

HERMITS MURDERED BY ROBBERS: CONSTRUCTION OF MARTYRDOM IN OTTONIAN HAGIOGRAPHY*

Marina Miladinov

In 861, hermit Meginrad, whose “desert” was the wilderness where almost a century later the abbey of Einsiedeln was to be founded, was cruelly murdered by two vagabond robbers greedy for the treasure they thought he was keeping in his cell. His sanctity was unquestioned, the care of his cult undertaken by the monks of Reichenau, and his *vita* written within one generation.¹ But although he had allegedly spent almost twenty-six years in solitude and asceticism, engaged in austere fasting and incessant prayer, fighting temptations and resisting the assaults of the devil, his hagiographer comprised this aspect of sanctity into a few paragraphs; the major part of the *vita* he devoted to that which, according to his own words, he actually wanted to describe: Meginrad’s “passion and death.”² And he described it in full detail, including a dramatic dialogue between the hermit and his murderers and covering the entire development of the event from the morning, when the robbers started to look for his hermitage, until the crucial evening scene, described at length, including the accompanying miracles and the evil end of the assassins.

It has been observed that this accent on martyrdom makes the *Passio Meginradi* a very early example marking the beginning of the peculiar predilection for martyrdom in the works of authors of the Ottonian cultural domain.³ Even though not absent as the ultimate—and for the most unattainable—ideal throughout the post-persecution history of Christian religiosity, its rise in importance is recognisable through the emphasis it gains with respect to the other merits of the particular personality. During the Carolingian period, even if a man actually did die

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¹ BHL 5878, quotations according to PL 142, 1177–84. Hereafter: *VM*. A detailed list of manuscripts and editions, as well as an overview of the different opinions regarding the dating is to be found in Theodor Klüppel, *Reichenauer Hagiographie zwischen Walahfrid und Berno* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1980), 45–50. The dating options currently vary from the last third of the ninth to the first third of the tenth centuries, even though the PL edition mentions Bern of Reichenau as the author.

² *passionem et obitum*. *VM*, Prologue, PL 142, 1177. Nevertheless, Meginrad’s clear classification as hermit is visible from the fact that in two of the earliest manuscripts, Sangall. 577 and MS 7666–71 of the Bibliothèque royale Belgique, his *vita* was placed directly after that of the hermit Ermenland from the Merovingian period. Klüppel, 52.

³ Klüppel, 55.

a violent death and was subsequently proclaimed a martyr by his community (in the monastic or simply local sense), his *vita* or *passio* would be slanted towards his religious life: his asceticism, charity, missionary work, or a particularly engaged episcopacy.⁴ The fact that even Meginrad's eremitic asceticism, a tendency in piety that was brought back into the focus of religious life precisely in this period, is overshadowed by his martyrdom, demonstrates the importance of the latter in securing salvation. Meginrad's hagiographer sees the real sign of his sanctity in the combination of violence and ritual in which the hermit's death is carried out, and in which he appears to take part as actively as his murderers.

Throughout the Ottonian period, this tendency to search for an ever more secure path to salvation will permeate—with varying intensity—all aspects of religious life: while laymen will offer donations to monastic or ecclesiastical institutions or even saintly individuals, dead or alive, in order to obtain memorial masses or other types of intercession with God, clerical and monastic circles will correspondingly enhance their penitence and asceticism, frequently engaging in the more exclusive and dedicated forms of eremitism and reclusion. The culmination of this ever greater strife to achieve salvation is observable in another thrilling description of hermits murdered by robbers: the *passio* of the Five hermit-brothers of Poland (*Vita quinque fratrum*), composed by Bruno of Querfurt around 1008, also only a few years after the event.⁵ Except for the fact that this piece of hagiography is significantly longer than the *Passio Meginradi* and therefore allows for more of an introduction into the episode of martyrdom, the pattern is very similar and permits us to establish several points of hagiographic procedure by means of which the death of the hermits is presented as martyrdom. This paper aims at a brief analysis of three main points, after which I will proceed to the discussion of the factors which brought martyrdom back into the limelight at the end of the ninth and tenth centuries.

