'The Cursed Stomach': Diet and the Construction of Holiness in Late Antique Syria

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Homer reveals the motivating influence of hunger when he makes a rurally-disguised Odysseus lament: "There is nothing worse for mortal man than the vagrant life, but still for the sake of the cursed stomach people endure hard sorrows, when roving and pain and grief befall them."[1] But hunger, the pangs of the "cursed stomach," is only a temporary handicap for a hero like Odysseus, for he somehow always finds an endearing host who gives him plenty to eat, and gifts to boot. Most individuals in the ancient world were obviously not so lucky. It has been estimated that up to ninety percent[2] of the population in Roman times was engaged in tilling the soil as wage-laborers, tenant-farmers (*coloni)* tied to the property of their landlords, or independent-farmers who owned and worked their own small piece of land.[3] But a close proximity to the land did not guarantee a farmer's survival from season to season. Whether free or not, many farmers had to enter into exploitative relationships with absentee landlords and patrons to gather the necessary food for survival. And patronage was only one among a host of what Peter Garnsey has called peasant "survival strategies."[4] He has also pointed out that these methods of survival often failed, resulting in food crisis and less often, famine.[5] Remaining a constant and unavoidable factor in peasant life, hunger, therefore, likely became a context from which many of their perceptions of the surrounding world were formed.

One problem the insight of Homer's "cursed stomach" can help to explain is the late antique Christian holy man's appeal to his rural Syrian audience, which subsequently evolved into the local and international cults of these holy figures. How was it possible for these desert-dwelling ascetics to capture the hearts and minds of thousands of admirers and critics, in a way that flowered into a seemingly limitless supply of hagiographical material,

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[1]Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. with an intro. Richmond Latttimore (New York, 1991), XV.343, p. 243.

[2]Estimate from Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 15-16.

[3]For a more thorough discussion of farming and the distinction between the three types of agricultural workers in the late antique world cf. A. H. M.. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602, A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1964), pp. 767-781, 792-803. For a more recent look cf. Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 75-77.

[4]Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 43-68.

[5]Ibid., p. 6.

as well as hostile literature, to peruse? Bodies were captured too, giving rise to the monastic movement, the genesis of the brotherhood of friars and the sisterhood of nuns that are perhaps the first images called to mind when any discussion of 'ascetics,' 'monks,' or 'holy people' takes place. Although part of the answer to the question of how the peasants of late antique Syria became enamored with the holy man can be explained in a wide context, a more satisfying answer can be obtained in focusing on the possible material, meaning economic, underpinnings of the peasant interpretations of the holy man's various acts of self-mortification. The focus on the peasant is justified in that, although the ascetic movement now appears to have begun in the cities of the Late Empire,[6] the source of the holy man's first fame in Syria were farmers and Bedouins who came to the him with their problems and concerns.[7] Therefore, the rural audience was first responsible for laying the foundation for the cult of saints. If by definition, ascetics possessed the perceived quality of holiness among the people, the question then arises: how was holiness defined by late antique peasant society? Put differently, how was holiness constructed by a segment of society that constantly faced persistent food crisis? The question may offer an insight into the connection between the earthly realms that dictated the peasant's concerns with what he perceived as the quality of holiness. It is an effort to show the relationship between material circumstance and "popular" spirituality.

The effort to produce a mundane explanation for the popularity of the holy man is certainly not a new one. Other scholars rigorously defined this connection long ago.[8] No longer will the Christian ascetic movement of the fourth and following centuries be excused as simply a curious superstition. But there has been one aspect of the question of how

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[6]Susanna Elm, *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1994).

[7]Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), reprinted with updated footnotes in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982).

[8]Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man"; and his "Town, Village and Holy Man: The Case of Syria," originally published in *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien*, ed. D. M. Pippidi (Bucharest, 1976): 213-20, reprinted in *Society and the Holy*: 153-65, above note 7; also influential is W. H. C. Frend, "The Monks and the Survival of the East Roman Empire in the Fifth Century," *Past and Present* 54 (1972): 3-24.

holiness was constructed that needs more attention: the function that the diet of the holy man had in building his acquired quality of holiness in the eyes of peasants. In order to examine this aspect, it will be necessary to show first that Christianity in rural Syria during the late fourth century and early fifth centuries was in many ways a "popular" religion, that is, one in which theological dogma probably was not the stick with which peasants perceived and interpreted the Christian faith. Second, given this "popular" context, an alternate basis for the peasant perception of the holy man can be found in examining some of the realities of peasant food production. By the holy man's seeming ability to conquer the societal dilemma of Homer's "cursed stomach" by only eating food consumed by most in times of food crisis, he, by living in what can be called a famine-lifestyle, probably appeared to betray a god-like power. Third, although the holy man seemed to possess god-like qualities, he was nonetheless considered quite human by his local audience, evidenced by the many ways in which peasants attempted to integrate the holy man into their communities. Therefore, the quality of holiness, and the subsequent power that could follow from this quality, was based upon the holy figure's ambiguous status between the human and the divine. Finally, the example of the Riot of the Statues of Antioch (AD 387) will provide a concrete example of the power that could arise from this ambiguous status. This study will be much in line with the current trend of scholarship on this topic, with the intention of trying to fill in some of the grayer regions by highlighting the function of the holy man's diet, using a few insights from marxist anthropology,[9] in the construction of his perceived quality of holiness. This, however, is not to suggest that food denial was *the* causal factor for the cult of the holy man in Late Antiquity, since food crisis and malnutrition are characteristic of many pre-industrial states, and since the popularity of

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9"Marx on the History of his Opinions" (1859), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York, 1978), p. 4. I am thinking of Marx's well-worn, but perhaps rightfully so, dictum: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." Marxist anthropologists have followed Marx's observation in seeking to explain culture as informed by the economic systems of a society or a class within that society. Cf. Leslie White, *The Evolution of Culture* (New York, 1959); Marshal Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976), esp. Ch. 4 "*La Pensée Bourgeoise:* Western Society as Culture"; Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York, 1979).

ascetics, though very widespread, is not a universal phenomenon. The purpose here is to show that it could be one factor among many others.

The main source of this inquiry into the diets of the holy men, and their possible meanings, will be the *Religious History* written by Theodoret the bishop of Cyrrhus. This magnificently rich work containing the *vitae* of some thirty holy men and women of the Syrian desert was composed around AD 440. The work is not without its limitations. Theodoret avidly despised the Arian heretical movement, as is better seen in his *Ecclesiastical History*. As such, Theodoret's lens was subjective. We see only what he considered to be orthodox Christian holy men. New scholarship shows that there was a substantial number of Arian ascetics in Asia Minor,[10] not to mention pagan ascetics as well. Thus, in focusing on Theodoret's accounts of the *vitae* of Syrian holy men, there is a risk of projecting a distorted picture, excluding important comparative material, ultimately doing injustice to the rich spiritual atmosphere of the fourth and fifth centuries. Also, it is important to recognize that out of the thirty *vitse*, only two are of women ascetics. Thus, though biased, the phrase 'holy man' is justified and will be used for the sake of simplicity. Nevertheless, despite the limitations, there is enough fertile, off-handedly mentioned details of the diets of the holy men in Theodoret's *vitae* to venture to make some generalizations about possible meanings betrayed by the consistent, though varied, mention of these diets.

