

Introduction

Christianity is a cult of the dead. And the story of its obsession with martyrdom and the remains of the dead begins with the cross. The cross has been an instantly recognizable symbol for centuries, but what is often forgotten is how this tool of Roman torture became more than a reminder of a single event in the past. It was a model for imitation again and again. According to early Christian tradition, all but one of Jesus's faithful apostles were martyred. Some were crucified, others beheaded, stabbed, flayed, or sawn in half.

The centrality of martyrdom to Christianity has profoundly affected the development of its cultural expression and devotion, from its art and architecture to its liturgy and literature—even its conception of time. The Christian calendar is a cycle of saints, a daily celebration of the martyrs who walked in the footsteps of the apostles. Martyrs' shrines are places of pilgrimage where miracles have occurred. Martyrs' relics are material manifestations of the holy, where heaven meets earth. Martyrs' stories—hundreds of lurid legends of unimaginable suffering and endurance—have been copied and recopied, translated and rewritten. The most rustic villagers of medieval Europe heard about the martyrs from itinerant preachers who carried condensed accounts of their deaths, while the most

illustrious work in Middle English is a salty collection of travelers' tales told en route to a martyr's shrine in Canterbury.

Though the Christian martyr cult peaked in the Middle Ages, interest in martyrs did not wane with the rise of Protestantism or even the scientific skepticism of the Renaissance and the early modern age. Catholic scholars eager to justify the cult of the martyrs excavated the catacombs and scoured the monastic libraries of Europe in a grand attempt to replace lost relics and collect every saint's life that had ever been written, reasoning that this would help separate holy fact from pious fiction. Meanwhile, Bible-based reformers promoted their own martyrs—not as saints to be venerated but as the newest links in a monumental chain of Christian suffering that joined contemporary witnesses to the gospel with those of the ancient past.



The Christian cult of the dead owes a lot to the unique perspective of Luke-Acts, the New Testament's two-volume history of Jesus and his earliest followers better known to most as the Gospel of Luke and, by the same author, the Acts of the Apostles. Luke's Jesus (as opposed to Matthew's, for instance, who is a second Moses and the fulfillment of Israel's history) is a second Socrates. He is an innocent and impassive martyr in the mold of that most self-assured of the ancient Greek philosophers. For Luke, who writes with evident knowledge of the Greco-Roman tradition of noble death, Jesus is a template—a model for emulation. And the first to follow Jesus in martyrdom was the deacon Stephen. According to Acts, Stephen was stoned to death in Jerusalem for his bold testimony on Jesus's behalf.

Stephen's story soon jumped from the page. His life and death, retold over several centuries in many literary elaborations, itself became a model of Christian martyrdom. Stephen's place in the Christian calendar, the movement of his relics, the sermons preached in his honor,

the construction of his shrines, and the books that meticulously catalogued his miracles—a litany of healings that Saint Augustine of Hippo once read aloud to his North African congregation—offer an entryway into several chapters of this book, about martyrs’ stories, martyrs’ relics, martyrs’ calendars, the many sermons preached about martyrs, and the lists of martyrs’ miracles that were kept at their pilgrimage shrines.

This flourishing of Christian culture around the martyrs accelerated tremendously after the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. With a Christian on the throne, other Christians were emboldened to tell the history of the Roman Empire anew. For one of Constantine’s advisors, this meant combining a chronicle of Roman persecution with an almost gleeful account of the deaths of those persecutors: all those anti-Christian emperors who had reigned before Constantine. For other classically educated Christians, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, the bishop of the eastern Mediterranean port city where Pontius Pilate once served as prefect, Constantine’s rise to power demanded an altogether new form of history: the ecclesiastical, or “church,” history.

As Eusebius saw it, narrative accounts of the martyrs were central to the story of the church. Several martyrdom narratives existed before Eusebius began writing, but he was the first to systematically gather and transmit them as a collection, thus helping to establish a recognizable genre of Christian death literature. Eusebius’s example of this new form of Christian history quickly became the model for many heirs and imitators, both those who wrote in Greek, as he did, and those who wrote in other important literary languages of late antiquity, like Latin, Armenian, and Syriac (a Christian dialect of Aramaic).

Heroic stories were not the only mementos of the saints that circulated throughout the Christian world. Martyrs’ bones, fragmented remains of the dead still pulsing with holiness, traveled just as widely.

Many of these relics were thought to belong to those who were killed during the persecutions about which Eusebius wrote; others, to much earlier witnesses for the gospel, such as Stephen and the apostles. Though Christians believe that Jesus's body was assumed into heaven after his death and resurrection, this was no obstacle to having a thriving trade in his relics too. Princely collectors from Byzantine emperors to crusading kings went to great effort and tremendous expense to acquire bits and pieces of anything that might have touched Jesus in his life and, more important, in his death. The most revered of these "contact" relics were thorns from his crown, splinters from his cross, and burial sheets from his tomb. Many centuries before the Shroud of Turin captivated Christian pilgrims, several other scraps of cloth were said to have been miraculously imprinted with a perfect likeness of Jesus's face.