It is the explicit labelling of the hermit's death as martyrdom that leaves no doubt about its character. The author of the *Passio Meginradi* promises martyrdom in the Prologue, and the *Vita quinque fratrum* presents asceticism almost as a mere preparation for martyrdom: the hermits have “after white heart and good deeds received the golden ending of crimson-red martyrdom.”⁶ Instead of referring to the eremitic authorities of the past, Bruno relates their death to that of Adalbert of

⁴ Such is the case of the first *vita* of the missionary Boniface, which accentuates his achievements in the field of missionary work and the organization of the ecclesiastical structure in the Christianised area. About the difference in later *vitae*, see below.

⁵ BHL 1147, quotations according to MGH SS 15, 716–38. Hereafter: VQF.

⁶ *post album cor et opus bonum acceperunt purpurae passionis aureum finem*. VQF, Prologue. MGH SS 15, 716.

Prague, who was killed during missionary work in 997 and whose first *vita* Bruno wrote some years before that of the hermit-brothers.⁷ This element is more significant than it might appear at first glance, for a genuine martyr preferably died at the hands of a pagan, not a fellow-Christian, however evil the latter might be. I would like to draw attention here to the argumentative writings of the *incentor martyrii* Eulogius of Cordoba⁸ from the end of the ninth century, in which he appears repeatedly compelled to defend the martyrs of his own times against the accusations of the main-stream Christians that they were not “genuine”: even though they were murdered by Muslims, their martyrdom was not as uncontested as one might expect, for they were, in the words of the contemporary sceptics, killed not by pagans adoring idols, but by people “abiding by God and the Law”: certainly a very dangerous point of view.⁹

In many cases, the murderers and plunderers were certainly pagans and thus the martyrdom corresponded better to its primary meaning of a confessional conflict.¹⁰ In our two cases, where the robbers were presumably Christians, the hagiographer had to justify the religious significance of their deed. He accomplished this task by presenting them as the agents of the Devil; in this way, he was able to view the death of the ascetics as the final battle with the forces of darkness, in which the hermits do not lose but win through their final confirmation of faith. Thus, Meginrad’s robbers were “inspired by the one who had entered the serpent,” “incited by the one who filled them with the most hateful spirit,” “vexed by the

⁷ BHL 38 and 39, quotations according to MPH 1, 189–222. Hereafter: *VA*. This text is a most valuable source for Bruno’s view on missionary activity and martyrdom, in particular when contrasted to the earlier *vita* by John Canaparius (BHL 37), where these aspects are left in the background with respect to the monastic values of charity, humility, and obedience. An exhaustive list of manuscripts as well as the critical analysis of the editions is to be found in Richard Wenskus, *Studien zur historisch-politischen Gedankenwelt Bruns von Querfurt* (Münster and Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1956), 7–68. Cf. Mathilde Uhlirz, *Die älteste Lebensbeschreibung des heiligen Adalberts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957).

⁸ The expression was used by his hagiographer (BHL 2704).

⁹ *ab hominibus Deum et legem collentibus*. Eulogius of Cordoba, *Liber apologeticus martyrum* 12, PL 115, 857. Cf. 3, PL 115, 853–4 and also *Memorialis sanctorum* 1, especially chapters 18, 21, and 26 (PL 115, 751, 754–5, and 758), where he enumerated various objections of contemporaries to the character of the martyrdom of their times. His own repulsion at establishing parallels between Christianity and Islam is exposed in the invective chapters 3, 12, 16, and 19 of the *Liber apologeticus martyrum* (PL 115, 853–4, 857, 859–60, and 861–2). Many bishops openly collaborated with the Muslim authorities, claiming it to be the right way to avoid persecutions, and provocations aiming at martyrdom were condemned at the synod of Cordoba in 852; criticism of this attitude as the betrayal of Christian ideals is found in the *Vita Iohannis Gorziensis* (BHL 4396, quoted according to MGH SS 4, 335–77, hereafter: *VIG*), written by a younger contemporary. An Ottonian ambassador to the caliphate, John was shocked by the readiness of the ecclesiastical structures to compromise. *VIG* 123, MGH SS 4, 372.

