix them together into dough before cooking them. After having just enough bread to revive her strength from fasting, “she distributed the rest of the food in her house to the poor.” Gregory of Tours, “Monegund,” 2.} Unlike monetary donations, the preparation and distribution of food was a much more active and involved expression of charity. It required a relatively stable location and a specific local community in mind for distribution.

Care for the community also extended into direct social interactions with the rest of society, including feeding, washing, clothing, and healing the poor and sick.\footnote{289 It is important to remark, however, that all the instances of direct contact feeding, washing, and clothing those outside the monastic community are only recorded in Radegund’s two vitae. Even more distinctive in Radegund’s accounts are the many references to some form of medicinal aid (potions, unguents, and oils) given to the sick, without divine intercession.\footnote{289 We must be careful, therefore, not to generalize that the rest of these saints also participated in such direct contact with their greater community. Before leaving her husband, Chlothar, Radegund washed and treat the needy women of her community.} Once
Radegund had retreated to her villa at Saix, a group of lepers would visit her and she “washed their faces and hands with warm water and treated their sores with fresh unguents and fed each one.” Radegund then “offered them small gifts of gold and clothing upon their departure.”

Every day she fed the paupers enrolled on the church’s list and prepared a bath for them twice a week. Even after entering within the walls of the monastery, Radegund “administered food to pilgrims from her own table and washed and cleansed the feet of the sick with her own hands.” This kind of work is indicative of a woman who was deeply engaged in the affairs of her community. At all stages in her life, both before her renunciation to a life of asceticism and before her formal entrance into a monastery, Radegund was occupied with providing aid directly to those in need.

One aspect of these early medieval vitae that is not found in the sources concerning late antique women is the references to miracles. With the development of saints’ cults, particularly after Martin of Tours, Gaul developed a popular religious culture dominated by the miraculous intercessions of God and the saints. For this reason, stories of miracles concerning the natural world and healing dominate the vitae of women in late fifth and sixth century. The lives of all six of these religious women are filled with miracles. Most of

293 Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom, 95-6. Raymond van Dam explains how the popularity of saint’s cults was, in part, a reaction to the difficult times Gaul was experiencing. The unpredictable weather, failing crops, illness, and warfare in late antique Gaul all contributed to a deep need for healing and miracles. Illness was seen as a punishment for a variety of sins, for which miraculous intercession was the only way to be absolved and reintegrated into society. Moreover, miraculous healings acted as a reassertion of the power dynamic between the saint, who conferred health, and supplicant, who accepted assistance. This challenged the authority of the Merovingian kings (who failed to impose an efficacious central authority) since the saints (and consequently the Church) acted as the adjudicators on earth. Therefore, saint’s cults and their miracles became the source of a great deal of power in Gaul do to their capabilities to confer both justice and health. Raymond van Dam, Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 82-115.
these are healing miracles, in which these women were able to cure a variety of people from ailments ranging from blindness to paralysis through divine intercession. These miracles receive a great deal of attention in these vitae and, once again, demonstrate an involvement with the community at large. It is helpful, therefore, to think of these miracles as additions to or extensions of the previous paragraphs concerning communal involvement. To those hearing or reading about these miracles, the message would have been the same—these women actively participated in helping their community. The fact it was done with divine intercession only substantiated the sanctity of these women even further.

This collection of activities—labor, chores, feeding, washing, and healing—all reveal some of the anxieties present in a society that was experiencing great difficulty and turmoil. The prevalence of food procurement, preparation, and distribution in these vitae can be used as a mirror into the concerns of late fifth- and sixth-century Gaul. Climate changes on the continent decreased the productivity of crops, which decreased the availability and affordability of food; consequently, all levels of society experienced a general impoverishment in sixth-century Gaul. Severe winters, locusts, plagues, famines, heavy taxes, fires, and floods, all featured in Gregory of Tours’ History of the Franks, substantiate the turmoil expressed within these vitae. Furthermore, the devastation caused by warfare between the various barbarian kingdoms also contributed to the lack of sustenance and stability in the realm. Once again, Gregory of Tours demonstrates the violent effects of civil war—invasions, sacking, looting, plundering. From Clovis’ ascension in the late fifth century to the end of the sixth century, the Franks dealt with foreign invasions and wars

Florentius, “The Life of Rusticula,” 13, 14, 16, 19, 20; Since Glodesind’s vita was written in the ninth century, it only includes post-mortem miracles, “Saint Glodesind,” II.16, 18, 19, III.20-7, IV.28-36, V.37-46.
296 Brown, Through the Eye of a Needle, 481.
297 Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks, III.37, V.28, VI.33, VII.45, VIII.23, 33, IX.17, 22, 30, 44, X.30.
298 Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks, III.12, IV.30, V.23, VII.13, 24, X.5.
against the Alamani, Burgundians, Goths, Danes, Thuringians, Huns, and Lombards. With the welfare of the people threatened, the focus on feeding, washing, clothing, and healing the poor and sick in these *vitae* can be put into context. Women began enter monasteries to find security in this tumultuous time and renunciation became more accessible to members of all levels of society. Since these *vitae* are largely constructed models of female sanctity, the aspects of devotion that the authors choose to emphasize—whether fabricated or real—can point out the concerns of that society. Since care for the community became a social necessity in early medieval Gaul, these religious women began to look inwards towards the ailments within their respective communities rather than outwards to the Holy Land.

In contrast, the sources concerning the late antique women rarely address any kind of direct and active involvement in their local communities. Instead, the aristocratic women a century prior were lauded for their monetary donations, scriptural study, prayer, and instruction of fellow nuns. This does not necessarily mean that women like Paula or Melania the Younger did not perform manual labor and tasks, food preparation, or bathing the sick, but the lack of emphasis on these activities in the late antique sources does cause us to question how active they were outside of scripture and prayer. They certainly provided funding for hospices and monasteries and donated a great deal of their wealth to the poor, but the lack of direct interaction with their immediate community does point to a very different socio-economic environment. Even though barbarians were penetrating the Roman Empire, the general infrastructure and administrative systems were still in place. North Africa was still flourishing in the fourth century despite the political turmoil in the northern Mediterranean and grain was still being imported from Egypt to supply Rome with food until the Vandal invasion of Africa in 430. Furthermore, Syria and Palestine, where the women of late antiquity eventually settled in their monastic communities, was experiencing a

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300 McNamara, “A Legacy of Miracles,” 40-3; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 488.
population growth and increase in prosperity. Consequently, the situation in the late fourth and early fifth century did not necessitate the extensive aid for the community that characterized late fifth- and sixth-century saints’ lives. Instead, these late antique women could leave their local communities to embark on ascetic pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

Since vitae served as models to be emulated, the virtues they emphasized can be used to extract the concerns of their authors, and consequently, the society from which they emerged. Therefore, while monetary denotations, piety, scriptural study, and pilgrimages are emphasized in late antique vitae, the late fifth- and sixth-century sources place a greater importance on labor tasks, preparation of food, bathing, and clothing the poor and sick of the community. Not only did the old ruling power of Rome dissolve, but it was replaced with quarrelsome kingdoms that lacked the stability that had previously been characteristic of the Roman Empire. In the context of a transforming early medieval West, care for the community outside the monastic walls became more important than personal acts of devotion. This shifting environment, visible through these saints’ lives, provides us with one of the factors that must have contributed to the decline of female ascetic pilgrimages in the early medieval West.

