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ABSTRACT

The Martyrdom of St. Agatha from Local Legend to Later Reception

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This project examines the martyrdom of St. Agatha of Sicily (ca. 250 CE) as recorded in the eighth-century Acts of Agatha. The thesis considers the discourse surrounding Agatha in its Late Antique setting. The discourse made her a symbol of feminine morality and asceticism. Her role as a protection figure against Sicily’s potential natural disasters helped to localize her to her home and allowed her cult to continue local traditions. The thesis also discusses how Agatha’s cult was spread and canonized by Pope Gregory I (590-604) because of his theological and political concerns. This thesis finds that St. Agatha was constructed to serve as a symbol for different audiences with different goals in mind.
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Introduction

St. Agatha, the patron saint of Sicily, was martyred in the third century during the Christian persecution of the Roman emperor Decius. Agatha’s story does not appear in writing until centuries later, casting doubt on her historical authenticity, but what is not in doubt is her popularity. For centuries, Agatha was one of seven female saints whose names were recited during Mass, until the reforms following the 1969 Second Vatican Council.¹ In the seventh century, Pope Gregory I officially canonized her. In this introduction, I give a background of her manuscript tradition and the manuscript I analyze in this project. I then give an overview of Agatha’s life and martyrdom as told in the story and as is discussed in this thesis.

This thesis argues that Agatha was interpreted to fit the needs of her audience as her cult and Christianity gained popularity in Late Antiquity. On her home of Sicily, Agatha was connected to natural phenomenon and took on the role of protector against Mt. Etna. The monks of Late Antiquity, Agatha became a symbol of the ascetic lifestyle and her story was used to promote asceticism. The varying interpretations of Agatha’s story show that she could symbolize different things and that the role of a saint like Agatha can change with audience.

Collecting the Saints: The Manuscript Tradition of Agatha

The varying manuscripts and written accounts concerning Agatha fit into a larger tradition of collecting martyr narratives. Eusebius, as a church historian, provides the best evidence for the beginnings of martyr narrative collection. His sources indicate that these

narratives were part of local traditions and recorded first and foremost on the local level. The earliest evidence we have of written martyr narratives and their collection is through Eusebius. He himself seems to have collected martyr stories and references such collections in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Based on these references, Eusebius expects his reader to know of such narratives, but that collections of multiple narratives may not be as common. Some of these texts are credited to the martyrs themselves, like the prison diary of Perpetua. Others were written accounts credited to the time of martyrdom and passed down. Local churches and Christian communities often compiled and circulated these texts.

As stated above, the beginnings of creating martyr stories began locally. The people most likely to circulate these stories were the survivors of the early persecutions. Following a large persecution in Gaul, Eusebius writes, “Therefore the most shining congregations here had sent off the writing about the martyrs to the churches throughout Asia and Phrygia.” According to Eusebius, the Christian communities and church officials of Gaul gathered documents, such as prison letters and firsthand narratives, and circulated them among the greater Christian communities of the Mediterranean, most likely among clergy. The transmission of martyr stories began locally during the persecutions, where the stories were recorded and passed down by survivors, usually in Greek or Latin. Agatha’s story is no different; as discussed below, witnesses to her martyrdom honor and pass on her story, though the text is dated to centuries after her

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5 Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 5.1, text from LCL 153: τὴν οὖν περὶ τῶν μαρτύρων γραφὴν αἱ τῆς διαφανέσταται ἐκκλησίαι ταῖς κατὰ τὴν Ἀσίαν καὶ Φρυγίαν διαπέμποντα. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
death. The record of Agatha’s story begins in the same place as many other saints, with the *Martyrology of Jerome*.

St. Agatha’s martyr story is first attested in the so-called *Martyrology of Jerome*, the earliest extant collection of its sort. Collections like the *Martyrology* follow the calendar year, with entries about the relevant martyrs on each day. Some entries mention biographical and passion details, while others simply record names. The *Martyrology of Jerome* is problematic; even its name is misleading. Though named after St. Jerome for letters falsely credited to the church leader, the martyrology has uncertain origins. The oldest manuscripts date to eighth-century Gaul and northern Italy; though some argue that an earlier tradition existed for this martyrology, no concrete evidence exists for this idea. The author of the martyrology drew on local calendars, perhaps including the Syriac and other calendars. Despite the dubious name, origin, and source texts of the *Martyrology of Jerome*, all other martyrology collections descend from this text. Agatha’s passion also descends from this martyrology tradition; though these early collections read more like calendar entries, elements of saint narratives and feast days were first recorded in such collections.

In addition to her inclusion in official church calendars and martyrologies, Agatha’s story was passed down in more detail in the *Acts of Agatha*, also called the *Passion of Agatha*. The

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earliest of these texts also date to the eighth century. The Acts of Agatha, however, currently lack a critical edition and a full study of the manuscript tradition associated with the saint. For this reason, in this paper, I analyze the text that is “fundamental, the most widespread and known,” which is the Latin text found in several manuscripts and published in the Acta Sanctorum. I chose to use this version of the Latin text because it is the most prevalent and “standard,” as in the elements of the narrative and language the most consistent. More than one hundred manuscripts survive of the Acta Sanctorum version alone. Santo D’Arrigo lists 171 manuscripts that contain various texts about Agatha’s martyrdom. A full study of these manuscripts is beyond the scope of this project. A wide array of differences exists in the manuscripts, and while I cannot treat those differences here, I have chosen to work with the text that is most widely available and try to be aware of these differences. I discuss below the main difference between versions of her story: the time of her martyrdom during the persecutions of Decius (249-251) or Diocletian (284-305). The time of her martyrdom has larger implications for the person telling the story; by choosing between two emperors famous for persecutions, later authors give a general “time of persecution” context for her martyrdom. Dating her martyrdom to these well-known, ancient persecutions places Agatha within a famous and prestigious martyrdom context; the dating lends her cult antiquity.

Agatha’s martyrdom is usually credited to the reign of Decius, based on the earliest sources and the majority of the manuscripts, while a minority of later authors use Diocletian.

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Bede, Adhelm, and “many others” credited Agatha’s martyrdom to the reign of Diocletian instead of the usual Decius, and he refutes this chronology. The shared beginning of these manuscripts may solely be a product of the English manuscript tradition for Agatha and stem from a single error. As an outlier and “outsider” version of the martyrdom, the Diocletian time frame is not usually considered the “correct” version of the story. Instead of concerning myself with the historicity of one version or the other, I simply wish to note that the differences exist.

Because both emperors are famous for their persecutions, the attribution of Agatha to the time of either one shows a later desire to place her within the history of persecutions. Both of these narratives lay claim to a time that by the eighth century may as well have been the mythical past. Both versions of the story place Agatha’s martyrdom during times of famous persecutions and place her story within an era that symbolized martyrdom. The emperors do not factor into the story beyond setting the scene in the opening of each version of her passion. The usage of these imperial names shows how Late Antique discourse was concerned with Christianity’s past treatment and trials and wished to tell such stories. With one name, the reader immediately understands the context and expected outcome of the story. Regardless of the difference in time of fifty years, each name evokes a past time of persecution, especially for an author like Bede, who is writing centuries later on Britain, a different island than Agatha’s.

Decius is the more widely used and accepted emperor for the timeframe of Agatha’s martyrdom, but I do not see Diocletian as a surprising or obscure choice for a later author to make. This discussion gets at the heart of my analysis. Though Agatha’s story likely existed as

15 Morini, “Una redazione sconosciuta,” 308.
an “oral tradition” well before it was ever written down, what we do have of the extant writing dates well after the time of her martyrdom.\textsuperscript{16}

For a saint to exist other people need to remember that person and their actions; “one is never a saint except for other people.”\textsuperscript{17} By the eighth century, remembering included written accounts and recitation in church. Rather than following Pierre Delooz’s concern over “real” saints versus “constructed” saints, I see that on some level all saints are constructed.\textsuperscript{18} This “reconstruction of the saints” is not to say that no saint was real in the historical sense, but that how they are presented and thought of after death is necessarily an act of reconstruction. Taking this approach in mind, I consider this text for what it represents to the later audience and for what it says about the character of Agatha. To these later readers, she is both a shining example of Christian femininity and an atypical woman for rejecting marriage and motherhood. Before I delve into her narrative, I first turn to a brief overview of Agatha’s story.

\textit{The Life of St. Agatha}

St. Agatha’s persecution is attributed to Decius, in approximately 251 CE. Her age is not given for the time of her death, but because she is young and of marriageable age, I suggest she was approximately sixteen to twenty years old, putting her birth sometime between 230 and 235 CE. The \textit{Acts of Agatha} does not give much information for her early life or life prior to persecution. She is only noted as a beautiful woman of noble birth.\textsuperscript{19} These traits serve more as proof of her inherent good nature and stand in contrast to “low-born” Quintianus, the Roman

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\textsuperscript{16} D’Arrigo, \textit{Il martirio di sant’Agata}, 41.
\textsuperscript{17} Delooz, “Towards a Sociological Study,” 194. Emphasis my own.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 195.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Act.Ag.} 2 in \textit{AS} 621: \textit{nobilissimis ortam natalibus Dei famulam}, “born a servant of God with the noblest origins.” Her family background is not mentioned beyond this. Cf. Quintianus, described in the same section as \textit{de genere ignobili natus}, “born from an ignoble family.”
consul of Sicily, who wishes to marry Agatha because of her beauty and wealth (*Act.Ag.*2 in *AS* 621). When Agatha refuses him, he uses his position to persecute Agatha as a Christian. His use of authority and his application of the law are depicted as less about his concern for religious practice and more about personal vendetta. Though Decius is known for officially sanctioned persecution, his decree requiring sacrifice to the imperial cult is not mentioned in the *Acta*, showing how haphazardly Quintianus is using the law.²⁰ Agatha’s persecution is not mentioned in context of other Christians persecuted on Sicily. Quintianus takes his personal vengeance out by using imperial and legal authority. The story does not hint at a general Christian persecution.

