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Sisters and Equals? Slavery and Hierarchies in Early Monastic Communities for Women

1 Introduction

1.1 Hildegard of Bingen as a Late and Famous Point of Departure

Although this article will focus primarily on late antiquity and the rise of Christian monasticism, the first revealing example of ambivalent stances to social hierarchies in women's monasteries is drawn from a much later period, i.e., the twelfth century. This example, a correspondence between the two abbesses Tengswich of Andernach and Hildegard of Bingen, demonstrates a persistent inconsistency between expectations and practices in the monastic world. In a letter to Hildegard, Tengswich raises a series of questions about how her contemporary leads her monastery. One of Tengswich's main concerns is that Hildegard upholds a worldly hierarchy in her monastery and only permits noble women to enter. Tengswich writes: 'That which seems no less strange to us is the fact that you admit into your community only those women from noble, well-established families and absolutely reject others who are of lower birth and of less wealth.'[1] To Tengswich, this seemed 'strange and irregular'[2] and not in accord with 'all the precedents laid down by the fathers of the Church, to which all spiritual people must conform [. . .].'[3] Nevertheless, Hildegard remained unmoved by Tengswich's indignation and defended the practices of her monastery by referring to the created order. She declared:

> God also keeps a watchful eye on every person so that a lower order (*minor ordo*) will not gain ascendancy over a higher one, as Satan and the first man did, who wanted to fly higher than they had been placed. And who would gather all his livestock indiscriminately into one barn – the cattle, the asses, the sheep, the kids? Thus it is clear that differentiation must be maintained in these matters (*discretio sit in hoc*), lest people of varying status, herded all together, be dis-

1 Hildegard of Bingen, *Epistolarium* 127–130, no. 52r, in *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium, 91–250*, vol. 2, eds. Leonardo van Acker and Monika Klaes-Hachmöller, Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis 91 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1991]: 126): et quod his omnibus non minus mirandum nobis uidetur, in consortium uestrum genere tantum spectabiles et ingenuas introducere, aliis uero ignobilibus et minus ditatis commansionem uestram penitus abnuere. (Trans. in Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. 1 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994]: 127).

2 Hildegard of Bingen, *Epistolarium* 127–130, no. 52r: 126: quoddam insolitum de consuetudine uestra. (Trans. in Baird and Ehrmann, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*: 127).

3 Hildegard of Bingen, *Epistolarium* 127–130, no. 52r: 126–27: Omnia quippe precedentium Patrum instituta, quibus cunctos spirituales maxime informari condecet, pro posse nostro perscrutantes subtilius [. . .]. (Trans. in Baird and Ehrmann, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*: 127).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111380575-010

> persed through the pride of their elevation, on the one hand, or the disgrace of their decline, on the other [. . .]. For God establishes ranks on earth (*Deus discernit populum in terra*), just as in heaven with angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, cherubim, and seraphim. And they are all loved by God, although they are not equal in rank (*equalia nomina non habent*).[4]

The famous Hildegard thus did not promote social equality. On the contrary, she argued theologically for a static approach to (monastic) life, where 'differentiation must be maintained' (*discretio sit in hoc*). Though Hildegard had already obtained a status of spiritual authority in her own lifetime, her conservative monastic practice of strict social differentiation provoked other monastic authorities. In this case, it was Tengswich who found Hildegard's approach problematic and apparently followed other principles in her convent in Andernach. The exchange between Hildegard and Tengswich shows us that it is impossible to present a monolithic history of monasticism: it also reveals that although monasticism was often radical in its non-worldliness, it also included conservative structures that preserved existing "worldly" hierarchies. Departing from this medieval example involving one of the most famous representatives of women's monasticism, Hildegard of Bingen, we will now look further back to late antiquity.

During the late antique and early medieval periods, Christian monasticism came into being and developed into increasingly concrete and institutionalized forms. In recent decades, scholarship has emphasized the early development of female monasticism and its influence on the broader monastic movement.[5] This contribution remains within that general field of research and focuses on women's monasteries and ascetic communities, particularly on the role of enslaved people in early ascetic communities and monasteries for women. Furthermore, it seeks to establish which ideals of equality were formulated in these milieus. These topics are not altogether easy to present coherently, because there is not one obvious conclusion: the monastic institutions were not homogeneous from the beginning, and theological ideals and monastic practices did not always converge.

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4 Hildegard of Bingen, *Epistolarium* 127–130, no. 52r: 129: Deus etiam habet scrutinium scrutationis in omni persona, ita quod minor ordo super superiorem non ascendat, sicut et Satanas et primus homo fecerunt, qui altius uolare uoluerunt quam posit sunt. Et qui homo congregat omnem gregem suum in unum stabulum, scilicet boues, asinos, oues, hedos, ita quod non discrepant se? Ideo et discretio sit in hoc, ne diuersus populus in unum gregem congregatus in superbia elationis et in ignominia diuersitatis dissipetur [. . .] quia Deus discernit populum in terra sicut et in celo, uidelicet etiam angelos, archangelos, thronos, dominationes, cherubim et seraphim discernes. Et hi omnes a Deo amantur, sed tamen equalia nomina non habent. (Trans. in Baird and Ehrmann, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*: 129).

5 Albrecht Diem, "The Gender of the Religious: Wo/Men and the Invention of Monasticism," in *The Oxford Companion on Women and Gender in the Middle Ages*, eds. Judith Bennett and Ruth Marzo-Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 432–46; Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008); see also Susanna Elm, *"Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

To provide a general impression of ideals and practices related to servants and slaves in early women's monasteries, a series of chronologically ordered examples will be given in the following. We will explore contexts ranging from Macrina's ascetic household in fourth-century Pontus to Radegund's monastery in Poitiers at the end of the sixth century. Before presenting these specific cases, however, this chapter first continues with an introduction to the early monastic world and a further description of how the word "slave" was reinterpreted in that context.

1.2 A Sketch of Early Monastic History and Its Dominant Principles

In the period primarily under investigation (400–600 AD), the monastic world, along with its institutions and rules, were still under development. The history of Christian monasticism begins in the third century in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, especially in the Egyptian desert, where Christians began to live ascetic lives either alone as hermits or together in so-called cenobitic communities.[6] Only later did it become the standard that such Christian communities were organized by a set of specific regulations. The monastic communities came to be organized hierarchically with an abbess or abbot as the leader: eventually, a strict separation of the sexes also developed. Between the more or less unregulated ascetic life in the desert and the organized life in evolving monasteries, there were other monastic forms, including groups of women living as Christian virgins in Roman city houses or celibate married couples living a religious life together. Unfortunately, our knowledge of these informal groups is scarce. From an early stage, the church had a vested interest in trying to obtain some control over the ascetic / monastic movement to suppress developments that seemed too radical. Thus, the Council of Gangra, which took place around 340, condemned people who engaged in diverse forms of ascetic behaviour, such as women who wore men's clothes, those who were strict vegetarians, and anyone who taught slaves that it was an act of piety to leave their masters for religious reasons.[7] The third point is, of course, of particular interest in the context of this article: it tells us that early on, ascetic communities dealt with slaves.

6 For a thorough introduction to early women's monasticism, see Elm, *'Virgins of God'*.

7 Council of Gangra, *Canon* 3, in *Fonti – Discipline Générale Antique*, fasc. 9, ed. Périclès-Pierre Joannou, Les canons des Synodes Particuliers 1.2 (Rome: Grottaferrata, 1962–1964): 90; trans. Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 490: 'If anyone teaches a slave, under pretext of piety, to despise his master, to withdraw from his service and not to serve him with goodwill and all respect, let him be anathema.' (Εἴ τις δοῦλον, προφάσει θεοσεβείας, διδάσκοι καταφρονεῖν δεσπότου, καὶ ἀναχωρεῖν τῆς ὑπηρεσίας, καὶ μὴ μετ' εὐνοίας καὶ πάσης τιμῆς τῷ ἑαυτοῦ δεσπότῃ ἐξυπηρετεῖσθαι, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.).

