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Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2008. xii + 340 pp. Notes and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-674-02647-0

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Evelyn Waugh cultivated a strong aversion to things French. Once, however, he offered begrudging praise. "Saints," wrote the novelist, were "the one good thing about the frogs." As he explained in a letter, "some nations ... because of their greater spiritual dangers, tend to produce more saints than others. USA have not produced one ... France hundreds, of all types. It is to make up for the Zolas and ... Picassos." [1] *Flesh Made Word*, previously published as *Histoires de saints: Leur rôle dans la formation de l'Occident*, obviously harbors none of Waugh's disdain for the French. Yet, something in his backhanded compliment resonates with the book under review. Saints, as Kleinberg reminds us, "keep the world ethically functional" (xi). After all, it was difficult for ordinary Christians, especially medieval ones, to be good: "The Christian God had almost impossible moral expectations, and most people were unable (and perhaps unwilling) to live up to them" (xi). No need to despair, though: "...so long as there were people in the world who responded heroically to the moral imperatives of the Lord, so long as there were people found worthy of divine grace, all was not lost for the others." Fortunately, then, there are treasures in the economy of salvation, heavenly intercessors whose virtues could "make up for" the vices of others.

As "symbolic bridges" connecting earth to heaven, saints are the "liminal" figures "par excellence" (pp. 127, 179). Dwelling on the threshold, they suspend disbelief. Who needs to ask whether God exists when people typically encounter divine "powers" working through His agents (p. 5)? Moreover, contact with the holy, especially through stories, is collective. Similar to his 1992 study on the communal recognition of sanctity (*Prophets in Their Own Country*), Kleinberg's latest book uncovers a religious world that was thoroughly social. We see why saints were "a package deal" (p.132) for the church. They addressed a number of common problems, not least of which was the ongoing task of Christianizing Europe.

Their role in medieval culture now captivates historians. Concomitant with the heightened interest is a scholarly transformation, which Kleinberg's book superbly exemplifies. Historically unreliable, hagiography, to recall an earlier critic's phrase, used to be considered "ecclesiastical-swindling literature." [2] Not any more. What changed? After Vatican II ended the Latin mass, a taste for the exotic began to inform studies on medieval religion (though the connections cannot be addressed here). [3] The old disdain for the supernatural gave way to the suspension of judgment that the phenomenology and anthropology of religion could foster. Following this lead, medievalists started focusing on how saints *functioned*, especially in their earthly afterlife. [4] Commemoration of the dead, after all, serves the interests of the living. The heirs of this methodological shift are now fine-tuned to hagiography's worldly operations. In other words, hagiography is drawing increasing attention because scholars are recognizing in it a group's capacity to encode ideology, articulate power-relations, create control mechanisms but also—and this point stamps Kleinberg's conclusion—to subvert hegemony.

Why such different roles? With respect to the Mediterranean region and European society from Late Antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages—the book's geographic and temporal scope—saints were needed to cure the sick, channel political power and nourish the popular imagination. Since they had to address current needs, saints performed much of their work posthumously. Their deeds became a record managed by ecclesiastical officials, usually bishops, whom Kleinberg calls, following Peter Brown, “the impresarios of saints” (pp. 6, 43). In other words, saints survived primarily as supervised stories. These stories, as the study shows, became malleable, often re-worked to express changing aspirations among the interest groups responsible for hagiographic production. Thus saints were not just “constructed”; they were also deconstructed to achieve their various ends. [5]

For Kleinberg these ends, though not always met, are political (pp. 204, 279-286). Texts, even the homogeneous ones of hagiography, are hard to pin down. Given the many ways Saints' Lives can be interpreted, the historical situation Kleinberg finds is unstable, with different groups contesting the same stories and responding to them by creating new versions that undercut competing narratives. In terms of the interpretive communities manipulating these stories, the study points to two main parties: church officials and, so it seems, everybody else. What the ecclesiastical “elite,” as Kleinberg calls priests and bishops (p. 286), wanted from hagiography and what peasants or Franciscan purists wanted did not always coincide. To show the tensions at work, Kleinberg offers a close reading of several key narratives, investigated in terms of what they reveal about the ecclesiastics who authorized them and the audiences who consumed them. What emerges is an eloquent and far-reaching analysis of the shifting meaning people made of their saints.

