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Holy day in a holy place: space, time, and annual miracles in late antique hagiography and the cult of saints

Abstract: This article examines hagiographical accounts of miracles that occurred annually at sanctuaries of martyr saints on their feast days. It argues that these accounts, popular in Christian literature of the later part of the first Millennium in both the eastern and western Mediterranean, demonstrate the parallel development and close resemblance between Christian concepts of holy places and holy days. The annual miracles confirmed the saints' powerful presence at specific points in time and space, demonstrating that neither the selection of cult places nor feast days was arbitrary, but reflected God's design. God scattered holy places and holy days throughout the earth and the year in order to add glory to His saints and support His people.

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Introduction

Some lengthy literary descriptions, a number of occasional remarks, and also good parallels from various cultures and periods allow us to grasp the importance and vivacity of the festivals during which late antique Christians celebrated the memory of saints. Crowds gathered, stories were read, sermons preached, and hymns sung, all that accompanied by fairs, dancing, eating, and drinking. But several stories from various regions of Christendom also show us another element of the feast – a miracle which repeats year by year, in the same place on the anniversary of the saint's glorious death.

A perfect example of such a story comes from the *Life and martyrdom of Athenogenes of Pedachthoe*, a hagiographical account which probably dates from the

fifth century.¹ It describes the annual feast of this saint, celebrated in his village not far from Sebaste in the province of Armenia Minor, on the 17th of July, in the following way:²

Χρὴ τοῖνυν μηδὲ ἐκεῖνα παραλείπειν ἅπερ τῷ τρισμακαρίῳ καὶ ἀγίῳ μάρτυρι ἐχαρίσθη παρὰ τοῦ πάντα δωρουμένου Χριστοῦ, τῷ ἰουλίῳ μηνὶ καθ' ἕκαστον ἐνιαυτὸν ἐπιτελουμένης τῆς μνήμης αὐτοῦ ἐπιφαινεσθαι τὰ χαρίσματα τοῖς ἀξίοις αὐτοῦ. Καὶ ἡ ἔλαφος παραγίνεται ἐν τῇ μνήμῃ τῶν ἁγίων μαρτύρων, καθὼς ἡτήσατο τὸν θεὸν ὁ μακάριος Ἀθηνογένης. Παραγινομένη δὲ προσάγει τὸν γόνον αὐτῆς δῶρον τῷ θεῷ· προσάγει δὲ αὐτῷ ἀναγινωσκομένου τοῦ ἁγίου εὐαγγελίου ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον, θεωροῦντος παντὸς τοῦ λαοῦ, καὶ τιθεῖσα τὰ ἑαυτοῦ γόνατα προσκυνεῖ τῷ θεῷ· καταλιμπάνουσα τὸ ἑαυτῆς νεβρὸν ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ πορεύεται ἐν εἰρήνῃ. Ἀναλίσκεται δὲ ὁ γόνος αὐτῆς τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ καὶ μνήμην τῶν ἁγίων μαρτύρων. Ἐν δὲ ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ τῶν καυμάτων μὴ φαίνεσθαι εἰς κρεωπώλιον ἢ ἐν ἄλλοις τοῖσι μυῖαν ἐν τῇ μνήμῃ αὐτοῦ· εἰ δὲ καὶ φανῇ ἐν οἴκῳ ἀδρανῇ αὐτὴν εἶναι καὶ ὥσπερ ἐν χειμῶνι νεναρκυῖαν, καὶ ὃς ἐὰν ἐπικομίσῃται ἐκ τοῦ πιτρασκομένου κρέους, λόγῳ εὐλογίας ἀκέραιον τοῦτο φυλάττεσθαι ἕως ἂν βούληται. Καὶ ὃς ἐὰν συνδράμῃ ἐν τῇ μνήμῃ τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ χρήζῃ ὕδατος – βραχὺ γάρ ἐστιν ὕδωρ ἐν τῷ τόπῳ ἐκείνῳ – καὶ ἐὰν ὀρύξῃ, παρέχεται αὐτῷ τὸ ἀρκοῦν ὕδωρ ἐν τῷ τόπῳ ἐκείνῳ, ὅπερ μετὰ τοῦτο ὑπονοστεῖται καὶ ζηραίνεται.

It is then necessary that we should not omit those things which have been granted to the holy martyr by Christ, the granter of all gifts – namely the graces that occur to those worthy of him, when his commemoration is celebrated in the month of July every year. So the deer comes in the memorial shrine of the holy martyrs, as the blessed Athenogenes asked God. When it appears, it brings forth its offspring as a gift to God. And it brings it, while the holy gospel is being read at the altar, all the people watching, and, bending its knees, it venerates God. And it leaves her fawn in the church and departs peacefully. And her young is consumed on the same day to the glory of God and in the memory of the holy martyrs. And in that time of burning heat, no fly appears in butcheries or other places, in his memorial shrine. And even if it does appear at a house, it is immobile and numb, as in winter. And if one obtains some of the meat that is sold, they can keep it intact as long as they wish, due to the blessing. And, if someone assisting in his commemoration needs water (water is indeed scarce in that place) and digs, sufficient water is granted to him in that place, which after that disappears and dries away.

This description is one of the numerous scenes of a specific miracle repeating every year at a feast of a saint in his or her shrine that we find in late antique hagiography. And so, for example, the Greek *Martyrdom of Sergios and Bakchos* claims that at the annual commemoration of the former, beasts of the desert

¹ For the edition and the history of this text see: P. MARAVAL, *La Passion inédite de S. Athénogène de Pédachthoé en Cappadoce* (BHG 197b). *Subsidia hagiographica*, 75. Brussels 1990.