Despite some variation in practice, a few principles always dominated monastic and ascetic fellowships: firstly, monastic life included a demand to choose celibacy and a lifestyle dominated by continency. Secondly, ascetic life was marked by an austere ideal of renunciation which demanded that its practitioners give away all their belongings, either to the poor or the monastic community.

The notion of voluntary renunciation drew upon the teaching of Jesus, who, according to Matthew 19:21, said: 'If you want to be perfect, sell all you have, and give to the poor, and come, follow me.' This is, in fact, the verse which, 'according to the Life of Antony, inspired St. Antony, around 270 CE, to pioneer the ascetic lifestyle in the Egyptian desert.'[8]

The biblical ideal of voluntary poverty is also relevant to our consideration of servants and slaves within the monastic world. In principle, it excludes the possibility that anyone could enter a monastic community with slaves as their possession or with a vast fortune that would entitle them to privileges.[9] However, as exemplified in the different depictions of the life of Melania the Younger, the demand to give up all one's earthly possessions was not always followed, or the possessions were only given up over a certain period.[10] Renunciation of private property served a spiritual pur-

8 Gillian Clark, "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender," in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 35.

9 Richard J. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 191: 'The slave had no claim to rights as an individual – under Roman law, he or she was nothing more than a master's property. Although the slave could hold property or possessions as a peculium, ultimately these things were also the property of the master.'

10 Melania travelled extensively and gave out of her immense fortune for a long time. One description of her generosity also entails her manumission of slaves, see Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 61: in *Palladio. La storia Lausiaca*, ed. Gerhardus Johannes Marinus Bartelink (Verona: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1974): 'She sent across the sea to the east ten thousand pieces of gold to Egypt and the Thebaid, the same amount to Antioch and the area around it, fifteen thousand to Palestine, and ten thousand to the churches on the islands and those in exile beyond the frontiers; she also personally allotted a similar sum to the churches of the west. All these riches, and four times as much again, her faith enabled her to snatch from the lion's jaws (if God will forgive the expression), in other words, from Alaric. She set eight thousand slaves free who wished to be given their freedom; the rest did not want to be set free, but opted to become her brother's slaves. She allowed him to take them for three denarii each. She sold her possessions in Spain, Aquitaine and Gaul and kept for herself only those in Sicily, Campania and Africa, using the income from them for the upkeep of the monasteries. This was the wisdom she displayed with regard to the burden of her wealth.' [. . .] διὰ θαλάσσης ἀπέστειλεν ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ, Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ Θηβαΐδι νομίσματα μύρια, Ἀντιοχείᾳ καὶ τοῖς μέρεσι ταύτης μύρια νομίσματα, Παλαιστίνῃ νομίσματα μύρια πεντακισχίλια, ταῖς ἐν νήσοις ἐκκλησίαις καὶ τοῖς ἐν ἐξορίαις νομίσματα μύρια, ταῖς κατὰ τὴν δύσιν ἐκκλησίαις ὡσαύτως δι' ἐαυτῆς χορηγοῦσα, ταῦτα πάντα καὶ τετραπλασίονα τούτων ὡς ἐπὶ θεοῦ ἐξαρπάσασα ἐκ τοῦ στόματος λέοντος Ἀλαρίχου τῇ πίστει τῇ ἐαυτῆς. Ἠλευθέρωσε δὲ τὰ βουληθέντα ἀνδράποδα ὀκτακισχίλια, τὰ λοιπὰ γὰρ οὐκ ἐβουλήθησαν ἀλλ' ᾐρήσαντο δουλεῦσαι τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτῆς· ᾧ παρεχώρησε πάντας ἀπὸ τριῶν νομισμάτων λαβεῖν. Τὰ δὲ κτήματα τὰ ἐν ταῖς Σπανίαις καὶ Ἀκυτανίᾳ καὶ Ταρακωνησίᾳ καὶ Γαλλίαις διαπωλήσασα, τὰ ἐν Σικελίᾳ μόνα καὶ Καμπανίᾳ καὶ

pose: it was a sign of radical self-denial. Giving up one's property also meant forsaking one's self-determination and dependence on worldly goods to choose instead to serve others and live in accordance with the rule of a community. Basil the Great, one of the founders of monasticism, depicted this kind of asceticism as a form of slavery: 'No one should be his own master, but each should think and act in every respect as though given by God into slavery for the brethren who share one same mind, though each in his own allotted place.'[11]

Monasticism arose in the eastern part of the Roman Empire but then spread westward. John Cassian was one of the theologians who transferred monastic ideas from the East to the West. He was active in the fourth century, and his *Institutes* give us a good impression of the monastic mindset which he transferred from the Egyptian deserts to Gaul. In the following quotation, he considers who is allowed to preside over a fellowship of monks. His aim is to underscore that persons who are unable to humble themselves should not rule over others:

> For no one is allowed to preside over the assembly of the brethren, or even over himself before he has not only deprived himself of all his property but has also learned the fact that he is not his own maker and has no authority over his own actions. For one who renounces the world, whatever property or riches he may possess, must seek the common dwelling of a coenobium, that he may not flatter himself in any way with what he has forsaken or what he has brought into the monastery.
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> He must also be obedient to all (*sic oboedire cunctis*) so as to learn that he must, as the Lord says, become again a little child (Matthew 18:3), [. . .] he knows he is serving in Christ's service (*se gerere in Christi militia*), he should not hesitate to submit himself even to his juniors (*subdere se etiam innioribus*). Further, he is obliged to habituate himself to work and toil so as to prepare with his own hands, in accordance with the Apostle's command, a daily supply of food (1 Thessalonians 4:11), either for his own use or for the wants of strangers; and that he may also forget the pride and luxury of his past life, and gain by grinding toil humility of heart.'[12]

Ἀφρικῇ ἑαυτῇ καταλείψασα ἐπελάβετο εἰς χορηγίαν μοναστηρίων. Αὕτη αὐτῆς ἡ σοφία ἡ περὶ τοῦ φορτίου τῶν χρημάτων. (Transl. in Carolinne White, *Lives of Roman Christian Women* [London: Penguin, 2010]: 123).

11 Basil, *Epistola* 22.1, in *Saint Basile. Lettres*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Yves Courtonne (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957): Ὅτι οὐ δεῖ οὔτε αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ κύριον εἶναί τινα, ἀλλ' ὡς ὑπὸ Θεοῦ παραδεδομένον εἰς δουλείαν τοῖς ὁμοψύχοις ἀδελφοῖς, οὕτω καὶ φρονεῖν πάντα καὶ ποιεῖν, ἕκαστον δὲ ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι [. . .]. Cf. Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 120.

12 John Cassian, *Institutes* 2.3, in *Institutions cénobitiques*, ed. Jean-Claude Guy, Sources Chrétiennes 109 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965): 60–62: 'non enim quisquam conuenticulo fratrum, sed ne sibi quidem ipsi praeesse conceditur, priusquam non solum uniuersis facultatibus suis reddatur extemus, sed ne sui quidem ipsius esse se dominum uel potestatem habere cognoscat. ita namque renuntiantem huic mundo quibuslibet facultatibus ac diuitiis praeditum necesse est coenobii commorationem expetere, ut in nullo sibi ex his quae reliquit aut intulit monasterio blandiatur, sic oboedire cunctis, ut redeundum sibi secundum sententiam domini ad infantiam pristinam nouerit, [. . .] quam se gerere in Christi militia recognoscit, subdere se etiam innioribus non moretur. operis quoque ac sudoris ad-

When we recall that Cassian was writing to an aristocratic audience in Gaul, it is evident that the sentiments he is expressing are quasi-revolutionary.[13] Cassian was asking the upper classes to behave like slaves, for Christ's sake. He is, as Richard J. Goodrich has shown, introducing a "Rhetoric of Renunciation" into the language of the social elite in Gaul.[14] In the East, Athanasia, a wealthy woman, was encouraged not to enter a monastery with the following argument:

> You are adorned with great wealth, you have now taken a husband, you are of noble lineage, you have acquired much property, your body is delicate and weak, you are served in every way by handmaidens and attendants (πάντῃ ὑπὸ δουλίδων καὶ παίδων ἐξυπηρετεῖσαι·). Asceticism, my child, is for the one who serves, not one who is served.[15]

Both the willingness to give away all of one's property and, in a certain way, to become a slave for others are key themes in the ascetic life. Beyond the scope of ascetic theology and practice, such demands would border on the absurd: how could anyone voluntarily give up everything, including one's will? The modern researcher, Richard Valantasis, argues that asceticism is 'performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.'[16] In other words, ascetic practice is meant to challenge and change the world, if not at large, then at least inside the ascetic and monastic community and within the life of the individual ascetic.

