# Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage

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# Martyrs

Martyrs and their cults stimulated much of the pilgrimage traffic to → Rome and other destinations. The Greek word "martyr" ("witness") designates in canonical scriptures one who could testify to or bear witness to Christ (e.g. Luke 24:48, John 1:15 and 5:36–39, Acts 1:22); in Revelation it has the additional sense of one who is killed for witnessing the faith (Rev. 2:13), the usage which gradually became a standard term. How enthusiastically Christian communities commemorated such witnesses is revealed by the mid second-century *passio* of Polycarp when it praises its hero for aspiring to be "numbered amongst the martyrs" and specifies that the Church of Smyrna preserves his body as a relic, gathers at his tomb "as occasion allows, with glad rejoicings," and annually will celebrate "the birthday of his martyrdom" (Staniforth, trans., *Martyrdom*: 129–31). Such celebrations necessarily elided into pilgrimage because people in the ancient world considered the dead so "unclean" that burials were restricted to areas outside of the city walls. Therefore the commemorating community had to journey to the martyr's tomb for the sake of prayer. How this effort could unite living and martyred Christians is illustrated by the Alexandrian Church during the Severan persecutions (shortly after 200) as described by Origen (d. c. 254): "That was when one really was a believer, when one used to go to martyrdom

with courage in the Church, when returning from the cemeteries whither we had accompanied the bodies of the martyrs, we came back to our meetings, and the whole church would be assembled there, unbreakable. Then the catechumens were catechized in the midst of the martyrdoms, and in turn these catechumens overcame tortures and confessed the living God without fear" (Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah* in Frend, trans., *Martyrdom*: 241; see also → Burial ad Sanctos).

Martyrdom's capital was → Rome, thanks to Nero (54–68) whose persecutions caught up → Peter, → Paul, and what Tacitus (d. c. 117) described as an "immense multitude" of Christians (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44). Their first *memoria* were necessarily modest, such as the *aedicula* marking Peter's grave on the Vatican hill. In the Christian empire these monuments could be replaced by great basilicas. Constantine (306–337) built the largest, St Peter's on the Vatican; Theodosius (378–95) began the construction of St Paul's Outside the Walls; imperial patronage continued, and, among the other monuments, one might note the Church of St Peter in Chains, erected by empress Eudoxia (437–462) in the 430s to house chains that allegedly had bound Peter. Many pilgrims attracted by the apostolic martyrs also visited other cult sites, thus helping Rome's local martyrs become universal saints. These included Clement (d. 90), one of Peters' early successors; → Lawrence (d. c. 258), a deacon of Rome roasted on a grid iron; Cecilia (third century?), an aristocratic lady who became the patroness of music; Agnes (third century?), a virgin martyr who protected her purity; and Sebastian (late third century), famously shot full of arrows-all these, and many more became honored in churches frequented by pilgrims and frequently enhanced by papal patronage (see also → Plague Saints). Non-martyred Romans, such as the virgin Praxedes (second century?) who seems to have endowed a house church, could become incorporated into the story of the martyrs, famous for aiding martyrs then and pilgrims in the present. The master narrative of martyrdom could also absorb pagan sites with no

connection to Roman martyrs, such as the Colosseum. It included many anonymous martyrs assumed to be buried in Rome's cemeteries. Archaeologists have identified about sixty pre-Constantinian Roman Christian burial grounds and those with underground catacombs were often venerated and sporadically looted as the resting places of the martyrs (five remain open for public tours today). This piety was facilitated by Pope St Damasus (366–84) who identified tombs of the martyrs and labeled them with verse inscriptions in rustic capitals. In the Middle Ages pagan Rome remained an awesome presence in its surviving physical plant and unsurpassed literary heritage-Christian Rome simply overlaid it with the cult of the martyrs.

Rome's martyrological hegemony was unchallenged in the Latin West, where relics of martyrs, and indeed all types of holy relics, were probably less abundant than in the Greek East. In former imperial provinces local martyrs were commemorated in the derelict remains of cities along the old Roman roads, but martyrs were in shorter supply in Ireland and in other lands whose conversions to Christianity had occurred without much violence. Moreover, Latin bishops were generally able to control martyr cults in ways that reinforced their own authority (cf. Brown, *Cult*: 93–103). The one exception was North Africa, where the claim to be the true church of the martyrs was contested by the schismatic Donatist Church (cf. Saxer, *Morts*).

## THE EAST

→ Constantinople, the new Rome, had a certain amount of ground to make up. The original Byzantium had been a relatively small place with few native martyrs. Its embarrassment here was not unparalleled inasmuch as martyrdom's sacred geography was frequently ill-fitting, characterized by clusters of holy graves around those Roman cities whose officials had wielded powers of life and death. The new capital took the lead in distributing martyred saints more conveniently by 'translating' them. Just as pilgrimages moved people to relics, translations could move relics to

people, much more efficiently after the ancient taboos prohibiting the presence of bodily remains within cities broke down (cf. Brown, *Cult*: 1–8, 93). Constantinople acquired its own apostolic martyrs once Constantius (337–61) enriched his father's Church of the Holy Apostles by translating relics of Andrew from Patras, of Timothy from Ephesus and of Luke from Thebes. Other martyrs also arrived in Constantinople. George had five or six churches there, to go along with his tomb at Lydda in Palestine. Relics of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste were discovered in the city by Empress Pulcheria (Augusta 414–453). Even though Constantinople was nearer than Old Rome to Jerusalem, with better access to the → True Cross and other relics of Christ's life and passion (see also → Relics of Christ's Passion), and even though it had more contacts with the famous ascetic saints of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, its churches featuring relics of martyrs did become important parts of the local sacred topography.