² *Passio s. Athenogenis* 40, trans. by E. Rizos in the *Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity* database E02999. Hereafter the database will be referred to by a hyperlinked record number followed by the name of its author.

come to his shrine in Resafa, tame and harmless.³ The Greek *Life of Tychon*, written in the sixth or seventh century, asserts that at the feast of this saint, on the 16th of June, grapes in Amathous in Cyprus miraculously ripen, and the patriarch Methodius describes the miraculous effervescing of the oil in the lamps at the feast of St Agatha in Catania.⁴ In Latin literature similar stories can be found in Gregory of Tours, although interestingly, some of them are located in the East. When describing the festival of St Thomas in Edessa, Gregory lists some of the elements which we have already seen in the *Martyrdom of Athenogenes*: no quarrels, no flies, no shortage of water.⁵ At the tomb of St Andrew in Patras on his feast day his body secretes fragrant manna which is later used to heal the sick.⁶ But Gregory also tells us about repetitive miracles in the West: a dried lily blossoms at the tomb of St Genesius of Tarbes, and bare trees become covered with flowers at the tomb of St Eulalia in Merida.⁷ Also, according to the *Martyrdom of Clement*, bishop of Rome, at his feast the sea in Chersonesus recedes three miles to uncover his tomb for seven days.⁸ This list is by no means complete.⁹

This article aims to explain the literary function of such accounts and to show a coherent image of the divine presence in the world they meant to build. I will argue that the annual miracle accounts served hagiographers to express an idea of the feast, whose two essential elements, Delehaye's "hagiographical coordinates", date and place, were equally important and strictly connected.¹⁰ Even more importantly, the study of this connection reveals a late antique perception of time and space in which, in specific moments and places, the power of God and his saints intensified in a predictable way.

It goes without saying, the miracle accounts showed the power of saints and their shrines, and consequently may have served to advertise their festivals. Indeed, a good turnout at the feast was important. The number of pilgrims attending it confirmed the prestige of the sanctuary, strengthened the position of the local bishop, and was advantageous to the local economy: the busy market mentioned

3 *Martyrium ss. Sergii et Bacchi* (BHG 1624), 30; CSLA E02791 (E. Rizos).

4 John the Almsgiver, *Vita s. Tychonis* (BHG 1859–1860) 12–18; CSLA E07040 (E. Rizos/G. HERMANIN DE REICHENFELD); Methodius, *Encomium s. Agathae* (BHG 38), 32.

5 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum* 32; CSLA E00515 (M. TYCNER/B. WARD-PERKINS).

6 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum* 30; CSLA E00502 (M. TYCNER).

7 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum* 73; CSLA E00481 (M. TYCNER), and 90; CSLA E00640 (M. TYCNER/B. WARD-PERKINS).

8 *Passio s. Clementis* (BHL 1848), 7; CSLA E02488 (M. PIGNOT).

9 See e.g. The miracles at the feast of St Symon the Stylites: Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.14; CSLA E04490. St Euphemia: Theophylact Simocatta, *Historia* 8.14; CSLA E00015 (E. Rizos).

10 H. DELEHAYE, Cinq leçons sur la methode hagiographique. *Subsidia hagiographica*, 21. Brussels 1934, 13–17.

in the *Martyrdom of Athenogenes* is a recurrent motif in the descriptions of saints' festivals.¹¹ That making crowds gather on a feast day was important can be illustrated by a story from the late fifth-century *Miracles of St Thekla*. Its author recounts with satisfaction that Bishop Marianos of Tarsus, who forbade his flock to go to the festival of St Thekla at Seleucia, was punished for that by the saint with sudden death.¹² No better proof is needed that the author was anxious about a good turnout at the festival in the sanctuary in which he served.

However, unlike the episode of the deer at Pedachtoe, most stories quoted above do not talk about a festival and sanctuary the author was connected with, but about distant places, often too distant to visit. To take one example, Gregory of Tours describes annual miracles in Chersonesus, Edessa, and Merida, but not in the sanctuary in Tours, whose fame he certainly wanted to boost and did so by writing four books of the *Miracles of St Martin*. But among 270 stories about miracles which occurred at the shrine of St Martin in Tours or St Julian in Brioude, the other sanctuary whose position Gregory promoted, there is none which would repeat every year on the same day, even if in both shrines the feast is evidently a high point of the saint's healing activity.¹³ It is unlikely that Gregory really tried to encourage his readers to travel to the shores of the Black Sea or Syria, or even to Merida.¹⁴ Also, unlike miracles from Tours and Brioude, and several famous healing shrines, annual miracle stories do not focus on a high number of usual cures which attracted the sick, but on spectacular and regularly repeating wonders showing the power of saints over animals, plants, and the elements. Thus, advertisement is not a fully satisfying explanation of this type of miracle. We should look elsewhere to understand their purpose.

Admittedly, stories about wonders in shrines of faraway places were attractive for literary purposes. Like the apocryphal acts of the Apostles, especially those whose action was set in distant countries and involved wild, sometimes fantastic,

11 See e.g. Basil the Great, *Ascetica. Regulae fusius tractatae* 40; CSLA E01278 (E. RIZOS). Asterius of Amaseia, *Homilia* 3.1; CSLA E01958 (E. RIZOS). Cassiodorus, *Variae* 8.33; CSLA E04335 (B. WARD-PERKINS). Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum* 57; CSLA E00583 (M. TYCNER).

12 *Miracula s. Theclae* 29; CSLA E05648 (J. DOROSZEWSKA).

13 E.g. Gregory of Tours, *Libri de virtutibus s. Martini* 2.56; CSLA E03477, 4.20; CSLA E04118), and his *Liber in gloria confessorum* 18; CSLA E02561 and 94; CSLA E02753 (all by K. WOJTALIK); see also the Coptic *Wonders and Miracles of Apa Phoibammon* 6–8; CSLA E00240 (G. SCHENKE).