His first action against Agatha is to send her to a woman called Aphrodisia, a brothel-keeper, in the hope that will sway her to his favor (*Act.Ag.*3 in *AS* 621). Agatha spends a resolute thirty days there, ignoring, in turn, the bribes and tortures she receives. When she remains firm, Aphrodisia returns to Quintianus and tells him that Agatha remains firm in her beliefs. He has her called before his tribunal again, where they engage in a lengthy and heated theological debate (*Act.Ag.*4-8 in *AS* 621-22). Failing again to convince Agatha, Quintianus orders her jailed and tortured. Between torments, he comes to her again and again, demanding she give up her belief and sacrifice to the gods. Perhaps he thinks that if she sacrifices to the gods, she will also agree to marry him, or perhaps he is only focused on vengeance and cruelty at this point. Each time she refuses, her tortures become more horrific and described in more detail, culminating in the removal of her breast (*Act.Ag.*8 in *AS* 622).

As Agatha, gravely hurt, sits in her cell, an old man with medicine visits her in the night. She refuses his offers to help until he reveals himself as an apostle sent by Christ himself (*Act.Ag.*9-10 in *AS* 622-23). Although typically credited as St. Peter, the apostle is not named

outright here; he is only named as the old man in later depictions of the scene.\textsuperscript{21} After revealing himself, Agatha is miraculously cured and he disappears.

Unsurprisingly, Quintianus is baffled and enraged at Agatha’s recovery. In anger, he orders further torture, mockingly asking, “Now I will see if your Christ will cure you.”\textsuperscript{22} He orders hot coals and sharp potsherds placed on the ground and that Agatha be rolled in them while nude. Subjected to this torment, she is in fact saved again. An earthquake strikes Catania, ending her torture, knocking down the jail, and killing some of Quintianus’ men. The earthquake also causes a mob of Catania’s citizens to chase off Quintianus; they are angry at his treatment of the Christian girl. While fleeing, Quintianus is attacked by his own horses while attempting to cross a river, causing him to drown and his body never to be found (\textit{Act.Ag.}14 in \textit{AS} 624). In her ruined cell, Agatha prays to God to take up her spirit, and then she dies. A mob of people then lifts up her body and buries her in an elaborate marble tomb. A large group of mysterious boys, well dressed and beautiful, show up among the mourners (\textit{Act.Ag.}13 in \textit{AS} 623-24). They deposit an inscribed headstone for her and then are never seen on Sicily again. The people assume they are angels and revere Agatha all the more because of it.

In the narrative, Agatha is revered, but her birthday does not become her feast day until years later. The \textit{Acts of Agatha} concludes with a particularly violent eruption of Mt. Etna (15 in \textit{AS} 624). Some people come to Agatha’s tomb while fleeing. Taking the veil covering her sepulcher, they stand against the lava flow, and it miraculously parts around them. The \textit{Acts} conclude that this day was no longer known as the Nones of February, but as Agatha’s day.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Act.Ag.}12 in \textit{AS} 623: Nunc videbo si Christus tuus curabit te. Emphasis mine.
In many ways, Agatha’s Acts are not out of the ordinary. Aspects of her martyrdom, speeches, and overall narrative resemble those of other martyrs, particularly the virgin martyrs. What makes Agatha striking is the use of her voice within her Acts. She speaks at length through a variety of forms of address: debating Quintianus at the tribunal three separate times; rejecting the medical aid of the old man, who turns out to be St. Peter; and addressing God during her final torture, asking for martyrdom. Agatha’s voice and story reflect the larger goal of the narrative—depicting ideal Christian femininity and behavior. Using Agatha’s own words, Chapter 1 analyzes her story and the representation of womanhood and asceticism she presents through these instances mentioned above. Chapter 1 argues that her representation places her within an ascetic, Late Antique context. Chapter 2 presents the elements of her story that localize her to Sicily, namely her association with earthquakes and Mt. Etna. Her associations with natural disasters in Sicily allow her to connect to past practices and views on providing protection from such disasters. Chapter 3 examines her use and reception outside of Sicily through Pope Gregory I, how he viewed Agatha, and his role in spreading her cult and monasticism. The chapter also considers Agatha in Old English texts through this connection. On the local, Sicilian level, Agatha was used as a protection figure, while by the greater church organization and monastic orders, she was considered an ascetic example. These different representations show how those who venerate the saint construct their role.
Chapter 1:
The Ascetic Body and the Late Antique Eye:

Constructing Feminine Morality in the Acts of Agatha

The text of the Acts of Agatha came out of the eighth century tradition for collecting martyr narratives. The audience of the Acts, likely monastic orders, which are discussed further in Chapter 3, look to tales of third century persecution for example of how to endure life’s hardships. Late Antique ascetics would have viewed these texts as instructive and used them in that context. Agatha’s sexual morality and asceticism is admirable within the world of monks. Her indifference to physical pain and embarrassment reflect her inner spiritual strength. The depiction of her femininity focuses on her spirituality more than her physical body. While other female martyr narratives sexualize the violence done to the women, Agatha’s text largely refrains from this type of depiction. The Late Antique author of the Acts is not looking at Agatha as a sexual figure or looking to her to model typical behavior for women of the time, but instead uses her as an example of ultimate asceticism.

Agatha and Quintianus debate at length over her Christian beliefs in the Acts of Agatha. She is called before him at the tribunal, where he questions her in his role as consul and judge. Though witnesses would likely have been present at their public discussion, the discussions are written more like private debates than as a public spectacle. The narrator largely ignores the question of audience until witnesses are needed for Agatha’s miracles, discussed below. In one scene, Agatha says that Quintianus is like Jupiter and wants a wife like Venus, greatly offending
Quintianus (Act.Ag.5 in AS 622). Agatha seems to have calculated the insult to have a double effect. By comparing humans to gods, she is able to renounce the polytheistic Roman religion further. Agatha alludes to Quintianus’ impious desire for beauty and sex, but no Roman would in reality want a wife on the model of adulterous Venus. She also seeks to provoke Quintianus, knowing that his reaction can serve a greater purpose for her argument for Christianity. In her criticism of Quintianus, Agatha states:

Miror te virum prudentem ad tantam stultitiam revolutum, ut illos tuos dicas deos esse, quorum vitam non cupias tuam coniugem imitari; et dicas tibi iniuriam fieri, si eorum vivas exemplo. Si enim veri dii sunt, bonum tibi optavi, ut talis vita tua sit qualis eorum fuisse perhibetur. Si autem execraris eorum consortium, mecum sentis. Dic ergo eos tam pessimos esse, tamque sordidissimos.\(^{23}\)

I am amazed that you aware of men have been turned to such foolishness, so that you may say that these gods are yours, whose life you would not desire your wife to imitate; and you would say that it would be an insult to you, if you should live by their example. For if they are true gods, I wish you well, so that such would be your life as is regarded to have been theirs. If indeed you curse their fellowship, you feel as I do. Say therefore that they are the worst, and are the filthiest.

The most telling portion of Agatha’s speech is *Si autem execraris…mecum sentis*. Even though she detests Quintianus and his views, she seeks to prove the logic of her belief and set a good example. She also seeks to argue against Roman religion by fitting Roman gods into the Christian way of thinking—one should want to emulate their gods. Ancient authors well before Agatha’s time questioned negative depictions of the gods; Agatha’s rhetoric incorporates this question into Christian discourse and argumentation.

Agatha’s argument reflects a tradition long present in ancient thought: why do the epic poets portray the gods so terribly and why would anyone follow their example? Agatha’s views would be at home in an earlier philosophic school. The negative portrayal of the gods led thinkers like Socrates to worry people will therefore follow their bad example. Quintianus has

\(^{23}\) *Act.Ag.5* in *AS 622.*
fallen into the trap Socrates fears in the *Republic*; the disreputable and conniving actions of the gods have a bad influence on those who study epic. These ideas are also seen in later writers, such as St. Augustine, more contemporary to St. Agatha and her audience. Augustine criticizes and cites Virgil at length in his *City of God*, pointing to where he thinks Virgil and Rome’s religious logic is flawed. Since Virgil describes the Trojan gods as “conquered,” why would Romans choose them as their gods? If these “gods” could not protect Troy, “What folly it is to think that Rome was wisely entrusted to these guardians?” he asks. Augustine focuses on the defeated aspect of the Roman gods to criticize the Romans. He himself was versed in Platonic thought, discussing these ideas at length in and out of the context of Virgil.

Agatha’s argument draws on these ideas in a similar way, showing that if Quintianus believes these things about the gods, he is actually more like a Christian, and he should curse the gods. Agatha is being compelled to sacrifice to the gods and imperial cult, but she turns this argument into her own exhortation to join Christianity by proposing a logical argument in the style of a Greek philosopher. This philosophy combines well with Christian thinking, especially in a martyr narrative setting. Martyrs seek to emulate God by imitating the example of Jesus Christ. They choose to die for a religious example and reenact Christ’s sacrifice. Although Agatha’s educational background is unknown, her speech presents a point of view familiar with Christian, Greek, and Roman thought. She uses these ideas to support her argument, making her narrative more compelling for readers.