Throughout the late antique and early medieval period, slaves were a fundamental part of the socio-economic system in the Roman Empire and the ensuing kingdoms. What is the significance of the fact that the monastic vocabulary included the phrase "slave of Christ"? Did the monastic communities fight to overcome slavery in the world? Or did they instead depend on an enslaved workforce themselves? The source material available to us is not directly helpful in answering these questions because

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suetudinem ita subire conpellitur, ut propriis manibus iuxta apostoli praeceptum cotidianum uictum uel suis usibus uel aduenientum necessitatibus parans et fastus uitae praeteritae possit et delicias obliuisci et humilitatem cordis contritione laboris adquirere.' (Transl. in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second Series*, vol. 11, trans. Edgar CS Gibson (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894): 206.

13 Cf. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian.*

14 Goodrich, *Contextualiszing Cassian*: 151–207.

15 *I. S. Matronae vita prima*, in *Acta Sanctorum Novembris*, vol. 3, eds. Hippolyte Delehaye et al., Acta Sanctorum 64, BHG 1221 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1910): 790–823: 'πλούτῳ κομᾷς πολλῷ, ἀνδρὶ νῦν προσωμίλησας, τὸ γένος περίβλεπτον ἔχεις, περιουσίαν μεγάλην κέκτησαι, τὸ σωμάτιόν σου τρυφερόν ἐστιν καὶ ἀσθενέστατον, πάντῃ ὑπὸ δουλίδων καὶ παίδων ἐξυπηρετεῖσαι· ἡ δὲ ἄσκησις, τέκνον, ὑπηρετοῦντός ἐστιν, οὐχ ὑπηρετουμένου.' Trans. Jeffrey Featherstone and Cyril Mango, "Life of St. Matrona of Perge," in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996): 54, with my own alteration.

16 Richard Valantasis, "Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical? Revisiting an Old Problem with a New Theory," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 64.

most of what we have is normative material, either in the form of regulations or idealized depictions. Several scholars have already grappled with the sources and questions addressed here.[17] The following compilation of material, daring in terms of the broad array of sources it utilizes, draws on and adds to the existing work.

2 Slavery and Women's Monasticism in the Eastern Roman Empire

2.1 Macrina and Her Ascetic Community

Macrina is one of the few women of the fourth century whose biography and philosophy are well known to us. They have been passed down through the writings of her famous brother Gregory of Nyssa. Yet, as has become increasingly evident, we cannot transcend Gregory's depiction of her to reach the historical Macrina herself.[18] It should also be noted that Basil of Caesarea belonged to the prominent family of Macrina and Gregory. Basil is famous for his monastic rule, though some modern scholars suggest that Macrina should receive some of the credit for having "invented" the kind of monastic life that Basil's Rule promotes.[19] At a minimum, it should be acknowledged that, like her brother, Macrina also established an ascetic community. Indeed, Gregory made a big deal of this in his hagiographical *Vita Macrinae*. There Gregory explained how Macrina's family belonged to the upper class of Roman society. Both her father and her brothers were well-educated. Her father was also a major landowner. After he passed away, her mother inherited the family estate and ran it with her oldest daughter, Macrina. Due to the size of the estate and social rank of the family, there were many enslaved people in the household, as was to be expected in that period. However, as a Christian striving towards perfection, this unequal social setting posed a problem for Macrina.

17 The focus on slavery and different kinds of (enforced) dependency in ascetic and monastic contexts is popular in current research, see e.g.: Ilaria Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery. The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Lilian Larson, "Constructing Complexity. Slavery in the Small Worlds of Early Monasticism," in *Social Control in Late Antiquity*, eds. Kate Cooper and Jamie Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 131–50; Roy Flechner and Janel Fontaine, "The Admission of Former Slaves into Churches and Monasteries," *Early Medieval Europe* 29, no. 4 (2021): 586–611. For some examples of monks with slaves or slaves entering monasteries to become monks, see Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 147–53.

18 Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'," *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 1–31.

19 Cf. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger*: 46–49.

According to her *Life*, in the wake of her father's death, Macrina found an opportunity to bring their customary upper-class lifestyle to an end. She convinced her mother that they should choose a new form of life, namely, a philosophical and spiritual way of life, which included an injunction to live with their former slaves as equals. In the *Life of Macrina*, Gregory explains at length how Macrina was the instigator of the reorganization of their upper-class estate with its servants into a monastic community of equals:

> As they [that is, Macrina and her mother] no longer had any excuse for leading a materialistic life (ὑλωδεστέρας ζωῆς), Macrina persuaded her mother to renounce the life she was used to and give up her extravagant style of living and the services of servants (τὰς ἐκ τῶν ὑποχειρίων θεραπείας) to which she had grown accustomed. Instead, she came to regard herself as being on one level (ὁμότιμον) with the mass of ordinary people, sharing a life in common with the young girls who worked in the house (μεθ' ἑαυτῆς ἐκ δουλίδων καὶ ὑποχειρίων), making them her sisters and equals (ἀδελφὰς καὶ ὁμοτίμους ποιησαμένη).[20]

Gregory describes the pivotal moment when Macrina – at least in principle – equalizes the social differences in her house. She does not go so far as to set her former slaves and servants free because, according to the text, they are not offered a chance to leave the premises but are expected to remain in a community of equals. In this quotation, more than one Greek word for "slave" is used, indicating that there were different kinds of servants on the estate. One word is the unpleasantly physical ὑποχειρίων that spells out the servant's position "under the hands" of his or her owner. Peculiarly, Gregory reiterates (or adds to) the procedure once more in chapter eleven to underline this aspect of Macrina's achievements, which is viewed as the completion of an almost implausible social act:

> [. . .] the young woman [Macrina] became her mother's guide to this kind of philosophical and spiritual way of life. Macrina, who had already given up all the norms of society (ἀποστήσασα τῶν ἐν συνηθείᾳ πάντων), inspired her mother to strive for the same humility (τῆς ταπεινοφροσύνης): she persuaded her to live as an equal (ὁμότιμον) with the young women (τῶν παρθένων), sharing the same table, the same kind of bed, and all the same necessities of life on an equal footing. All differences of rank were removed from their way of life (κατὰ τὴν ἀξίαν διαφορᾶς ὑφαιρεθείσης αὐτῶν τῆς ζωῆς.).
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> Indeed, it would be impossible to describe their noble way of life, its order and the loftiness of their philosophy, both by day and by night. Just as the soul released from the body by death is

20 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 7, in *Grégoire de Nysse. Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. Pierre Maraval, Sources Chrétiennes 178 (Paris: Les Édition du Cerf, 1971): 164: 'Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ πάσης ὑλωδεστέρας ζωῆς ὑπόθεσις ἤδη αὐτοῖς περικέκοπτο, πείθει τὴν μητέρα καταλιποῦσαν τὸν ἐν ἕθει βίον καὶ τὴν κομπωδεστέραν διαγωγὴν καὶ τὰς ἐκ τῶν ὑποχειρίων θεραπείας, αἷς προσείθιστο κατὰ τὸν ἔμπροσθεν χρόνον, ὁμότιμον γενέσθαι τοῖς πολλοῖς τῷ φρονήματι καὶ καταμῖξαι τὴν ἰδίαν ζωὴν τῇ μετὰ τῶν παρθένων διαγωγῇ, ὅσας εἶχε μεθ' ἑαυτῆς ἐκ δουλίδων καὶ ὑποχειρίων ἀδελφὰς καὶ ὁμοτίμους ποιησαμένη· [. . .].'