¹⁰ Such was the example of the recluse Wiborada, murdered by Hungarians in 926 at St Gallen. *Vita s. Wiboradae* by Hartmann (BHL 8866), dated post 973; *vita* by Hepidannus (BHL 8867), dated to 1072.

demon” and “blessed by the Satan;”¹¹ the robbers in the *Vita quinque fratrum*, again, are presented as demonic creatures, whose “liver is craving, lips are trembling, nostrils steaming, entrails drawing blood...”¹² Meginrad is contrasted to them as a “strong athlete, ready for the battle with the help of God’s comfort,”¹³ and the brothers as a “heavenly division.”¹⁴ This selected vocabulary enabled the hagiographer to depict the robbers as destroying the hermits as Christians, as saintly, and not ordinary men, which was a point of primary importance if the act was to be understood as directed against the faith itself and if the hermits were to be seen as victims of persecution.

Related to this is the insistence of both hagiographers in question that the robbers came with an explicit intent to kill, a desire which appears even stronger than their greed for treasure. Thus, the murderers of the five brothers came in order to “harm, as a robber in the night, in order to close up the day of life, without a cause, to the bodies of the innocent.”¹⁵ They were led by instinct, like “dogs to the blood, wolves to their prey,”¹⁶ and the robber conversing with hermit Isaac declares: “Truly, we want to murder you. That is the reason for which we came.”¹⁷ While relating the events around the robbery and the homicide, the texts are thus constructed to convey the atmosphere of persecution and martyrdom in a similar apologetic manner found in many lives of the ascetics: not only by applying to the actual story the vocabulary of the arena, but also by forcing the protagonists into the corresponding roles in the ritual. The small dialogues in both lives, even though void of the great exhortative or confessional utterances characteristic of acts of martyrs, still create a situation in which the hermits can be shown in their transcendental light, assisted and substituted by Christ in their suffering.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the appearance of the robbers in the eremitic context could be additionally interpreted as a response of the devil to the hermit’s sanctity. In this respect, an unexpected act of violence could be seen rather as the final act of the long struggle between the holy man and the forces of evil, in particular if we view the retreat into the desert as a provocation on the

¹¹ *eo inspirante qui serpentem intravit... agitante qui eos impleverat terribili spiritu... daemone tandem vexati. VM 10, PL 142, 1180–1; benedicente Satana. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 731.*

¹² *iecur hiat, labia tremunt, nares flant, precordia sanguinem trahunt... VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 730.*

¹³ *athleta fortis, Deo confortante, pugnaturus egreditur. VM 12, PL 142, 1181.*

¹⁴ *diva cohors. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 732.* It should, however, be noted that Bruno utilises little military terminology, concentrating rather on words implying fervent desire and longing for Christ.

¹⁵ *venerunt nocentes, ut fur nocte, corporibus innocentium sine causa claudere diem vitae. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 730.*

¹⁶ *canes ad sanguinem, lupes ad predam. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 730.*

¹⁷ *Verum occidere vos volumus. Ecce causa, pro qua venimus. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 731.*

side of the hermit and the challenge to the devil for a combat on his own ground. Meginrad had successfully resisted the assaults of the demons before; his long life of austere asceticism made him fit for this battle. Eventually, the entire story appears reversed in soteriological light, for the hermit is not weak because he lives unprotected in solitude and is not therefore attacked by robbers, but on the contrary, he grows ever more powerful by means of his ascetic exercise and his minor battles with demons. The final attack is sent to him only when he is sufficiently armed to turn it into his own triumph.¹⁸

Secondly, both hagiographers accentuate that death was offered to the hermits by God as an act of grace. Bruno places this attitude in the mouth of hermit Isaac: "How good it is for us that... this happy hour, which we never merited by ourselves, we have encountered by the sole mercy of the Saviour."¹⁹ What is given to the hermits is not only the opportunity to earn the crown of martyrdom, but also the readiness for it and the strength to endure the suffering. It is significant that one of the five hermit-brothers, Christianus, tries to defend himself with a piece of wood and is therefore at first not buried together with the others, which is meant to point out that in him God's grace did not operate to such a perfect degree, but more probably reflects also his lowly status as their servant and cook, since Bruno says: "Do not bind an ox with an ass," explaining it as "a wise man with a stupid one."²⁰ Nevertheless, Christianus is soon rehabilitated and rejoins his companions in their tomb, which Bruno comments with another appropriate passage: "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the slave and the free man, we are all one in Christ."²¹ Moreover, somewhat earlier Bruno compares him to the fifth wound in Christ's side, out of which came blood mixed with water and which is thus particularly associated with the Redemption.²²