Context and Scholarship

To understand the cult of the Syrian holy man in the fourth century AD, it is necessary to recognize that early Christianity, from its beginnings in the first century AD until the fourth century, after which it became the institutional and political powerhouse that we perhaps better understand, was always a "popular religion." This is not to say that Christianity in its humble beginnings was some superficial belief, or just a lucky flash-in-the-pan fringe group that somehow managed, quite miraculously, to succeed in becoming

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[10]Elm, esp. Ch. 4 "Homoiousian Asceticism."

the religion of the emperors. It is only to suggest that Christianity, with its structures and congregations, drew less distinction between its priestly hierarchy and the spiritual community in those centuries than it was to do later. Lucian, a second century critic of such "popular" movements, including pagan cults as well, gives a candid look at the resourcefulness of the "astonishing religion" of the Christians. In a physical sense, they "moved heaven and earth" when one from their group was in danger. In Lucian's case, the supposed Christian was imprisoned. Meals were brought to the jailed man and "committees" were sent with "common funds," to give some "advice and consolation." Lucian mockingly concludes: "The efficiency of the Christians show whenever matters of community interest like this happen is unbelievable; they literally spare nothing."[11] In less than two centuries, this empire-wide, loosely organized, network of believers rose into an empire-wide institution with the more literal power to "move heaven and earth." By the close of the fourth century, we hear, on the one hand, of the real power of the Christian Church in the famous account of St. Ambrose of Milan excommunicating Emperor Theodosius; and on the other, we begin to see some of the weaknesses and dangers that faced a more institutionalized religion, namely the challenge to orthodoxy by schismatics like Donatus and heretics like Arius, and the consequent move toward Christian intolerance.[12]

Somewhere below the history of the institutionalized and increasingly hierarchical Christian church, began a new sort of "popular" Christianity, carrying on the grassroots religiosity that characterized Christianity's initial appeal and spread during the first three centuries AD. The fourth century saw the growth and establishment of ascetic movements in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. The nature of asceticism was defined regionally. In Egypt, we see a relatively quick movement from individual asceticism, or anchoritism, to the establishment of communal living in monasteries, or cenobitism. In contrast, Syria

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[11]Lucian, *The Death of Peregrinus*, 10-13, trans. and ed. L. Casson, *Selected Satires of Lucian* (Chicago, 1962), p. 368.

[12]For a new summary of the evolution of the Church in the fourth century AD cf. H. A. Drake, "Lambs into Lions: Explaining Early Christian Intolerance" (forthcoming).

developed more individualized and idiosyncratic forms of denying the world.[13] The most famous of these Syrian ascetics was Simeon Stylites (the pillar-sitter). He was known for his symbolic removal of himself from the world by chaining himself to the top of a pillar over forty-feet tall where he administered advice, prayers, and adjudications to the thousands of pilgrims who visited him from all around the Roman world.[14] Theodoret, a contemporary, observes:

> So with everyone arriving [at Simeon's pillar] from every side and every road resembling a river, one can behold a sea of men standing together in that place, receiving rivers [of people] from every side. Not only do the inhabitants of our part of the world flock together, but also Ishmaelites, Persians, Armenians subject to them, Iberians, Homerites, and men even more distant than these; and there came many inhabitants of the extreme west, Spaniards, Britons, and the Gauls who live between them. Of Italy it is superfluous to speak.[15]

This kind of fame, though not altogether unfamiliar, seems strange to us living at the close of the twentieth century. From time to time we hear of the "popular" expressions of religiosity best typified in a scene from Fellini's great film *La Dolce Vita*, in which two small children become literally mobbed by thousands when it becomes known that they possess the God-given power to heal. Although perhaps somewhat familiar, we are still at a loss to explain these expressions of "popular" spirituality historically.

In the fourth century, it is easier to establish the broad context for the societal esteem of the holy man, climaxing in the perhaps somewhat exaggerated description of the flocks of pilgrims coming to see Simeon, than it is to examine the phenomenon's particulars. First and foremost in this broad context is the martyr connection. It was felt that after the three centuries of persecutions, Diocletian's Great Persecution having begun

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[13]For the differences between Egyptian and Syrian asceticism cf. Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2 vols., vol. 2 CSCO 17 (1960), pp. 293-300.

[14]Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Religious History*, XXVI.12, p. 165 for pillar size; and for adjudications XXVI.26, p. 171. All citations and page numbers to *Religious History* will be from the English translation by R. M. Price, *A History of the Monks of Syria* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1985).

[15]Ibid., XXVI.11, p. 165.

as late as AD 302, and after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in AD 312 after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, that the traditional test of a true Christian, that is his willingness to suffer martyrdom in the face of earthly authority, was now gone. Thus, to fill this Christian-test-vacuum many men and women began to live as if they were dead to this world, giving rise to the ascetic movement.[16] The definition of holiness, in a broad sense, had changed to accommodate changing political conditions. A second context laying the groundwork for the cult of the holy man was the movement towards syncretism in pagan religions and the growth of a pagan asceticism as well. The two most obvious were the cults of Isis and Serapis, and the cult of Mithra. Asceticism and virginity were common characteristics of both.[17] A final piece of groundwork was an intellectual one. The Stoic sense of asceticism was picked up by the Gnostics in the second and third centuries AD, typified by Clement, and then transmitted to Origen. Origen took Clement's gnosticism and made it into a rigorous system of mortification which was meant to purify the soul in order to better gain the knowledge (*gnosis*) of God .[18] A tradition of contemplation would then be adopted by the ascetics of the fourth century. Thus, in a very broad sense, we could say that "Asceticism was in the air."[19] This sort of broad context says more about elite perceptions of ascetics and perhaps may be revealing in showing some of the personal reasons why many joined the swelling ranks of the desert-dwellers of Syria and Egypt, and even perhaps why the movement spread throughout the Mediterranean within a century. But what this broad context does not reveal, at least to any satisfactory degree, is an answer to why a thoroughly un-Hellenized Syrian peasant, unfamiliar with the above notions, imprinted the quality of holiness onto the ascetics in the fourth century AD.

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[16]The martyrdom connection has been widely discussed cf. James A. Mohler, *The Heresy of Monasticism* (New York, 1971), p. 41; Claudio Leonardi, "From 'Monastic' Holiness to 'Political Holiness," *Concilium, Religion in the Seventies* 129 (1979): 46-55, p. 47; Francois Vanderbrouke OSB, *Why Monks?*, Cistercian Studies 17 (Wash., D. C., 1972), p. 11; and most recently Drake, "Lambs into Lions," above note 12 above.

[17]Mohler, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, p. 42; for a better treatment of the existence of pagan asceticism and the mixture of pagan belief with Christian belief, cf. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 29-33.

[18]Mohler, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, pp. 40-41.

[19]Ibid., p. 42.

It is difficult to explain more specifically the popularity and spontaneity of the movement without making some of the characteristic errors of scholars of previous centuries who saw the ascetics as fueled, in Edward Gibbon's words, "by the dark and implacable genius of superstition."[20] From the perspective of a 'modern' like Gibbon, what else other than superstition could have caused late antique society to embrace a man who sat on top of a pillar nearly forty feet tall, who ate barely nothing, who spent most of the day standing with outstretched arms while reciting prayers rather than spending time with a family or in some intellectual pursuit like reading Homer or Plato?[21] Gibbon concludes:

> These extravagant tales, which display the fiction, without the genius, of poetry, have seriously affected the reason, the faith, and morals of the Christians. Their credulity debased and vitiated the faculties of the mind; they corrupted the evidence of history; and superstition gradually extinguished the hostile light of philosophy and science.[22]

Perhaps what most irked Gibbon was the very populism that raised what otherwise might have remained just a small blip in the history of the Late Empire to the well-established institution of monasticism that Gibbon saw in his own day, and that indeed continues to the present. The assumption that is being made by Gibbon and others[23] like him is that the "credulity" of the ascetics and the esteem given to them by their 'clients', the popular aspect, or even what we might call the holiness of the ascetic, was based on an emotional, as opposed to a 'rational' acceptance.

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[20]Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2, ed. J. B. Bury, orig. pub. London 1776-88 (New York, 1946), Ch. 37.

[21]For the general aspects of asceticism cf. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, pp. 256-78.

[22]Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Ch. 37.