14 Spain was closer to Gaul than the eastern shrines, but Gregory strongly associated it with heretic kings and their people: E. JAMES, Gregory of Tours, the Visigoths and Spain, in S. Barton/P. Linehan (eds.), *Cross, crescent and conversion: Studies on medieval Spain and Christendom in memory of Richard Fletcher. The Medieval Mediterranean*, 73. Leiden 2007, 43–64.

animals, they provided a good and pious read, and this aspect of religious narrative cannot be ignored.¹⁵ However, upon a closer examination we can see that they also implied a certain way of thinking about the saints, their power, space, and time. And their examination helps us to better understand the new religious mentality from which they grew.

Emergence of the holy places and holy days

The conviction that some places in the world are saturated with divine power emerged early in the Constantinian period. We can see it first in the Holy Land, and, just slightly later, at the tombs of the Apostles and martyrs, which began to be considered sources of miraculous power in the mid-fourth century and, disseminated throughout Christendom, formed a network of sacred points on its map.¹⁶ The late fifth-century author of the *Miracles of St Thecla* reflects on this issue in the following way:¹⁷

...φιλόανθρωπος ὢν ὁ Θεὸς καὶ περὶ τὸ ἐλεεῖν ἐτοιμώτατος καὶ φιλοτιμώτατος ἐγκατασπεῖρει τῇ γῇ τοὺς ἁγίους, ὥσπερ τισὶν ἰατροῖς ἀρίστοις κατανείμας τὴν οἰκουμένην...

...God, being a friend of mankind, very disposed to act mercifully, and supremely generous, sowed his saints over the land, as if parcelling out the inhabited world among certain excellent doctors...

Two elements of the sacred geography presented in this passage are important. First, the author clearly perceives the Christian world as a network of holy places. Second, he considers this network to be created by God's will and not by human design. While many authors emphasised the possibility and even the necessity of

15 S.F. JOHNSON, Late antique narrative fiction: apocryphal acts and the Greek novel in the fifth-century *Life and Miracles of Thekla*, in S.F. Johnson (ed.), *Greek literature in Late Antiquity: dynamism, didacticism, classicism*. London 2006, 189–207.

16 For the debate on how the phenomenon of the holy places appeared see R. MARKUS, How on earth could places become holy? Origins of the Christian idea of holy places. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994), 257–271; B. BITTON-ASHKELONY, Encountering the sacred: the debate on Christian pilgrimage in Late Antiquity. Berkeley 2005; A.M. YASIN, Saints and church spaces in the late antique Mediterranean: architecture, cult, community. Cambridge 2009, 15–26, and R. WIŚNIEWSKI, The beginnings of the cult of relics. Oxford 2019, 27–47.

17 *Miracula s. Theclae* 4, ed. by G. DAGRON, Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle. *Subsidia hagiographica*, 62. Brussels 1978; trans. S.F. JOHNSON in S.F. Johnson/A.-M. Talbot, *Miracle tales from Byzantium*. *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library*, 12. Cambridge, MA 2012; CSLA E05371 (J. DOROSZEWSKA).

spreading holiness through the transfer of relics, there was a widely shared conviction that holy places could not be established anywhere. This can be observed in a well-known canon of the Council of Carthage held in 401, which introduced the following rule:¹⁸

Item placuit ut altaria quae passim per agros et per vias tamquam martyrum instituuntur; in quibus nullum corpus aut reliquiae martyrum conditae probantur; ab episcopis qui locis eisdem praesunt, si fieri potest, evertantur.

There are in many places, in the fields and by the ways, altars constructed in honour of martyrs. If it cannot be proven that a body or relics of the martyrs were placed there, it pleased us that the bishops of those places should destroy them, if this can be done.

This canon may be read in the context of the conflict between the Donatists and Catholics: the bishops certainly tried to keep control over cult places and prevent the veneration of the Donatist martyrs. But it is important to see what the canon says explicitly: martyrial shrines can be built only in the places which were physically linked with a saint. Admittedly, we can see churches dedicated to saints whose graves or relics they did not possess. But late antique ecclesiastics were usually uncomfortable about this and they worked hard to create a link: by bringing relics in, inventing a story about their presence, transfer or discovery (almost always initiated by God or the saints themselves), or at least by suggesting that the place was visited by a saint during his or her travels.¹⁹

In this very same period in which the first holy places appeared in Christendom, Christians started to fill time with holy days. Before the fourth century the church obviously followed the rhythm of the week and gathered on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist, but Sunday was not really a holy day and so the ecclesiastical calendar at that time had only one major focal point, Easter.²⁰ But in the fourth century this changed. The Roman *Depositio martirum* shows that in the middle of this century the Church of Rome celebrated Christmas, 23 feasts of martyrs, al-

¹⁸ *Registri ecclesiae Carthaginensis excerpta*, ed. CH. MUNIER CC Series latina, 149. Turnhout 1974, 83; trans. S. ADAMIAK in CSLA E08261.

¹⁹ Excellent examples of each of these strategies can be found in Gregory of Tours: transfer of relics to a church missing them: *Liber in gloria martyrum* 33; CSLA E00516; an imaginary transfer of relics: *Liber in gloria martyrum* 11; CSLA E00386. Finding of relics under a newly-built church: *Liber in gloria martyrum* 62; CSLA E00587 (all by M. TYCNER). Gaul is full of places through which St Martin supposedly passed: *Libri de virtutibus sancti Martini* 1.17; CSLA E02873. *Liber in gloria confessorum* 5; CSLA E02455 and 11; CSLA E02553 (all by K. WOJTALIK). See B. BEAUJARD, *Le culte des saints en Gaul: les premiers temps. Histoire religieuse de la France*, 15. Paris 2000, 378.

²⁰ P.F. BRADSHAW/M.E. JOHNSON, *The origins of feast, fasts and seasons in early Christianity*. Collegeville, MN 2011.

most all of them from the City, and 12 commemorations of its non-martyr bishops.²¹ In 411 the Syriac Martyrology composed in Edessa names nearly 160 feast days of martyrs.