Similarly, other martyrs are familiar with the religious traditions of those around them and use this knowledge in their arguments. In the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, he addresses the crowd

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24 Pl. Resp. 378b-e
26 See August. De civ. D. 8.18, 8.19, and 14.3.
using examples from literature they know.\textsuperscript{27} In light of their gloating and enjoyment of the Christian persecution, he uses examples of Homer, Moses, and Solomon for the Greeks and Jews present to remind them that they should not be acting that way (\textit{MPion} 4.1-7). Just as he exhorts them to follow their literary leaders’ examples, Pionius turns the narrative and states that he is simply following his leader’s example. Pionius is knowledgeable of the Jewish Bible and Homeric epic, directly quoting each in his speech.\textsuperscript{28} He also uses his knowledge to support his Christian beliefs and martyrdom. Martyrs and their texts use these ideas and arguments because their audience could understand them. These ideas add to the instructive quality of martyr narratives by placing them in a larger literary and philosophical tradition. Her speech not only reinforces her own conviction, but also is meant to convince whoever hears it, whether those present in the courtroom or a congregation hearing her \textit{Acts} read aloud on her saint day later. The rhetoric used plays up the text’s liturgical, instructive purpose.

Agatha’s attempts to show Quintianus and his government the error of their ways ends completely following the torture and removal of her breast at his order. Though she has already been tortured repeatedly, she kept a steadfast espousal of Christianity to this point. She still does, but uses the harshest language against Quintianus. When addressing him following the torture she says,

\begin{quote}
Impie, crudelis, dire tyranne, non es confusus amputare in foemina, quod ipse in matre suxisti? Sed ego habeo mamillas integras intus in anima mea, ex quibus nutrio omnes sensus meos, quas ab infantia Christo Domina consecravi.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

“Wicked, cruel, evil tyrant, were you not upset to cut a woman, when you yourself have suckled at a mother? But I have intact breasts within, in my soul, from which I nourish all my senses, and which I dedicated to the Lord Christ from infancy.”

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] \textit{MPion}. in Rebillard, \textit{Greek and Latin Narratives About the Ancient Martyrs}, 53-79.
\item[28] \textit{MPion} 3.3 alludes to Exod. 20:3, Deut. 6:13, and other Biblical verses, see Rebillard, 55.
\item[29] \textit{Act.Ag}.8 in \textit{AS} 622.
\end{footnotes}
Even in this state of physical degradation, Agatha again uses her words to support her beliefs. First, she attempts to shame Quintianus, reminding him of the shared human experience as nursing infants. She already considers him *impie*, but his actions prove without a doubt that he should be considered so, perhaps even to a pagan audience. After exhorting and shaming Quintianus, Agatha reaffirms her faith, using the same nursing imagery for the spiritual *mamillas integras* that sustain her body. The breasts stand in for the entire body; no matter what Quintianus does to Agatha’s body, he cannot hurt her soul.

Just as Agatha dedicated her “body” to Christ through preserving her virginity, she announces that her soul is dedicated to Christ as well. The use of *quas* here refers back to her breasts, the *mamillas integras*. Her physical and, more central to Agatha’s point of view, her spiritual breasts were dedicated to God. Her breasts serve as a symbol for her bodily chastity; as a virgin dedicated to God, she will never nurse a child and so her spiritual breasts can only nurse herself. Agatha’s emphasis on the soul in this passage also shows that she has retained her chastity, though her physical body is harmed.

The removal of her breasts serves as a mark of improper female action in the tradition of apocalyptic Biblical Apocrypha, and is a punishment chosen because, in Quintianus’ view, Agatha is acting improperly by not marrying. In the Epistle of Pseudo-Titus, the author writes of an apocalyptic future in which “women will be tortured in their breasts”\(^\text{30}\) because “they had handed their bodies over to men in wantonness.”\(^\text{31}\) In life, the women had given their physical bodies to sin and so in the afterlife they are tortured as a result; the men they sinned with are also


\(^{31}\) Ibid. II. 416-18: *quae in ludibrio corpus suum tradiderunt masculis.*
tortured nearby. Just as Quintianus “ordered that she be tortured in her breast,” the adulterous women are ordered tortured in their breasts en masse.  

Similar types of torture also occur in apocryphal Hebrew texts. In these texts, the narrators witness women “hanging by their breasts” or “hanging by the nipples of their breasts,” adding specificity to the types of torture enacted on the women. The second example, the women are called “daughters of iniquity,” and, similar to the example set in Pseudo-Titus, are tortured in this manner because they “uncovered their hair and rent their veil and sat in the open market to suckle their children, in order to attract the gaze of men and to make them sin; therefore they are punished thus.” In this last example, the connection to breasts and torture is drawn explicitly to a particular sinful action in life. The women not only set out to have sex with men, but they acted inappropriately in public to do so. This inappropriate behavior includes public breastfeeding and therefore public exposure of the breast.

Women are tortured for adulterous action in their breasts in these other examples of Biblical literature. Agatha stands in contrast for her disavowal of a sexual life. She is tortured in the same manner as adulterers because of this rejection in an inversion of the narrative. Agatha has violated sexual norms in Quintianus’ eyes and so he tortures her as such. The correlation of nursing imagery between the Jerahmeel text and Agatha’s self-nurturing comment shows the parallels between the situations. By upholding her religious sexual convictions, Agatha has gone against the Roman norm; instead of nursing in the open market, she has nursed her Christian soul, resulting in the same punishment. Agatha is redeemed from this association by her

33 Reshith Hokhmah 1 and Jerahmeel 16:1-5 in The Books of Elijah, trans. Stone and Strugnell, 18 and 22, respectively.
miraculous healing at the hands of St. Peter, so that when she dies her physical body matches her saintly internal spirit.

Although Agatha has lost a symbol of her femininity and been stuck with this symbol of adultery, she does not want to be healed. When St. Peter comes to heal Agatha in her jail cell, she refuses his offers of medicine. She refuses the efforts to heal her body, specifically refusing “bodily medicine,” saying “I have never presented carnal medicine to my body; and it is foul, so that what I have kept safe since entering my age, now I may lose.” Agatha has never cared for worldly comforts; her asceticism seems to extend to medicine. Her argument is that if she has never accepted medicine before, she will not start now. Her words concerning the nourishment of her soul echo here, though they are left unsaid. Agatha only wants spiritual healing and spiritual medicine. The only way she believes she can gain this is through a martyr’s death.

In his continued line of reasoning, Peter seems to assume she is referring to the preservation of her virginity and that she fears his intentions. He reassures her by saying he is also a Christian and a doctor and asks that she not fear him. This assumption does not seem that strange considering the language of preservation and loss that Agatha uses. For Agatha to fear the old man or further degradation would not be surprising considering the horrible treatment she has endured. Instead, though, she continues to display her resolve. She denies modesty is a factor in her refusal, saying “And what can my modesty be around you, since you are older and so aged? Although in truth I may be a girl, my entire body is mangled, so that the wounds themselves do not permit anything to be stirred in my mind, from where modesty could be

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35 Act.Ag. 9 in AS 622: Medicinam carnalem meo corpori numquam exhibui; et turpe est, ut quod tamdiu ab ineunte aetate mea conservavi nunc perdam.
brought forth.” Agatha implies that it would be physically impossible for either her or the old man to think or act immodestly.

The fear of immodesty, which Peter tries to address, would only be natural in a virgin martyr, but here, Agatha does not have this fear. By emphasizing medicine for the body, Agatha makes clear that her convictions alone cause her to reject Peter’s medical help. Finally, the old man asks why she does not allow him to cure her. She responds, “Because I have my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who heals everything with a word, and whose discourse alone repairs all: if he wishes, he can make me well.” Agatha does not care about outward appearances, humility, or physical pain. She endures these things because, in her view, doing so strengthens her soul.

Agatha’s final, explicit statement to Peter about her faith is what allows her miraculous healing. At these words, the old man reveals himself to be an apostle sent by Christ himself to heal Agatha. She only accepts the cure when the old man reveals his divine origin. Agatha previously proved her devotion to virginity by refusing Quintianus even under torture. In return, he marked her as an adulterer by removing a symbol of her female sexuality, her breasts. The healing of Agatha and the restoration of her breasts prior to her death symbolize her devoted spirit. Agatha is honored to die a martyr for Christianity, and in turn she is honored to die in a physical body that reflects her soul. Freed from imperfections, her body no longer had the mark of adultery and she is a proper Christian woman again.

Agatha’s final act is to address God during the earthquake that interrupts her last torture. She passionately calls for him to take up her soul and release her from her suffering. An

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37 Act.Ag. 9 in AS 622-23: *Et quae potest verecundia mea circa te esse, cum tu sis senior et maior natu? Ego vero licet puella sim, ita totum corpus meum laceratum est, ut vulnera ipsa non permittant aliquid stimulari in mente mea, unde possess verecundia excitari.*

38 Act.Ag. 9 in AS 623: *Quia habeo salvatorem Dominum Jesum Christum, qui verbo curat omnia, et sermo eius solus restaurant universa: hic, si vult, potest me salvam facere.*
earthquake has knocked over the walls of the torture chamber, Quintianus has fled, and a crowd of townspeople is on her side, but Agatha’s story cannot be complete until she becomes a martyr.