[23]Gibbon was not alone in his Enlightenment distaste for what he saw as the growth of superstition in the Roman Empire. W. E. H. Lecky's *History of European Morals, from Augustus to Charlemange* originally pub. 1869 (New York, 1955) provides some delightful/despicable examples of the scorn felt for the ascetics of the fourth and following centuries. Lecky writes: "There is, perhaps, no phase in the moral history of mankind of a deeper or more painful interest than this ascetic epidemic." (p. 107) Lecky even identifies the ascetic movement as one of the causes for the fall of the Roman Empire: "Asceticism, drawing all the enthusiasm of Christendom to the desert life, and elevating as an ideal the extreme and absolute abnegation of all patriotism, formed the culmination of the movement, and was undoubtedly one cause of the downfall of the Roman Empire." (p. 141)

Scholars of more recent decades have shown very persuasively that the cult of the holy man, though unprecedented in nature, was not so much an emotional hysteria, as a wholly sober acceptance given the social and political context of the fourth century. Peter Brown has led this 'revisionist' thrust of scholarship. His basic argument in his landmark article, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" (1971), is that the Syrian holy man was important to late antique peasants in promoting village solidarity through his role as a "rural patron."[24] This scholarship largely was derived from British functionalist anthropology, which in Brown's words "impressed" him "by its deep sanity and tolerance for the strangeness of others." These words come from an article written a decade after his initial article on the holy man. From hindsight he offers some admirable revisions to his previous views. Most importantly, he re-asks the question: How was holiness defined by late antique society? Or in his words:

> I now had to ask myself what abiding "Identikit" of religious expectations led our villagers to recognize in a holy man, however spasmodically, imperfectly, and in however self-interested a manner, a figure who distilled in concrete and accessible form values and expectations that had a lifetime, a viscosity and a resilience that outlived the day-to-day strategies of patronage, "objectification" and arbitration, whose spoor I had learned to trace, in the sources, with such relish in individual incidents in the lives of individual holy men.[25]

In this way, Peter Brown has moved the analysis of the holy man from the scorn of the Enlightenment thinkers who based their conclusions on the belief that Christians were somehow capitalizing on the misery of the poor peasants, to a more 'mundane' (a less-loaded word than 'rational') focus in which misery and superstition was not the context for the construction of holiness. Now we can begin to look at the marvelous stories in the saints' *vitae* through a new lens, recognizing that there was probably some niche in the late antique peasant value system that the holy man was able to fill. What we find is that the

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[24]Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity."

[25]Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 1 (1983): 1-25, p. 14.

holy man was given meaning by his surrounding audience; he *did not* necessarily give meaning to his audience's suffering, as the eighteenth century thinker Nietzsche would have us believe. Man, he argues

> was essentially a *sickly* animal: but it was not suffering itself that was his problem, it was the lack of an answer to the crying question '*Why suffering?*' . . . The meaningless of suffering, *not* suffering itself, was the curse which hitherto lay over mankind—*and the ascetic ideal gave it meaning*.[26]

Divorced from this logic, a remarkable variety of tools can be used to explain the role of the holy man in Late Antiquity, in particular anthropology's gift to history—ethnographic analogy. Particularly, we can begin to answer, at least partially, the nagging question raised by Brown. What was the criterion of holiness in late antique peasant society and from where was this criterion derived? There is a wonderful body of analogous material, from both scholarship within the field and from elsewhere, that shows that the "popular religion" of the saints had a material basis, something historical, that is, something that can be seen over time. For instance, we can begin to examine what has been called "models of holiness among the people," with the recognition that "popular religion" is more than just "superstition" and emotional "fanaticism."[27] Just to give one example, we can also apply what has been learned in this regard from places as remote from the Near East in Late Antiquity as Brazil in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The people of Brazil during the past few centuries have nurtured their own form of "popular religion," which was and continues to be discouraged by the dominant Catholic Church. In particular they have raised up their own saints, effecting "canonizations by the people."[28]

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[26]Friedrich Nietzsche (b. 1844), *A Nietzsche Reader*, selected and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1977), p. 162.

[27]Eduardo Hoornaert, "Models of Holiness Among the People," *Concilium, Religion in the Seventies* 129 (1979): 36-45.

[28]Ibid., p. 36.

Models of Holiness

These "canonizations by the people" in Brazil have followed an interesting pattern. Each of the "popular" saints seems to have been somehow opposed to the colonial authorities. In a couple of cases, missionaries, seeking to distance themselves from this hated authority as a way to integrate themselves with local communities, sold off the slaves and properties that were given to them by the state, and by connection the dominant Catholic Church. Eduardo Hoornaert concludes: "In refusing to identify themselves in this way with the colonial pattern of behaviour, these individuals made it possible for the holiness of the Brazilian people to be realized. In other words, holiness can only be really understood in relation to a concrete historical sacrilege."[29] This "sacrilege" was the enslavement, both economic and legal, of the Brazilian people through the establishment of the western colonialism since the sixteenth century. The insight made that "canonizations by the people" might reflect a people's perception that the holy figure represents the denial of certain "pattern of behaviour" is probably about the furthest the analogy can be taken. Indeed, it is tempting to look in, or perhaps read into, the sources to find some evidence for the holy man phenomenon as an expression of colonial resistance, the colonizers being the Hellenized Romans whose Greek formed a cultural and political tyranny over the hapless Syrian locals. This interpretation does not hold up.[30] But if we change the source of the "historical sacrilege" to something a little less dramatic, we may have a case for applying this model of holiness to our focus in late antique Syria.

What then could the "historical sacrilege" have been, or can we even speak of such a thing? For our purposes, the most basic insight that the Brazilian "canonizations by the people" affords is that the peasants bestowed the attribute of holiness upon a person who,

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[29]Ibid., pp. 39-40.

[30]Peter Brown, "Town, Village and Holy Man," in *Society and the Holy*, above note 3. Brown makes a good case warning us to avoid seeing the realm of the Syriac village in conflict with the Hellenized town. He argues that for any sort of resistance to occur, there must first exist a relationship. He shows that, in fact, there was a "non-relationship," and therefore it is not possible to talk about the holy man as a form of resistance.

to them, represented the seeming transcendence of some historical dilemma. In the case of the "popular" saints of Syria, we can immediately point to the peasant "value system" forged by the "rhythms of life of a millennia"[31] of subsistence farming as forming the historical dilemma that laid the foundation for the acceptance of the holy man. Compounded by this basic reality of survival was the increasingly complex patronal relationships evidenced around Antioch in the fourth century. Peter Brown has identified the arrival of the "rural patron" in the steppelands of Syria in particular as a new source of either exploitation or succor. Included in this category were the Christian bishop, the military official and his country garrison, a new class of retired imperial officials (*honorati*), and finally the holy man.[32] This was a very complex web of individuals and groups, most of whom had a vested interest in the peasantry. Of course the peasants had their interests as well and could just as often take advantage of their exploiters.[33] But the holy man was the exceptional "rural patron" whose advice and help was free and disinterested due to his detachment from this world, as evidenced by his unique lifestyle.[34] Thus, the model that appears to form really revolves around the question of lifestyles. The life of the peasant was dictated by the vicissitudes of the harvest; he was always planning ahead, looking for the best possible way to avoid the pangs of the "cursed stomach." The holy man, on the other hand, had conquered the stomach, thereby conquering the peasant lifestyle, ultimately rising above the historical dilemma of the late antique peasant. In the volatile atmosphere of the fourth century, however, a religious and social revolution was

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[31]Ibid., p. 156.

[32]Peter Brown, Ibid., p. 160. Brown mentions the bishop, the general, and the holy man, while J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, in *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 187-192, points to the "New Aristocracy," or the *honorati* as a class that could exercise power and influence without the burden of collecting taxes. This "new aristocracy" was therefore undermining traditional patronal relations around Antioch, leaving the *curiales* to shoulder an even weightier burden.

[33]Brown, "Town, Village and Holy Man," p. 158. Peter Garnsey cites the second century physician Galen's record of the "native cunning" of peasants of Asia Minor, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 48.