Just as a greater concern was placed on care for the community, these vitae also focused on these women’s ability to provide and care for the women within their monasteries. These foundresses achieved their sanctity, in part, due to their wealth, which provided the funds for the very monasteries they would join afterwards. As Jo Ann McNamara has points out, monasteries began to act as “refuges to shelter women who sought to escape the confines of the secular world.” Since women of the lower social strata increasingly found their way to a monastic life, more funds were needed to feed and clothe

301 Cameron, The Later Roman Empire, 123.
302 The following refers only to the women who had founded or administered monasteries: Radegund, Rusticula, Godesind.
them. Particularly in times of warfare and economic turmoil, monasteries became sanctuaries for widows or women with no marriageable prospects. Consequently, these monasteries became essential to society as they provided care and protection for unmarried women.\textsuperscript{304}

Yet, in order to provide for all this surge of women, foundresses and abbesses had to use their personal wealth and administrative skills to ensure the livelihood of their fellow nuns.

The increasing number of monasteries for women in late-sixth century Gaul follows a larger pattern of patronage of the church towards local communities. In the third and fourth centuries, benefactors of the church were funneling wealth to the Holy Land after its promotion as the sacred center of Christendom. Although larger cities with more prominent bishoprics could afford this deflection of resources, many of the smaller towns in Gaul and other provinces could not.\textsuperscript{305} Our late fourth- and early fifth-century Roman ascetics went on pilgrimages and donated their wealth to fund holy men and women in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria and founded monasteries at Jerusalem, Bethlehem, or Thagaste. Yet, by the beginning of the fifth century, Christians became more involved in their immediate communities and directed their wealth to local churches.\textsuperscript{306} Once more, this is reflected in the sources concerning our Gallic religious women, all of which used their wealth to found and run local churches and monasteries. Since their money was being used locally, their prospects to go on long-distance pilgrimages diminished. This redirection of monetary resources mirrors their actions of providing care to their local communities as spiritual mothers. Despite the fact many of them had the freedom and finances to go abroad, their decision to do so was drastically altered by the aid that they provided within their communities.

\textsuperscript{304} McNamara, “A Legacy of Miracles,” 40-3.
\textsuperscript{305} Brown, Through the Eye of a Needle, 281.
\textsuperscript{306} Brown, Through the Eye of a Needle, 286.
Redistributing personal funds and sharing wealth for the sustenance of the monastery is reflected in many of the monastic rules that developed in the sixth and seventh centuries. The two sixth-century monastic rules for women’s communities, those of Caesarius and Aurelianus of Arles, both demonstrate the economic and administrative aspects of founding and running a monastery. Before entering the community, the women were to sell all their property and personal belongings. It was preferred that those who were wealthy would donate their wealth to the monastery for the abbess to use to support all the women.

Radegund relates that her and her sisters, “following the apostolic example, …when [they] entered the monastery, made over by deed all [their] substance in earthly possession, reserving nothing for [themselves].” Afterwards, all things were to be held in common. All personal property was to go into the possession of the abbess who would secure and distribute it as necessary. Together, the measures detailed within the monastic rules were meant to ensure the continued sustenance of the monastery. Monastic founders and foundresses, however, were still concerned about the monastery’s continued sustenance after their death or in the event that the monastery’s resources ran out.
Although monetary contribution was vital, active participation in the monastery’s
daily tasks was also necessary for its sustained operation. Particularly in instances where
money ran low, the nuns had to take up menial tasks and manual labor as a supplement to
their devotional practices. In a sense, daily chores were seen as an extension of their
devotional practice as it taught them humility and provided them with an active task that kept
their minds focused on God. In Aurelianus’ monastery, Saint Mary, the nuns were required to
meditate during their work, thus supporting the connection between work and spiritual
discipline.\footnote{Per totum diem cum operamini manibus meditatio sancta de corde noncesset: propter illud apostoli psalmis, hymnis, canticis, spiritualibus cantantes et psalentes in cordibus vestris domino. Aurelianus of Arles, \textit{Regula ad virgines}, MS. M. BSB Clm. 28118, f. 194, XX.} Abbesses delegated work to every nun in the monastery, which all the nuns, in
turn, were required to perform.\footnote{Nemo sibi aliquid operis vel artificii pro suo libito eligat faciendum; sed in arbitrio senioris erit quod utile prospexerit imperandum. Caesarius of Arles, \textit{Regula ad virgines}, MS. M, BSB Clm. 28118, f. 185v-186, VI. In Aurelianus’ rule: \textit{Nulla opera pro suo libito eligant facenda sed quod abbatissa imperaverit, hoc faciant}. Aurelianus of Arles, \textit{Regula ad virgines}, MS. M. BSB Clm. 28118, f. 194, XVIII.} The only \textit{vita} that offers a glimpse into daily monastic
work and chores is that of Radegund at her monastery in Poitiers. Radegund would clean and
oil the shoes of all her fellow nuns, sweep the floors of the monastery, dust, nooks and
crannies, and clean the privies.\footnote{Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 23.} Her weekly chores spanned from bringing in firewood or
water from a well, scrubbing vegetables and legumes, cooking, and washing dishes for the
nuns in her community. Although Radegund is the only one of these women whose \textit{vita}
explicitly mentions such activities, it is clear that these chores took place on a weekly basis
for all the nuns at Poitiers. Furthermore, since chores were an important part of the Rule of
Caesarius, it is likely that Rusticula and her nuns at St. Jean were doing similar chores.
Within a monastic context then, it is possible that Glodesind and all other nuns in
institutionalized monasteries performed similar chores of some fashion.