> also released from worries about this life, so their life was lived apart, far removed from all trivialities, and organized in imitation of the angelic life (πρὸς μίμησιν τῆς τῶν ἀγγέλων).[21]

Macrina thus promoted equality among "Christian sisters". The equality she espoused had practical consequences: ideally, all members of the household, including former servants, should have shared the same table, the same kind of bed, and the same access to necessities.[22] To what degree this ideal was put into practice and spread to other communities, we do not know, but the *Vita Macrinae* is itself a written testimony of equality within a limited Christian community. There are several questions that we cannot answer about the conceptual scope or extent to which the ideal of equality was realized in Macrina's community. We are told in the *Life* that more women eventually joined the community, but we are given little information about their status. The former servants probably had to work as before, while Macrina and her mother also took on some tasks in the household. As Gregory, full of amazement,

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21 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 11: 174–76: [. . .] γίνεται σύμβουλος τῆς μητρὸς ἡ τῆς παρθένου ζωὴ πρὸς τὴν ἐμφιλόσοφον ταύτην καὶ ἄϋλον τοῦ βίου διαγωγὴν καὶ ἀποστήσασα τῶν ἐν συνηθείᾳ πάντων πρὸς τὸ ἴδιον τῆς ταπεινοφροσύνης μέτρον κατήγαγεν, ὁμότιμον αὐτὴν γενέσθαι τῷ πληρώματι τῶν παρθένων παρασκευάσασα, ὡς καὶ τραπέζης μιᾶς καὶ κοίτης καὶ πάντων τῶν πρὸς τὴν ζωὴν κατὰ τὸ ἴσον συμμετέχειν αὐταῖς, τῶν πρὸς τὴν ζωὴν κατὰ τὸ ἴσον συμμετέχειν αὐταῖς, πάσης τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἀξίαν διαφορᾶς ὑφαιρεθείσης αὐτῶν τῆς ζωῆς. Καὶ τοιαύτη τις ἦν ἡ τοῦ βίου τάξις καὶ τοσοῦτον τὸ ὕψος τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ ἡ σεμνὴ τῆς ζωῆς πολιτεία ἐν τῇ καθ' ἡμέραν τε καὶ νύκτα διαγωγῇ, ὡς ὑπερβαίνειν τὴν ἐκ τῶν λόγων ὑπογραφήν. Καθάπερ γὰρ αἱ διὰ θανάτου τῶν σωμάτων ἐκλυθεῖσαι ψυχαὶ καὶ τῶν κατὰ τὸν βίον τοῦτον μεριμνῶν συνεκλύονται, οὕτως κεχώριστο αὐτῶν ἡ ζωὴ καὶ ἀπώκιστο πάσης βιωτικῆς ματαιότητος καὶ πρὸς μίμησιν τῆς τῶν ἀγγέλων διαγωγῆς ἐρρυθμίζετο.

22 'The material concerning the slaves suggests manumission of all domestic servants, at least those closest to Emmelia and Macrina. This manumission could have occurred in two ways, either as a *manumissio in ecclesia* or as *a manumissio inter amicos*. [. . .]. *Manumissio inter amicos* [. . .] was far less complicated. A master simply declared a slave to be his friend, expressing this either by letter (*per epistulam*) or by inviting him to dine at the same table (*per mensam*). In contrast to the other forms of manumission, *manumissio inter amicos* did not result in full citizenship: a slave thus freed merely became Latinized. The events in Emmelia's household presumably took the latter form of manumission, *inter amicos*, more precisely *per mensam*.' (Elm, "*Virgins of God*": 85). Susanna Elm interprets Macrina's choice as radical: 'By undertaking a service task Macrina consciously overstepped the rigid boundaries set by her rank and social class and introduced a new dimension into her life. Whereas her entire life had previously been circumscribed by the limits of her social status, this personal act of humility signifies her first breaking away, her first tangible rupture with the conventions of the time.' (Elm, "*Virgins of God*": 46). Contrariwise, Lilian Larson is hesitant to ascribe significant radicality to Macrina's actions: 'At once, dismantling and instantiating institutionalized hierarchies, the presence of slaves at the table inversely marks Macrina's elite ascetic, and social, status. If one eschews idealized interpretations, it is arguable that enforced "table fellowship" simply imposes an alternate type of servitude upon individuals who remain, nonetheless, subordinate.' (Larson, "Constructing Complexity": 140). Although both Elm's and Larson's interpretations are well-argued and hold some truth, I am inclined to follow Elm's more positive estimation of the *original* ascetic impulse to create new relationships. Nevertheless, I do acknowledge Larson's point that asymmetrical dependencies remained in place when aristocrats made new rules within their own house.

wrote of Macrina, she carried out the task of 'making bread for her mother with her own hands'.[23] Whether or not the relations in this transformed household seemed equal to the former slaves is an open question. We must wonder, did they experience any significant change of circumstances?

What would have happened if an enslaved woman from another estate had fled, sought out Macrina's community, and expressed a wish to join it? In such a case, it is possible that Macrina would have had to send the woman away and thereby follow the same principle as her brother Basil prescribed in his Rule. Likewise, when male slaves sought out his monastic community, he sent them back to their masters. The only deviation from this general rule was if their master was deemed *exceptionally* cruel.[24]

While Macrina gives her former servants the new name of sisters, she designates herself and her famous brother Gregory as "slaves". She thus further underlines the ideal change of norms in her household. Macrina prays: 'God, you have filled me with this grace and have not failed to grant my desire, for you have inspired your servant (σὸν οἰκέτην), my brother, to visit me, your servant girl (παιδίσκης σου).'[25]

There is no reason to doubt that there was a real historical person behind Gregory's depiction of Macrina, but it is also certain that he had an interest in presenting her in a way that aligned with his own theological ideals. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that Gregory makes an elaborate point out of the transformation of his family's household. In fact, Gregory of Nyssa is one of the few theologians of the Early Church who was a principal and outspoken opponent of slavery. In his homilies, he describes slaveholding as a sin against God's law. He supports his perspective via several arguments, one being that since human beings principally belong to their creator: God, then holding slaves means stealing God's possession.[26] Macrina and Gregory thus agreed that slavery should be dissolved when and where possible, which was a rare attitude in their time.

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23 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 5: 158: '[. . .] in particular often making bread for her mother with her own hands. This was not her main activity for it was only after she had performed the liturgical tasks that she used her spare time to cook for her mother, believing this was appropriate to her way of life.' ([. . .] ἐν τῷ ταῖς ἰδίαις χερσὶ πολλάκις τῇ μητρὶ παρασκευάζειν τὸν ἄρτον· ὅπερ οὐ κατὰ τὸ προηγούμενον αὐτῇ διεσπουδάσθη, ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ ταῖς μυστικαῖς ὑπηρεσίαις τὰς χεῖρας ἑαυτῆς ἔχρησε, πρέπειν ἡγησαμένη τῷ ἐπιτηδεύματι τοῦ βίου τὴν περὶ τοῦτο σπουδὴν ἐκ τοῦ περιόντος τῇ μητρὶ παρεχορήγει τὴν ἐκ τῶν οἰκείων πόνων τροφήν. (Transl. in Carolinne White, *Lives of Roman Christian Women* (London: Penguin, 2010): 108). Cf. Elm, *"Virgins of God"*: 46.

24 Basil, *Regulae Fusius Tractatae* 11, trans. in Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*: 196. Cf. Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*: 144–45.

25 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 17: 196: 'Καὶ ταύτην ἐπλήρωσάς μοι, φησί, τὴν χάριν ὁ θεός, καὶ οὐκ ἐστέρησάς με ἀπὸ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας μου, ὅτι ἐκίνησας τὸν σὸν οἰκέτην εἰς ἐπίσκεψιν τῆς παιδίσκης σου.' (Transl. in White, *Lives of Roman Christian Women*: 124–25).