[34]Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," pp. 130-36.

taking place, one in which there were many factors that, together, formed the proper context for the peasant to raise up a conqueror of his historical circumstance.[35]

Where the Syrian "popular" saints depart from previous notions of how holiness is constructed, rests in the motives of the holy man himself. It did not matter so much what the holy man thought he was doing, but that what he was doing somehow caught the attention of his rural audience. It was the audience that gave the holy man his meaning and corresponding holiness, despite what his own personal motives were. This, of course, is contrary to the traditional model of holiness as espoused by the Catholic Church. It has been generally agreed that the model of holiness, resulting in a formal canonization, has been Jesus of Nazareth. Central to this model are the motives of Jesus himself. He brings God's holiness to the people. Contrasting himself to the rigorous asceticism of John the Baptist, Jesus says:

> The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.[36]

And through his actions as God of the dispossessed, including his crucifixion, carefully retold for maximum effect, he gathers his disciples and converts, bringing them *to him*.[37] Though we can make parallels between the model of Jesus and the holy man of the fourth century, there is an important difference. It was the goal of the holy man to separate himself from the world, from civilization, and from others. For the holy man, it was in the other-worldly sphere that the front lines in the war against Satan were to be held, not on the

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[35]J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, "The End of the Ancient City," ch. 1 of *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. John Rich (London, 1992), p. 33. Part of the rural attraction to the holy people in Syria was due, Liebeschuetz argues, to the "emancipation of the countryside" due to the changing patronal relations alluded to above. Free from traditional bonds, peasants placed themselves in the care of holy figures, giving rise to "powerful and widespread religious movements."

[36]Matthew 11:19 (King James Version). Also telling is St. Paul's warning to Timothy that "in the latter times some shall depart from the faith. . .forbidding to marry, *and commanding* to abstain from meats, which God hat created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth." I Timothy 4:1, 3 (King James Version). From this, we would expect that late antique asceticism would have been interpreted as contrary to the teachings of the New Testament.

[37]Josep Rovira Belloso, "The Nature of Holiness in Jesus of Nazareth." *Concilium, Religion in the Seventies* 129 (1979): 3-13.

streets of Antioch, nor in a temple in Jerusalem for that matter. It was only through a complete removal of oneself from the world that Satan could then be battled. Theodoret writes that only after the holy man had perfected his self-mortifying techniques, his separation of himself from 'the world,' was he able to expel

> the whole array of their adversaries [meaning Satan's control over the senses]; for they are not able to make war when they lack the thoughts that betray the interior and are deprived of the cooperation of the limbs, since the devil uses our own limbs as weapons against us; for if the eyes are not enticed nor the hearing bewitched nor touch titillated nor the mind receptive of evil intentions, the zeal of those plotting harm [demons] is in vain.[38]

Theodoret, with his intimate knowledge of the holy men, *sometimes* contends that the self-mortification of the ascetics and the corresponding quality of holiness was part of a divine plan,[39] much in line with the traditional model for Jesus's holiness, but for our purposes, it is more important to realize that most of the peasants who became enamored with the holy man did not know the Gospels, and were not aware of the divine plans of "the Ruler of the universe." It is more likely that their religious views were more informed by surviving "pagan" traditions. An interesting work by David T. M. Frankfurter has effectively shown that the pillar cults of late antique Syria, thought to have been started by Simeon, whose fame we saw was so explosive, can be connected with Syrian phallic cults of the second century AD as well as a more general reverence for pillar symbols not only in Syria but throughout the Arabic world. Apparently, by the fifth century AD the Syrian countryside was not as culturally Christianized as once believed. It is thus a remarkable statement to conclude that "in the case of Symeon, it appears that his devotees were more interested in the powers of the divine Symeon than the theology of the divine Christ."[40]

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[38]Theodoret, *Religious History*, Prol.4, pp. 5-6.

[39]Ibid., XXVI.12, p. 166.

[40]David T. M. Frankfurter, "Stylites and *Phallobates*: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria" *Virgiliae Christianae* 44 (1990): 168-98.

The point of Frankfurter's study is that the saint was a "construction of society." The new model of holiness for the Syrian ascetic is then to be focused on the societal context of the holy man, and not his individual motives. Just as a "popular" worship of pillar cults helped to lay the context for Simeon's fame, the societal dilemma of the "cursed stomach" provides another context for the construction of holiness. And just as some have shown that economic activities inform cultural values, we naturally must look at peasant economy and its relation to the cult of saints. A telling clue in showing this relationship is provided by one holy man known specifically for his rigid diet of barley.

The Mystery of the "Barley-Eater"

Theodoret had a especially close relationship with one holy man. His name was Macedonius and he lived on Mount Silpius, the slopes of which bordered the great *metropolis* Antioch in Syria. In a way, Macedonius was like a godfather to Theodoret. Before our hagiographer was born, his mother was experiencing fertility problems. This did not bother her so much, as she was an aspiring ascetic herself. "But childlessness greatly distressed my father," relates Theodoret, "who went round everywhere, begging the servants of God to ask for children for him from God." Macedonius was the only one who could give the desperate man "explicit assurance" that God would grant him a single son. After four years, the promise was made good and Theodoret was born. We now can see that all that the holy man gave the couple was a placebo. After Theodoret was born, Macedonius provided him with spiritual teaching and guidance, reinforcing the father-son affinity they felt for each other. "I myself often enjoyed his blessing and teaching. To exhort me he often said: You were born, my child, with much toil: I spent many nights begging this alone of God, that your parents should earn the name they received after your birth. So live a life worthy of toil."[41]

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[41]Theodoret, *Religious History*, XIII.16-18, pp. 106-107.

These details would not matter so much except that they help to illustrate an essential point in examining how holiness was constructed. It does not matter what Theodoret, with his filial knowledge of Macedonius, believed the holy man was doing by living the life of the ascetic. In fact, if he wanted the reader to know more of what was inside Macedonius's mind, he might have recorded some of the many conversations he had with his spiritual father, perhaps demonstrating the holy man's knowledge of Christ's teachings. He had done something similar in writing his *Dialogues*, which creates a hypothetical conversation between an orthodox Christian (Orthodoxos) and a heretical Arian (Eranistes) with the intent of 'logically' proving the "truth" of orthodox belief.[42] Instead, in his *Religious History*, Theodoret provides the reader with a handful of rich anecdotes to demonstrate the holiness of Macedonius and the other holy people. "The type of man he was and the labors by which he attracted divine grace, these stories are sufficient to demonstrate."[43] Thus Theodoret knew that the quality of holiness hinged on the external aspects, the acts and appearances that were the determining factors from the peasant perspective of the ascetic's holiness.

Thus in focusing on the external appearance of the ascetic, we can begin to put ourselves into the minds of the peasants who viewed the ascetics' strange practices by attempting to understand better the life-ways of this rural audience. The diet of the holy man can particularly show the relationship of the mundane realm of peasant society in the construction of holiness, for Theodoret provides a striking example this relationship in his *vita* of Macedonius. The first lines of the *vita* show that, not only was Macedonius a "popular" saint, one among the "canonizations by the people," but also that he was canonized, in a "popular" sense, for an especially startling trait, his diet.

> Macedonius, called the Barley-eater—for this food won him the name—is known by all, Phoenicians, Syrians, and Cilicians, and known too by

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[42]Theodoret, *Dialogues*, trans. with notes by Rev. Blomfield Jackson, in vol. 3, 2nd. ser., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1975).

[43]Theodoret, *Religious History*, XIII.19, p. 107.

> the neighbors bordering on them, of whom some were eyewitnesses of the man's miracles, while others heard reports that celebrated and circulated them. Not all know everything, however, but some have learnt this and others that, and naturally they admire only what they know.[44]

Apparently one thing that those who called him the "Barley-eater" knew was that he ate "neither bread nor pulses, but ground barley, merely soaked in water."[45] To at least some peasants, therefore, he was Saint Barley-eater, and not Saint Macedonius, Holy Lover of Jesus. In other words, his holiness was seen by many in terms of his choice of food, and not his mastery of Scripture. Thus we see a situation similar to that which Frankfurter demonstrated in regard to Simeon Stylites, whose holiness and fame were constructed around the figure and activities of Simeon himself, rather than the theological motives that Simeon may have held. We have yet to explain why there would be such a "popular" canonization, that is: why Saint Barley-eater? To us, the meaning of this name is lost. Indeed, it is easy to skim past such a phrase as yet another example of the "backward" and foreign nature of a society that lived nearly two-thousand years distant from our own. But this name seems to betray a very real, mundane, non-superstitious societal concern, which brings us back to Odysseus's "cursed stomach." Barley, obviously being a food, was used in a much different way than we use it today. In fact, most of us never think about barley. Not so in antiquity. Barley played a different role in society, which naturally means that societal values concerning barley were different.