Related to this is the behaviour of the hermits towards their murderers, as well as the symbols and rituals they impose upon the situation, thus turning the robbers

¹⁸ Nevertheless, some difference should be observed with respect to the assaults of the devil himself, in his various disguises, since his purpose is to draw the solitary away from God and from his *propositio*. Cf. Maria-Elisabeth Brunert, *Das Ideal der Wüstenaskese und seine Rezeption in Gallien bis zum Ende des 6. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1994), 374–6. The assassins, on the other hand, as well as the persecutors of the early Church, are perceived rather as being instigated by the devil, which was ultimately considered directed by God for some hidden purpose.

¹⁹ *Bene... nobis, qui tam bonam noctem et sic felicem horam, quam numquam pro nostris meritis meruimus, sola misericordia Salvatoris invenimus.* VQF, 13, MGH SS 15, 732.

²⁰ *Non iungas bovem cum asino, hoc est: sapientem cum stulto.* VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 713.

²¹ *Non est distinctio Iudei et Greci; servus ac liber, omnes in Christo unum sumus.* VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 734. Rom 10, 12.

²² *Qui supradictus Christinus... super quattuor occisos sanctos impio vulnere quintus interfectus accrevit magno illius beneficio, de cuius quinto vulnere in latere salutis, per quae remittuntur peccata hominibus, exivit sanguis et aqua...* VQF, 13. MGH SS 15, 732. John 19, 34.

into mere tools of their fulfillment in *imitatio Christi*. In both *vitae*, the hermits address their murderers as “friends” (*amici, socii*).²³ Meginrad reproaches them for not having come earlier to celebrate the Mass with him before realizing their intention; he offers them his tunic and mantle, bread and drink, asks them to light two candles when he is dead, one at his head and another at his feet; he urges them to hurry in order that they should not be caught and punished; and the brothers bless their murderers as well.²⁴ This view of an evil deed, which is at the same time directed by God, is expressed perfectly concisely by Bruno saying that the robbers were “wishing to be harmful, but compelled to be useful.”²⁵ At the same time, it is related to the fine, but important line which separates the voluntary submission to martyrdom from provocation, the line that the martyrs of Cordoba obviously did not always succeed in maintaining. The attitude of a genuine martyr was expected to be a non-defensive, but certainly not an offensive one.

Thirdly, in both cases miracles take place while the robbers are still present and this fact underlines God’s command of all events, whereby even those apparently evil are in fact directed to a good purpose. The moment Meginrad exhales, the oratory is filled with a “smell of such mildness as if fragrances of all sorts were spreading their sweet odour around the place.”²⁶ The ravens, sensing the presence of the devil just like the chicklets, which Meginrad had been feeding and which we met running frantically around the hermitage before the robbers entered the cell, pursue the two men so closely and raise such a clamour that these are soon caught and burned alive.²⁷ Bruno tells us that the murderers of the five brothers, having left the scene of their crime, hear from the inside “a sweet melody and a voice singing.”²⁸ When they re-enter to see whether anybody has been left alive, they discover that Benedict, who lay dead “as if he were asleep,” has put his hood on and turned towards the wall.²⁹

All these elements of hagiographic procedure unite to complete the picture of the hermits’ death as meriting the label of martyrdom. It should be observed,

²³ VM 12, PL 142, 1181; VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 731.

²⁴ VM 12, PL 142, 1182. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 732.

²⁵ *volentes nocere, coacti prodesse*. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 730.

²⁶ *Egrediente autem iam anima... tantae suavitatis odor progrediens totum cellulae locum compleverat, ac si omnium pigmentorum odoramenta ibi diffusa fragrarent*. VM 13, PL 142, 1182.

²⁷ VM 15, PL 142, 1182–3.

²⁸ *dulcem melodiam et vocem cantantium intus sonantem audierunt*. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 732.