Other Eastern cities had martyr patrons who drew pilgrims. The shrine of the virgin martyr Euphemia at Chalcedon had three churches, including a main basilica so grand that it was able to accommodate the fourth ecumenical council (during the Persian invasions of the seventh century, her relics were translated to Constantinople where her new shrine was the converted great hall of the palace of Antiochos). From the fifth century on, → Thessalonika had its famous shrine of the military martyr Demetrios the Great. There was even a "Martyropolis" (modern Silvan in Turkey), an administrative center between the dueling empires of Roma and Persia whose walls were said to be fortified with relics of Persian martyrs. *Martyria* could themselves be mini-cities, independent points of pilgrimage and power, such as the great church of St Sergius on the Euphrates frontier at Rusafa.

## OMNIPRESENT CULTS

Yet the cults of the martyrs involved more than the great *martyria* and their pilgrims. Martyrs became omnipresent and even the greatest could be widely shared. Relics of the Maccabees, martyred in the mid second century BC for not worshipping the Greek gods, appeared in Constantinople and in Rome in the fourth century AD, apparently soon after their removal from their original former synagogue location in Antioch (cf. Shatkin, 'Maccabean'). Relics of Stephen the Protomartyr, within a generation after their discovery in 415, could be found in *martyria* not only in Palestine, but also throughout North Africa, in Spain, in Minorca, and in Constantinople (cf. Clarke, 'Claims'). Ecclesiastical devotees of martyrs could accumulate huge stores of relics: Bishop Victricius of Rouen, around 400, published a sermon "In Praise of the Saints," which reveals that in his relatively remote church he had accumulated relics of "throngs of saints," martyrs who would "willingly associate with us if we bring a pure conscience to their service," whose healing power "is no less in the parts than in the entirety" (Victricius, *De Laude Sanctorum* in Clark, trans., 'Victricius': 376, 393, 397). In the altars of all churches, according to late antique fathers and councils, relics of martyrs were to be placed (cf. Hermann-Mascard, *Reliques*: 11–70). These might possess personal identities established through notarized labels and perhaps even church dedications or they could be anonymous impersonal bits of bone jumbled together, a general witness of the armies of martyrs and confessors who served the Lord. What pilgrims increasingly saw, however, were reliquaries, jeweled boxes or 'purses,' or even, from the tenth century onward, replicas of body parts, perhaps busts of saints looking like idols such as that which held the virgin martyr → Ste Foy at → Conques.

New martyrs were relatively rare, except on the frontiers of Christianity where missionary saints could still die for their faith. Nevertheless, ancient ones could be rediscovered: at → Santiago de Compostela, → James the Greater had his tomb revealed in the ninth century by a star; although the Theban Legion, martyrs under Diocletian, had been commemorated at Agaune in Switzerland since the fifth century, the fortuitous discovery of

related martyrs at Cologne and elsewhere provided relics for the great German imperial basilicas of the tenth and eleventh centuries; so did Ursula and her 11,000 virgins (perhaps a misreading of '11.'), allegedly martyred at Cologne, some of whose relics reappeared in the tenth century. Rediscoveries could coincide with periods of ecclesiastical construction: Rodulfus Glaber (d. about 1047) is famed for his claim that soon after the year 1000 "it seemed as though each Christian community were aiming to surpass all others in splendour of construction. It was as if the whole world were shaking itself free, shrugging off the burden of the past, and cladding itself everywhere in a white mantle of churches," but, less famously, he goes on to say that "When the whole world was, as we have said, clothed in a white mantle of new churches, a little later, in the eighth year after the millennium of the Saviour's Incarnation, the relics of many saints were revealed by various signs where they had long lay hidden. It was as though they had been waiting for a brilliant resurrection and were now by God's permission revealed to the gaze of the faithful" (Rodulfus Glaber, *Historiarum Libri Quinque* in France, ed. and trans., *Rodulfus*: 114-17, 126-27). Internal church controversies did provide some potential new opportunities to die for the faith, but there was not much enthusiasm for ideological cults such as that of the inquisitor Peter Martyr (d. 1252). The great exception was → Thomas Becket (d. 1170), the martyred archbishop of → Canterbury whose shrine became a pilgrimage center so attractive that it was the obvious destination for Geoffrey Chaucer's famous pilgrims.

## CONTROVERSIAL CULTS

The cults of martyrs continued to be popular, as the lively pilgrimages to their shrines suggest. Perhaps too popular, insofar as enthusiastic acclamations of martyrs could sometimes push the boundaries of orthodoxy. People were quick to claim fallen kings as martyrs, some of whom in their lives had seemed rather weak models of sanctity. Even fallen rebels might be proclaimed martyrs by their partisans, as happened in the case of the younger Simon de Montford (cf. Maddicott, 'Follower'; Valente, 'Simon'). So too were boys allegedly killed by Jews in the course of nefarious rites. These undisciplined popular acclamations may help explain why late medieval popes were relatively slow to canonize martyrs (see also → Canonization). Nevertheless martyrs continued to be featured prominently in the liturgy. About 80% of the saints included in the *Golden Legend* (see also → Hagiography, Local History, Theology) were martyrs. Martyrdom was a model so firmly established that when the sixteenth-century reformation began, new Catholic, Protestant, and Anabaptist martyrs were quickly acclaimed (cf. Gregory, *Salvation*). Martyrdom continues to be dynamic: 397 martyrs are listed among the 464 new saints recognized by John Paul II (1978-2005), a man who urged that pilgrims visiting Rome for the Jubilee year in 2000 should "also visit the tombs of the martyrs and, raising their prayers to these ancient champions of the faith, [...should] turn their thoughts to the 'new martyrs,' to the Christians who in the recent past and even in our time are subjected to violence, abuse and misunderstanding, because they wish to remain faithful to Christ and to his Gospel."

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