26 Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery*: 172–89, see especially 177–79: the interpretation of Gregory's Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes.

2.2 Jerome Writing to and About Women

Some of our earliest sources about women's monastic communities are letters from the theologian Jerome to his female friends. Jerome corresponded with several noblewomen, and we know that some of these friends lived with other female virgins and widows and conducted a monastic life in Rome and Jerusalem. Jerome fully supported these women's choice to adopt a monastic lifestyle, but he also emphasized its severity. In a letter to Eustochium, written in 384, Jerome underlines what a significant decision it is to promise to be a virgin of Christ and how such a life with Christ as one's bridegroom ought to be. He addressed the letter ambivalently to the lady (*domina*) and fellow servant (*conserva*) Eustochium, thus conforming to the rhetoric of renunciation mentioned above. In late antiquity, such contrasting forms of address entailed a revolution in the making: 'my Eustochium, daughter, lady, fellow-servant (*conserva*), sister – for the first name suits your age, the second your rank, the third your religion (*illud religionis*), and the last our affection.'[27]

Jerome explains to Eustochium that all servants in her house, who wished to join the monastic life, should be allowed to do so. Nevertheless, he also urges her to remain attentive to the sincerity of their motivation:

> If any of your handmaids (*ancillae*) share your vocation (*propositi*), do not lift up yourself against them or pride yourself because you are their mistress (*domina*). You have all chosen one (*unum*) bridegroom; you all sing the same (*simul*) Psalms; together, you receive the same (*simul*) body of Christ. Why, then, should your thoughts be different (*diversa*)? [. . .]. But if a girl pretends (*simulat*) to have a vocation simply because she desires to escape from service (*fugiens servitutem*), read aloud to her the words of the Apostle: 'It is better to marry than to burn' (1 Corinthians 7:9).[28]

In other words, for Jerome, eschatological salvation depends on the sincerity of the profession of a desire to become a Christian virgin. The appeal of living in a household dominated by equality should not mislead someone to pretend to be a Christian virgin. That Jerome imagines a Christian profession as an excuse for service indicates that some servants may have attempted to pursue a Christian vocation to avoid hard work.

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27 Jerome, *Epistula* 22.26, in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, ed. Isidorus Hilberg, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 54 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1910): 181: 'mi Eustochia, filia, domina, conserva, germana – alius enim aetatis, aliud meriti, illud religionis, hoc caritatis est nomen [. . .].' Transl. in Frederick Adam Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933): 111.

28 Jerome, *Ep.* 22.29: 187: 'Si quae ancillae sunt comites propositi tui, ne erigaris adversus eas, ne infleris ut domina. Unum sponsum habere coepistis, simul psallitis Christo, simul corpus accipitis, cur mensa diversa sit? Provocentur et aliae. Honor virginum sit invitation ceterarum. [. . .]. Si qua simulat fugiens servitutem, huic aperte apostolum lege: "Melius est nubere quam uri."' Transl. in Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*: 111.

In Jerome's *Letter 22*, the emphasis is again on equality among sisters (they are *simul – simul*), but in this letter, we are not told about the details of daily life in Eustochium's home. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that not all monastic communities of late antiquity were organized according to an equality principle. In another letter from around the year 400, also addressed to Eustochium and known as the *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*, Jerome describes how Eustochium's mother Paula set up a monastic community in Jerusalem:[29]

> I shall now describe the order of her monastery (*de ordine monasterii*). [. . .] Besides establishing a monastery for men, the charge of which she left to men, she divided into three companies and monasteries (*in tres turmas, monasteriaque divisit*) the numerous virgins whom she had gathered out of different provinces, some of whom were of noble birth (*tam nobiles*) while others belonged to the middle or lower classes (*quam medii, et infimi generis*). But, although they worked and had their meals separately from each other (*in opere et in cibo separatae*), these three companies met together for psalm-singing and prayer (*psalmodiis et orationibus iungerentur*).[30]

This description from the *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae* is somewhat sobering since it shows us that from the very beginning, there were not only ideals of equality but also practical and social considerations behind the organization of monasteries. Social stratification also existed in some monasteries for men.[31] In Paula's community in Jerusalem, the equality of the community members seems to have existed only in the context of liturgical actions and not in their common life. In late antiquity, it seems to have often been the case that Christian equality was interpreted liturgically and lim-

29 Earlier in the same letter, Jerome describes the conditions in her household. The two descriptions are not in complete agreement. See Jerome, *Epistula* 108.2, in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, ed. Isidorus Hilberg, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 55 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1912): 308: 'In dealing thus with her relatives and the men and women of her small household – her brothers and sisters rather than her servants – she has done nothing strange; for she has left her daughter Eustochium – a virgin consecrated to Christ for whose comfort this sketch is made – far from her noble family and rich only in faith and grace.' ('Nec mirum, de proximis et familiola, quam in utroque sexu de servis et ancillis in fratres sororesque mutaverat, ista proferre, cum Eustochium virginem, et devotam Christi filiam, in cujus consolationem libellus hic cuditur, procul a nobili genere, sola fide et gratia divitem reliquerit.') Transl. in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second Series*, vol. 6 (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1893).

30 Jerome, *Epistula* 108.20: 334–35: 'Dicam et de ordine monasterii [. . .]. Post virorum monasterium, quod viris tradiderat gubernandum, plures virgines quas e diversis provinciis congregarat, tam nobiles, quam medii, et inifimi generis, in tres turmas, monasteriaque divisit: ita duntaxat, ut in opere et in cibo separatae, psalmodiis et orationibus jungerentur.' Transl. in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6.

31 Cf. '[. . .] social stratification existed among the *serui Dei* at both Nola and Primuliacum. [. . .]. Paulinus and Sulpicius may have intellectually acquiesced to the fundamental equality of all brothers in Christ, but on a practical level it is clear that the old social order persisted.' (Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian:* 196).

ited to certain spaces and occasions. Additionally, that which marked Christian interaction, in general, was not primarily the embrace of universal social equality.[32]

Moreover, the Pauline saying in Galatians 3,28: '[In Christ Jesus] there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus', was, despite its possible radicalism, not immediately interpreted as a revolt against the Roman society in which Christianity was embedded. In Paula's monastery, it would seem that the noble women could still, in principle, have been served by slaves. However, Jerome mentioned a supplementary rule: that the noble women could not maintain the same slaves as they had possessed in their worldly life. If they were permitted to do so, the risk would be that they would simply continue their former lifestyle within the monastery.[33]

2.3 Olympias and Her Monastery in Constantinople

While Paula set up her tripartite monastery in Jerusalem, in Constantinople the ultra-rich widow Olympias did the same and opted for an ideal of relative equality. In the fifth century, she founded a women's monastery in connection with the famous church Hagia Sophia, where she enrolled all her female house servants and installed them in one wing of her monastic complex. We are told in her anonymous vita:

> Then by the divine will, she [Olympias] was ordained deaconess of this holy cathedral of God and built a monastery at an angle south of it. She owned all the houses lying near the holy church and all the shops which were at the southern angle [. . .] In the first quarter she enclosed her own chambermaids (κουβικουλαρίας), numbering fifty, all of whom lived in purity and virginity (ἐν ἁγνείᾳ καὶ παρθενὶᾳ βιωσάσας). [. . .] [Elisanthia with her sisters Martyria and Palladia] entered with all the others, having made over in advance all of their possessions to the same holy monastery.[34]

32 Jaclyn LaRea Maxwell, *Simplicity and Humility in Late Antique Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 25–26.

33 Jerome, *Epistula* 108.20: 335: 'atque inde pariter reuertentes instabant operi destricto et uel sibi uel ceteris indumenta faciebant, si qua erat nobilis, non permittebatur de domo sua habere comitem, ne ueterum actuum memor et lasciuientis infantiae errorem refricaret antiquum et crebra confabulatione renouaret.'