Lifting her hands to God, she proclaims:

Domine, qui me creasti, et custodisti me ab infantia mea, et fecisti me in iuventute viriliter agere; qui tulisti a me amorem seculi, qui corpus meum a pollutione separasti; qui fecisti me vincere tormenta carnificis, ferrum, ignem et vincula; qui mihi inter tormenta virtutem patientiae contulisti; te deprecor ut accipias spiritum meum modo: quia tempus est ut me iubeas istud seculum derelinquere, et ad tuam misericordiam pervenire. Haece dixisset coram multis cum ingenti voce, emisit spiritum.39

Lord, you who created me, and protected me from the time of my childhood, and made me act courageously in my youth; you who bore love of the times away from me, who separated my body from defilement; you who made me conquer the torments of the torturer: iron, fire, and chains; you who bestowed the virtue of suffering on me amid my tortures; I pray that you take up my soul at once; because it is time that you order me to abandon this age, and to arrive at your compassion. When she had said these things with a great shout in the presence of many people, she set free her soul.

She survived horrible tortures and was healed of her injuries, only for her to die of her own volition soon after. Presumably, this death has averted an official execution, which some later authors say was ordered.40 At the moment Agatha pleads for death, she seems to be the victor in her battle with Quintianus. He still holds power as consul, however, and likely would not have stopped torturing her until she died. Because Agatha’s death occurs in this seemingly unnecessary way, she is able to stay in control of the narrative and how she represents her ideals. By showing she fully rejects her body and earthly life, she can take up death as a martyr and a saint. Even though she was not physically close to death, she proclaims her spiritual wish to unite with God, and this spiritual wish is what overcomes the concerns of the body. Agatha’s words follow ascetic Christian discourse, which focused on the physical body. This greater ascetic focus on the body “was accompanied by a mushrooming in the recording of greater and greater

40 For example, Bede states she was supposed to be burned at the stake (*Hist. eccl.* 4.20.17). Considering Bede deviates in other details, I use him as an example of a later variation rather than as proof that Quintianus ordered her execution.
feats of physical endurance” in martyrology; in these stories, “the body became less a symbol of integration than an obstacle to be overcome.” Following ascetic discourse, Agatha proclaims her body conquered and her tortures overcome because of God. Through her death, she achieves the ascetic goal of overcoming her own body and physical being.

This passage also provides a summary for Agatha’s story and theology. She credits God with creating and guiding her. She mentions the specific tortures she endured and credits God with allowing her to endure and conquer her trials. The repetition of seculum provides a closing parallel. God removed from her love for her current times and life. She held up this ideal in her actions and support of her faith. Now she calls on God to remove her from her current times to his love, in this case misericordia instead of amor.

Agatha has rejected the worldly desires of her age and seeks the compassion of Christianity. Her closing remarks elucidate her views, not only to God, but to the multis who hear her speech. Agatha’s final act as a proper Christian is to teach Christian doctrine to others. She serves as an example not only to these witnesses of her martyrdom, but also to later Christians who would hear this story recited aloud in church. Her story no doubt served a liturgical purpose. The Acts of Agatha close by saying Christ “would save them with the speeches and kindnesses of St. Agatha,” meaning the congregants who hear her words. The inclusion of witnesses to Agatha’s final words and to her story as a whole allows the listeners to participate in the tradition of Agatha’s martyrdom by themselves becoming witnesses.

Spectators or witnesses were not present or mentioned for the majority of Agatha’s Acts. The absence of witnesses makes her martyrdom into less of a spectacle. Those in the prison when Peter heals Agatha are said to be in awe of the act. In the case of Agatha’s death and

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healing, witnesses are likely supplied to provide legitimacy and evidence for her miraculous healing and martyrdom. Witnesses are not mentioned during her courtroom appearances, trials in the brothel, or later tortures. These events seemingly occur in private, or are at least not meant as a public spectacle. Scholars have discussed the public violent treatment of martyrs as voyeuristic, sexualized spectacle.\textsuperscript{43}

The types of language present in narratives that eroticize violence are not present in the \textit{Acts of Agatha}, despite the sexual nature of much of this violence. Agatha’s tortures are overtly sexual in nature, but the narrative does not describe or focus on these aspects. From the brothel of Aphrodisia to her jail cell, she speaks of her resolve to ignore earthly pain. Quintianus’ order for the torture of Agatha’s breasts and the action occurs all within the same few lines; the text does not go into great detail. The focus is Agatha’s words, rather than her body. Though the text repeatedly returns to the body, Agatha brings the reader back to her cause of spiritual morality. In contrast, St. Agnes, as written by Prudentius, is highly sexualized; even her words discussing her impending death and her love for Christ drip with innuendo.\textsuperscript{44} That Agatha does not use such language is not to say that a listener in Late Antiquity would not view her story this way. With illuminated manuscripts, Agatha’s treatment was depicted right on the page. The text may not specify how Agatha’s breast is tortured and removed, but later artists find a multitude of means to depict this scene.\textsuperscript{45}

Although the text is not itself erotic, the identity of Agatha as virgin creates an undercurrent of sexuality. Her virginity is what incites her torture. Agatha defies aspects of the sexualized martyr trope, but she conforms in it, too, as a punished virgin. By rejecting customary


\textsuperscript{45} Carrasco, “An Early Illustrated Manuscript of the Passion of St. Agatha,” 22.
life cycle events and taking up an ascetic lifestyle, Agatha is inherently at odds with how Roman viewers, and later Christian viewers, would expect a woman to behave. Agatha is at once a model of good behavior and an outsider. Her choice to resist “the normal sequence of social passages—from girl to wife, from virginity to maternity—could inspire audiences’ admiration only at one level. At another level that refusal seems to spark a punitive rage that is enacted through the person of the torturer.”

For this behavior, she is given the apocalyptic punishment that awaits adulterers; for this, her womanhood is taken from her. On some level, a reader of Agatha’s passion might be gratified at the punishments she receives as a virgin, ascetic woman. These punishments also fit into the later patristic discourse. As someone who rejects marriage and motherhood, Agatha “oscillates disturbingly between femininity and virility.” In her final speech, Agatha describes herself as acting “courageously,” but the term viriliter can also signify the masculine stance she has taken by declaring control of her own sexuality. Agatha is punished for this stance and a Christian reader expects her to be punished for this stance. At the same time her behavior is meant to be exemplary and awe-inspiring to a Late Antique and Early Medieval audience. Most women should not remain virgins, but all people should aspire to such a level of devotion to Christianity as Agatha.

The Acts of Agatha as a product emerging from the eighth-century tradition of collecting and distributing martyr lives is mainly instructive in purpose. The audience of the Acts is looking back to the third century, gleaning what can be learned from earlier times of struggle and persecution. Agatha’s sexual morality and asceticism is admirable within the discourse of sainthood. Her self-control and fortitude are as miraculous as her healing. Though her story does

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46 Frankfurter, “Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze,” 236.
47 Ibid.
not overly focus on the violence, the violence against her may have been some of the draw to this type of discourse. Her story is not meant to be confined to those who witnessed her martyrdom in the third century, but is set down to be remembered *in secula seculorum*. 
Chapter 2

*Pia Filia*: Natural Disasters, Superstition, and the Cult of St. Agatha

To this day, St. Agatha is seen as a protector against the eruptions of Mt. Etna. This chapter explores how this role was depicted in Late Antiquity and how it may have developed out of other narratives of local protection figures. In this chapter, I consider the way the ancient inhabitants of Sicily, in particular of Catania and its surrounding area, dealt with and reacted to the threat of natural disasters. Earthquakes and eruptions factor into Agatha’s martyrdom as proof of her divine power. In particular, the beliefs relating to the volcano, and customs surrounding protection against it, were highly integrated into Catanian society; the use of Agatha as a protector-figure against the threat continues on pagan tradition. Instead of looking at Agatha’s passion from the ascetic perspective, this chapter looks at the text in the context of the Sicilian environment. I consider the role natural disasters play in her narrative and what these types of events would have signified to an ancient audience.

Despite varied explanations for natural phenomena, the ancient inhabitants surrounding the volcano felt that the eruptions and resulting damage could not be avoided, at least without appeasement to the gods. Some offered incense to the gods they believed controlled Etna and its eruptions.48 This ritual held into the Christian period, where such disasters were seen as caused by God and so must be accepted. Angus Duncan suggests a framework for how pre-industrial societies reacted to and managed natural disasters, which I have considered in this chapter. These

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responses are characterized by “action by individuals or small groups,” “emphasis on harmonization…with nature,” and “losses [being] perceived as inevitable. The mindset of inhabitants is dominated by notions of supernatural punishment.” These types of responses form a consistent base on which ancient inhabitants of Catania reacted to natural disasters. I look at earthquakes and volcanic eruptions as they impact Sicily and how they influence Agatha’s narrative, earning her the title of patron saint and protector against such disasters.

**Earthquakes**

Sicily experienced numerous destructive earthquakes through Late Antiquity. Earthquakes were more likely to cause damage in Sicily than the eruptions of Etna itself. Like volcanic eruptions, the causes of earthquakes were not understood, making them all the more frightening. Ancient authors sought to explain why earthquakes occur, by using pseudo-scientific theory or by looking to a divine cause. For example, Seneca wrote that it is unsettling when the very thing one thinks is fixed, the ground, no longer is. Because of this fear, Seneca sought to explain the cause of earthquakes in order to eliminate this fear. Whether or not he was successful in providing this comfort, earthquakes were a disruption that was accepted as a scary part of life.