In order to properly run a monastery, either by channeling funds or organizing daily
work, foundresses and abbesses had to be effective at certain administrational tasks. Often,
these roles paralleled those of running a large household, which many of these noble foundresses and abbesses were already familiar with. In his Rule for Virgins, Caesarius outlines the roles of an abbess, one of which was to constantly think about the property of the monastery.\textsuperscript{317} Aurelianus’ rule warns abbesses against the improper use of monastic resources, including selling or donating monastic properties without the consent of her fellow nuns.\textsuperscript{318} Monastic rules were not only used to provide guidelines to abbesses, but also for financial and administrative independence to protect monastic property. It seems that Radegund took up the rule of Caesarius in order to do just that.\textsuperscript{319} Since Radegund had difficult relations with Maroveus, the local bishop of Poitiers, she “was forced to go to Arles with the abbess whom she had appointed,” where they received Caesarius’ rule, “and on their return put themselves under the protection of the king, because they could find no care for their security in the man whom should have been their pastor.”\textsuperscript{320} The combination of Caesarius’ rule, which gave guidelines for the protection and dispensation of monastic resources, and the power of the king, ensured that Radegund’s monastery would be well cared for despite Bishop Maroveus’ abnegation of duty. Aside from donations, abbesses found other creative ways, including attracting pilgrims with relics or saints’ shrines, to provide steady, long-term sustenance for the monastery.\textsuperscript{321} As monasteries became

\textsuperscript{317}...\emph{de substantiola monasterii, quod ad victum corporis opus est, iugiter cogitare.} Caesarius of Arles, \textit{Regula ad virgines}, MS. M, BSB Clm. 28118, f. 187, XXV.

\textsuperscript{318} \emph{Sanctae abbatisseae non liceat aliquod de facultatibus monasterii donare ac vendere nec aliquid contra regulae instituta agere. Quod si facere temptaverit, sancto consilio et uno consensu sororum ex numero permisso non ei adquiescatis, et hoc fieri nulla ratione permittite: quia causam se ante deum noverit esse dicturam.} Aurelianus of Arles, \textit{Regula ad virgines}, MS. M. BSB Clm. 28118, f. 194v. XXXI.

\textsuperscript{319} Klingshirn, “Caesarius’ monastery for women,” 441-481, esp. 476. Aigrain also attributes Radegund’s decision to seek a monastic rule for practical reasons since she could not get any protection from Bishop Maroveus; see Aigrain, \textit{Sainte Radegonde}, 94-7.

\textsuperscript{320} Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, IX.40.

increasingly filled with women from the lower classes and their economic survival became increasingly precarious, an abbess’ administrative capabilities and protection of resources could become a marker for her sanctity.

Although monastic rules provide a much clearer record of the kind of duties an abbess was expected to perform as the leader of a community, it is still possible to catch glimpses of these duties in their *vitae*. At St. Jean in Arles, Rusticula demonstrates the motherly and managerial care of an abbess more clearly,

...she had prudently dispensed wheat from the Lord’s storehouse to the household in her charge and because, aflame with the zeal of the Holy Spirit, she made firm God’s tottering temples with the rigor of righteousness. This was her constant effort, her constant intent, that none of her flock should be afflicted with needless sadness or burdened with excessive labors or grow weary, but she, with a fervent spirit, would still herd them all to rest. It is a wonder how this blessed mother completed so many offices while her body was never free of daily sickness, yet it was so.322

This passage clearly demonstrates the spiritual and administrative leadership necessary for the running of a monastery. Her ability to prudently dispense food to the household is complemented by her care in strengthening the faith and integrity of her flock—“God’s tottering temples.” As spiritual mothers, these women had to care for the spiritual as well as physical welfare of their flock. A foundressess’ duties to preserve and protect the economic sustenance of her monastery continued even after her death. Local bishops were generally assigned as guardians of monasteries, but at times the nobility and even the bishops themselves would try to usurp monastic lands.323 Radegund provides a prime example of long-term precautionary thinking when she wrote a letter to the bishops of Gaul to be used by

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any of the future abbesses seeking aid against the appropriation of monastic land or leadership over the monastery after Radegund’s death.\textsuperscript{324}

The continued emphasis of a foundress, such as Radegund, or an abbess, such as Rusticula, being present to care for their monasteries demonstrates the necessity that these women stay close to their flock. It makes sense that Rusticula did not go on a pilgrimage since she grew up under Caesarius’ rule of enclosure. Likewise, if Glodesind’s rule included claustration, then her lack of long-distance travel makes sense. Radegund, however, provides a more complex case. In theory, she had both the wealth and independence after her ascetic renunciation at Saix (and even in the period after founding a monastery at Poitiers and before instituting Caesarius’ rule) to go on a pilgrimage. The fact that she chose not too, despite her knowledge of the voyaging women who preceded her a century before, points to other factors that tied her to Gaul. Her intensive care for her monastic community provides part of the answer. Radegund remained local in order to fulfill the obligations that she found to important within the political and economic climate of sixth-century Gaul.

In sum, these religious women in the late fifth and sixth century were so engaged in helping their local and monastic communities that they had neither the time nor the finances left over to make a journey to the Holy Land. Even though they were wealthy and independent insofar as their mobility, they still remained within their regions to act out the role of a spiritual mother within their community. With all the economic and political turmoil afflicting Gaul in this period, it might have been more evident to remain local when trying to emulate the apostolic care of the bible. As they continued to dispense their time and money

\textsuperscript{324} Although Radegund was certainly a powerful and influential woman, there was no certainty that her monastery would not be taken advantage of after she departed. Radegund’s forceful letter called upon both written documents and oaths from past kings as well as divine power to protect her establishment in the future. Along with proper legal documentation, this letter could have been used as an official testament against potential usurpers of monastic land and power. The detail of this letter, carefully laid out to cover all the bases, demonstrates her abilities as an administrator to think forward, so that even after her death, she continued to ensure the safety and continuity of her monastery at Poitiers. For Radegund’s letter to the bishops, see Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, IX.42.
towards the community or monastery, their ability to go on a pilgrimage decreased. Had they left their native Gaul to go abroad, they might not have even made it onto the pages of their biographers since saints’ lives are as much about teaching the appropriate behavior required by that society, as they are about promoting a saint. The models that these women provided, then, stresses the importance of caring for the local communities, which, in turn, deemphasized the pilgrimages that were prevalent in the late antique sources.
Chapter 5: Peacemakers: the involvement of religious women in politics

“She sent to their noble followers to give the high kings salutary counsel so that their power might work to the welfare of the people and the land...”