²⁹ *Solus Benedictus... sicut dormiens jacebat... cum venirent ipsi occisores videre, mirantes, si adhuc viveret, qui in Dei carminibus indesinentes voces deintus sonare audiebant, sanctus ille Benedictus cucullam capiti imposuisset et mutato latere ad parietem converteret, qui cum illis omnibus mortuus erat*. VQF 13, MGH SS 15, 732–3.

however, that there are points in which the *Vita quinque fratrum* adopts a significantly different tone than the *Passio Meginradi*, which is in my opinion not to be attributed only to authorial differences, but is to be seen as a result of a more than a century long development of the worldview that stands behind Bruno's work, revolving around two main points: the Christocentricity and the crucial importance of salvation, in the first place personal, but through that of collective salvation as well. The examples in the *Vita quinque fratrum* are so numerous that I will restrict myself only to the most important ones.

The author beseeches the Lord as *restitutor innocentiae, salvator* and *Redemptor mundi*. Benedict, one of the brothers, begins in his infancy *philosophare in Christo* and, for Bruno, the highest grade on the way to salvation is to "depart from the world and be with Christ," by which he means both evangelization and martyrdom.³⁰ Benedict rejoices in suffering for the love of Christ according to the Apostle: "For me to live is Christ and to die gain";³¹ and the syntagm *pro amore Christi* is encountered in almost every paragraph. It is understandable that Christ plays a special role in the lives of the martyrs, since they are identified with him both in his passion and his triumph, the two aspects highlighted as well in the Christocentric art of the tenth century. Christ on a gemmed cross inspires as a symbol of suffering and victory joined together, as the *auctor crucis*,³² and in order to present the death of their heroes as the emulation of Christ, hagiographers develop a predilection for having them take a posture of the cross before dying. Thus, Adalbert of Prague falls dead on the ground extending his arms in the shape of the cross,³³ and Lambert of Liège prostrates himself on the floor in the same position, in which he is then discovered by his assassins and murdered.³⁴

Regarding more particularly salvation, Bruno incorporates the story of Romuald of Ravenna, who threw the abbatial staff at the feet of the Emperor since he found the discipline in the monastery too lax, in order that "he should not be lost himself, who could not gain any other"³⁵ and somewhat further "so that he would in friendly seclusion save at least himself, since in that monastery for the reason of

³⁰ *dissolvi et esse cum Christo*. VQF 2, MGH SS 15, 719. This active understanding of the quotation from Phil 1, 23 is striking with respect to its usual passive meaning such as, for example, in Odilo of Cluny's epitaph to Adelheid. *Epitaphium Adelheidae imperatricis* (BHL 63), PL 142, 981.

³¹ *Mihi vivere Christus est et mori lucrum*. VQF 4, MGH SS 15, 721. Phil 1, 21.

³² VIG 26, MGH SS 4, 344.

³³ VA 33, MPH 1, 221.

³⁴ *Vita Lamberti episcopi Traiectensis* 3, 36, PL 132, 659 (the tenth century *vita*: BHL 4683).

³⁵ *ne forsitan se perderet, qui alium lucrari non potuit*. VQF 2, MGH SS 15, 718.

disturbance of secular matters he could not merit any gaining of the souls.”³⁶ Personal salvation plays a crucial role in evangelization as well, which is seen by Bruno as a quest for the remission of sins (*remissio peccatorum*), which are “washed off in baptism and completely extinguished in martyrdom.”³⁷

This counterposition of sin and salvation, as well as the establishment of martyrdom as the highest grade in the career of an ascetic, create the impression that Bruno regarded the active quest for martyrdom as complementary to God’s grace in securing the eternal life. The question to be asked is: what factors worked upon the idea of martyrdom in order to shift it from the means of resistance against religious laxity or from the patient and joyful acceptance of violent death to the triumph of exclusivity it attained as the path to salvation? Adding this problem to the other manifestations of tenth-century spirituality, such as eremitism and reclusion, monastic reforms, clerical asceticism, or royal sanctity, is bound to increase our understanding of the causality that governed man in his passage through his earthly life and his efforts to achieve the eternal one.