Admittedly, these celebrations did not appear out of thin air. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* attests the custom of gathering at the tomb of the martyr probably already in the late second century, and in the mid-third century Cyprian of Carthage recommends that the Christians note down the date of death of the martyrs, in order to commemorate them afterwards.²² However, the third-century commemorations hardly differed from normal annual meetings at the tombs of dead members of the family or friends. The famous passage from the ending of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* presents the character and purpose of such gatherings in the place ...²³

... ἐνθα ὡς δυνατόν ἡμῖν συναγομένοις ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει καὶ χαρᾷ παρέξει ὁ κύριος ἐπιτελεῖν τὴν τοῦ μαρτυρίου αὐτοῦ ἡμέραν γενέθλιον εἰς τε τὴν τῶν προηθληκότων μνήμην καὶ τῶν μελόντων ἀσκησίν τε καὶ ἐτοιμσίαν.

... where the Lord will grant that we, as far as we can, shall gather in joy and gladness, and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in remembrance of those who have already fought the contest, and for the training and preparation of those who will do so in the future.

Remembering the dead was the obvious aim of every meeting at the graves, Christian or not. Training and preparation for those who would struggle in the future was a specifically Christian element. But the didactic aim of this celebration only emphasises the difference between the period in which saints were admired as examples to follow and that in which they became intercessors and holders of miraculous power.²⁴ Later feasts, with crowds gathering, vigils, hymn singing, fairs, and banqueting, differed from these early commemorations as much as splendid martyrial basilicas in which the powerful bodies of the saints lay differed from

21 *Depositio episcoporum* and *Depositio martyrum*, in: *Chronica minora* 1, ed. TH. MOMMSEN. *MGH, Auctores antiquissimi*, 9. Berlin 1892, 70–72.

22 *Passio Polycarpi* 18. For its dating see P. HARTOG, *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Oxford 2013, 171–186, with references to the earlier discussion. Cyprian, *Ep.* 12.2; CSLA E08125 (S. ADAMIAK). See V. SAXER, *Morts, martyrs, reliques en Afrique chrétienne aux premiers siècles: les témoignages de Tertullien, Cyprien et Augustin à la lumière de l'archéologie africaine. Théologie historique*, 55. Paris 1980, 105–107.

23 *Passio Polycarpi* 18.3, ed. P. HARTOG; trans. E. RIZOS in CSLA E00087.

24 CH. PIETRI, *L'évolution du culte des saints aux premiers siècles chrétiens: du témoin à l'intercesseur*, in J.-Y. Tillet (ed.), *Les fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (III^e–XIII^e siècle): actes du colloque de Rome (27–29 octobre 1988). Publications de l'École française de Rome*, 149. Rome 1991, 15–36.

the martyrs' graves in the times of the persecution. They did not differ just because they were more magnificent, lasted longer, and gathered more people, but above all because they were really sacred moments in which God's and his servants' power was witnessed and celebrated.

Time and space together

There is a close parallel between the emergence of the martyrial feasts and shrines. First, they appeared in the very same period and environment. It is interesting to note that the codex in which the *Depositio martirum* was placed among other lists and calendars was a work of Furius Dionysius Filocalus. He was the same calligrapher who, acting on the order of pope Damasus, produced a series of beautiful inscriptions which marked the refurbished burial places of several Roman martyrs. Thus, in Rome the process of marking holy sites and holy days not only occurred simultaneously but also involved the same people.²⁵ It seems that the calendar and the renovation of martyr tombs were two elements of the same programme.²⁶

Second, location and time were really two coordinates of the martyrial feasts. This can be seen in late antique Christian calendars where each entry often consists of three elements: the date, the name of the saint, and the place in which they suffered martyrdom and at which their feast was celebrated. Local calendars sometimes omit the place of celebration as it was obvious for everybody, but complex martyrologia, which compile and integrate calendars of different churches, usually name it. In some calendars the link between the day and the place is even stronger. The *Depositio martirum* and the *Depositio episcoporum* specify an exact location, typically in one of Rome's suburban cemeteries, at which the commemoration is celebrated: *XIII kal. Feb. Fabiani in Callisti et Sebastiani in Catacumbas, XII kal. Feb. Agnetis in Nomentana*: "13th day before the Kalends of February [the commemoration] of Fabian at [the cemetery] of Callixtus and of Sebastian in the Catacombs. 12th day before the Kalends of February: the [commemoration] of Agnes at [the cemetery] on the Via Nomentana" etc.²⁷

²⁵ See M. SALZMAN, On Roman time: the codex-calendar of 354 and the rhythms of urban life in Late Antiquity. Berkeley 1990, 26 and 202–204.

²⁶ For the link between the calendars and shrines (and their iconography) in a broader perspective see A. M. YASIN, Saints and church spaces in the late antique Mediterranean. Cambridge 2009, 250–259.

²⁷ *Depositio martyrum* (as footnote 21 above), 71.

Cult places needed feasts and feasts needed places. Even Christological feasts, which were obviously Christendom-wide, were observed with special solemnity in the shrines built over the sites of the Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection, and it is hardly a coincidence that the celebration of Christmas is attested for the first time just a few years after the construction of the sanctuary of the Nativity in Bethlehem: the new cult place required a special moment to celebrate the event which was the very reason of its existence.²⁸

With the feasts of martyrs the link between the feast and the shrine remained even closer, even in the case of famous saints venerated in the East and West. In Sermon 298, preached in the late 420s in Hippo, Augustine expresses his dissatisfaction with the small number of people who gathered in his church for the celebration of the apostles Peter and Paul.²⁹

Debuimus quidem tantorum martyrum diem, hoc est, sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli, maiore frequentia celebrare. Si enim celebramus frequentissime natalitia agnorum, quanto magis debemus arietum?

Really, we should have been celebrating the feast of such great martyrs, that is of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, with a much bigger crowd than this. After all, if we flock in big crowds to the celebration of the birthday of lambs, how much more should we do for those of the rams?

Augustine evidently makes an allusion to the fact that the festivals of the local martyrs of Hippo attracted many more people than the feast of those two super-saints, whose tombs, however, were in distant Rome.