*The Life of the Holy Radegund*[^325]

**Just as these early medieval women were more involved in caring for their communities, they also became increasingly involved in the secular world of politics.** Chlothild and Radegund were both queens of the Frankish court before they retreated to an ascetic life. Glodesind was the daughter of one of the most powerful Frankish dukes, who eventually fell out of favor and lost his dukedom[^326]. Genovefa and Rusticula also involved themselves in the politics despite the fact they were both from the Gallo-Roman nobility. During this period, to renounce the world did not necessarily mean cutting off ties with the political issues of the Gallic realm. Because of their political involvement, religious women may have been more invested in the affairs of their immediate regions than their late antique predecessors. They were able to muster a certain degree of influence in matters of the realm, which provided an impetus for them to remain nearby. Therefore, it was not the ecclesiastical hierarchy, through their rules of enclosure, that was keeping these women from undertaking pilgrimages to the Holy Land, but rather secular powers that tied these women to the Frankish kingdoms.

Occurring alongside the political transformations in the Latin West after the fall of the Roman Empire was the changing roles of women in politics. In Frankish society, women became “the linchpins of local politics” from which they were able to muster a certain

[^326]: Wintrio was likely the duke of Champagne. He fell out of favor among his people and lost his dukedom in 585/6, which required him to flee. Then in 589–90, Childebert II levied his troops to go fight against the Lombards. Wintrio, perhaps in order to restore favor, joined the current duke of Champagne in the march on Italy. Gregory of Tours mentions that, while passing through Metz, they committed “violent and murderous acts,” and ravaged the Frankish lands as if they were enemies in a foreign land. *Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks*, VIII.18, X.3. It might be due to her father’s reversal in fortune that he was so adamant in finding her a new husband that could provide a lucrative, or at least influential, bond to the nobility. His eventual acquiescence to allow her to join a monastery might indicate that founding a monastery, or having a family member within a monastery, could prove to be equally beneficial politically to a marriage tie.
amount of status.\textsuperscript{327} Since the household was the main locus of political and economic power, the private household was also integral to public interactions.\textsuperscript{328} The household fell predominantly within women’s domain, which meant that Frankish women could exert a considerable amount of influence over politics if they were part of the court. The queens Brundhild and Fredegund are two such women whose active participation in Frankish politics was recorded with equal awe and fear by the historians of their age.\textsuperscript{329} Chlothild is another example of a queen regent who wielded power in the \textit{curia regis} before her renunciation.\textsuperscript{330} Chlothild evidently had the power to appoint bishops when she was queen.\textsuperscript{331} Within these courts, secular and religious women played vital roles in promoting Christianity.\textsuperscript{332} When a king converted, often at the behest of his queen, the people of the realm followed.\textsuperscript{333} Yet in the half-converted society of sixth-century Gaul there was still a fear that pagan superstition survived.\textsuperscript{334} Kings and queens promoted anti-pagan programs, where they called for the demolition of all pagan fanes in an effort to destroy all pagan elements that survived. As the battle between the Catholic Franks and their Arian neighbors raged on, the fate of the Catholic Church became conditional upon political supremacy. Therefore, since women played vital roles in Christianization, they were consequently involved in politics.

\textsuperscript{327} Halsall, \textit{Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West}, 484.
\textsuperscript{328} Schulenberg, “Female Sanctity,” 105.
\textsuperscript{329} After the death of their husbands, Brunhild and Fredegund ruled as regents for their sons and grandsons in order to secure their control of the kingdoms. The bitter rivalry between the Frankish queens Brunhild and Fredegund was largely the source of the wars between the kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy (under the control of Brunhild’s family line) and Neustria (under the hold of Fredegund and her son Chlothar II). Although Fredegund and Brunhild are rather unique cases, it is possible to deduce that Frankish queens could play a prominent role in the realm. Wood, \textit{The Merovingian Kingdoms}, 120-139; Janet L. Nelson, “Queens as Jezebels: The Careers of Brunhild and Bathild in Merovingian History,” in \textit{Medieval Women}, ed. Derek Baker, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 31-78.
\textsuperscript{330} Shulenberg, “Female Sanctity,” 106.
\textsuperscript{331} Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, X.31.
\textsuperscript{333} Schulenberg, “Female Sanctity,” 105.
Women were also able to carve out political roles for themselves outside the royal household. As monasteries increased in number due to royal patronage, they became “an ancillary form of courtly society.” Women who were connected to the court either founded or retreated to royal monasteries where their ties to secular society and politics remained strong. Once in her monastery of Poitiers, Radegund was able to interfere on behalf of her niece Basina to countermand Chilperic’s decision to marry her off. Prominent noblewomen, such as the Gallo-Roman Rusticula, who might not have originally played a role in the Frankish court, now found themselves entwined with the dangers of political involvement. Furthermore, monasteries could act as “an evangelizing vanguard” that reached out to the local population. Consequently, a woman’s role within a monastery extended outside of the cloister in order to convert the local population. The involvement of religious women, especially those of high nobility, in caring for their communities bridged the gulf between the Romano-Gallic population and their Frankish conquerors. Although their participation in Frankish politics may have been tangential, religious women within royally patronized monasteries were vital components to the solidification if Frankish rule and Catholic faith among local populations. Merovingian saints’ lives advocated that the “social-moral alliance,” provided by Christianity, was a necessary component Frankish rule and identity. Roles of peacekeeping became prominent in Merovingian vitae in order to communicate that Christianity was the only way to keep the peace in the realm. Although peacekeeping may have become a staple Merovingian saints’ lives, it does not mean that

336 Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks, VI.34.
340 Kreiner, The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom, 92, 125-139.
women did not fulfill these roles in reality. This is particularly evident in the earlier saints’ lives that are being dealt with here.  

We will now turn to the *vitae* of the ascetic and monastic women of the late fifth and sixth century in order to describe some of the ways they participated, either directly or indirectly, in Frankish politics. There are three main categories of political involvement for which these women are commended in their *vitae*: first, for their interference in court cases and liberators of captives, prisoners and slaves; second, for their Christianization, especially the promotion of its Catholic form; and third, for their involvement in court politics, particularly with issues of succession and keeping the peace. All of these cases of political involvement point to a greater investment in their kingdoms than the late antique women seemed to have towards the Roman Empire. In fact, these religious women of the late fifth and sixth century had considerable more political power than their predecessors within the heavily patriarchal Roman society. Because of this deep investment in political activities, their attention was once again focused inwards towards their kingdom rather than outwards to the Holy Land.