In the first place, I would like to point out that we must begin our research in the ninth century, which brought martyrdom back into the focus of attention by means of two correlated processes: an increased traffic in relics and pagan incursions. Whereas the first answered to an augmented need for spiritual protection, the other contributed considerably to the creation of that need, and towards the end of the century monasteries had armed themselves with numerous relics from most various regions, inventions filling the gaps. Literary production became more abundant, probably as a result of great losses of collective memory because of the destruction of monastic written documents. History rewritten took its chance in being better and more significant than its previous versions and the *vitae* and *passiones* of saints who died centuries before and might have never existed were intended to prove the great value of the relics obtained or discovered. For example, if we look at Reichenau, the hagiography of which has been analysed by Theodor Klüppel, we can find the accounts of translations and miracles of Genesisius, Aurelius, Valens, Iannuarius, Fortunata, Verena, Heraklius, Iustus, Maurus, Mark the Evangelist and some others. For all of these the hagiographers had to strain their imagination in order to provide the accounts. It is not incidental that the major martyrologies were composed precisely during this period: those of Florus of Lyon, Ado, Usuard, and Hrabanus Maurus.³⁸

³⁶ *ut in amico secreto saltem se solum salvaret, qui propter inquietudinem secularium in illo monasterio nullum lucrum animarum facere meruit. VQF 2, MGH SS 15, 718.*

³⁷ *in baptismo lavantur, in martyrio vero omnia extinguuntur. VQF 2, MGH SS 15, 720.*

³⁸ For the rise of “historical martyrologies”, see Jacques Dubois, *Les martyrologes du Moyen Age latin* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978).

Such intense veneration of old Christian martyrs brought from faraway regions prepared the ground for creating one's own, local martyrs, who would be remembered from the previous or one's own generation and thus provide not only more data for the creation of the story, but certainly also more feeling of saintly protection for the community. The incursions of Saracens, Danes, Normans, and Hungarians thus indeed not only contributed to the need for the creation of local martyrs, but also helped to provide the martyrs themselves, and their fame was spread throughout Christian Europe.³⁹

The tenth-century martyrs were immediately commemorated in hagiography. Besides the ones mentioned above, we should note as well Pelagius, a young Christian nobleman of Galicia who refused the advances of Caliph Abd-ar-Rahman, as well as conversion to Islam, and was thrown off the city walls in 925. His story must have been known throughout Christian Europe; certainly it was known at Gandersheim, where Hrosvitha recreated his *passio* in dramatic verse form.⁴⁰ The examples of extraordinary individuals and their heroic deeds should be considered among the strongest incentives for producing further martyrs, particularly in an age when the Christian church was recovering from a crisis and experiencing both material and spiritual revival. Emulation to the letter was, however, not required: as the real martyrdom was becoming more and more rare and at the same time the need for such accounts was increasing, a hagiographer himself could, so to say, place the crown on the head of any victim of violence. It can be observed that the post-Ottonian period demonstrates less preoccupation with martyrdom even in cases extremely similar to our two main examples. Benedict, a disciple of the hermit Zoerard-Andreas, was also murdered by robbers and approximately at the same time as the Five brothers. His *vita*, however, written by Maurus, the bishop of the recently founded diocese of Pécs in Hungary half a century afterwards, will accentuate his teacher's ascetic heroism, describing in details all the devices he used to mortify his body, but will spend no more than a sentence to inform about Benedict's death.⁴¹

Hermits murdered by robbers were far from being the only type of such martyrs. We can notice this tendency in other cases of individuals from most diverse backgrounds, and even in the poetic *passiones* of Hrosvitha, the variety of which encouraged an interpretation of her *opus* as presenting various aspects of humanity

³⁹ Particularly famous were the martyrs of Cordoba because of their number and the provocative heroism that led to their execution; but the fate of the martyrs of Pavia, Lindisfarne, of the abbot of Monte Cassino Bertharius, and other individual and group martyrdoms suffered during the pillaging of monasteries, would have been known as well.

⁴⁰ BHL 6617 and 6618.