The third element of the parallel between shrines and feasts is that the former were the places and the latter the moments in which the power of God and His servants manifested itself with unusual strength. This concentration of miraculous power is evident with the martyrial shrines.³⁰ The overwhelming majority of annual miracles occurred at the tombs of saints, which in most cases served as the main centres of their cults. Admittedly, a few successful cults spread far and wide and some authors emphasised that saints' activity was not limited to their

²⁸ For the firm embedding of the festivals in the topography of Jerusalem see F. GRAF, *Roman festivals in the Greek East: from the early empire to the middle Byzantine era*. Cambridge 2015, 227–238. The beginnings of Christmas are still widely discussed, see C.P.E. NOTHAFT, *The origins of the Christmas date: some recent trends in historical research*. *Church History* 81 (2012), 903–911.

²⁹ Augustine, *Sermo* 298.1, ed. C. LAMBOT. *Stromata Patristica et Mediaevalia*, 1. Utrecht 1950; trans. E. HILL, *The works of Saint Augustine*, 3/9. New York 1994; CSLA E02613 (R. WIŚNIEWSKI).

³⁰ P. BROWN, *The cult of the saints: its rise and function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago 1981, 86–127.

tombs or indeed to any specific place.³¹ But the very zeal of such statements suggests that the general opinion was different. The saints were believed to be particularly powerful at their graves.

A similar connection, although admittedly not as strong, existed between the miracles and feasts. It was during the feasts of saints that their miracles were commemorated with special attention. As the seventh-century author of the Coptic *Life of Shenoute* points out, the miracle stories associated with his hero were read “any time, but especially on the day of his holy remembrance which is the 7th day of the month Epiph”.³² But several authors emphasise that the feast is a moment at which people not only hear about miracles but also expect them to occur. The *Apparition of St Michael the Archangel*, presumably written in his shrine on the Gargano, claims that the healings in that place occurred “especially on his feast day, when larger crowds than usual gather from neighbouring provinces”.³³ Neither is it a coincidence that the *Martyrdom of St Agatha* attributes her greatest miracle, putting an end to the eruption of Etna and saving Catania where her tomb was venerated, to the day of her festival.³⁴ This brings us very close to the notion of annual miracles. However, it does not explain their repetitive nature which we need to explore further.

Sacred repetition

The idea of repetition is obviously crucial for the feasts that consisted in celebrating a historical event, and all Christian feasts of Late Antiquity belong to this category.³⁵ Both the Christological and martyrial feasts of that period repeated what they commemorated or rather brought the participants back to the sacred time of the commemorated event.³⁶ *Exsultet*, the Easter hymn, known from a sev-

³¹ Gregory the Great, *Dialogi* 2.38; CSLA E08470.

³² Vita Sinuthii, 1, ed. J. LEIPOLDT. CSCO, 41. Paris 1906; trans. G. SCHENKE; CSLA E01093.

³³ *Maxima tamen eiusdem die natalis, cum et de provinciis circumpositis plus solito conflua turba recurat ... Liber de apparitione s. Michaelis in monte Gargano* (BHL 5948), 6, ed. G. WAITZ, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum*. Hannover 1878, 543; see CSLA E03238 (M. PIGNOT).

³⁴ See footnote 13 above.

³⁵ S.K. ROLL, Toward the origins of Christmas. *Liturgia condenda*, 5. Kampen 1995, 26–27.

³⁶ This certainly brings us close to Eliade's sacred and cyclical time (M. ELIADE, *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion*. New York 1961, 68–113) although it has been rightly pointed out that the distinction between sacred and linear is not fully relevant to Christian perception of time in Antiquity, and the attempts to reconcile the two not fully convincing, see ROLL, Toward the ori-

enth-century manuscript but certainly older, repeats several times: “This is the night”, and adds: “O truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth”.³⁷ Indeed, the concept of annual miracles may have originated with the Christological feasts, for it is in their context that such miracles are attested earliest. According to Epiphanius of Salamis, writing in the 370s, in some rivers on the 6th of January, which according to him was the date of both the Nativity and the Miracle at Cana, water turns to wine.³⁸ About the same time the pilgrim Egeria’s account probably makes a reference to the miracle of fire which appeared every year on Easter night inside Christ’s tomb in Jerusalem.³⁹ In the fifth century Paschasius, bishop of Lilybaeum, informs pope Leo about a baptismal font which fills with water on the same feast.⁴⁰ In the sixth century Gregory of Tours describes the same miracle but in a different location.⁴¹ Finally, the anonymous Pilgrim of Piacenza asserts that on Epiphany the waters of the Jordan stay still for the time of the baptism.⁴² In each case the miracle is connected with the event which the feast commemorates: the miracle of Cana, the Resurrection, the baptism of Christ.

With the annual miracles of saints the pattern is the same. The feasts of martyrs were truly celebrated as the day of their death and triumph. They consisted of several elements which directed the thoughts of the participants to the glorious death of the heroes: their Martyrdom was read, a sermon on their suffering was preached, and in some places their relics were displayed. But there is more to it than that. The *passiones* often present martyrs as dying a miraculous death: the elements do not harm them, ferocious beasts lick their feet, and witnesses marvel at the amount of their blood. On the feast day the same miracles are repeated. In Chersonesus the sea reveals St Clement’s tomb as it did after his death, in Resafa wild animals become tame like those which mourned over the saint’s death and accompanied his funeral.⁴³ Perhaps even more characteristically, according to The-

gins of Christmas, 18–23 and J. DAY, Ritualizing time, in R. URO et al. (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of early Christian ritual*. Oxford 2018, 554–569, at p. 556.

37 For the dating see G. FUCHS/H. M. WEIKMANN, *Das Exsultet. Geschichte, Theologie und Gestaltung der österlichen Lichtdanksagung*. Regensburg 1992, 17–21.