At present, we use barley for a variety of purposes: in foods such as beer, breakfast cereals, flour, and confectionery products. It is also widely used as animal fodder. It is a crop grown throughout the world and has been domesticated for thousands of years.[46] In our world of strange health diets, we see nothing particularly unsettling about someone who eats barley exclusively. So it seems strange that anybody would

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[44]Ibid., XIII.1, p. 100.

[45]Ibid., XIII.3, p. 101.

[46]John M. Poehlman, "Adaption and Distribution," in *Barley*, ed. Donald C. Rasmusson, ser. Agronomy 26 (Madison, WI, 1985), pp. 1-17.

become so famous for having a barley diet. In Syria during Late Antiquity, barley was mainly used as food for livestock and only secondarily as a foodstuff, normally only in times of food crisis and famine. A "Barley-eater" was someone who willingly ate animal food, or food only eaten in times of want. From a suburban American perspective, it would perhaps be analogous to being willingly known as a "dog food-eater." Perhaps a better analogy is provided by modern Italy, in which corn (maize) is considered a food only to be eaten by animals. American tourists who savor corn-on-the-cob must seem a little strange to the Italians.

To illustrate these points more persuasively, a look at some of the characteristics of subsistence farming will need to be considered. Especially at issue will be the unpredictable nature of peasant farming and the change in societal values associated with the slow growth and tenuous victory of wheat over barley in ancient food production. It is a necessary exercise because it helps to establish the historical dilemma, or context, that provided the peasant with a means to measure the strange anti-lifestyle of the holy man. Again, we must try to answer the question: Why Saint *Barley-eater*? The answer lies in the role that economic systems play in shaping cultural perceptions.[47]

It is a stereotype that food production was always precarious during ancient times for a variety of factors. Fertilizers, modern irrigation systems, combine machines, and caterpillar tractors were simply not available to produce the kind of yields evident in current agro-business. Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller challenge this view by pointing out that food production in the ancient world has been judged using misguided criteria. The only standard that should be used in measuring the productivity of ancient agriculture is whether it was able to sustain society "over time."[48] Even this view is misleading, for it necessarily looks at society from the level of the elites, whom the phrase "over time" seems to favor.

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[47]A caveat is in order here. It is not suggested that peasant economy was a 'base' that informed some 'superstructure' in an absolutely deterministic or mechanical manner. The ideas here, therefore, may be marxist influenced, but not *Marxist*. And they are not meant to be taken to extremes, i. e. positing class struggle based on opposed ideologies formed by differing modes of production. It is only the very simple, even self-event, idea that "social being determines consciousness."

[48]Garnsey and Saller, *The Roman Empire*, p. 78.

From the perspective of the peasant, food production was not viewed "over time." The nature of subsistence farming in the Mediterranean made decision making and crop yields contingent upon constantly fluctuating climatic conditions, not to mention human factors, which made survival a game in which the rules had to be changed from season to season. But the goal was always the same: to avoid unnecessary risks and to maximize returns.

Garnsey, in another work, modifies his earlier view that farming was generally productive by bringing into focus some of the realities of peasant farming.[49] He concludes, based on modern analogy, that farmers faced a constant food crisis. Using current precipitation measurements in an attempt to reconstruct the conditions faced by farmers from the fifth century BC to the fifth century AD, Garnsey points out that one of the main reasons for food crises was the so-called "Mediterranean climate." Due to the geography of the land surrounding the Mediterranean, climatic conditions constantly shift, dumping rain in one region, while leaving a neighboring one bone-dry. The next rain might produce the opposite effect.[50] The result is "regional diversity" and "interannual variability," which in turn means an unpredictable agricultural yield. The conditions of the *ancient* Mediterranean were not any different. Without modern farming techniques, climatic variability posed a much more serious problem than it does today.

The challenge was to raise crops in this somewhat hostile environment. Unfortunately, peasant farmers virtually remain faceless in the source material. But scholars have been able to make some headway in explaining some of the complexities of peasant farming. For example, we know there were three types of farmers who worked the soil: independent farmers, rentiers, and wage-laborers. Among these, the independent farmer, or "owner-occupier" using Garnsey's term, was in the best position in times of food crisis. He owned a small piece of land and presumably would have a small amount of stored foodstuffs to carry him through bad seasons.[51] Wage laborers had the least access

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[49]Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*.
[50]Ibid., pp. 8-10.
[51]Ibid., p. 45.

to the means of subsistence, while rentiers had some degree of protection from their landlords.

Peter Brown has shown that in many cases the holy man could be found near "thriving" villages of independent farmers.[52] Both Libanius, a fourth century pagan rhetorician from Antioch, and Theodoret describe villages of "many owners," that is, villages of independent farmers who owned their land and were somewhat successful. Abraham, a holy man of the AD 340s, went to such a village incognito as a nut trader to convert the settlement. One day tax collectors arrived but the village was unable to come up with the necessary sum. Abraham was able to arrange for a loan from his contacts in Edessa (or Apamea) to cover the village debt. Thereafter, he was venerated and the village was converted.[53] If the independent farmers were "thriving," as Brown suggests, why were the villagers not able to pay the taxes? Of course, the stereotype (and rightly justified) is that taxes were simply too high for most to shoulder. A possible second , and integrally related suggestion, can be offered with the simple question: Was it perhaps just a bad year?

Crops failed at a remarkable rate in the ancient Mediterranean; thus there were many such bad years. Garnsey again uses modern analogy to estimate the probable rate of crop failure in the ancient world in two categories: wheat and barley, the two most important food crops in the ancient world. He took the average amount of rainfall of several regions and compared the data to the average amount of rainfall needed to raise wheat and barley. What he found was that, in Odessa wheat failed forty-six out of every hundred years, and barley fifteen to sixteen times every hundred years (one in six or seven years).[54] Wheat was obviously the more risky of the two crops to grow, but it was an important cash crop, which replaced the more consistently yielding crop, barley. If these data can be trusted,

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[52]Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," p. 115.

[53]Theodoret, *Religious History*, XVII.1-2, pp. 120-21; Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," pp. 117-18. Some observers may be puzzled at the seemingly un-ascetic life of Abraham as contradictory. For example, why would he go into a village and seek to convert others, when most sought to avoid others? Confusion and contradiction are avoided when we see that Abraham did not go to the village on his own accord, but was in fact on 'assignment' for a bishop from a neighboring town. He was like a spiritual mercenary, in a manner of speaking. Cf. also Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, pp. 56-7.

[54]Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 11.

ancient farming confirms at least some of the preconceptions about agricultural productivity from the *peasant perspective*. We must also remember that crops could also fail because of human reasons. Exploitation by absentee landlords, wars, piracy, civil strife, and imperialism, are among the factors that Garnsey mentions.[55]

The combination of climatic and human factors made subsistence farming a dangerous undertaking that most were forced to engage in. Crops did not fail every year, but could fail two years in a row, leaving the peasant even more hard pressed to put food on his table. In making year to year, season to season, decisions in trying to stay afloat as subsistence farmers, a certain set of social values was forged among independent farmers, which helped them to insulate themselves from persistent tax collectors on the one hand and the unpredictable and harsh steppelands of Syria on the other. Peter Brown's mention of the "value-system of the peasant," which was based on the rigors and routines of their daily lives,[56] has already been cited but provides the occasion to make a further point. Here, Brown brings us to the functionalist terminology that he hides so well in his writing: the production of food in the peasant subsistence sphere became an 'institution,' a repeated set of activities that fulfills a human need (food). Institutions, because they represent repeated activities, forge cultural values.[57] These cultural values were not frozen however; they changed to meet new conditions. One significant example for our discussion was the change in values associated with the switch in preference for growing wheat over barley.

Wheat, over the course of many centuries, became a luxury food for the rich who resided in the urban centers of the ancient world. It also became recognized as better for bread-making. Apparently, barley produces flat loaves of bread, rather than perhaps something a little fluffier. When ground, wheat makes finer flour, which when used in bread produces a better tasting food.[58] Many peasants began replacing their barley crops

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[55]Ibid., pp. 13-14.