34 John Chrysostom, *Vita Olympiades* 6, in *Jean Chrysostome. Lettres à Olympias. Seconde édition augmentée de la 'Vie anonyme d'Olympias'*, ed. Anne-Marie Malingrey, Sources Chrétiennes 13 (Paris: Les Édition du Cerf, 1968): 418: Τῇ οὖν θείᾳ βουλήσει χειροτονεῖται διάκονος τῆς αὐτῆς ἁγίας τοῦ Θεοῦ μεγάλης Ἐκκλησίας καὶ κτίζει μοναστήριον εἰς τὸν μεσημβρινὸν αὐτῆς ἐμβολον· πάντα γὰρ τὰ οἰκήματα τὰ παρακείμενα τῇ ἁγίᾳ Ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐργαστήρια τὰ εἰς τὸν λεγόμενον μεσημβρινὸν ἐμβολον ὄντα αὐτῇ διέφερον· [. . .] Καὶ κατὰ πρώτην μὲν τάξιν ἀποκκλείει ἐν αὐτῷ τὰς ἑαυτῆς κουβικουλαρίας, τὸν ἀριθμὸν πεντήκοντα, τὰς πάσας ἐν ἁγνείᾳ καὶ παρθενὶᾳ βιωσάσας. [. . .] καὶ εἰσέρχονται αἱ τρεῖς σὺν ταῖς λοιπαῖς πάσαις προσκυρώσασαι τῷ αὐτῷ εὐαγεῖ μοναστηρίῳ πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐταῖς. Trans. in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1982): 131–32.

From this description, it would seem that former slaves lived in the same complex as the wealthy women who joined the monastery. Only later in the vita are we told that Olympias freed many of her servants in an act of manumission:

> Having called from slavery to freedom (ἀπὸ δουλείας εἰς ἐλευθερίαν) a myriad of household servants (τὸν τῶν οἰκετῶν μυριόδεσμον), she proclaimed them to be of the same honour (ἰσότιμον) as her own nobility (τῆς ἰδίας εὐγενείας ἀνέφηνε·).[35]

The sources on women's monasteries from the late antique Eastern Empire confirm the general impression that noble women had some authority over their own wealth and life and that the Church let them utilize this power as founders and heads of monasteries as well as patronesses of the clergy. When hagiographers are lavish in explaining how much money and property the wealthy women gave to the church, they are probably interested in stressing these women's wealth and worldly power and lauding their virtue.

3 Slavery and Women's Monasticism: Fifth and Sixth Century Western Europe

In the fifth century, when there were already different forms of women's monasteries in the eastern centres of the Roman Empire, such as in Jerusalem and Constantinople, as well as in Rome, monasticism was still only slowly catching on in the West. The situation in Western Europe was radically different from that in the East: the Western Roman Empire had fallen, and newly ascendent kingdoms strove to dominate the heterogeneous and heterodox region. Women's monasticism finally spread throughout Merovingian Gaul in the fifth and especially sixth centuries. Thanks to Caesarius of Arles' *Rule for Nuns* and the two biographical writings that chronicle the life of Queen Radegund, we have relatively good information on women's monasticism from this epoch.

3.1 Caesarius of Arles: *Rule for Nuns*

From Caesarius' mid-sixth-century *Rule for Nuns,* we know that nuns were not to have personal slaves in the monastery. The rule states: 'No one, not even the abbess, may be permitted to have her own maid for her service (*Ancillam propriam nulli*); but

35 Chrysostom, *Vita Olympiades* 15: 440: ἀπὸ δουλείας εἰς ἐλευθερίαν τὸν τῶν οἰκετῶν μυριόδεσμον ἀνακαλεσαμένη ἰσότιμον τῆς ἰδίας εὐγενείας ἀνέφηνε· [. . .].

if they have need, let them receive help from the younger religious (*de iunioribus*).'[36] Obviously, according to this rule, there should not be any slaves for personal service, but a discernible hierarchy in the monastery was present in Caesarius' vision: the abbess held the greatest institutional authority; after her, it was the elderly sisters who deserved the most respect in the monastery. The lowest-ranked group in the internal hierarchy were the younger sisters, who were supposed to serve their elder sisters in a way which would have been expected from a maid. The abbess, who is also called mother, is the unquestionable authority, a fact that is underlined by a paragraph in the *Rule for Nuns*: 'All shall obey the mother after God.'[37]

In accord with the original ideals of monasticism, Caesarius' *Rule* underlines the importance of renouncing property:

> Those who had something in the world (*in saeculo*) shall, when they enter the monastery (*monasterium*), humbly (*humiliter*) offer it to the mother to be of use for the common needs (*communibus usibus profuturum*). However, those who had nothing ought not to seek in the monastery what they could not have outside. Those indeed who seemed to have something in the world should not look down upon their sisters who come in poverty to this fellowship [. . .]. All, therefore, pass your lives in unanimity and concord (*unianimiter et concorditer uiuite*), and honor God in one another (*honorate in uobis inuicem deum*) [. . .].[38]

Caesarius' rule depicts a life dominated by humility, service, and equal honour. The prescribed humility is also supposed to have a practical consequence. The rule declares: 'All works will be done in common'.[39] There was obviously an ideal among the virgins that they should not depend on slaves or previous fortune but should regard each other as equals and live accordingly. However, this is a principle that applied only within the confines of the monastic community and among its members. The rule openly acknowledges that slaves were not to be avoided as such. Slaves were allowed to enter the monastery, i.e., enter the building, and to perform practical work:

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36 Caesarius of Arles, *Regula ad virgines* 7, in *Césaire d'Arles. Oeuvres monastiques*, vol. 1, trans. and eds. Adalbert de Vogüé and Joël Courreau, Sources Chrétiennes 345 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988): 186: 'Ancillam propriam nulli, nec abbatissae, liceat in seruitio suo habere; sed si opus habuerit, de iunioribus in solatio suo accipiat.' Trans. in Maria Caritas McCarthy, *The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1960): 173.

37 Caesarius of Arles, *Regula ad virgines* 18: 192: 'Matri post deum omnes oboediant; praepositae deferant.'

38 Caesarius of Arles, *Regula ad virgines* 21: 194–96: 'Quae aliquid habebant in saeculo, quando ingrediuntur monasterium, humiliter illud offerant matri, communibus usibus profuturum. Quae autem non habuerunt, non ea quaerant in monasterio, quae nec foris habere potuerunt. Illae uero, quae aliquid uidebantur habere in saeculo, non fastidiant sorores suas quae ad illam sanctam societatem ex paupertate uenerunt, nec sic de suis diuutiis superbiant, quae eas monasterio obtulerunt, quomodo si eis in saeculo fruerentur. [. . .]. Omnes ergo unianimiter et concorditer uiuite, et honorate in uobis inuicem deum [. . .].' Trans. in McCarthy, *The Rule for Nuns*: 176.

39 Caesarius of Arles, *Regula ad virgines* 57: 242: 'Omnia opera in commune faciant.' Trans. in McCarthy, *The Rule for Nuns*: 189.