38 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 31(51), 30.1–3; see J. NAUMOWICZ, *Święta egipskie i chrześcijańskie. Świądectwo Epifaniasza z Salaminy* [Egyptian and Christian feasts: a testimony of Epiphanius of Salamis]. *U Schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze* 6 (2007), 32–50, at 44–49.

39 Egeria, *Itinerarium* 24.3.

40 Leo, *Ep.* 3.3.

41 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum* 68; CSLA E02679 (K. WOJTALIK).

42 Pilgrim of Piacenza, *Itinerarium* 11. According to the author the water is collected into jars and the ship-owners from Alexandria sprinkle their ships with it.

43 *Passio ss. Sergii et Bacchi* 26–28 and 30, see CSLA E02791 (E. RIZOS).

ophylact Simocatta, in Chalcedon the blood of St Euphemia becomes fresh and liquid,⁴⁴ thus showing that this is really the *dies natalis*, the day of the martyrdom and birth of the saint. The only exception is the miracle at Pedachthoe, which did not commemorate the saint's death. However, it fulfilled St Athenogenes' prophecy promising that the offspring of the deer would never be caught by hunters, but would instead bring themselves to be offered and consumed in his memory.⁴⁵ Thus, also this miracle was closely connected with the story of the saint's life and death.

Intensified presence

The annual miracle stories rarely explicitly state whose power performed the miracles, but they suggest that the saint was present when they occurred. Of course, the saints were expected to reside in their sanctuaries regularly, but the authors often pictured them as occasionally leaving their shrines to attend to certain matters before returning to them again. In the *Miracles of St Artemios*, for example, we witness the saint visiting a monk who needed his help on an island in the Sea of Marmara, and explaining that he could not come earlier because he had to be present with the crowds which gathered at his tomb during his festival.⁴⁶ The saints, like Greek gods, always returned at their feasts, summoned back by those assembled at their shrines. At the beginning of the fifth century Prudentius invoked the presence of St Vincent in this way:⁴⁷

*Si rite sollemnem diem
ueneramur ore et pectore,
si sub tuorum gaudio
uestigiorum sternimur,
paulisper huc inlabere,
Christi fauorem deferens,*

⁴⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *Historia* 8.14; CSLA E00015. See also Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.3, who however does not say that the miracle occurs at irregular intervals; CSLA E00374 (both by E. RIZOS).

⁴⁵ *Passio s. Athenogenis* 28.

⁴⁶ *Miracula s. Artemii* 40; CSLA E04255 (J. DOROSZEWSKA).

⁴⁷ Prudentius, *Liber peristephanon* 5.561–568, ed. by M. P. CUNNINGHAM. *CC Series latina*, 126. Turnhout 1966; trans. H. J. THOMSON, Prudentius, 2. Cambridge, MA 1953; CSLA E00885 (M. TYCNER/M. SZADA).

*sensus grauati ut sentiant
leuamen indulgentiae.*

If we duly reverence the day of your festival with lips and heart, if we bow down before your relics rejoicing in them, come down to us here for a little while bringing the favour of Christ, that our burdened souls may feel the relief of forgiveness.

A sixth- or seventh-century author of the Coptic *Enkomion of St Kollouthos*, which was delivered on the feast day of this saint at his shrine in Antinoe, summons him with very similar words:⁴⁸

ω παγονιστης εν ογμε ω παειν επιαλβο ννετωωνε αμογ ψαρον μποογ ω
πβαικλον μηεχ̣ω πεψωτ ντηντεροννενπηγε αμογ ψαρον μποογ ω πισραελιτης
ετε μη κρογ νενητγ σμογ ενεκψηρε ετσοογς εροκ παρακαλει μηεχ̣ εραι εχων
νηκω ναν εβολ ννεννοβε.

True competitor, physician who heals the afflicted, come to us today! Crown-bearer of Christ, merchant for the kingdom of heaven, come to us today! Guileless Israelite, bless your children gathered for you! Invoke Christ on our behalf, and he forgives us our sins!

A most spectacular scene of the annual arrival of a saint at her feast can be found in the *Miracles of St Thekla* in the following passage:⁴⁹

Καθ' ἣν γὰρ τιμᾶται πανήγυριν ἡ παρθένος – λαμπρὰ δὲ αὕτη καὶ περίσημος καὶ πολυάνθρωπός ἐστιν, ὡς ἂν καὶ πολλῶν πανταχόθεν εἰς αὐτὴν συρρεόντων –, εἴ τις φυλάξει κατὰ τὴν ἱερὰν νυκτεγερσίαν αὐτῆς τῆς ἑορτῆς ὑπὲρ τὴν ἀκρώρειαν τοῦ κατ' αὐτὴν ὄρους ἀνεστηκώς, ὁ πρὸς ἔω μὲν τὰ νῶτα, πρὸς δὲ δύσιν τὴν ὄψιν κέκτηται, γενόμενος δὲ αὐτόθι καὶ ἀγρυπνήσας ὁρᾷ πυρίνῳ ἄρματι ὑποῦ τοῦ ἀέρος βεβῶσαν τε τὴν παρθένον καὶ διφρηλατοῦσαν, καὶ οἰκοθεν οἰκαδε ἐπειγομένην ἀπὸ τῶν κατὰ Σελεύκειαν ἐπ' ἐκεῖνο τὸ νυμφευτήριον, ὃ ἀγαπᾷ τε μᾶλλον τῶν ἄλλων μεθ' ἡμᾶς καὶ περιέπει καὶ τέθηπεν, ὡς ἐν καθαρᾷ τε καὶ ἀμφοιδεξίῳ καταγωγῇ κείμενον.

The festival in honour of the virgin martyr [Thekla in Dalisandos] is magnificent, famous, and well attended, so that people flock to the festival from all over. If, during the holy night vigil of her festival, one keeps watch while standing on the highest peak of the mountain next to the city (which turns its back to the East and faces the West) and remains on the spot without falling asleep, one will see the virgin, high in the air and mounted on a chariot of fire, hastening from one of her homes to another, from the region of Seleukia to that virginal dwelling [at Dalisandos], which she loves more than any others besides us [i.e. the shrine of Hagia Thekla at Seleucia].