[56]Peter Brown, "Town, Village and Holy Man," p. 156.

[57]For the father of functionalism and a discussion of the formation of 'institutions,' cf. Bronislaw Malinowski, "A Scientific Theory of Culture," in *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*, orig. pub. 1941 (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944), pp. 75-6, 94-8.

[58]Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY, 1991) p. 346.

with wheat to meet this demand for this urban market. As a cash crop, wheat brought in the additional income many farmers needed as a supplement to the crops that were kept for household consumption.[59] It is likely that wheat became a necessary crop just to pay, in kind, tax collectors and landlords. This high demand for wheat seems to have caused a general shift in cultural perceptions of wheat and barley. Perhaps a peasant found himself asking: Why would those city folks squeeze wheat from us, if it was not somehow nutritionally better to eat? From at least the second century AD, many began to believe that wheat was healthier to eat than barley. Galen, a second century physician, felt that barley was, in fact, just plain backwards to eat:

> Among some peoples barley-meal is used when bread is short. I myself have countryfolk eating barley-meal in Cyprus, even though they grow a lot of wheat. In the old days, people used to prepare barley-meal, but now its weaknesses in terms of food value is recognized. It gives little nourishment to the body. Ordinary people and those who do not take regular exercise find it quite sufficient, but for those who do take exercise in any way at all it is found wanting.[60]

Galen was no scientist. If we look at the actual nutritional qualities of barley, we see that, as a food, it contains just as much protein as wheat. Protein content ranges from ten to fifteen percent in modern crops, which rivals wheat grown in similar conditions.[61] In the ancient world, protein content would have been a little lower, but the important point is that barley was not nutritionally inferior to wheat. Contrary to what Galen believed, barley could sustain men and women who took "exercise." Robert Sallares suggests that the shift had more to do with the energy differences required for the cultivation of each crop. The idea is that wheat was easier to produce than barley, therefore barley became a bad crop in the eyes of farmers.[62] Though scientific, this argument says nothing about the elite who were the main consumers of wheat. It is more likely that the shift in attitude was due

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[59]Ibid., p. 314, 346, 368.
[60]Galen VI.513 quoted in Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 51.
[61]Pochlman, "Adaption and Distribution," p. 15.
[62]Sallares, *Ecology*, p. 366.

almost entirely to a change in what was preferred on the tables of the well-to-do. Wheat tasted better, therefore it was believed to be healthier. Since wheat became a "rich" food, the wealthy city dwellers who demanded it told themselves that their fluffy loaves were superior from the flat barley loaves eaten by the peasants. It was a mark of class. The peasants could only follow their cultural superiors in their yearning for wheat. After all, they had taste buds as well. And more importantly, they had to supply the wheat demand of their landlords.

This shift in taste was not very wise. In fact, in many ways it was maladaptive. Barley is crop that is ecologically more suitable to the rigors of the steppe-lands of Syria, and to the climate of the Mediterranean in general. In this region, winters are mild with some degree of rainfall, while the summers are dry and hot. Barley possesses several properties which make it a good crop to grow in this type of environment. It is planted in the winter and matures rapidly. Since the barley life cycle is completed at such a quick rate, it does not require as much water as other crops and therefore does not deplete the winter-soaked soil of its moisture. Rapid maturation also saves the crop from the searing rays of summer. Barley is even able to survive the high saline content of soils suffering from rapid evaporation.[63] As shown by Garnsey, based on average yields, barley had less of a chance of failing from year to year than wheat. Its endurance is what made it a constant staple food, as it still is in many regions from South America to North Africa and China. Only with the introduction of fertilizers in the Early Modern period was wheat able to be cultivated as staple.

As suitable as barley was for the arid farmlands of Syria, it became integrated into a larger category of "poor" foods.[64] The ambiguous food group known as pulses joined barley in the less-than-desirable-food category, and was another regular food of the holy man.[65] There is no one type of plant which is known as a pulse. It is more like an

[63]Poehlman, "Adaption and Distribution," p. 2; Sallares, *Ecology*, p. 368.

[64]Sallares, *Ecology*, p. 346.

[65]Theodoret, *Religious History*, II.4 ("wild vegetables"), p. 25; VI.1 ("edible plants"), p. 63; XV.1 ("lentils soaked in water"), p. 114; XVII.6 (only non-cooked greens such as "lettuce, chicory, celery, and all

cornucopia of lesser vegetables, wild and cultivated, which were generally considered to be low quality foods. Included in this wide category were: chick peas, lentils, legumes, and other wild beans and peas.[66] As wheat rose into its place as the most desirable food crop, barley and pulses further plunged into the category of animal fodder. In times of food crisis and famine, these animal foods were naturally consumed readily.[67]

Eating some of these lesser foods sometimes actually posed a health risk. Consuming excessive amounts of grass peas (and chick peas?) was known to cause the disease lathyrism, resulting in some very unpleasant effects.[68] Some peas and other pulses contain a toxin which causes a the victim to become paralytic. One documented effect is a stiffness of the legs. Hippocrates, the famous fifth century BC Greek physician, noted: "At Ainos, all men and women who continuously ate peas became impotent in the legs and the state persisted."[69] If crops failed as often as we can assume based on Garnsey's "proxy data,"[70] we can also assume that peasants had to eat these lesser crops more often than they might have wanted. But if they ate these crops at irregular intervals, they might not have developed 'a stomach' for some of the more marginal foods like grass peas and even wilder beans and cereals. Herodotus pointed out the dangers of eating these wild foods. He describes Xerxes's retreat in the Persian War, during the early fifth century BC, in which many of his men fell ill because of a lack of good foods:

> During the march the troops lived off the country as best they could, eating grass where they found no grain, and stripping the bark and leaves off trees of all sorts, cultivated or wild, to stay their hunger. They left nothing anywhere, so hard were they put to it for supplies. Plague and

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plants of the kind"), p. 122; XVIII.1 ("chick peas and beans soaked in water"), p. 126; Epil.2 ("grass" and "soaked pulses"), p. 191.

[66]Don and Patricia Brothwell, *Food in Antiquity: A Survey of the Diet of Early Peoples* (New York, 1969), pp. 105-107.

[67]Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 52; Sallares, *Ecology*, p. 300, 302.

[68]Sallares, *Ecology*, p. 302.

[69]Quoted in Brothwell, *Food in Antiquity*, pp. 183-184

[70]Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 8.

> dysentery attacked them; many died, and others who fell sick were left behind. . .[71]

Sometimes crops themselves develop diseases, which when eaten cause illnesses and diseases. A persistent problem in the modern and ancient worlds is the cereal fungus *Claviceps purpurea*. In the ancient world, this fungus caused ergots and barley smut which destroyed large sections of crops, increasing the possibility of food crisis. When eaten, barley smut and ergots were deadly.[72] Most peasants naturally would have possessed the popular wisdom to know the properties of the available foodstuffs. They knew that it was better to avoid these kinds of foods, but often they had but two choices: eat and get sick, or starve to death. How, then, could peasants reduce the risk of falling to either extreme?

On a local basis, peasants dealt with food crisis in predictable ways. They intensified production and diversified their crops. They left less land fallow, exhausting the soils more quickly. Though this was risky, it was a safe-guarding measure which provided the peasant with a surplus that he could sell or put into storage. Peasants also planted different types of crops during the same season to insure at least some yield no matter what the conditions.[73] For instance, if a peasant planted all wheat and there was less rain than he predicted, then all his food would be destroyed, leaving him and his family empty-handed and starving.