One of the most prominent ways these religious women involved themselves in secular politics was by liberating slaves, captives, and criminals from capital punishment or prison. In the second half of the fifth century, Genovefa was recorded to have convinced Childeric I to not behead a group of captives. It is telling that Childeric had the city gates

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341 When sources outside saints’ lives can be used to corroborate the political roles religious women played in their *vitae*, they will be cited as well.

342 Very little is known of Childeric so it is difficult to place this event within a political context, but we do know that he was the father of Clovis, whom would eventually solidify Frankish rule over northern Gaul by 511. The extent of Frankish control in northern Gaul during Childeric’s time, however, is harder to assess since Goths, Saxons, Britons, and Romans were all vying for power in that area at the same time. By his death, Childeric had acquired the lands of Belgica Secunda, which he passed down to his son Clovis. Genovefa’s *vita* calls him “the King of the Franks” but the extension of his control to Paris, where we presume Genovefa to be located at the time, is not recorded in any sources. There is a possibility that Genovefa was actually at Laon, a city in the province of Belgica Secunda, when she convinced Childeric to be merciful towards the prisoners. The miracle preceding this story places her in the city of Lyon, which McNamara, Halborg, and Whatley note could have been Laon. See “The Life of Genovefa,” n. 38, page 27. For more on Childeric I, see Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 38-41.
shut “so that Genovefa could not rescue some captives he meant to execute,” thus insinuating that this might not have been the first time Genovefa interfered when he tried to put captives to death.\footnote{343 “The Life of Genovefa,” VI.25.} Since they are labeled as captives, is likely that they were prisoners of war—either of the barbarian tribe that had previously conquered the area or of the local Gallo-Roman population. Genovefa’s interference on behalf of them might argue that they were Gallo-Roman, like her, who had simply been caught on the wrong side of the Frankish military might.\footnote{344 Although this interpretation would not be viable if one agrees with Heinzelman’s assertion that Genovefa was of Frankish descent. See Martin Heinzelmann and Jean-Claude Poulin, \textit{Les Vies anciennes de sainte Geneviève de Paris}, 81-103.} As such, Genovefa provided a bridge between the local Gallo-Roman population and the conquering Franks. Although kings were above the law, they still heeded the advice of their counselors. Often, saints’ lives were intentionally constructed to instruct and solidify the system of justice in Merovingian Gaul. These \textit{vita}e had the ability to promote proper justice, that is, Christian law, towards the elites and royal court of the kingdoms. In order to do so, these authors often used saints, backed by the power of God, as the ultimate order of justice in the realm.\footnote{345 Kreiner, \textit{The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom}, 33-87.} Seen through this lens, Genovefa was being elevated as a counselor to the king. Her political involvement was seen as a virtuous marker for her sanctity not only because she was able to advocate for the lives of her countrymen and sow peace between two populations, but also as an advocate for the supremacy of Christian law over the Merovingian kings.

Genovefa and Radegund were both recorded to have interceded on behalf of criminals as well, demonstrating the conciliatory roles they played between king and people. Mediating disputes had long been one of the roles of late antique holy men, and it is possible that this reflects a longer tradition holy men and women involved in conflict resolution.\footnote{346 The origins of this can be found in the holy men of the East, who acted as arbiters in society, Brown, \textit{Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity}, 132-4. Likewise, van Dam argues that bishops acquired a reputation for freeing}
Radegund had entered the cloister, she appeared in a vision to the tribune of the fisc, Domnolenus, in order to restore his health in exchange for the release of seven prisoners under his charge.\textsuperscript{347} Likewise, “in response to Genovefa’s supplications,” Clovis “let guilty men go free and unharmed instead of punishing them for their crimes.”\textsuperscript{348} In Genovefa’s account, Clovis was painted as a “fearful king by right of war,” which is then counterbalanced by Genovefa’s supplication for mercy.\textsuperscript{349} The harmonious relationship between the king and his people, then, was only possible through Genovefa’s mediation. If Genovefa’s \textit{vita} was indeed written at the behest of Chlothild after the death of her husband Clovis, as scholars have speculated, the portrayal of Clovis was carefully crafted to legitimize his rule over Gaul.\textsuperscript{350} Rather than being characterized as lenient, Clovis was depicted as a strong ruler whose mercy would only come at the behest of a holy woman whose character was more conducive to merciful actions.

Another way women, especially the saintly queens, were involved in the politics was through their advocacy of Christianity throughout Gaul. This was done in two ways: by promoting Christianity within the Frankish realm and by going to war against the Arian Goths. As such, Christianity became a political tool and these women’s ability to wield it had noticeable effects on the politics of Gaul. One of Chlothild’s first acts as a queen was to try to slaves or ransoming captives due to the lack of an efficacious central government in the early Merovingian period. This may be another point of influence affecting the \textit{vita} of these women. Van Dam, \textit{Saints and their Miracles in late antique Gaul}, 102-3.

\textsuperscript{347} Fortunatus, \textit{“The Life of the Holy Radegund,”} 38. In this instance, Radegund was acting as an arbitrator between the government bureaucracy, represented by the tribune, and the people.

\textsuperscript{348} “The Life of Genovefa,” XI.55.

\textsuperscript{349} “The Life of Genovefa,” XI.55. When Radegund was still at court, she pled on behalf of criminals who were to be put to death. Similar to Genovefa, Radegund’s interference in the royal court was a means to mediate between king and people. Radegund went to Chlothar’s councillors and beseeched them to “soothe the prince’s temper until the king’s anger ceased and the voice of salvation flowed where the sentence of death had issued before.” Once again, the holy woman is presented as the merciful mediator to balance the fierce power of the king as well as to promote the king’s deference to divine law. And, much like Genovefa’s demand for the mercy on behalf of Childeric’s captives, freeing criminals from imprisonment or a death sentence had the effect of arbitrating between the local people of the realm and their conquering kings. Fortunatus, \textit{“The Life of the Holy Radegund,”} 10.