⁴⁸ *Encomion on St Kollouthos* 110; CSLA E00666, ed. and trans. S.E. THOMPSON. CSCO, 544–545. Louvain 1993. See also the Coptic *Encomion on Apa Apollo*, ed. K.H. KUHN. CSCO, 394/5. Louvain 1978, 38, 8–14; CSLA E05192 (both records by G. SCHENKE).

⁴⁹ *Miracula s. Theclae*, 26; ed. G. DAGRON, trans. S.F. JOHNSON; CSLA E05643 (J. DOROSZEWSKA).

This highly rhetorical description reflects a widely shared belief: the presence of the saints in their sanctuaries (among which some are more important than others) is stronger and more certain at their feasts. The annual miracle serves as confirmation of this presence and sanctifies a point in time, in the same way as the miracle-making tomb sanctifies a point in space.

Date

The importance of the feast as a miraculous day is frequently emphasised in the Greek *passions épiques*, much developed and dramatized accounts of the sufferings of martyrs. In many of them the death of the hero is preceded by a long prayer in which the saints ask God to bestow special graces upon those who invoke their name, venerate their relics, read their martyrdom, and, most importantly from our perspective, celebrate their feast, particularly in their sanctuaries.⁵⁰

Therefore, in the context of the expected presence of the saint at the sanctuary, the annual miracles served an additional purpose: they proved that the feast was celebrated on the correct day of the year. This day was never regarded as purely symbolic and could not be arbitrarily chosen by the church. The feast had to be observed on the same day of the year on which the event which it commemorated had taken place and which had been pre-set and often announced by God.⁵¹

Of course, it is undeniable that the dates of several feasts that appeared in Late Antiquity were in fact invented in this period. It is not coincidental that many prominent saints had their feasts around the winter and summer solstices: John the Baptist on 24 June, Peter and Paul on 28 or 29 June, Stephen on 26 December, just after Christmas, followed by the Apostles Peter, James, John, and Paul on 26

50 *Passio s. Georgii* (BHG 670a), ed. K. KRUMBACHER, *Der heilige Georg in der griechischen Überlieferung. Abh. der Kgl. Bayer. Akademie der Wiss., Philos.-philol. und hist. Klasse* 25/3. Munich 1911, 16.3–8; *Passio s. Barbarae* (BHG 213), ed. J. VITEAU, *Passion des saints Écaterine et Pierre d'Alexandrie, Barbara et Anysia*. Paris 1897, 98–99. These examples have been borrowed from B. FLUSIN, *Le contrat de Marina: passions épiques et culte des saints*, in V. Déroche/B. Ward-Perkins/R. Wisniewski (eds.), *Culte des saints et littérature hagiographique: Accords et désaccords. Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, Monographies*, 55. Leuven 2020, 39–53, who shows an interplay between holy places, holy days, and one more element essential for the cult of saints: the accounts of their martyrdom, which are often presented as vectors of thaumaturgical power.

51 The announcement of the day of death: Eugippius, *Vita s. Severini* 41; CSLA E02347 (M. Pignot). Dynamius, *Vita s. Maximi Reiensis* 18; CSLA E000852 (D. Lambert). *Vita s. Hilari Galeatensis* (BHL 3913), 11; CSLA E02534 (M. Pignot).

and 27 December.⁵² And yet while Christian writers were not ignorant of the link between the dates of these feasts and the solar cycle, they believed that this link did not result from an arbitrary choice or a fortuitous coincidence. Rather they claimed that this connection ensued from divine providence which made these saints die or be born on these specific days. The anniversaries were not symbolic; they were real. In *Sermon* 287, preached on the feast of St John the Baptist, Augustine expressed it in the following manner:⁵³

Denique quia humiliandus erat omnis homo Christo, ac per hoc et Ioannes; et quod exaltandus erat Deus homo Christus, demonstravit et dies natalis, et genera passionum. Natus est Ioannes hodie: ab hodierno minuuntur dies. Natus est Christus octavo calendas ianuarias: ab illo die crescunt dies.

Finally, that every human being should be humbled before Christ, and thus John also; and that Christ, the God-man, was to be exalted, was demonstrated both by their birthdays and by the ways in which they suffered. John was born today. From today on, the days diminish. Christ was born on the sixth day before the Kalends of January [25 December]; from that day the days grow longer.

Admittedly, some people thought that on 24 June the church celebrated John the Baptist's death and not his birth, some may have even confused John the Baptist with the Evangelist. Augustine corrects both errors.⁵⁴ But these people still thought that the feast was held exactly on the anniversary, on the actual day of the event which it commemorated. The same can be seen in the case of the feast of Peter and Paul: Augustine acknowledges they did not suffer martyrdom in the same year, but emphasises that they both died on 29 June and because of this are commemorated together.⁵⁵ This attachment to the correct dates of the anniversaries did not result from a taste for historical exactitude, but from a conviction that the saints demanded to be commemorated on the day of their martyrdom, because this day belonged to them, given by God. The Coptic *Martyrdom of Apa Sarapion*, written probably in the seventh century, emphasises that this martyr found particular favour in

⁵² John the Baptist: the earliest attestations come from the early fifth century: Maximus of Turin, *Sermones* 5, 6, and 88; CSLA E05320 (this and the following records by R. Wiśniewski), and Augustine, *Sermo* 288; CSLA E02417, probably the earliest of the long series of Augustine's sermons on this feast; Peter and Paul: *Depositio martirum*; CSLA E01052. Stephen: Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 4; CSLA E01904 (this and the following records by E. Rizos). Gregory of Nyssa, *Encomium s. Stephani* 1 and 2; CSLA E01830 and CSLA E01831. Peter, James, John, and Paul: Gregory of Nyssa, *Encomium s. Basilii* 1; CSLA E01808.