During times of food crisis, peasants also sought out more human sources to stave off the "cursed stomach." If the peasant had a landlord, he could presumably petition him for aid. If the landlord refused or if he was too exploitative, there was another source that many peasants began to go to in the fourth century--the military garrison in the countryside. Libanius was particularly angry about this practice in a dispute he had with some Jewish

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[71]Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (London, 1972), VIII.116, p. 563.
[72]Brothwell, *Food in Antiquity*, p. 190.
[73]Garnsey and Saller, *The Roman Empire*, p. 57.

farmers that were his tenants. The soldiers protected the peasants who brought them gifts for their services. Patronage networks began to overlap and compete with each other.[74]

When the peasants suffered food crisis, the town likely suffered as well, resulting in an increased demand for grain from the countryside. As if the peasant's plight was not enough during times of want, he had to contend with imperial demands for more grain. Often, the peasants brought their products to the city to sell in the marketplace, where they were sometimes exploited due to price controls, and simply from their vulnerable position of being foreign to the civic realm with few or no ties of kin for support.[75] Libanius again provides us with a look into this problem. During the early 380s, there was a prolonged food crisis in Antioch. The imperial governor (*Comes*) ordered bread to be rationed and prices fixed. Furthermore, he demanded increased grain supplies from the countryside. When the peasants arrived in the city with their animals packed with grain for the marketplace, they could only sell it for the low amount that the prices had been fixed at. There were also some nobles who, in the midst of this crisis, were funding private building projects that required the rubble of old structures to be hauled outside of the city. Some took further advantage of the peasants by appropriating their animals to haul this rubble. Libanius was infuriated at this practice, which prompted him to write another one of his orations.[76] He reports that sometimes the peasants even had to pay corrupt city guards who watched the town gates simply to leave the city. So whatever money they made from their grain was drained before they could even leave the town.

Not surprisingly, then, there was no imperial help for the peasants. In times of want, they were exploited only more vigorously. In these circumstances, many turned to

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[74]Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 60, citing Libanius *Oration 47*. Cf. also Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," pp. 118-19.

[75]We can gather that peasants had few ties to the civic realm from Libanius's description of the flight of townsmen from Antioch following the Riot of the Statues (AD 387). Apparently, when they fled to the countryside, they found no help there because no relationship, kin or otherwise, existed: "You could see women, with children, riding to beg the country folk, whom they did not know from Adam, to let them stay on their land–not in their houses that's certain. There weren't buildings enough, and besides, no one would readily consort with any person not of his acquaintance." Libanius, *Oration 23, Against the Refugees*, trans. A. F. Norman, vol. 2, *Libanius Selected Works* (London, 1977), 5, p. 249.

[76]Libanius, *Oration 50: For the Peasantry about Forced Labor*, trans. A. F. Norman, above note 75.

the holy man. Garnsey plays down the significance of this avenue of help, arguing that many went to holy figures on a regular basis in times of plenty as well as want. This being so, reports of peasants going to holy man to pray for rain cannot be used as a measure for the seriousness of a particular food crisis.[77] In another work, however, Garnsey does admit that the holy man provided help as "horizontal" patrons. The holy man was not a patron in the sense of being exploitative, therefore he was not in a "vertical" relationship to the peasants. But he did provide services nonetheless.[78] The practice of seeking out the holy man during times of food crisis and famine demonstrates the power that he represented to his audience, even if it cannot be a gauge for the severity of a particular bad season. Many placed their faith in the ascetic's supposed link to God because his intercessions were felt to possess the power to move the sky to rain.

Theodoret reports that a "terrible drought consumed men and drove them to prayer." Many priests came to see the holy man Polychronius, probably out of desperation from being besieged by their congregations for help during the water shortage. Through a simple prayer, the holy man was reported to have made water shoot up from a flask that one of the visiting priests was holding.[79] Whether or not Polychronius solved the drought problem is not as significant as noticing that many believed that holy man could alleviate their most severe problem—food crisis via droughts—better than the average priest. Theodoret was sure to emphasize this point.

Running to a sacred figure or place in times of crisis was not a new practice. Libanius gives us an insight into the similar function of pagan temples in the countryside—particularly on the estates of landowners—before pagan worship was outlawed in AD 385:

> Temples, Sire [Emperor Theodosius], are the soul of the countryside: they mark the beginning of its settlement, and have been passed down through many generations to the men of today.

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[77]Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 15, 24.

[78]Peter Garnsey and Greg Woolf, "Patronage of the Rural Poor in the Roman World," in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, (London, 1989), pp. 153-69, p. 165.

[79]Theodoret, *Religious History*, XXIV.7, pp. 156-57.

> In them [temples] the farming communities rest their hopes for husbands, wives, children, for their oxen and the soil they sow and plant. An estate that has suffered so [by the holy men destroying the temples] has lost the inspiration of the peasantry together with their hopes, for they believe that their labor will be in vain once they are robbed of the gods who direct their labors to their due end. And if the land no longer enjoys the same care, neither can the yield match what it was before, and if this be the case, the peasant is the poorer, and the revenue jeopardized, for whatever a man's willingness, surely his inability [to get a good crop yield] frustrates him.[80]

Here Libanius expresses the age-old belief in agricultural cults which goes back as far as the Neolithic Age. The hopeful dedication to the pagan temples had been shifting over the course of the fourth century, becoming absorbed by Christian centers of sacrosanctity. For many, the holy man and the local priest now fulfilled the societal need for the sacred. They were more personal than the blood-stained altars of the pagan temples. Their services were more tangible. Theodoret's personal history shows that Macedonius was a living representative of the divine, someone his father could go to with his spouse's fertility problems and who gave him a direct answer to his voiced concerns. And the relationship did not end there. Even after Theodoret was born, Macedonius continued to be the patron of the soon-to-be bishop and hagiographer.

The change did not result in any loss of faith, as Libanius would have us believe. Simeon's pillar, for example, simply was a substitution for a long existing tradition, and not a radical replacement of belief and meaning. Libanius's main concern was that the focus on other sources of religious authority than the temples of the "estates" resulted in another shift in attitudes. Peasants now no longer had to rely on the landowner for a place of religious comfort. The elites were losing control, which cost them revenue. As a landowner himself, Libanius, later in the same oration, does not hesitate to make the

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[80]Libanius, *Oration 30, For the Temples*, trans. A. F. Norman, above note 75, IX, X, pp. 110-11.

following suggestion: "Taxation, presumably, requires offices of collection: so let the [pagan] temple stand and be the collecting office, and keep it from demolition."[81]

To sum up and synthesize: though the unpredictable nature of farming and the triumph of wheat over barley may be interesting in themselves, the brief sketch here is meant to illustrate the role that barley played in peasant society as perhaps informative to peasant perceptions of the holy man's proscriptive diet. As the Brazilian model of holiness shows, "popular" canonizations, that is "canonizations by the people," are made when the holy figure represents the antithesis, or inverse, of a historical dilemma. Thus, we can now unravel the mystery of Saint *Barley*-eater. Because there was intermittent and constant subsistence crises, many were compelled to eat "famine" crops, such as legumes, barley, chick peas, and even wild grasses, all of which had been slowly becoming animal foods. The holy man was known for selecting small portions of animal foods, such as barley, pulses, and chick peas, to live on for years and years. In other words, to the peasants the holy man willingly chose to live in a state of famine by eating the foods that they themselves normally associated with times of want.

Living in a state of famine was a serious matter. Often there was no other recourse for the peasants. The imperial powers were not so sympathetic to the concerns of the peasants when the cities had food problems of their own. Patrons were more likely to be a worry than a help. The holy man and the church could often provide some form of relief. But in the end, the peasants had to eat their "poor" crops when other crops failed, as wheat was likely to do half the time. As with his other acts of self-denial, a famine lifestyle placed the holy man far above the simple mundane institution of food production and the values associated with it. As a result, he might have appeared holy—a conqueror of the material realm.

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[81]Ibid., XL, p. 139.

The Power of the "Barley-eater"

To stop at this point would be misleading. The holy man as a conqueror of the material and social needs of men and women places him in a god-like realm. This, however, is only half the picture, for the ascetic was also considered human-like. Contrary to what has been argued,[82] the power of the holy man, that is, in Weber's terms, his successful ability to influence others, was based on his ambiguous status as a creature both *of and* not of this earth. He was almost-divine and he was sometimes all too human. This duality is important for our model of holiness as well. It makes more sense for "canonizations by the people" to occur for a person who represents the concerns of the community and its historical context, and at the same time somehow stands aloof from it. It must be re-emphasized that no matter how virtuous a person might have been, he did not acquire the quality of 'holiness' until it was bestowed upon him by the community. The question then is: how did the people of the late antique countryside attempt to define the strange men and women of the desert with their outrageous lifestyles into the local context, that is seeing them as at least partially human, that they needed to see this strange behavior as 'holy'?