⁴¹ *Vita sanctorum Zoerardi et Benedicti auctore Mauro episcopo Quinqueecclesiensi*, BHL 452.

and its sinfulness purified by martyrdom.⁴² The most extreme case is certainly that of Gongolf, a nobleman killed by his wife and her lover after he discovered their affair. While the wife ended up in madness, exposed to the ridicule of the crowd, Gongolf was indeed venerated as a martyr. Hrosvitha's metric *passio* describes at length his coronation in heaven, accompanied by the sound of angelic hymns, and the mournful funeral on earth, followed by the miracles and the rapid spread of his cult even outside the community.⁴³

In addition, a number of political murders were interpreted in terms of martyrdom, and royal sanctity was often legitimised precisely in this way. This was the case not only when the king was murdered by pagans, as for example Edmund of East Anglia, but also in the case of political murder, like Wenceslas of Bohemia, who in the *vita* by Gumpold of Mantua, written during the Ottonian period, spends a night in fervent prayer and expectation of martyrdom and in the morning offers a weapon to his assassin himself.⁴⁴

Finally, the tendency to accentuate martyrdom is visible in the re-writing of existing saints' lives. It has been observed by Ludwig Zoepf that the third *vita* of Liudger, re-written at the turn of the ninth to the tenth century, suddenly mentioned his longing for martyrdom,⁴⁵ which is especially interesting since this re-writing occurred only a short time after the previous one and in the same monastery of Werden, which dates the change of taste to this period just as the *Passio Meginradi* does. Also, Radbod's *vita* of the missionary Boniface accentuates his desire for martyrdom in several places, whereas in his previous *vita* there was no mention of it—a free interference of the hagiographer, since Boniface's letters leave no impression of his mission as a quest for martyrdom.⁴⁶

Furthermore, martyrdom as desire appears in the lives of saints who never even suffered violent death, as in the cases of Lebuin, Berlendis, or Odilia.⁴⁷ Admittedly, the motif of the saint replacing his martyrdom through asceticism because of living in peaceful times appeared sporadically throughout the earlier periods. However, in the Ottonian hagiography it appears as if the saint needs to be

⁴² Heinz Hofmann, "Profil der lateinischen Historiographie im zehnten Jahrhundert." *Il secolo di ferro: Mito e realtà del secolo X. Settimane di studio del centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 38, 19–25 aprile 1990 (Spoleto, 1991), 2: 892–3. Cf. E. Dorn, *Der sündige Heilige in der Legende des Mittelalters* (München, 1967).

⁴³ BHL 3328 and 3329. The mentioned passage is found in PL 137, 1092–4. Cf. Ludwig Zoepf, *Das Heiligen-Leben im 10. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1908), 127.

⁴⁴ *Vita Wenceslavi auctore Gumpoldo episcopo Mantuano* (BHL 8821) 19, MGH SS 4, 220.

⁴⁵ Zoepf, 126.

⁴⁶ Zoepf, 126–7.

⁴⁷ Zoepf, 129.

excused for not having suffered it, and this excuse appears to be the reason for the re-writing of a number of *vitae*.

Nevertheless, it should be observed that not all authors of the time were that quick to ascribe martyrdom to victims of Christian homicide, especially when compared to the “genuine” martyrdom. While telling of the murder of Adalbert’s brothers, Bruno of Querfurt is careful to point out that their death was not as worthy as that of Adalbert himself, a fact which “everybody understands who knows that he died for God, whereas they fell for the world and defending their lives.”⁴⁸

We can draw the conclusion that the construction of martyrdom did not develop in an atmosphere of decay and desolation accompanying the collapse of Carolingian central political power and the ravaging of the pagans, even though it might be said that these events helped create a new awareness of human sinfulness and the consequent loss of favour with God, with which especially the expected forerunners of Christianity, monks and clerics, were burdened. Stability was needed to spur spiritual effort, to create the theology of salvation that would help construct martyrs in an elegant and vivid, heroic prose. The Ottonian dynasty, although by no means undisputed in its rights and deeds, apparently provided such an impression of stability. From the very beginning, it worked on its image as God’s deputy on earth and the protector of the Church, which reached its peak during the second half of the tenth century and then lost its power with the growth of pre-Gregorian tendencies. The enlargement of the Empire under the Ottonian dynasty, combining conquest and missionary activity in what was perceived as the triumph of Christian faith, the Christ-centred representation of the imperial power, reflected in iconography, rituals, and ceremonies, the sanctification of a number of members of the imperial house, that is, the entire building up of the sacrality of the Ottonian dynasty obviously created the impression of an advance towards collective salvation. In spite of criticism of this or that aspect of rulership, the overall impression of the century, in particular contrasted to the previous one, is not only that of the deep piety of the religious elite, both monastic and clerical, but also that of order.