⁵³ Augustine, *Sermo* 287.4. PL 38, 1302; trans. E. Hill, see CSLA E02345 (R. Wiśniewski).

⁵⁴ Augustine, *Sermo* 380.1; CSLA E04546 (R. Wiśniewski).

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Sermo* 381.1; CSLA E04547 (R. Wiśniewski).

the eyes of the Lord, who granted him two feasts, one commemorating his death, the other the dedication of his church.⁵⁶

The sacred character of the date of the feast is perfectly visible in rare narratives in which the saint, through a vision, discloses it to the faithful. Let us take an example from the *Book of the Miracles of St Julian* by Gregory of Tours:⁵⁷

Huius festivitatis tempus ignara plebs maesta pendebat, nesciens diem, in quo martyr beatus deberet pro virtutis ac passionis gloria honorari. Et haec ignorantia usque ad beatum Germanum Autissiodorensem antestitem est protracta. Factum est autem, ut antedictus pontifex Brivatem adveniret, sciscitatusque ab incolis, quo tempore huius sacra celebrarentur, se nescire respondent. Tunc ille: "Oremus", inquit, "et fortassis nobis haec Domini potentia revelabit". Quod cum fecissent, mane orto, convocatis senioribus loci, ait, quinto Kalendarum mensis septimi caelebrandam esse festivitatem. Ex hoc nunc devotes adveniens populus, vota praesoli reddens, refert et animae et corporis medicinam.

Because the people did not know the day on which the blessed martyr ought to be honoured for the glory of his power and his suffering, they were sad and, in their uncertainty, disregarded the time for his festival. This uncertainty extended until [the episcopacy of] the blessed bishop Germanus of Auxerre. For it happened that when the aforementioned bishop visited Brioude, he asked the inhabitants when [Julian's] festival was celebrated. They replied that they did not know. Then Germanus said: "Let us pray, and perhaps the power of the Lord will reveal this date to us." They prayed, and at daybreak Germanus announced to the elders from this region who had gathered that the festival must be celebrated on the fifth day before the Kalends of the seventh month [= 28 August]. Thereafter the people now piously gather, offer prayers to their champion, and leave with medicine for their soul and for their body.

It is difficult to say when and how the feast of the martyr Julian began to be celebrated on 28 August and whether Germanus of Auxerre really played a role in this. But it is important to notice that according to Gregory this day could not be simply fixed. If nobody knew the actual date of the martyrdom, the feast could not be celebrated properly, the only thing people could do was to pray for a revelation.

Similarly, in his *Glory of the Confessors* Gregory recounts the story of a nun named Vitalina who personally revealed the date of her feast. She was a very pious woman but could not enter the Kingdom of Heaven because of an obstacle

⁵⁶ The *Martyrdom of Apa Sarapion*, ed. by I. BALESTRI/H. HYVERNAT. CSCO, 43. Paris 1907, 87, 5–16; CSLA E05395 (G. SCHENKE).

⁵⁷ *Liber de passione et virtutibus s. Iuliani* 29, ed. B. KRUSCH. MGH, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, 1/2. Hannover 1885; trans. R. VAN DAM, *Saints and their miracles in late antique Gaul*. Princeton 1993; CSLA E05230 (K. WOJTAŁIK). For a similar story of a miraculously solved doubt concerning the date of a feast see *De virtutibus quae facta sunt post discessum beate Geretrudis* 11; CSLA E07666 (B. SAVILL).

which seemed insignificant when she was alive but turned out to be very serious after death: she had washed her face on Good Friday. However, through the prayers of St Martin, who visited her tomb, the obstacle was removed: Vitalina became a true saint and miracle-worker, deserving cult. Gregory concludes this story by saying that “many then saw the virgin in a vision; she offered them the benefits they sought and announced the day of her death on which her memory would be celebrated.”⁵⁸ Once again we see that the feast could not have been simply placed in the calendar, even by a saintly bishop; its day had to be revealed.

Interestingly, we can observe a close parallel between the miraculous discovery of the date of the feast and dreams or visions in which the saints revealed the place of their forgotten or hidden relics.⁵⁹ The nature of these scenes, which emerged in Christian literature in the late fourth century and quickly became a standard feature of the *inventio* accounts, is strikingly similar: the saints themselves disclose the location of their tomb, appearing either repeatedly to one person or to several people, and thus enhancing the credibility of the message. This further strengthens the similarities between the perception of holy space and holy time.

Conclusions

What the annual miracle accounts show us is a vision of time and space, perceived as a stage on which the power of God and his servants manifests itself in certain places and moments, the former scattered through the inhabited world, the latter through the year. Neither of these, claim hagiographers, can be set arbitrarily; both are chosen by God, for the glory of his saints and the benefit of people. This vision, presented in a number of texts, was certainly an intellectual concept, a fruit of reflection on what the holy place and feasts really were. But it is also likely to have been an element of lived religion. When hundreds of people, many of them sick, gathered in one place, expecting miracles, some miracles were likely to happen. During feasts expectations were certainly high, all the more so as they were fed by the sermons, public reading of miracle stories and accounts of their witnesses. Thus, the vision presented by the hagiographers was likely shared by those who attended sanctuaries of saints at their festivals and hoped to experience their

⁵⁸ *Liber in gloria confessorum* 5, ed. by B. KRUSCH. *MGH, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, 1/2. Hannover 1885; trans. R. VAN DAM, *Gregory of Tours: glory of the martyrs*. Liverpool ²2004; CSLA E02455 (K. WOJTAŁIK).

⁵⁹ E. CRONNIER, *Les inventions de reliques dans l'Empire romain d'Orient (IV^e–VI^e s.)*. *Hagiologia*, 11. Turnhout 2015, 189–209.

power, although not necessarily in such a spectacular way as the annual miracle stories presented it.