> When the roofs have to be mended, or the doors and windows have to be replaced, or something of this sort has to be repaired, skilled workmen and slaves (*artifices tantu et serui*) to do any such work may come in with the provisor if necessity requires it; but not without the knowledge and permission of the mother.[40]

In other words, while there was no place for slavery within the monastic community or for the possession of slaves by individual sisters, slaves could enter the physical grounds of the monastery. An enslaved workforce was still considered normal as part of "the world" and could even be employed by the monastery. This double standard gives rise to other practical questions that cannot be easily answered. For instance, did the monasteries depend on an enslaved workforce to manage the fields and buildings around the monasteries? The sources being investigated here do not tell us whether or not such women's monasteries were at times connected with and possibly funded by agriculture, nor do they tell us who, if that was the case, worked in the fields.[41]

3.2 Receiving Former Slaves into the Monastery

Caesarius' *Rule* does not explicitly say what the monastic community was supposed to do if a slave arrived with the wish to join the monastery as a member. Caesarius seems not to have foreseen this as a problem, so we might infer that during his lifetime, there were not many runaway slaves trying to enter the monastery. Alternatively, we could also conclude that Caesarius was reluctant to address an issue where monastic principles clashed with the interests of the surrounding society. However, certain slightly later sources indicate that slaves wished to join monasteries. Indeed, this happened so frequently that both secular and ecclesial laws had to be introduced to regulate how monasteries were to deal with runaway slaves. When Bishop Aurelian wrote his rule for nuns, he made sure to elaborate on the issue of runaway slaves and wrote: 'Slaves shall not be received (*ancilla non excipiatur*); however, if a freedwoman (*liberta*) comes as an adolescent and presents herself with a letter from her patron, the abbess will decide if she should be received.'[42]

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40 Caesarius of Arles, *Regula ad virgines* 36: 218: 'Cum uero aut tecta retractanda sunt, aut ostia uel fenestrae sunt conponendae, aut aliquid huiusmodi reparandum, artifices tantum et serui ad operandum aliquid, si necessitas exegerit, cum prouisore introeant; sed nec ipsi sine scientia aut permissio matris.' Trans. in McCarthy, *The Rule for Nuns*: 183.

41 Cf. Judith Evans Grubbs, "Slave and Free at the End of Antiquity," in *Living the End of Antiquity*, eds. Sabine R. Huebner et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 181–94.

42 Aurelianus of Arles, *Regula ad Virgines* 13, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 68, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: JP Migne, 1847): 401: 'Ancilla non excipiatur: liberta tamen si fuerit, adhuc adolescens aetate, et cum epistolis patroni sui venerit, in abbatissae sit arbitrio si excipi debeat.' Trans. in Sarah Louise Greer, "Behind the Veil: The rise of female monasticism and the double house in Early Medieval Fran-

It did happen that released slaves came to monasteries to join them as virgins with the permission of their former masters. We know about such an instance from a sixth-century letter by Pope Gregory the Great in which he granted the slave Montana her freedom along with rights as a Roman citizen and the permission to join a monastery as she wished.[43] Montana had been a slave of the church and had worked for a priest, but after the priest died, the pope set her free with a manumission document. Gregory provides a theological justification for the manumission, i.e., God originally created humans with freedom.[44]

Pope Gregory wished to make it possible for slaves of the church to join monasteries. He thought that if humans tried to stop someone from joining a monastery, it would be like stealing something from God himself. (In fact, Pope Gregory further developed the argument deployed against slavery by Gregory of Nyssa, cf. above.) However, Pope Gregory and the Roman church worried (as Jerome had done a century earlier) whether some slaves wished to join the monasteries for the "wrong" reason, i.e., merely seeking to escape a life of slavery instead of being motivated by the "right" spiritual reasons. Therefore, Canon 6 of the Roman Council of 595 (at which Pope Gregory presided) emphasized that there must be a noviciate in the monasteries, a time of testing, before someone – particularly a slave – could join a monastery as a full member. Canon 6 reads:

> We know that many of the ecclesiastical *familia* hasten to the service of the omnipotent God in order that, living in monasteries in divine service (*seruitium*), they may be free from human servitude (*seruitudo*); [. . .] It is, therefore, necessary that he who wishes to be converted (*conuerti desiderat*) from the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical servitude to the service of God, ought to prove himself first in lay habit and, if his *mores* and way of life bear witness to his good intention, he should be permitted to serve (*seruire*) the omnipotent Lord in a monastery without objection, so that he, who yearns to enter harsher *seruitus* in divine obedience, may leave human service (*seruitium*) as a free person.[45]

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cia" (Master Thesis, University of Auckland, 2012): 122, https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/20320/whole.pdf?sequence=2 [accessed 03.09.2024].

43 Gregory the Great, *Epistula* 6.12, in *S. Gregorii Magni Registrum Epistularum*, vol. 1, ed. Dag Norberg, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 140 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982): 380–81.

44 Gregory the Great, *Epistula* 6.12: 380.

45 Gregory the Great (Roman Council), *Incipit decretum ad clerum in basilica beati Petri apostoli* (*Roman Council §6)*, in *Gregorii I papae Registrum epistolarum (Liber 5–7 (Indictio XIII), Liber 5)*, eds. Paulus Ewald and Ludo M. Hartmann, Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolae 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1891): 365: 'Multos ex ecclesiastica familia nouimus ad omnipotentis Dei seruitium festinare, ut ab humana seruitute liberi in diuino seruitio ualeant in monasteriis conuersari; [. . .]. Si uero festinantes ad omnipotentis Dei seruitium incaute retineamus, illi inuenimur negare quaedam, qui dedit omnia. Unde necesse est, ut quisquis ex iure ecclesiasticae seruitutis ad Dei seruitium conuerti desiderat, probetur prius in laico habitu consitutus et, si mores eius atque conuersatio bono desiderio illius testimonium ferunt, absque ulla retractatione seruire in monasterio omnipotenti Domino permittatur, ut ab humano seruitio liber recedat, qui <in> diuino obsequio districtiorem subire appetit seruitutem.'

In fact, Emperor Justinian underlined the same demand in his law codex.[46] Obviously, the authorities had an interest in controlling the stream of slaves into monastic life. Imperial and ecclesiastical concern that slaves would flee to asceticism only to escape their harsh lot in life suggests that, on the one hand, the monasteries, with their attitude against slavery, posed a socio-economic problem in late antique and early medieval societies because they drained the enslaved workforce, while, on the other hand, they were also seen as important religious institutions and the profession of a desire to live there was so laudable that there was no discussion of altogether denying people the right to join a monastery.

In Leander of Seville's rule for nuns *De institutione virginum* from sixth-century Spain, he deals head-on with the question of how former slaves are to be dealt with within the monastery and urges the sisters to treat each other with love:

> Their birth made them slaves (*ancillas conditio*), their profession has made them your sisters (*sorores professio*). Let nothing remind them of their ancient servitude. She who serves with you in the ranks of those having virginity in Christ should enjoy the same freedom that you have. We do not seek to challenge you to humility in order that we may raise them up in pride, but as long as you accept them as sisters, they will the more willingly be your servants, and they will offer their services, not as subjected to servitude (*obsequium non servitute*), but as free in love (*sed liberae charitate*).[47]

Nonetheless, Leander does not expect that the differences existing in "the world" can be forgotten in the monastery because the nuns will have different needs depending on their upbringing and former life. Due to the diverse experiences of the nuns, certain distinctions should be maintained in the monastery, according to Leander:

> For division must be made to each according to need. She who could be honored in the world and was rich in worldly goods may be more carefully treated in the monastery; she who left costly clothing in the world deserves better in the monastery. But she who lived in poverty in the world and was needy of clothing and food should be thankful to be in a monastery where she is neither cold nor hungry [. . .].[48]

(Trans. in Roy Flechner and Janel Fontaine, "The Admission of Former Slaves into Churches and Monasteries," *Early Medieval Europe* 29, no. 4 [2021]: 586–611).

46 Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*: 144–45.

47 Leander of Seville, *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi* 12, in *Patrologia Latina 72*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris 1844): 886: 'Quas tibi fecit, aut fecerit ancillas conditio, et sorores profession, jam non pro nexu servitutis exulceres, sed pro paritate professionis honores. Quae ergo tecum in Christo virginitatis stipendiis militat, pari tecum libertate exsultat. Nec sic vos provocamus ad humilitatem, ut illas superbia erigamus: quas dum tu accipis it sorores, gratius illae tibi sint famulae, praebeantque obsequium non servitude addictae, sed liberae charitate.' (I rely on both the translations of Claude W. Barlow, *Iberian Fathers*, vol. 1, The Fathers of the Church 62 [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1969]: 215–16 and Charles de Montalembert, *The Monks of the West*, vol. 2 [London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1861]: 189).