This is the spiritual atmosphere in which the preoccupation with salvation starts taking its accentuated form. The tendency of medieval men to view the trials of humanity as divine punishment for its sins is biblically based and contained in the core of Christian perception of the self and its role in the surrounding world, but this basic fact cannot be taken as a satisfactory explanation for the rise of the fear of one’s insufficiency in attaining salvation, nor for the fact that increasingly broad layers of society devote themselves ever more intensely to increasing their chances.

⁴⁸ *mors sua quam praestantius foret... omnis intelligit, qui ipsum causa Dei, illos causa seculi et defendende vite cecidisse cognoscit.* VA 22, MPH 1, 210.

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Despite the atmosphere of “permanent anxiety”⁴⁹—and scholars are still debating on how much it might have been due to millenarian expectations—the eschatological perspective is certainly the principal concern shaping the character of piety. In my opinion, the theological discussions of the ninth century have often been undeservedly ignored in this discussion. I am speaking, of course, primarily of the predestination controversy, the outcome of which absolved the man, for good or for bad, of his double predestination and placed his salvation in his own hands, thus enlarging his chances for attaining eternal blessedness and damnation alike. Man was left to his own devices and at the same time made fully aware of his sinfulness and personal insufficiency in this strife for the eternal life. The anxiety resulting from this situation is best reflected in Bruno’s words: “Other saints, even if they led the purest and most sweet-smelling of lives in the eyes of God, do not depart from this world secure, but suffer from infinite anxiousness around the final hour, not knowing whether their clean life will be considered worthy by the one in comparison with whom everything is unclean.”⁵⁰

The “final hour” thus becomes the breaking point, the moment of judgment, in which a real saint actually does become certain of his salvation as soon as he “closes for a moment his eyes, with which the men and the world were seen, and at once opens the interior ones, with which angels and God are seen,”⁵¹ so that he is able to “speak with Christ face to face, like a man to his friend.”⁵² The successfully attained salvation of a saint gains an additional meaning with respect to a less perfect, ordinary Christian of whichever social order: as the soul of the latter, certainly unable to reach Christ at the moment of death, enters the intermediate state in which it must wait for the final judgment and in which it is too late to repair any damage it had done, the intercession of a saint can still make a difference. Eventually, personal salvation functions at the highest eschatological level of the salvation of the Christian Empire—one Empire under a single head—that is to be saved by means of its individuals as well as in its totality.

This discussion of the subtle factors forming the complex ideology of martyrdom revealed in the writings of the Ottonian cultural domain aimed at demonstrating its specificities with regard to previous sporadic occurrences in

⁴⁹ George Duby, *Adolescence de la chrétienté occidentale (980–1140)* (Genève: Éditions d’art Albert Skira, 1967), 113.

⁵⁰ *Ceteri sancti quamvis candidam et odoriferam vitam ante oculos Dei habuerint, de hoc seculo securi non recedunt, sed circa extremam horam infinita angustia laborant, nescientes utrum eorum munda vita ab eo iudicetur digna, cuius comparatione sunt inmunda omnia.* VA 31, MPH 1, 218.

⁵¹ *claudere in momento oculos quibus homines videbantur et mundus, et aperire statim interiores ut videantur angeli et Deus...* VA 31, MPH 1, 219.

⁵² *loquere facie ad faciem, quasi homo ad amicum suum.* VA 33. MPH 1, 221.



HERMITS MURDERED BY ROBBERS

written sources. In particular, I sought to illuminate the process of the “construction” of martyrdom, the building-up of the hagiographic devices by means of which a homicide—in my examples performed by robbers on hermits—could be transformed into an outright testimony in blood. This process reached its pinnacle in the glorification of martyrdom in the writings of Bruno of Querfurt, who developed this theme on the basis of the contrast between sin and salvation, the former being the oppressive human condition, and the latter the main human goal, attainable through the uncompromising imitation of Christ in his passion. In this sense, those hermits, who started their way to the remission of sin through daily martyrdom of asceticism, and ended it by obtaining the crown of martyrdom in blood, can be seen as a vivid reflection of the Christianity of effort, a sign of the times of the Ottonian period.

Ph.D. Candidate, CEU Department of Medieval Studies, Budapest
Mphmim01@phd.ceu.hu