Escaping the destruction caused by earthquakes was a reason to praise the gods and considered a miracle, although they could also be seen as punishment from the gods, as seen in Agatha’s case. Ancient authors typically only mention earthquakes when a famous individual is nearby; for this reason, evidence for how people commonly reacted to earthquakes and resulting destruction is limited. In one instance, Tacitus recorded that during Nero’s debut at a Naples

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49 Angus M. Duncan, et al, “Eruptive Activity of Etna before A.D. 1600, with Particular Reference to the Classical Period,” in *Cultural Responses to the Volcanic Landscape*, Table 5.1.


theater, an earthquake struck. The miracle was that the theater only collapsed once everyone had exited; Nero credited the gods for preventing additional catastrophe:

Illic, plerique ut arbitrabantur, triste, ut ipse, providum potius et secundis numinibus evenit: nam egresso qui adfuerat populo vacuum et sine ullius noxa theatrum conlapsum est. ergo per compositos cantus grates dis atque ipsam recentis casus fortunam celebrans.\textsuperscript{52}

There, as many people thought, a sad thing happened, but as he himself thought, it was more the prescience of the favorable gods: for after the people who were present exited, the empty theater collapsed without injury to anyone. Therefore through composed songs, and celebrating that luck in the recent disaster, he gave thanks to the gods.

I point to this story because of both the “miracle” aspect and because it seems to show the more ordinary side of earthquakes. Several written sources and widespread archaeological evidence can only point to massive events, such as the 365 CE earthquake that likely struck all over the Mediterranean, not just Sicily.\textsuperscript{53} Most occurrences would not have been recorded if they included only local destruction, or if famous personages were not nearby, like in the example of the earthquake recorded because Nero was in attendance. Given the notoriously shoddy building standards for some non-elite Roman buildings, I also imagine that even slight tremors would have caused large amounts of destruction.

Evidence for destructive events provides cultural and historical background for understanding the reception of natural disasters in martyrological narratives. These events occurred within an established cultural background and with established expectations on how to manage them. Christian texts had to work with these expectations. The earthquake associated with Agatha’s story shakes Catania and destroys the building she is being held in as punishment for her torture and as a means to save her from further torture and execution. The \textit{Acts of Agatha} portrays this event as a result of the torture and treatment of Agatha, saying that the walls

\textsuperscript{52} Tac. \textit{Ann.} 15.34. Cf. Suet. \textit{Ner.} 20, in which Nero keeps performing even though the earthquake began, and Smolenaars, “Earthquakes and Volcanic Eruptions in Latin Literature,” 324.

collapsed in the building and killed some of Quintianus’ associates. Quintianus himself flees the scene because the earthquake not only knocks down the building, but it also incites the residents of the city to riot outside the building. If there was any doubt why these men died and why the townspeople rallied, the narrative points to it directly a few lines later, as the townspeople congregate outside the building in protest: “they began to drive with too much disorder, where the sacred handmaid of God was suffering with impious tortures, and for that reason they all supported the danger.” Quintianus is afraid of both the earthquake and the crowd as he flees. The earthquake in Agatha’s story signals both her piety and her torturers’ wrongdoing. Instead of occurring as an act of capricious gods, the earthquake is treated as a just punishment for Quintianus.

Even Quintianus’ death is due to supernatural events, though not related to the earthquake. As he attempts to cross a river, his horse is driven mad, biting him and knocking him off into the river, where he is swallowed up and never seen again. The effect of these natural events serves to connect Agatha to natural phenomena In this framework, those who commit crimes against God are punished through natural events; though the city as a whole is taken up in the event as well, they side with Agatha’s plight. Connecting the moment to her death to an earthquake also serves as another example of why Agatha deserves the saint title because she can affect natural events through her actions.

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55 *Act.Ag.12 in AS 623:* *omnis civitas Catanensium a vi terraemotus exagitata est.*
56 *Act.Ag.12 in AS 623:* *coeperunt nimio tumultu agere, quod sanctam Dei famulam impiis cruciatibus fatigaret, et idcirco omnes periculum sustinerent.* Emphasis mine.
57 *Act.Ag.14 in AS 624.*
Eruptions of Etna

Just as earthquakes could be attributed to the gods, so could volcanic eruptions. In one of Martial’s *Epigrams*, he discusses the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. He describes the previous lush volcano as a favorite haunt of the gods, finishing that even the gods “would wish that this [destruction] was not permitted to them.”58 In Martial’s world, even the gods wish they could not cause such devastating destruction. In this case, Martial imagines the destruction as it affects the gods, but the idea of god-influenced natural disasters is still present.

Etna was known to be active prior to Greek colonization of Sicily. The inhabitants of eastern Sicily, the Sicel people, were influenced by the volcano through their myths.59 Cults were dedicated to the inner workings of the volcano and temples to Sicel gods were located on the margins of Etna. This local myth was partly adopted and incorporated into Greek belief by the new settlers.60 Though an active volcano, most eruptions from Etna do not lead to large ash deposits or in lava flow reaching beyond the base of the volcano. Volcanic eruptions, and the destruction they cause, did occur, though. Archaeological remains, records of volcanic activity over the last five hundred years, and written accounts describing the volcanic destruction of Catania show that these destructive events can and do occur.61 These events would not have been common occurrences, but were enough of a threat to those living nearby. The sight of Etna in the distance and the possibility of destruction would have been a part of life and on the minds of those living around the volcano.

60 Ibid. 59.
61 See Duncan, “Eruptive Activity of Etna before A.D. 1600,” 61-67 and Table 3.1.
The *Pii Fratres* story represents a myth as well-known in Catania as Agatha’s would later become. In the legend, the brothers, Amphinomus and Anapias, carried their parents out of the burning city on their backs. The lava parted around them as they fled. The story is recorded by ancient authors, such as Seneca the Younger, who writes:

Vicere Siculi iuvenes: cum Aetna maiore vi peragitata in urbes, in agros, in magnam insulae partem effudisset incendium, vexerunt parentes suos; discessisse creditum est ignes et utrimque flamma recedente limitem adapertum, per quem transcurrerent iuvenes dignissimi, qui magna tuto auderent.⁶²

The young Sicilians conquered: when Etna, agitated by a greater force, rained fire down on the cities, fields, and a great part of the island, they carried their parents; it was believed that the flames parted and with the fire falling back on either side a path was opened, through which the most worthy boys crossed, they who dared great things safely.

Seneca does not need to name the boys for his story to be recognized. Through their piety, bravery, and devotion to their elders, the boys were rewarded with a path opening for them among the lava and fire. Similarly, in Strabo’s account of Catania, the city is most famous for the destruction brought by Etna and for the boys’ “filial piety, so often recounted.”⁶³ For Strabo, the story goes hand-in-hand with Etna itself, and he assumes his audience may be familiar with it since it is told often.

The brothers were honored for their piety through public monuments, notably with statues that remained on display until the 8th century CE, after which point the record of the statues is lost.⁶⁴ These statues were also likely displayed as part of a monumental complex dedicated to the brothers; their imagery was also featured on several coins minted in Catania. As figures of protection against volcanic eruptions, the *Pii Fratres* played a role in “popular

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superstition.”

Denis Sami claims the story is of Hellenistic origin, though it could have an earlier origin. Like the story of Agatha, the exact date of this story does not matter so much as what that story represented to those who told it. The legend tells of an instance of individual piety and agency successfully changing the course of a natural event. The story also relates what a pious person should do and what qualities they have: in the brothers’ case, saving your elders, and in Agatha’s, service to God and Christianity.

Volcanic eruptions were a threat to Catania and figures, through the Pii Fratres, were created as a means to understand and protect against the danger. Like with earthquakes, locals were steeped in local myth. In creating the story of Agatha, Christians could continue this role through the saint cult. Just as an earthquake marked Agatha’s death, an eruption serves as her first post-death miracle and the instigation for celebrating her saint day. A year after her death, around her birthday, Etna erupted so violently that the lava flow was “melting the rocks and earth” and reached the city of Catania. Because the lava was approaching the city, people fled to her tomb in fear, thus recording her next natural miracle:

Tunc paganorum multitudo fugiens de monte descendit; et venerunt ad sepulchrum eius, et auferentes velum unde erat copertum sepulchrum eius, statuerunt illud contra ignem venientem ad se; et ipsa hora stetit ignis divisus.

Then fleeing throng of countryfolk descended from the mountain; and they came to her tomb, and carrying forth her veil whence her tomb was covered, they stood there against the fire coming toward them; and at the hour itself the divided fire stopped.

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65 Denis Sami, “The Fate of Classical Statues in Late Antique and Byzantine Sicily,” 232.
66 Denis Sami, “The Fate of Classical Statues in Late Antique and Byzantine Sicily,” 225; Duncan suggests that an eruption dated to 697 BCE and described by Thucydides could be the inspiration for the legend. See Thuc. 3.116 and Duncan, “Eruptive Activity of Etna before A.D. 1600,” 59.
67 Act.Ag.15 in AS 624: saxa et terram liquefaciens, veniebat ad Catanensium civitatem.
68 Act.Ag.15 in AS 624
The eruption lasted from the Kalends until the Nones of February, the day she was buried. Due to the power of her intervention in the eruption and the symbolism of it ending on her burial day, the Nones of February from that time became her feast day.

Agatha’s story uses the ancient thought about the gods influencing volcanic disasters by applying the concept to a positive Christian context. Agatha serves as a protector against the disaster, rather than as a vengeful deity figure. Such disasters were attributed to Christians according to Augustine, who fights against such a view extensively in his *City of God*. Augustine claims that people blame Christianity for recent natural disasters because they can no longer worship the pagan gods. For example, he claims that had Christianity arisen before other famous disasters and times of trouble, they also would have been blamed then:

> si humanum genus ante bella Punica Christianam recuperet disciplinam et consequeretur rerum tanta vastatio, quanta illis bellis Europam Africamque contrivit, nullus talium, quales nunc patimur, nisi Christianae religioni mala illa tribuisset.\(^6^9\)

If the human race had accepted the Christian teaching before the Punic Wars and such devastation of property had followed, how much it wore down Europe and Africa in those wars, there is no one of those sorts, who we suffer now, unless he would have attributed those evils to the Christian religion.