48 Leander of Seville, *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi* 27: 887: 'Sic enim dividendum est, prout uniquique opus est. Quae potuit honorari in mundo, et dives fuit in seculo, blandius fuvenda

3.3 Radegund – A Queen and a Slave?

We find a striking example of the idealization of service in monasteries in the hagiographical writings on the Merovingian queen, Radegund, i.e., the *regina* who served as an *ancilla*.[49] Radegund, who – to the dismay of King Clothar I – decided to step down as queen and live as a nun, founded a monastery in Sainte-Croix in *Poitiers* in *ca.* 560. Radegund decided that her community should follow the Rule of Caesarius of Arles. Her *Lives* thus shed light on the rule and its status.[50]

Even in her own lifetime, Radegund became so famous and popular as a saintly person that shortly after her death in the late sixth century, two authors wrote her biography in a hagiographical fashion. In his biography, Venantius Fortunatus described Radegund's eagerness to serve in the monastery:

> While all the nuns (*monachabus*) were deep in sleep, she [Radegund] would collect their shoes, restoring them cleansed and oiled to each. [. . .] she led an austere life in sackcloth and ashes, rising early to be singing Psalms when the others awoke. For no monasterial offices (*de officiis monasterialibus*) pleased her unless she observed them first. She punished herself (*ipsa se castigabat*) if anyone did a good deed before she did. [. . .] She did not shrink from cleaning the privies/latrines but cleaned and carried off the stinking dung. For she believed she would be diminished if these vile services did not ennoble her (*si se non nobilitaret vilitate servitii*). She carried firewood in her arms. [. . .]. She would care for (*serviens*) the infirm beyond her assigned week (*extra suam ebdomadam*), cooking their food, washing their faces [. . .], going the rounds of those she was caring for and returning fasting to her cell.[51]

Good deeds and service were organized in the monastery; there were specific offices and particular times assigned for acts of servitude. Radegund wanted to do even more

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est, in monasterio; et quae reliquit in saeculo vestem pretiosam, cultiorem in monasterio meretur. Quae vero sub penuria vixit in saeculo, et tegumento victuque eguit, grate ferat in monasterio nec algeat, nec esuriat [. . .].' (Trans. in Barlow, *Iberian Fathers*: 222).

49 Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Radegundis* 4, in *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum 2*, eds. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1888): 366: 'the devout lady, queen by birth and marriage, mistress of the palace, served the poor as a handmaid.' ('Sic devota femina nata et nupta regina, palatii domina pauperibus serviebat ancilla'). Trans. in Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg and E. Gordon Whatley, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992): 72.

50 Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Radegundis* 24: 372: 'she took up the Rule of Arles' ('exciperet Arelatensem regulam'). Trans. in McNamara, Halborg and Whatley, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*: 81.

51 Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Radegundis* 23: 324: 'Adhuc monachabus omnibus soporantibus, calciamenta tergens et unguens. Transmittebat per singulas. [. . .]. In cinerem et cilicium semper vitam duxit austeram, prius se levans, ut psalleret, quam congregation surrexisset. Nam de officiis monasterialibus nihil sibi placuit, nisi prima serviret, et ipsa se castigatbat, si bonum post alteram. [. . .]. Secretum etiam purgare opus non tardans, sed occupans, ferens foetores stercoris, credebat se minorem sibi, si se non nobilitaret vilitate servitii. [. . .]. Infirmantibus serviens, ipsa cibos decoquens, aegrotis facies abluens [. . .] visitabat quos fovebat, ieiuna rediens cellulam.' Trans. in McNamara, Halborg and Whatley, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*: 80.

than what the monastic rule and tradition prescribed: she even made service into a competition. The author of Radegund's life was not primarily interested in promoting a certain kind of social equality but in underlining both Radegund's extraordinary willingness to serve and her great humility. There seems to be some exaggeration in Radegund's behaviour or at least in her hagiographers' depiction of it. Thus, it is impossible to make definite social / historical inferences from the text. In effect, Radegund does not question the institution of slavery in society as such: she pushes herself to be the humblest slave of all, a fact that her hagiographer stresses. She thus represents a new ideal that accords with Cassian's message to the Gallic elite quoted previously, i.e., despite belonging to the aristocracy, they ought to serve like slaves.

4 Conclusion

This article has provided a broad and representative, but not exhaustive, depiction of the sources at hand concerning early monasteries for women and the role of slaves within these communities. Admittedly – because of either the prescriptive or laudatory character of the sources – many practical questions remain unanswered. For example, how frequently did slaves enter monasteries to work for the nuns? Moreover, were the monasteries, in fact, dependent on forced labour, even though various sources promote an ideal of equality among nuns? When looking for slaves in late antique monastic texts, they appear everywhere, as they did in any late antique society. In general, former slaves could become sisters if they had the permission of their former owner or were set free by the foundress of the monastery. In general, though, former slaves were not treated like the women who had left a position within the nobility. Social divisions and, at times, even physical separation persisted in many monastic communities.

Obviously, from the beginning of monastic history, there were diverse practices regarding slaves. The sources make it possible to distinguish different approaches:

The *Life of Macrina* promotes an ideal of full equality within a limited religious community of women. It was the managers of the estate, Macrina and her mother, who chose an ascetic lifestyle for the entire household. This transformation did not necessarily give the former slaves and servants better conditions or freedom in any modern sense of the word. Rather, it entailed that the former estate owners would work and live on equal terms with their former slaves. The relationship between the members of Macrina's community is characterized by the concept of ὁμοτιμία: equal honour. The same concept is used to describe Olympias' community. However, in the *Life of Olympias*, we encounter a vision of "relative equality". All former slaves were included in the monastic community, were assigned one wing in a big monastic complex, and were eventually set free.

Jerome's *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae* describes a monastic community without social equality. A strict social hierarchy is upheld by means of different buildings, and diverse tasks are assigned to sisters, depending on their origin. Equality here only finds an expression in the liturgy.

Caesarius' *Rule for Nuns* indicates, in a prescriptive form, a community without personal slaves but with a strict internal hierarchy where the older sisters could exert power over the younger. Enslaved people were part of the maintenance of the monastic property. The complexity of living and describing this monastic life finds an expression in these sources.

Interestingly, the idea of a created order, willed by God, was used to argue both for and against slavery. Social divisions were sometimes understood (directly or indirectly) as integral to the created order (cf. Hildegard of Bingen). In other contexts, by contrast, human freedom was understood as a basic part of the created order (cf., e.g., Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory the Great).

In the monasteries, there was a constant reinterpretation of the vocabulary of the outside world and a vision to radically invert worldly practices. The word "slave" was regularly used as a metaphor to express the expectation that the individual nun would be ready to serve her sisters. Being a slave of God meant serving the community; slave-like service was ennobling. The ideal figures were noble ladies and queens who behaved like servants. Though the metaphorical language did not immediately effect concrete changes in the outer social world, the advent of the Christian ethos and the idea of fundamental equality were nevertheless turning points in human history.[52]

52 The German socialist Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) argued that what was going on in the early monastic communities were nothing short of a "communist" revolution. By now, his Marxist reading of the ancient sources is, of couse, hopelessly outdated and academically dubious. However, Kautsky's book is of interest in this context, because he focused on the institution of slavery in the Roman world and picked up on a monastic transformation of some worldly standards. In his book *Foundations of Christianity* (originally published in German in 1908) Kautsky wrote: 'The monasteries took them up again and continued them; in fact, could develop them to a higher point, as the monasteries replaced slave labor by that of their own free members. In view of the general disintegration of society, the monasteries finally became the only places in the decaying empire in which the last remnants of ancient technology were preserved through the storms of the migration period and even perfected in many points. Aside from the influences of the Orient, particularly of the Arabs, the monasteries were the points from which civilization in Europe again started to grow during the Middle Ages.' (Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity. A Study in Christian Origins* [New York: International Publishers, 1925]: 451–52). However wrong Kautsky might have been, I find it peculiar and worth mentioning that a Marxist interpretation concluded that monasteries were, ideally, communities of shared work and resources.

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