\textsuperscript{350} On the speculated authorship, see “The Life of Genovefa,” n. 1, page 18 and n. 73, page 36.
convert her husband, Clovis, to Christianity and abolish paganism, which Clovis refused.\textsuperscript{351} When the Franks were on the losing end of a battle against the Alamans and Suevi, however, Clovis was told by an advisor to “believe in the God of Heaven Whom the queen honors and He will free you and yours from imminent peril and give you victory.” In an event that recalls that of Constantine at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Clovis reached up to heaven and pledged his conversion after which the Franks achieved victory.\textsuperscript{352} Although this conversion was done for purely practical reasons, it was nevertheless attributed to Chlothild’s unceasing supplications to her husband. Chlothild’s “sweetness softened the hearts of a pagan and ferocious people, namely the Franks, and she converted them through the blessed Remigius.”\textsuperscript{353} Her desire to rescue “the king and his people from the snares of the Devil,” created some unity between the Franks and the predominantly Christian Gallo-Roman population. After his conversion, Clovis provided aid to widows, orphans, and the poor, thus strengthening the bond between him and his people.\textsuperscript{354} Radegund was able to make a name for herself as a promoter of Christianity when she burnt a pagan fane in the countryside a few decades later.\textsuperscript{355} Although the complete Christianization of Gaul was not accomplished for centuries, these saintly queens were lauded for their proselytization.

As the Frankish kingdoms tied themselves to Catholic Christianity, they joined the fight against the Arianism of the other barbarian kingdoms. Clovis’ conversion to Catholic Christianity acted as a political tool that justified the expansion of the Frankish Kingdom.

Praised as a key player in influencing his conversion and advising Clovis to go to war against the Arian Visigoths, Chlothild could be seen as having played a role in Frankish

\textsuperscript{352} “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 6. See also Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, II.30. This parallel was not lost on Gregory of Tours, who praised Clovis as “a new Constantine.” Gregory of Tours, \textit{The History of the Franks}, II.31.
\textsuperscript{353} “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 11.
\textsuperscript{354} “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 7.
\textsuperscript{354} What was remarkable to Baudonivia, however, was Radegund’s ability to placate the angry pagan Franks. In doing so, Radegund sowed peace among the population all while promoting Christianity. Baudonivia, “The Life of the Holy Radegund, Book II,” 2.
expansion. Chlothild’s political involvement against the neighboring kingdoms, however, did not end after the death of her husband and her ascetic renunciation. One such example begins with the marriage of Chlothild’s daughter, also named Chlothild, to Almaric, the king of the Goths after the death of her father. Once in Spain, the daughter sent word back to Chlothild and to her brothers, who were now kings, that she was being treated shamefully by the Goths due to her Catholic faith. “Moved to wrath, [Chlothild and the brothers] gathered an army and went to war with Almaric.” During the invasion, Almaric was killed by a Frankish soldier, which granted Childebert, one of Clovis’ and Chlothild’s sons, free reign to devastate Spain and loot the city of Toledo. Regrettably, the daughter died of a disease on the way back to Paris so the invasion was not particularly fruitful, but it does demonstrate how religion was used as a tool to legitimize warfare. Although Chlothild was certainly not the primary actor in this military venture, it is likely that she played a role in influencing her sons to rescue her daughter. In *The History of the Franks*, Chlothild was recorded to have convinced her sons to go to war against the kingdom of Burgundy.

Lastly, these religious women were entangled in the quarrels between the divided Frankish kingdoms, especially concerning issues of succession and keeping the peace. Although she had already retreated to the ascetic life, Chlothild evidently still had enough power to threaten royal succession. After the death of her son Chlodomir, she took in his sons (her grandsons) to raise and protect. Chlothild’s two other sons, Childeric and Chlothar “thought that she planned to make them [ie. her grandsons] king.” Consequently, they had

356 In a conversation with Chlothild, he spoke that “it [was] unseemly and indecent that Arian Goths should hold the greater part of Gaul.” Clovis believed that the Franks should “go and drive them out of this land.” Chlothild’s response paralleled the expansion of Clovis’ kingdom on earth with his subsequent destiny “to reign with Christ in his celestial kingdom.” Therefore, Chlothild was advising Clovis to expand into the Visigothic kingdom in order to achieve his destiny in heaven. “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 8.
357 “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 9. This episode is also recorded in *The History of the Franks*, but does not mention Chlothild’s role, nor any of the brothers except for Childebert, Gregory of Tours, *The History of The Franks*, III.10.
their two nephews killed to avoid such a reality.359 Although Gaul had already been divided into four between Chlodomir, Childeric, Chlothar, and Theudeoric in 511, Childeric and Chlothar still feared their mother’s political power and ability to influence succession and king-making.360

In the Loire valley, Poitiers became a focal point embroiled in these civil wars.361 It is within this context that we can place Radegund at her monastery in Poitiers (561-587), where she continuously worked for peace between her warring stepsons. The region south of the Loire, including Tours and Poitiers, had been given to Sigibert after the death of Charibert in 567, but Chilperic’s continued assaults on his brother caused a great deal of the fighting, looting, and devastation right outside the doors of Radegund’s monastery.362 After Poitiers was burned to the ground and looted due to the warfare between Childebert and Guntram, Radegund’s efforts to secure peace were recorded by her biographer, Baudonivia.363

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360 Theuderic was Clovis’ son from a previous marriage.
361 In 558, Chlothar had united the Frankish kingdoms until his death in 561, after which Gaul was divided into four among his sons. Charibert (d. 567) received the region based around Paris but died soon after so his three brothers divided his kingdom amongst themselves. Sigibert (d. 575) received the region of Austrasia, based around Metz. Chilperic (d. 584) received the region surrounding Soissons, but expanded his kingdom with the lands of his deceased brother Charibert, which roughly constituted the kingdom Neustria. Guntram (d. 592) received Burgundy, which was based around Orléans but extended all the way into southern France. Despite receiving their equal share, Sigibert, Chilperic, and Guntram were, nevertheless, constantly at war. In 573, Sigibert took the region of Poitiers and Tours from Chilperic and marched on Arles against Guntram. During this time, Guntram, who had initially allied himself with Chilperic, abandoned the alliance, which gave Sigibert the advantage against Chilperic. Then, in 575, two servants of Fredegund (Chilperic’s wife) killed Sigibert. The death of Sigibert put his five-year-old heir, Childebert II, in a rather precarious position. Chilperic took advantage of this opportunity and reclaimed the region of Poitiers and Tours. But an alliance with his uncle Guntram secured Childebert II’s power and aided him against his rather opportunistic uncle, Chilperic. By 581, however, Childebert II and Guntram were at odds with one another and the former allied himself with Chilperic. Then, Guntram and Chilperic, after resolving their issues, took the offensive in 584 against Chilperic, who died within the year. After the death of her husband Chilperic, Fredegund made an alliance with Guntram to protect her son Chlothar II’s (r. 584-629) hold on the Neustrian throne. Soon after, however, Guntram made Childebert II, Sigibert’s son, his heir, which united the kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy at Guntram’s death in 592. See Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, IV.22, 51, V.1-2, 17, VI.1, 3, 45-46, VII.5, 7, VII.33. Fredegar, The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its continuations, trans., with introduction and notes by J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1960), 14. Wood, The Merovingian Kingdoms, 55-8, 89-93.
362 Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, IV.45, V.23, VII.13, 24, X.5.
363 Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, eds., Introduction to “Radegund, Queen of the Franks and Abbess of Poitiers,” in SWDA, 60-1 63-4.
She was always solicitous for peace and worked diligently for the welfare of
the fatherland. Whenever the different kingdoms made war on one
another, she prayed for the lives of all the kings, for she love them all. And she
taught us also to pray incessantly for their stability. Whenever she heard of the
bitterness arising among them, trembling, she sent such letters to one and then
to the other pleading that they should not make war among themselves nor
take up arms lest the land perish. And, likewise, she sent to their noble
followers to give the high kings salutary counsel so that their power might
work to the welfare of the people and the land. She imposed assiduous vigils
on her flock tearfully teaching them to pray incessantly for the kings. And
who can tell what agonies she inflicted on herself? So, through her
intercession, there was peace among the kings. Mitigation of war brought
health to the land. Aware of her mediation, everyone rejoiced, blessing the
name of the Lord!\textsuperscript{364}