That meaning began in response to death. As Kleinberg presents Christian origins, the resurrection story assuaged the disciples' “guilt” for standing “idly by” during their innocent leader's execution (p. 23). But bringing Jesus “back to life” entailed more than relieving a bad conscience; it also vindicated him as “the Savior of mankind,” whose example was “the ultimate, the one true model.” His story thus entailed an imperative. Genuine imitation of the “suffering servant” meant that Christians had to be willing to sacrifice themselves rather than renounce their faith. Hence, martyrdom became the hallmark of sanctity, the fullest expression of *imitatio Christi*. “Dying for the Savior—and like the Savior—constituted the most reliable proof of a person's value” (p. 15).

This background contextualizes Perpetua's well-known martyrdom. She died with her companions in a Carthaginian amphitheatre on March 7, 203. The *Passio* is stunning, perhaps early Christianity's most distinctive document. It includes visions and exchanges with her pagan father. To introduce the work, Kleinberg offers some arresting questions implicating authorial intention with the social world of audience: “If we knew that we had only a few days to live, if we knew that we were going to die a violent and painful death, what sort of text would we write? ... Would we compose an indictment, an apologia? Would we write words of farewell...” (p. 58)? These queries invite us into his careful examination of Perpetua's prison diary. His interpretations resist easy summary, for they involve a painstaking explication of substantial passages as well as a comparison with relevant classical texts. It is sufficient to say that he makes a compelling case for seeing in the record an alternative world addressing the martyr's anxiety just before dying. As he observes, “Roman culture and law did not grant her the right to speak.... Between that world and the world of the journal, Perpetua's choice forms a dividing line: she *chose* Christianity and freed herself from a world of obligations” (p. 60). To face the consequences of such defiance, her religion gave “psychological” security, but at a cost: “... martyrdom is a safety net made of barbed wire. On the one hand, it offers honor, a rise in status, solidarity, and the kingdom of heaven. On the other, it demands everything else” (p. 77). He concludes this text's treatment on a note subsequent chapters echo. The *Passio's* complexities were “flattened out” by later editors, who produced a simplistic abridgement that “surpassed the original version in popularity.” The unconventional martyr was thus refashioned for “cultural primetime” (p. 80).

Kleinberg also sees sanctity's domestication in Antony's *Life*, the story of monasticism's famous hermit. When persecutions ended, martyrdom ceased to be possible, but the idea of undergoing self-sacrifice through fasting, vigils and sexual renunciation offered a way to conform to the original model under different historical circumstances. The ascetic movement drew "wild" practitioners who lived in the desert or on top of pillars (pp. 134, 164-180). Certainly, Bishop Athanasius' account of Antony has plenty of the wild man in it. But the wandering monk settles down: "...the athlete of Christ becomes a responsible Christian leader, not just for the hermits ... but for the Christian community as a whole" (p. 117). Eventually, the "ascetic pendulum" swung. By the seventh century, "society increasingly called 'madness' what it had once been willing to call 'sainthood'" (p. 150).

To develop his argument, Kleinberg moves gradually from the early sources to the medieval ones. The salient case illustrating hagiography's role in creating tensions between the era's church leaders and idealists is that of Francis. His life became the focus of intense hagiographic reworking: the *Vita prima* of 1229 led, after an official request for more information in 1244, to the *Vita secunda*, both composed by Thomas of Celano. There is a collection of stories too, on which the *Second Life* drew, compiled by three of Francis' friends. "The letter from three friends is one of the most interesting hagiographic texts from the ... period"; it is also "problematic" (p. 217). The handling of the friends' testimony marks a critical juncture in Europe's religious history. To promote this image of Francis would keep the order's "charismatic rigor alive," but at the risk of a "confrontation with the papacy." Avoiding this confrontation, Bonaventure, the friars' minister general, published in 1263 another biography of Francis to supersede the earlier ones, which were to be "destroyed" (pp. 218-219). Hence, "the leadership of the order ... offered a more moderate Francis, a saint less literal in his demands, more accommodating to spiritual interpretations..." But this was not the end, for "the old, tattered, uncompromising beggar refused to go away" (p. 219). In fact, the fourteenth-century *Little Flowers of Saint Francis* recaptured much of the original spirit of the friends' letter and became immensely popular (p. 226).