Augustine shows the strong link people saw between the gods and natural disasters. He sought to disconnect Christianity as responsible for the disasters, not because he did not think God could control such things, but because these events were not actually any worse in his day than at other times in the past. The incorporation of these elements into Agatha’s passion likely played into these already existing beliefs by portraying her as a benevolent figure. Quintianus is portrayed as the instigator of the earthquake, while the townspeople rally in support of Agatha. Later, the people flee to Agatha for protection rather than to old methods of propitiating gods and receive such protection. Agatha’s story uses these pre-existing notions about natural disasters in

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Agatha’s favor at a time when Christians were likely still being accused as a cause of contemporary disasters.

Agatha’s veil remained a powerful symbol of protection against eruptions through at least the nineteenth century. In one large eruption in 1669, the veil is credited with saving the city yet again. Spain, ruling over Sicily at the time, sent in troops to assist the locals, only to spark rumors that the troops’ true goal was to steal the veil.⁷⁰ Agatha served as a symbol of protection from at least Late Antiquity into the modern era. Though no official mention of Agatha’s veil being used against eruptions occurs after 1889,⁷¹ these ideas remain an enduring symbol for Sicily and Catania. The feast of St. Agatha is still the largest religious event in Catania, crowding the streets every year for the procession. Her continuing presence in the region may be tied to her role as a protector against disasters, while her close associations to Etna and earthquakes allowed her to stay relevant in the lives of local Sicilians. Even when her cult was officially brought to Rome and beyond, as I discuss in the next chapter, the elements of her story grounded in local legend and context allowed her to have lasting power in this region. The localized aspects of Agatha’s martyrdom are one interpretation of her role and what she symbolizes.

⁷¹ Ibid. 98.
Chapter 3:

Pope Gregory I and Monastic Interpretations of St. Agatha

This chapter explores how Agatha’s story was used and reinterpreted outside its original Sicilian context. Previous chapters discussed the language use in the Acts and how the story is localized to Sicilian disaster. Now, this chapter looks at Agatha’s official adoption by the Roman church and her role in ascetic life. In particular, this chapter looks at how St. Agatha’s sixth century canonization by Pope Gregory I (590-604) brought her to a wider audience and why he may have chosen to honor her. Gregory’s choice of Agatha reflects his personal ties to Sicily, his connection to asceticism, and his efforts to connect with the Byzantine East and to convert in the west. Gregory weighed politics and personal ideology in his choice of Agatha and in her presentation. Gregory is perhaps most famous for his missionary activity in England; his legacy there of spreading the rites of the Roman church and monasticism also played a role in bringing Agatha to popularity among English clerics through her association with ascetic principles. Finally, this chapter considers how Agatha’s story becomes repurposed in the Old English Christian tradition and writing. Agatha’s cult was promoted for political influence and for religious ideology. These factors combined to make Agatha popular within the English monastic orders, which also venerated Gregory I.

*Why Agatha?: Papal Interests in Sicily*

By the time of Gregory’s birth around 540 CE, Rome had gone through long periods of conflict and likely experienced a severe population decrease from its imperial height. Though
Gregory writes little about his early life experiences, the famine caused by the siege of Rome in 546 affected even the wealthy communities to which Gregory belonged.\textsuperscript{72} By the time of a second siege of Rome in 549, Gregory’s family may have escaped to their estate in Sicily,\textsuperscript{73} which, indicates that Gregory may have spent a significant portion of his childhood on the island. Though modern scholars cannot know when and if Gregory lived in Sicily during this particular period, his connection to and knowledge of Sicily is evident in his letters. Over a fifth of his surviving letters are written to people on Sicily or about affairs on Sicily.\textsuperscript{74} These letters show that Gregory was highly knowledgeable about Sicily’s culture, history, and “topography and economy.”\textsuperscript{75} Gregory would later give his land to the church and found six monasteries in Sicily; he also established a monastery dedicated to St. Andrew on his Caelian estate in Rome, where he began monastic life as a novice.\textsuperscript{76}

His interest in Sicily was likely enhanced from his own connection there, but went deeper than personal estates. Sicily’s political situation and continued role as agricultural supplier meant that the papacy had an active interest in closely overseeing Sicily’s affairs. Whereas the Latin West was fractured and controlled by kingdoms with varying commitments to the Roman Church, the Byzantine East maintained an organized church structure and was an ally to the Roman Church.\textsuperscript{77} Sicily connected to the Byzantine East not just as a place in the Latin West that still maintained Greek language and culture, as it had for centuries before Roman contact, but

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\textsuperscript{72} George Demacopoulos, \textit{Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome} (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 1f.
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also as a territory under direct Byzantine control.\textsuperscript{78} From the time when Justinian retook Sicily as his personal patrimony from Ostrogoths in 535, a praetor who reported directly to Constantinople ruled Sicily.\textsuperscript{79} Sicily represented the western point of contact and communication for the Byzantine empire with the rest of the Latin West; Sicily’s ports were full of ships traveling from Rome, Constantinople, and elsewhere in the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{80}

Although Sicily was officially under Byzantine control, that did not negate its close connections to Rome, or that the island had historical and cultural relationships with both cities. In addition to the monasteries and convents established on Gregory’s lands and those of his friends on the island, the church owned large swaths of land which were worked by tenant farmers.\textsuperscript{81} These farms were crucial to Rome’s grain supply. In addition to the papal estates, other Italian churches owned land on Sicily and the island was home to many Latin churches. These connections via property meant that “Byzantine-controlled Sicily never fully pulled away from the orbit of Rome…thus [Sicily] could act as a sort of meeting ground between the two Christian civilizations.”\textsuperscript{82}

Sicily’s traditional role as a supplier of grain became even more critical during Gregory’s papacy, because the island was not invaded during his time. Rome, on the other hand, was facing almost constant Lombard threat and invasion. The church’s connection to Sicily meant residents of northern and central Italy fled south away from Lombard control, and the continued supply of grain was necessary. This grain was subject to Byzantine inspection,\textsuperscript{83} adding even more reason

\textsuperscript{78} Martyn, “Introduction” in \textit{The Letters}, 24.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Martyn, “Introduction” in \textit{The Letters}, 24.
\textsuperscript{82} Davis-Secord, \textit{Where Three Worlds Met}, 30f.
\textsuperscript{83} Martyn, “Introduction” in \textit{The Letters}, 25.
for Gregory to monitor church affairs on the island and to ensure good relations with Constantinople.

Gregory was in the perfect position to fulfill this role as Roman aristocrat, Sicilian land owner, and former papal emissary to Constantinople. He spent six years in the Byzantine capital, beginning in 579, where he became acquainted with the emperor Maurice and his family; he was even made godfather to the emperor’s son, Theodosius, and stayed with the family in the royal palace. This experience prepared Gregory for the politics of being pope, and was a factor in his election. Gregory was also admired for his personal convictions; “besides his political and diplomatic experience, he had shown a passion for a religious life and abstinence, almost starving himself to death,” making him the perfect candidate both doctrinally and politically.

As the first monk to become pope, Gregory is known for introducing monastic principles into canon law. His papacy came at a time when monasticism had been on the rise in the West and was solidifying itself as an institution of Western Christianity, as well as a time when Roman liturgy was becoming more standardized. From Gregory’s papacy onward, Rome as Church enjoyed greater influence in the Latin West. His influence included spreading saint cults he favored, such as Agatha’s.

Gregory’s view of asceticism involved the typical rejection of material possessions and personal gratification, calling for moderation in food and rejection of sexual desire. In addition, Gregory recognized the “social dimension” of asceticism, in which he argues that the “true

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85 Ibid. xii.
ascetic was the one who cared so little about himself that he would willingly suspend his own enjoyment of the contemplative life to be of service to others.”\textsuperscript{88} The idea that ascetics should put others first was not original to Gregory, but he put forward this idea as a centerpiece of his thinking; he argued that ascetics could not reach full spiritual fulfillment with contemplation and study alone.\textsuperscript{89} Perhaps Gregory was reflecting this idea when he humbly proclaimed that he did not want the papacy and was unsuited to the job when he was elected.\textsuperscript{90}

Gregory’s theology is in contention with his political-economic concerns. Gregory was “selectively memorialized” at the time of his death because his monastic principles were at odds with the economic institutions and profits earlier clerics had set in place.\textsuperscript{91} This argument is compelling, as Gregory tied monasticism in with his missionary activity; he also felt that when missions were undertaken and new groups converted, social reforms had to be enacted to calm political tensions.\textsuperscript{92} Additionally, one cannot deny the economic benefit to the church asceticism brings; in particular, practicing a life of celibacy meant no heirs and more estates being left to the church.\textsuperscript{93} Though this economic gain was likely not Gregory’s goal, insofar as he promoted church officials following this lifestyle and condemned corruption, this undercurrent is still present in his ascetic principles, especially the promotion of them to the upper class. Whether or not Gregory took advantage of this possibility, the promotion of ascetic principles allowed him to promote his doctrine and create politically advantageous situations. The elevation of the cult

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid. 28f.
\textsuperscript{90} Martyn, \textit{Brides of Christ}, xii.
\textsuperscript{92} Scheibeleiter, “Church Structure and Organisation,” 678.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. 693.
of St. Agatha is one small piece of how he could do this. Gregory had personal, historical, economic, and theological reasons for elevating Agatha.