Radegund used her influence as a respected religious woman and former queen to mend the
tears within the Merovingian family. As a prominent figure in the community of Poitiers, she
would have been deeply concerned with the welfare of the people. Moreover, Radegund
would have tried to appease the negative tension between her stepsons as she relied on a good
relationship with them to ensure their protection of her monastery.\textsuperscript{365} If she was seen
supporting one side over another, she risked everything that she had put into the monastery.
Radegund had to act as an outside mediator for peace in order to ensure the welfare of
Poitiers, her monastery, and even herself. It is possible that this was not the only time
Radegund tried to use her influence to achieve peace in the realm. She would have had the
occasion to share many conversations with whichever stepson controlled Poitiers at the time.
The inclusion of this political involvement in her \textit{vita} demonstrates that her role in the secular
realm was both substantial and commendable enough to be a marker for her sanctity.\textsuperscript{366}

\textsuperscript{365} Radegund placed her monastery under the protection of Sigibert when the bishop Maroveus refused to act
out his pastoral and administrative duties as bishop, see Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks, IX.40.
Likewise, she gathered the support of her husband, Chlothar and his sons, Charibert, Guntram, Chilperic, and
Sigibert, with written documentation to protect her monastery from usurpers. Gregory of Tours, The History of
the Franks, IX.42.
\textsuperscript{366} Radegund continued to play a role in the politics of the realm after the tumultuous civil war that peaked in
573-5. A decade later, in 584, the usurper Gundovald claimed to be one of Chlothar’s illegitimate sons and
managed to gather a following of aristocrats who went on campaign with him. Interestingly enough,
Gundovald called upon Radegund to substantiate his claim to the throne: “If ye would know the truth of what I
say, make inquiry of Radegund of Poitiers and Ingitrude of Tours, for they will confirm my words are true.” It is
Likewise, Rusticula’s tenure as abbess at St. Jean of Arles was situated within this deep rivalry between the warring kingdoms of Burgundy and Neustria. Since Rusticula was close to Brunhild, she was caught on the wrong side of the family when Chlothar II took over Burgundy in 613. As a result she was summoned to the royal court of Chlothar. This complex story concerning her court summons requires a brief retelling here. Bishop Maximus and prince Ricomer, both went to King Chlothar II and “accuse[d] [Rusticula] of secretly supporting the king.” Infuriated, Chlothar II summoned Rusticula to court. Since Rusticula refused to come to court, she was found guilty. Chlothar II sent one of his optimates, Faraulf, to fetch her. Once again, Rusticula refused and used Caesarius’ rule of enclosure as her defense, saying that she “would die rather than transgress the precepts of the Holy Father Caesarius.” In response, Faraulf threatened the governor of Arles, Nymfidius, who “begged her to come out voluntarily without violence” so that Faraulf would not execute him. She was “placed under guard in a cell of a monastery in that city” for seven days before

impossible now to discern the legitimacy of Gundovald’s claim to the throne. He had his supporters, and Radegund was apparently one of them, but he also had his enemies. The fact that he called upon Radegund to test the legitimacy of his claim is telling. As a former wife of Chlothar, it is likely that Radegund would have had knowledge of many, if not all, of Chlothar’s children. Gundovald, therefore, was calling upon her political role as a former queen. Moreover, by using the title Radegund of Poitiers paralleled with Ingitrude of Tours (the abbess of a monastery in Tours) to substantiate his claim, it seems that he was also calling upon her as a respected religious woman. The fact that her support could be influential enough to carry such weight further demonstrates the political power she could and did wield after her renunciation. See Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks, VII.36; Wood, The Merovingian Kingdoms, 93-98.

367 Childebert II, who succeeded Guntram in 592, reigned for three years before he died and his sons succeeded him. Theuderic II (r. 595-613), received the kingdom of Burgundy, while Theudebert II (r. 595-612) received Austrasia. The rivalry between the kingdoms continued with Theudebert II and Theuderic II siding together against Chlothar II. In 605, and then again from 610-12, however, Theudebert II and Theuderic II took up arms against one another until Theuderic II defeated his brother and took over the Austrasian throne, uniting it with Burgundy once again. With a rejuvenated power, Theuderic II then marched against Chlothar II in 613 but died of dysentery on the road. Consequently, the Frankish kingdoms were once again united under one king, Chlothar II from 613-629. Fredegar, The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar, 16-17, 20, 25-27, 37, 38-39, 41-3.

368 It has been suggested that the king in question is Childebert, the son of Theuderic II, who had just been killed by Chlothar II in 613. Florentius, “The Life of Rusticula,” n. 31, page 127. It is likely that the king in question was one of the past rulers of Burgundy, possible Theuderic II himself.

journeying north. Angered by Chlothar’s poor treatment of her, Domnolus, the bishop of Vienne, went to the king to “denounce him for giving grave offence to God by condemning Christ’s handmaid through an unjust judgment.” Bishop Domnolus threatened the death of Chlothar’s son, which caused Chlothar to send two of his counts to accompany Rusticula “with honor and reverence” on her journey to him. Once Rusticula arrived at court, “her own presence rather than common gossip testified for her,” and “the king and queen and all their optimates began to venerate her with great honor and reverence” Chlothar’s lords of the palace then advised that he return Rusticula to her monastery at Arles.