Kleinberg's treatment of Francis also shows the fruit of his approach. Besides his skillful use of the anthropological category of liminality (especially pp. 119-127), there is at work a method reminiscent of more traditional scholarship. Hippolyte Delehaye advocated, as a way to conduct hagiographic research, examining the "dossier"—that is, investigating all the various documents pertaining to a particular saint to see how the representation changed over time. [6] Kleinberg has capitalized on the potential of dossiers, especially in Francis' case, with the hagiographic revisions illuminating the church's conflicted reception of his story. Likewise, the divergent texts surrounding Perpetua's martyrdom also yield valuable insights. In short, the "unsettling ambiguities" (p. 296) that Kleinberg sees at the heart of the hagiographic enterprise emerge strikingly in textual comparisons of different sources depicting the same saint.

Delehaye's research also represents the so-called "two-tiered model," according to which the ignorant masses demanded fantastic stories about miracle-workers, and rational priests reluctantly complied. Brown demonstrated the weakness of this view, noting high churchmen's participation in saints' cults (p. 43). [7] There are moments when this reader wonders whether Kleinberg has revived a qualified version of the two-tiered model. He relishes (p. 189) the Gregorian allegory of the "oxen" (learned clergy) and "asses" (unlettered peasants). Similar to Delehaye's view, saints' stories are the oxen's "concession" to the asses. Clerics were "impelled" to write "irrational" hagiography (p. 290). He also speaks, when discussing heresy, of "a battle of the elite against the new masses" (p. 197). Hence, a firm distinction appears between ecclesiastical officials on the one hand and charismatic associations on the other. Indeed, the almost ubiquitous references to "the elite" underscore such division. Yet, Kleinberg also acknowledges that the elite occasionally "lost control of its creations" (p. 285), that hagiography "develop[ed] almost unsupervised" (p. 287). Thus, sometimes there seems to be a firm binary, but one of its components, the elite, appears flimsy by the book's conclusion, which offers the larger picture of hagiography's "subversive potential" (p. 284).

Naturally, Kleinberg's extensive examination makes his task especially challenging and his work all the more impressive. However, there is not always an obvious rationale for selecting material. The author briefly mentions Sulpicius's *Vita sancti Martini*, composed, according to Kleinberg, "about 410" (though 397 has been firmly established by the scholarship he cites here). [8] As Kleinberg acknowledges, Martin's *Life* is one of "the most influential hagiographic writings" (p. 190). Why, then, is it not treated in greater detail, especially since the story of Martin, who cut his cloak for a naked pauper and clashed with bishops, informs Francis' hagiography? Its re-workings reveal that Sulpicius' portrait of a subversive saint was undercut by later literature accommodating Martin to an aristocratic episcopacy. [9] Thus, Martin's representation bears (and perhaps imparted) the very tensions and ambiguities Kleinberg discovers elsewhere. As for his popularity, we need only consider the testimony of Bishop Gregory of Tours, who recorded miracle after miracle at Martin's tomb. Gregory's testimony would be hard to explain in terms of elite versus masses. In short, the Martin dossier might both confirm and challenge this book's argument.

Though hearing more about Martin would have been especially welcome, the wealth of material that does receive attention more than makes up for what is missing. Based on that material, Kleinberg offers a major reconsideration of hagiography's role in the West. He reinvigorates the study of this literature by showing its importance for understanding Europe's cultural history; and he does so in a way that will engage specialists as well as newcomers to the field. Indeed, the pressing issues he sees are hardly confined to a remote past, for the unstable world of saintly representation is still very much with us. The recent, conflicting interpretations of the dark side of Mother Teresa, whose appearance on television once captivated a skeptical Kleinberg (p. ix), give a contemporary ring to the volatile passions voiced in the risky stories of medieval saints.

#### NOTES

[1] Mark Amory, ed., *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 233.

[2] See Marc Van Uytenghe, "Les avatars contemporains de l'hagiologie," *Francia* 5 (1977): 639-71.

[3] Mayke de Jong addresses these issues, along with the scholarly literature: "The Foreign Past: Medieval Historians and Cultural Anthropology," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 109 (1996): 326-342.

[4] Peter Brown's work has been instrumental, notably "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101, reprinted in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 103-152, and *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[5] Pierre Deloiz, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church," in Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 189-216.

[6] Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), pp. 101-117.

[7] Brown, *Cult*, pp. 17-22.

[8] Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 71-72.

[9] See Raymond Van Dam, "Images of Saint Martin in Late Roman and Early Merovingian Gaul," *Viator* 19 (1988): 1-27.

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