*St. Agatha in the Writing of Gregory the Great*

Gregory mentions St. Agatha twice explicitly in his letters, excluding a series of letters involving a land dispute for a monastery dedicated to her. These letters deal with St. Agatha’s cult. The first letter dated to March 594, details the rededication of Agatha’s church near the city of Rome.94 Gregory also discusses this event in greater detail in his *Dialogues*,95 which I discuss below. The second letter, addressed to the Bishop of Sorrento in July 591, details the proper treatment of saint relics. According to the letter, Agatha’s relics are located on Capri.96 In this letter, Pope Gregory discusses the proper treatment of such remains. These instances in which Gregory mentions Agatha demonstrate his attitude toward venerating saints and shows how his inclusion of her may have helped spread her cult.

One central event in which Gregory mentions Agatha and her cult is in the rededication of her church near Rome. The rededication of Agatha’s Subura church may have served for the establishment of her feast day and inclusion in the Canon of the Mass. This event may have signified the adoption of her feast day because no other record survives associating Agatha with February 5 prior to this period.97 One early version of the *Martyrology of Jerome* associates Agatha with July, showing that her tradition was not firmly established until this later period when her veneration reached official status and was adopted by a wider audience. The church mentioned in this letter was founded around 470 CE, but was rededicated by Gregory because of

its long associating with Arianism following Gothic invasions of Rome.98 This association earned the church the epithet Gotorum, which is still occasionally associated with Agatha today though both she and this church were disassociated from Arianism following this rededication in the early years of Gregory’s papacy.

Gregory’s letters and Dialogues also allow for us to see his two different perspectives on this church. In his letters, Gregory’s concern is for the practical maintenance of the church so that it can function properly. In his Dialogues, Gregory’s concern is showing how the rededication of this church supports his ideology. He explores the symbolism of the event more deeply and adds miraculous events to bolster the importance of the church as a conquest over Arianism, which also indirectly shows the power and saintliness of Agatha.99 Gregory includes this anecdote about the church dedicated to St. Agatha among many miracles as proof that Arianism is heresy.

In the Dialogues account, the Subura church is dedicated with the relics of St. Agatha and St. Sebastian. A huge crowd arrives to the Mass at the church, and those standing are harassed by a pig running over their feet; later, the pig is seen leaving the church, which Gregory takes as a sign from God that an “unclear spirit” is leaving the place.100 Over the next few days, a series of miracles takes place at the church, including lamps igniting on their own and sweet-smelling mist covering the altar. Gregory does not associate these events with Agatha or the presence of her relics, but with the eradication of Arianism from the place. The dedication of saintly relics instead allowed for the rededication of the church, and in part allowed the miracles to occur.

98 Frere, The Kalendar, 95.
99 Arianism is a belief that asserts that Jesus Christ is a separate entity from God and subordinate to God. Arians do not believe in the Holy Trinity concept. Because Goths were Arians, dissociating from Arianism and previous Gothic occupation of the church are one and the same.
100 Gregory I, Dial. 3.30 in The Dialogues, trans. Zimmerman, 165.
The letter Gregory writes about this church is an example of his care for Agatha’s cult, but also shows his concern and oversight of practical considerations of church life, in contrast to his overarching concern for ideology as seen in the *Dialogues:*

Locorum venerabilium cura nos ammonet de eorum utilitate per omnia cogitare. Quia ergo ecclesia sancta Agathae sita in Subora, quae spelunca fuit aliquando pravitatis hereticae, ad catholicae fidei culturam Deo propitiante reducta est; ideoque huius auctoritatis tenore commonitus pensiones omnium domorum in hac urbe constitutarum, quas praedicta ecclesia temporibus habuisse Gothorum constiterit, annis singulis congregare non desinas, et quantum in sarta tecta, vel luminaribus, aliaque reparatione eiusdem ecclesiae necessarium fuerit, erogare modis omnibus studebis. Quicquid vero exuberare potuerit, fideliter rationibus te ecclesiasticis inferre praeципimus.\(^{101}\)

The care of venerable places urges that we consider all things concerning the use of them. Therefore the church of St. Agatha, located in the Subura, which was once a cave of heretical crookedness, was brought back to the care of the Catholic faith by the grace of God;\(^{102}\) therefore having been reminded by the tone of this order, do not stop collecting the payments every year on all the homes having been established in this city, which the previously mentioned church agreed to have held in the time of the Goths, and collect as much as would be necessary until the roofs are repaired, or the lamps, and others things for the restoration of the same church, and you will be diligent to disperse in all measures. Whatever truly could be abundant, faithfully we advise that you bring in the ecclesiastical accounts.

This letter shows that Gregory is practical when it comes to monitoring “the care of venerable places.” Gregory cares about this church returning to his ideology and away from foreign heresy and influence. Doing so not only aligns this place with his beliefs but also serves as a symbol of the church surpassing the Gothic invaders. Because the Lombard threat was constant during Gregory’s papacy, this symbolism was likely important to his an own effort at keeping the Roman church’s dominance. At the same time, Gregory directs the church to continue to collect taxes previously assigned to this church. He makes clear that they are to pay for repairs of the


\(^{102}\) I follow Martyn’s translation of *Deo propitiante* here to mean grace of God, which I think gives a better sense of the meaning, rather than a participle like “grace-giving” or the like. See Martyn also for formulaic phrases in Gregory’s letters.
building to make it fit for service again. Gregory considers the restoration of the church to be important; the restoration allows the church to serve as a “venerable place” again, and once again shows the Roman church’s power in the local community by continuing to collect taxes and by completing a local building project.

Gregory’s letter that directs the renovation and tax collection of Agatha’s Subura church is administrative rather than overtly theological. The letter does not mention the Subura church as a location for Agatha’s relics, though the Dialogues do. Agatha’s relics come up in his letter to the Bishop of Sorrento. Gregory’s treatment of Agatha’s supposed relics on Capri also shows that he is looking to give saints their due honor, just as he was with her Roman church. Though no dispute is evident in his surviving letters, Gregory could have also been concerned about competing claims for the relics and sought to have them treated in a way he thought appropriate. The word choice used in the letter does not make it clear what type of relic Gregory is discussing here. Gregory did not approve of the practice, favored by the Byzantines, of dismembering and dispersing saintly remains, and instead advised that one place a cloth near the body, which then takes on the saint’s holy properties and can be dedicated.103 This idea is present in the miraculous powers of the veil located on St. Agatha’s tomb discussed in Chapter 2. Gregory’s terminology does not make this distinction evident except when he explicitly talks about practices; frequently, he simply applies the term reliquae, without indication if this means the physical body or not.104 Gregory was highly concerned with the proper treatment of relics, whether the physical body or not, as shown in his concern that the relics of Agatha be dealt with properly:

Religiosis desideriis facile est praebere consensum, ut fidelis devotio celerem sortiatur effectum. Et quoniam Savinus abbas monasterii sancti Stephani insulae Capris suessit

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nobis, se sanctae Agathae martyris reliquias iam olim apud se habere concessas, et in monasterio suo vult ipsa sanctuaria collocari, ideoque ad praedictum monasterium te iubemus accedere et, si ibidem nullum corpus constat humatum, praedicta sanctuaria sollemniter collocabis, ut devotionis suae potiatur effectu.¹⁰⁵

It is easy to offer an agreement on religious desires, so that the faithful offering may receive swift effect. And as Savinus, abbot of the monastery of St. Stephen on the island of Capri, suggested to us, that he himself has had the departed relics of the martyr St. Agatha at his monastery now for some time, and in his monastery he wishes that those relics be settled, therefore we order that you go to the previously mentioned monastery and, if in that place no interred body lays, you will establish the aforementioned reliquaries¹⁰⁶ solemnly, so that one may receive the effect of one’s devotion.

This letter does not offer any indication that the relics dedicated in the church in Rome are of a similar type to those found in the monastery on Capri. The term relic could refer from anything to physical remains to items interred with or near the body. Because the reliquary history of Agatha’s body is murky and uncertain, Gregory’s unspecific terminology does not help determine what he is talking about. The Capri relics may have been of bodily nature because of the concern Gregory shows; in general, he does not approve of moving saints’ bodies. In addition, the use of reliquias concessas may indicate that the relics were missing from Catania, since it does not seem the monk was officially entrusted with them. Due to Gregory’s reluctance to move the remains of saints, these may in fact be remains translated from Catania, and now he allows them to be dedicated because that is proper practice.¹⁰⁷ Because of Constantinople’s control of Sicily, the imperial desire for relics may have led to Agatha’s relics being dispersed in a way displeasing to Gregory. By the tenth century, Agatha’s remains are no longer recorded as

¹⁰⁵ Gregory I, Ep. 1.52 in Registrum Epistolarum, ed. Hartmann and Ewald.
¹⁰⁶ I translate sanctuaria as synonymous with reliquiae in agreement with McCulloh’s assertion that Gregory uses the terms almost interchangeably, see “The Cult of Relics,” 158-69.
being in Catania; their whereabouts are uncertain for this period, but she may have been translated to Constantinople along with a number of other prominent saints.  

The reliquary and translation history for Agatha’s remains shows the growing popularity of saint cults, Agatha included. This event also shows the tension between Gregory’s desire for ideological control and the realities of cult veneration practices. Gregory’s veneration of Agatha has the side effect of less-than-ideal reliquary practices in his view. While Agatha’s relics were dispersed, the ideas she represented were adapted to a new Christian community influenced by Gregory.