While it is Jesus's life that continues to dominate the Christian calendar (notably in the long, penitential seasons of Advent and Lent and the more festive seasons of Christmas and Easter which they respectively precede), scores of other martyrs have participated in this annual cycle of fasts and feasts. Thanks to Usuard, a ninth-century Parisian monk, many Christian liturgical calendars are still, to this day, just expansive lists of saints. Usuard was not the first to collect and collate the martyrs (the Venerable Bede's attempt was widely influential, as were others before his), but his especially well-organized list became the calendar against which all others were measured. It was the Medieval Standard Time by which Christians kept pace with the seasons and their lives.

Any saint with a day in Usuard's calendar was sure to be found in Jacopo de Voragine's immense, thirteenth-century compendium, known as *The Golden Legend*. Many of Jacopo's more fabulous stories are indeed legends (which is to say, popular stories of rather dubious authenticity), but the Latin term for them is less freighted: *legendaria* were simply collections of "readings" about the lives of the saints.

Jacopo's collection, which is written in silvery but unadorned Latin, is a reader's digest of saints, an encyclopedia of martyrs that was originally intended to aid traveling mendicants such as the Dominicans—that most famous of the medieval preaching orders. Perhaps inadvertently, the Dominicans afforded a wide exposure to Jacopo's book, turning what had begun as a reference work into an unexpected best seller. Many hundreds of complete manuscript copies of *The Golden Legend* still survive, and with the arrival of print in the fifteenth century, Jacopo's book initially outpaced even the Bible in its number of editions and translations.

So popular were saints' lives that even tales about fictional travelers to a saint's shrine were a hit. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is not a compendium of saints' lives, but the stories his characters tell along the way from London to Canterbury at once honor the traditional medieval pilgrimage and bawdily critique its follies and excesses. By the end of the fourteenth century, when Chaucer was writing, Canterbury Cathedral was well known as the house of an especially competent wonder-worker, Saint Thomas Becket. This beloved bishop-martyr was officially elevated to the ranks of the saints in the late twelfth century, scarcely more than two years after he was killed by knights acting on the orders of King Henry II. The books collecting and describing Becket's posthumous miracles are as important for understanding medieval piety as is the cathedral that was the terminus for the thousands of pilgrimages he once inspired.

Despite its massive popularity, even Becket's shrine was imperiled by the time of King Henry VIII. In this case, the disagreement between church and crown was not confined to two men. Henry's fury over the pope's refusal to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon led to a permanent schism between the Church of England and the one in Rome. Years later, when Henry's eldest daughter, and the only fruit of his contested marriage, briefly reestablished Catholicism in England, she inaugurated a new age of martyrs. "Bloody"

Mary burned hundreds of Protestants at the stake, including Thomas Cranmer, the formerly Catholic archbishop of Canterbury, spurring the composition of yet another new form of ecclesiastical history. Not surprisingly, martyrs were again at its center, just as they had been for Eusebius centuries earlier during an altogether different leadership transition. After Mary's death, Queen Elizabeth's ministers, seeking to solidify their new, national church, built upon the three literary pillars of the English Reformation: the Bible, the revisions of Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, and the wonderfully illustrated monument of Protestant church history that had come to be known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*.

At the same time, the response of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, both in England and on the Continent, was one of entrenchment. Over and against the Protestant call of *sola scriptura*, "by scripture alone," Catholics reasserted the importance of scripture and tradition. In Rome, a circle of scholarly priests and lay brothers dove deep into the past with the goal of reaffirming the long history of the Christian cult of the dead. They plumbed the newly rediscovered catacombs for martyrs' relics. They reread their Livy and Tacitus, seeking clues about ancient Roman methods of torture that might enliven, in gruesomely specific ways, their devotional readings on the sufferings of the saints. And they composed new ecclesiastical annals while simultaneously revising the liturgical calendar, purging it of saints of local or more recent interest in favor of a universal list more thoroughly grounded in tradition.

In the seventeenth century, a group of priests from the Southern Netherlands known as the Bollandists responded to increasing skepticism toward the stories of the saints by committing themselves to a preposterously difficult task: they would track down, analyze, critically edit, and then publish every saint's life that had ever been written. In the process, they would question legendary accretions and seek to clarify truths. Their scholarly and "scientific" approach to the

saints was not without controversy. When the Bollandists challenged the founding myth of the Carmelite order, which claimed a connection to the Hebrew prophet Elijah, they attracted the rather unwanted attention of the Spanish Inquisition. After decades of suppression, the Bollandists reemerged to carry on their work. It continues today.



MAP BY BEN PEASE