Rusticula must have held a considerable amount of power to pose a threat to Chlothar II when he took over control of Burgundy. As the abbess of one of the most reputable monasteries in Gaul, Rusticula may have held some sway in the public opinion about the new ruler, for which she was brought to the attention of Chlothar II. Although regime changes often result with the downturn of those who had been previously favored, it is interesting that an abbess of a monastery was considered a threat. Her alliance with the previous rulers must have run deep in order to incite such fear and anger in Chlothar II, thus indicating her previous involvement in the political affairs of the realm. Guntram was the king that initially gave Liliola permission to rescue Rusticula from her kidnapping. Then, Rusticula had sustained amicable relations with Brunhild, her son Childebert II and her grandson Theudebert II during their reigns. Her concern for the life of Nymfidius, the governor of Arles, continues to place her relations and interactions outside the monastery’s walls. The intercession of Dumnolus, bishop of Vienne, demonstrates how far-reaching her influence must have gone. Her summons to Chlothar’s court, therefore, must be seen as the culmination of decades of interactions between herself, as the abbess of St. Jean, and the

371 Florentius, “The Life of Rusticula,” 11-12. The monastery in the city is likely still in Arles where she was held before being taken to north to Chlothar’s court.
tumultuous politics of Merovingian Gaul. It was a testament to her political involvement and influence that she was summoned by the king on the grounds of being a supporter of the last king of Burgundy.

Although many of these cases seem isolated or unique, that does not necessarily mean that religious women were not repeatedly involved in politics. Saints’ lives tend to moderate a saint’s engagement in the secular world in favor of their celestial qualities. Therefore, any inkling of political involvement in these vitae may only be a small portion of their actual participation in the secular realm. It is important to note that neither Monegund nor Glodesind seemed to be entangled in politics. It is likely that they are perhaps more representative of the religious women during this period and that Genovefa, Chlothild, Radegund, and Rusticula are just exceptional cases. Nonetheless, the possibility remains for a religious woman to be deeply invested in the affairs of the realm and, therefore, too occupied to leave the kingdoms. Rusticula and Glodesind are the only women that lived in monasteries throughout their entire religious vocations. Genovefa, Chlothild, and Radegund, however, were both wealthy and relatively mobile through much of their ascetic careers. Their political involvement, much like their social involvement, therefore, may be one more piece to the puzzle that helps elucidate the reasons they did not undertake a pilgrimage. They acted as mediators between the local population and the kings, as well as between the warring kings themselves. Therefore, they were tied to Gaul, not because of monastic regulation, but due to their roles as peacekeepers within the realm. Their decision to remain in Gaul was once again for the benefit of the realm and the people within it.
CONCLUSION

Due to the growing number of saints’ cults throughout Gaul, it was no longer necessary to travel to the other side of the Mediterranean in order to experience the *loca sancta*. Now, *loca sanctorum* were found all over Gaul. Short-distance pilgrimages became increasingly prevalent among religious and lay alike in early medieval Gaul. One of the first Christian holy places in Gaul was the shrine of Saint Martin of Tours. As many of the women in this study demonstrate, a pilgrimage to Tours in order to visit Saint Martin’s shrine was swiftly becoming a popular practice. Genovefa traveled from Orléans to Tours in order to pray at Saint Martin’s tomb. While at Tours, she attended the vigil of Saint Martin and cast devils out from various possessed locals with the powers she received from God and Saint Martin. After her renunciation, Chlothild went to Tours where she spent most of her life as an ascetic close to the basilica of Saint Martin. After the death of her two daughters, Monegund initially retreated to the ascetic life within her home. After some time amassing fame in her local Chartres, she “fear[ed] that she might fall to vainglory,” so she, too, fled to the basilica of Saint Martin and resided in Tours for the remainder of her life with a few *monachas*. Finally, Radegund, on her way to her ascetic retreat at Saix, traveled to Tours. There, she attended mass and visited all the courts, shrines, and basilica of Saint Martin, “weeping unchecked tears, prostrating herself at each threshold!” Ascetic women in the later fifth and sixth century were still going on pilgrimages; they were just doing so closer to home.

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374 For more on the rise of short-distance pilgrimages to local Gallic shrines, especially that of Saint Martin of Tours, see van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in late antique Gaul*, 116-149.
377 Gregory of Tours, “Monegund,” 5.
The parallels between these short-distance pilgrimages and the long-distance pilgrimages to the Holy Land accomplished by our late antique women are striking. All four of these women traveled to Tours as part of their ascetic practice, either as an initiation or a permanent relocation. Often, the impetus to convert to an ascetic lifestyle occurred after a great bereavement. Such was the case for Monegund who lost her two daughters, for Chlothild whose husband, Clovis, had just died, and for Radegund, who just learned that her husband Chlothar had her only surviving brother killed. Once at Tours, the women visited the holy shrines of Saint Martin, attended vigils and masses, and prayed at Saint Martin’s tomb. All the characteristics of late antique pilgrimage are there—the only difference was that Tours was still in Gaul. Moreover, none of these women were bound by a rule of enclosure like Rusticula and perhaps even Glodesind. Once again, we can reassert that claustration was not an issue for many women in the late fifth and sixth centuries. In the seventh century, with the continued development of monasticism, it becomes clearer that rules of enclosure were major factors in prohibiting the movement of religious women. Within the bounds of this present study, however, claustration was not the reason for which religious women no longer went on pilgrimage. They clearly had the mobility, and likely the wealth, to travel abroad. The reasons for the decline in female ascetic pilgrimages, therefore, must look beyond the institutionalization of monasticism and ecclesiastical regulation.

As I hope to have demonstrated, the roles that religious women played in their communities and in the realm can help shed some light on this decline. Taking into account the political and economic climate of early medieval Gaul, especially between the years 511 and 613, it becomes clear that religious women performed vital functions in society. From their beneficent care towards a struggling populace to their mediating roles for peace and

justice, they had their hands full at home. They no longer had the luxury to travel across the Mediterranean for their own personal and individual ascetic practice. As the focus of ascetic practice turned outwards to their respective community, they became bound to those same communities they sought to aid. Consequently, they were socially, politically, and morally obligated to remain within Gaul. In turn, their biographers, who understood the necessities of the time, promulgated an image of female sanctity that commended women for these roles and, consequently, instructed future generations of religious women how to embody the virtues of these early medieval religious women.
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