Agatha in England: Interpretation for a New Community

Though Agatha and Gregory were popular in Late Antique-Early Medieval Christian England, our deeper knowledge of these views is due to the records left by authors such as Bede, and may not reflect a view unique to England. Regardless, Gregory did initiate mission activity in England, as he did elsewhere, such as Sardinia. Though more evidence remains of English practice because of Bede, some indication remains for why Agatha became popular in England. First, southern Italian saints heavily influenced the Old English Mass, perhaps because of Gregory’s influence and the desire to connect with Rome. These figures and texts may also have resonated because of their compatibility with local practice. The spread of Roman Christian

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110 Frere, The Kalendar, 47.
rites and ideas began with music, which could easily be incorporated into existing Celtic practice.\textsuperscript{111}

The adoption of Christianity in England led to the adoption of saint cults. In supporting monasteries in England, Gregory was able to spread his particular ideals and preferred practices. Agatha’s cult became a part of this tradition, too. English church leaders such as Aldhelm, who worked under Augustine and corresponded with Gregory, wrote about Agatha. Aldhelm mentions Agatha in his prose and verse works praising virgin martyrs. For example, Aldhelm writes that Agatha belongs on the list of virgin martyrs because of Gregory’s decree placing her in the daily Mass.\textsuperscript{112}

As discussed above, Bede includes Agatha in both his \textit{Martyrology} and \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica}.\textsuperscript{113} He uses Agatha in the \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica} to position a local martyr, St. Æthelthryth, in the tradition of historic virgin martyrs. Bede’s account of church history ignores British influences in the English church and instead highlights “the Romanization of insular churches after the arrival of continental missionaries,” sent by Gregory.\textsuperscript{114} Just as Italian saints were those most popularly included in Old English church texts, Bede focused his history on the influence and connections to Rome. Agatha, as a traditional martyr from the Roman period, is used to emphasis this point. Bede’s point of view influenced other monastic writers, who continued to cite Roman saints like Agatha.

In the Medieval period, the rise of monasticism was influenced in part by Gregory and Bede’s involvement in the English church. In their writings, monks used Agatha as a paragon for male ascetic control. By the time of St. Ælfric, the same story is translated into the vernacular

\textsuperscript{111} Frere, \textit{The Kalendar}, 44.
\textsuperscript{112} Aldhelm, \textit{De Virginitate} 23, in \textit{AS} 601.
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica} 4.20; Agatha is listed in the February 5 entry of Bede’s \textit{Martyrology}, see Lifshitz, “Bede's \textit{Martyrology},” 181.
\textsuperscript{114} Lifshitz, “Bede's \textit{Martyrology},” 172.
and adapted to fit the tenth century monastic goals of Ælfric.\textsuperscript{115} In his Life of St. Agatha, Ælfric translates the text of the Acts of Agatha into a nearly word-for-word Old English translation, with additional emphasis placed on shame, to the point where he inserts shame vocabulary that are not present in the original.\textsuperscript{116} For example, at the episode in which Agatha insults Quintianus through Venus and Jupiter, Ælfric adds the terms fule and sceandlica to describe the gods, words which Alice Jorgensen translates as “foul” and “shameful,” to change the meaning of this section to: “May your wife be as was Venus, your foul goddess, and may you be as Jove was, your shameful god.”\textsuperscript{117} The Latin text, instead, states, “May your wife be like Venus and you like Jupiter.”\textsuperscript{118} Ælfric adds vocabulary to describe the gods as shameful to make Agatha’s intent clearer. The interplay between shame and rage and Ælfric’s use of emotion “could further enhance devotion towards the saint, who is the victor not just in a spiritual struggle but in a contest of honour.”\textsuperscript{119} What I emphasize, though, is that Ælfric emphasized shame to the point that he altered the text in his version. This alteration is a direct example of an interpretation used to suit a particular viewpoint, and it shows how interpretations change with the viewer. Ælfric’s point in making the change is to emphasize the aspect of chastity and rejection of physical needs. Ælfric depicts Agatha’s body as “more saintly” to drive monastic reform.\textsuperscript{120}

Ælfric was selective in the saints he chose for his Lives collection; he writes in his preface that in a previous work he wrote about saints that the people commonly venerated, and in

\textsuperscript{115} For the sources and influences on Ælfric’s Lives of the Saints, including Bede as a source, see Peter Clemoes, “Ælfric,” in Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature, ed. Eric Stanley (London: Nelson, 1966): 184-86.


\textsuperscript{118} Act.Ag.5 in AS 622: sit ergo uxor tua talis ut Venus, et tu ut Jupiter


this present work he is focusing on saints that monks venerate.\textsuperscript{121} By focusing on saints preferred by monks, Ælfric sets out a likely audience for this new depiction of Agatha. Rather than an example of the ideal Christian woman, Ælfric’s Agatha is the ideal ascetic. If Ælfric wants to encourage asceticism and model proper monastic behavior, especially regarding sexual purity, then it makes sense that he would choose a virgin martyr, since sexual purity is so strongly associated with women. Because of the modifications Ælfric made to Agatha’s Life, the argument that he was using the virgin martyr as an example of ideal ascetic behavior for men is compelling. After all, “As a pillar of chastity, wisdom, and steadfastness in the face of persecution, Agatha—especially in Ælfric’s Old English adaptation of her legend—perfectly exemplifies the ideals of reformed monasticism;”\textsuperscript{122} Nuns as well as monks may have enjoyed and been educated using this kind of text, though they may be overlooked in patristic writing and modern scholarship.

The use of Agatha at the end of the first millennium was to serve as an example of asceticism and tie together political church factions. Under Gregory, Agatha symbolized a connection to the Roman past and the modern Byzantine government. She also served as an example of the Roman church defeating Arianism and the Gothic threat. As Gregory promoted his monastic beliefs through missionary activity in England, these ideals, as well as Agatha’s story, became adapted into English church history as well. Agatha was part of a historical tradition that connected England to Rome, rather than to a Celtic past. Although local saints were also written about, such as Bede’s hymn to St. Æthelthryth,\textsuperscript{123} ancient martyrs allowed the newer Christian community in England to anchor themselves to the past. As monasticism reached its height in the tenth century in England, these influences from Late Antiquity allowed Agatha to

\textsuperscript{121} Malo Chenard, \textit{Narratives of the Saintly Body in Anglo-Saxon England}, 171f.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. 199.
\textsuperscript{123} Bede, \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica} 4.20.
be interpreted to fit a narrative more focused on shame and to cater to a monastic audience. As I noted in my introduction, “one is never a saint except for other people.” Saint identities are constructed following their deaths, and they can continue to be reconstructed to fit contemporary concerns and authors. Ælfric's use of Agatha is just one way this can be done. The introduction of Agatha’s cult in England allowed Gregory to engage in his theological interests and cultural expansion.

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Conclusion

St. Agatha’s story is a representation of Late Antique views of earlier persecutions Christians suffered. Though not necessarily a historical figure or historical events, the narrative tells modern readers about how views on martyrdom and asceticism developed as Christianity rose to power. Agatha’s story serves just one facet of how these ideas were shared and used. The disaster elements of her story give her a personal connection to Sicily and add to her divine status. Pope Gregory I made her cult official and brought it to the forefront of the calendar. His influence likely made Agatha popular among monks.

Interpretations and uses of Agatha continue to change into the modern period. She is said to have saved Malta from a Muslim invasion in 1551. Though much later than the time of Gregory, in this depiction Agatha is still associated with monastics and with preventing an island disaster. Versions of her story in the Maltese tradition also say that she spent time in Malta to evade persecution, thereby creating a “historic” link to Malta in her story in response to contemporary events. The Bollandists of the Acta Sanctorum do not include this version of the story even in their alternatives, but A.A. Caruana maintains that the local legend dates to the fifth century CE. Whatever the dating of the Maltese version of Agatha’s story, this later interpretation shows that Agatha continued to be venerated in variable ways and could hold different meanings to specific localities and audiences.

126 Ibid. 5.
Following Sicily’s incorporation into Muslim rule, Agatha’s cult seems to have survived in Catania and Sicily.\(^{127}\) Paul Oldfield argues that her cult was even instrumental in reintroducing Christian control after the Norman conquest of Sicily in the eleventh century.\(^{128}\) I feel Oldfield tends to generalize the effects of “Islamization” and “Christianization,” by neglecting the multicultural community present in the period during and following Muslim rule. His points, however, on the official use of the cult by the Norman conquerors are compelling especially on how powerful a symbol Agatha continued to be locally. In addition, the dynamics discussed in this period, such as the rebuilding of Agatha’s cathedral in Catania and the establishment of a Benedictine monastery dedicated to her, show additional background for how Agatha would be venerated in the modern era.\(^{129}\) Future work on this subject includes a more detailed study of Agatha’s manuscript tradition and the manuscripts of her *passio*, of which a complete study has not yet been done.

While more work such as Oldfield’s can be done to explore the view of Agatha in the Medieval period, additional research is needed to center her in her contemporary society by exploring third-century Christian Sicily. Several Sicilian communities, such as Catania, Syracuse, Taormina, and Agrigento, were centered on martyred bishops, in addition to other martyrs like Agatha. Despite these martyrdoms set in third and fourth century Sicily, modern scholars know little about the Christian communities of Sicily in this period.\(^{130}\) Such work would give insight into the competing views of Agatha’s “contemporary” society and how that society is discussed in martyr narratives. Though traditionally dismissed as a non-historical martyr

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\(^{128}\) Ibid. 439-56.

\(^{129}\) Ibid. 443.

\(^{130}\) Sami, “Changing Beliefs,” 217.
figure, the study of Agatha offers many insights into the development of Christian beliefs in Late Antiquity and in the Medieval period.
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