It is tempting to raise the holy man far higher from man and his wretched earth than the peasants likely did. Indeed, we see that, through the practice of self-mortification, the holy man was probably seen as a conqueror of the needs of man. There was Alexander the Sleepless, Saint Sleepless in "popular"-canonization-speak; there was Macedonius the Barley-eater, and Macedonius the Goubâ. Apparently our Saint Barley-eater was also known as Saint Pit because for a time he lived at the bottom of deep holes (Goubâ being a

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[82]Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," p. 130-32. Here Brown argues that the societal power, the base of the holy man's influence, was dependent on the perception that the holy man was not human. "In late Roman society, the holy man was deliberately not human. He was the 'stranger' *par excellence*."

Syriac word meaning pit).[83] These are only a few examples, but they do show that "popular" saints were canonized, that is, considered holy, for their ability to conquer the very tangible demons (necessities for most of us) of sleep, food, and shelter—not to mention the sexual appetite. Thus in this way it is impossible to focus exclusively on externals, for without the private, spiritual war in which the holy man was engaged, there obviously would not have been any external acts or appearances onto which the imaginations of late antique society could grasp. So there was a certain intersection of internal and external factors that needs to be recognized, then, for the purposes here, discarded. The important point is that fighting a *private* war, the warrior was rewarded, in a "popular" sense with these "canonizations by the people." The enemies he fought were recognizable ones, the same demons the peasants themselves had to deal with daily, but with far less success. It was holiness placed in peasant terms. Parenthetically, in our own society, and most others, warriors are rewarded with items and prestige that reflect what is considered especially lustrous. The victories of the corporate warrior are lavishly rewarded with wealth, respect, and sometimes even political careers. Though it is appropriate to see these "popular" canonizations as a form of societal reward for the conquering the mundane concerns of the human realm, these conquerors of human needs were not seen as unapproachable and distant gods. Instead, the peasant audience sought to integrate the outwardly anti-lifestyle of the holy man into their community, thereby creating a context for understanding and esteem.

The "popular" names given to the holy men illustrate this attempt to place the holy man on a recognizable ground. It is helpful to see the "popular" names, such as "Barley-eater," as nicknames. This is important and justified for two reasons, both of which form the basis of nickname-giving in general. First we have seen that a name like "Barley-eater" was given to the holy man by the surrounding community. Second, such names were

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[83]For Alexander the Sleepless cf. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," p. 114, cf. also Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, pp. 185-96. "Barley-eater" op. cit.; For "Goubâ," Theodoret, *Religious History*, XIII.2, p. 101.

given in recognition of some outstanding trait. In this case, we saw that the name reflected the dietary dilemma of the peasantry, Homer's "cursed stomach." In others, such as the "Sleepless," we saw that other human concerns could be the focus. And in the case of Macedonius, we saw that his nickname, or his "popular" name, could change—from Saint Pit (Goubâ) to Saint Barley-eater, depending on what characteristic was most noticed and amplified. One ethnographic explanation for nicknames in peasant village communities, the first source of the holy man's fame, is that by defining a person by "virtue of their unconventional behaviour" the "non-conformist" is allowed to "enter the community."[84] In most cases, nicknames work as community sanctions. Thus, a known pickpocket could be called Little Thief, or worse probably. More than likely the thief, if he wants to stay in the community, would stop picking pockets. The holy man, through his strange acts that appeared to have been fueled by the supernatural, was given some mundane name that reflected something earthly. The peasant community was attempting to understand the "non-conformist" in their own terms. But in the case of the holy man, these nicknames were not meant to be sanctions (in a punitive sense) since the village and its individual members could benefit from his various services, adjudication being the most significant. Thus they did not try to change his behavior, just to make it seem more familiar or relevant to their own experience. In effect, the holy man was made an almost-member of the community. It was this ambiguous status, between the community and the divine, that gave the holy man the distance to seem fair and disinterested in his judgments as well as familiar enough to trust.[85] Not only did the communities find a trustworthy figure in the holy man, many, like Macedonius, found fulfillment in a quite personal contact with 'the world.' He developed relationships with others, just as they had come to trust him.

This sort of contact really demonstrates the humanity of the holy man, which in many ways is a central theme in Theodoret's *vitae*. As Brown noticed, miracles, a strictly

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[84]Julian A. Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra*, 2nd ed. orig. pub. 1954 (Chicago, 1971), pp. 167-69.

[85]Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," pp. 130-34.

other-worldly topic, are "secondary" in Theodoret's accounts. Instead, he was more interested in the power behind the miracle, that is the work the holy man had to do—both behind the scenes, patiently increasing the severity of his self-mortifying techniques, and in his relations with others, through his acts of 'community service'—to build up to the exercise of his command over the supernatural. In better words, "The miracle condenses and validates a situation built up by more discreet means."[86] Why would Theodoret emphasize the flesh and blood aspect of the ascetic when it would seem more natural and spectacular to focus on the divine, angelic aspect? We must try to understand Theodoret's dilemma when writing about the holy men. He somehow had to make a bizarre, or to use his own word "irrational," behavior seem worthy of esteem to a much wider audience, one that could not directly see the subtleties that eventually effected his "popular" canonization. In the following passage, Theodoret's dilemma is illustrated by his attempt to 'sell' the "irrational" behavior of the holy men to a distant audience. Interestingly, in doing so, he focuses on the vulgar aspect of the holy man's diet to illustrate the miracle of his ability to transcend this otherwise foolish suffering:

> Those who take [nourishment] to the point of repletion have a sufficient protection against the attack of the freezing cold, for they [nourishments] fortify the body by it, and make it withstand such a time of year. But those who enjoy neither food nor drink each day and, when they do, do not partake of what can warm the body but either eat grass like irrational animals or use only soaked pulses—how could they draw heat from such nourishment? What quantity, or quality, of bloodstream could result therefrom?[87]

The answer that Theodoret gives is to be expected: "Divine Love" fuels, taking the place of regular food, the holy man. But again, despite what divine power the holy man, or his hagiographer, believed he possessed, the important thing to notice in this passage is not the answer that Theodoret gives, but in noticing how Theodoret frames the question. From it,

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[86]Ibid., pp. 121-22.
[87]Theodoret, *Religious History*, Epil.2, p. 191.

we see that the holy man had to be both human and angel. He was not a god, nor an angel, but needed food, however little. But he also needed "Divine Love" to conquer his own "cursed stomach." Thus, by emphasizing the dual nature of the holy man, Theodoret shows that the he necessarily occupied a place in the community of humans as an almost-member just as well as occupying a role among more lofty realms as an almost-angel, "imitating the life in heaven."[88]

As Theodoret's focus on diet in the above passage also demonstrates, the topic of the rigorous diet of the holy man was always a troublesome one. For lack of sleep, depriving oneself of sex, being bound in chains, standing on pillars, or living in mud huts or in the crags of mountains (all various acts of mortification) would not kill a person. But not eating, or eating like a "irrational animal" could. Food was the most difficult of earthly bonds to break free from and therefore the denial of food became the most widespread act of mortification. For this reason it is easy to see that food denial was felt to be the first and most basic step in becoming a true ascetic. And for the same reason, Theodoret devotes much time to showing that the holy man, though fueled by "Divine Love," was more calculating when it came to his own "cursed stomach" than what may have been otherwise believed.

Imitating angels did not mean complete starvation. One of the striking features of Theodoret's accounts, attested in other lives,[89] is the practicality and flexibility the holy man displayed when his acts of mortification threatened his precariously maintained balance between the human and the angelic. In many passages, the holy man takes extra food, or food of higher quality when becoming ill or reaching old age. Upon hearing of the imminent death of James of Cyrrhestica, Theodoret traveled all night to see this famous holy man, whom he had visited before. James had been ill for a few days, and by the time Theodoret arrived, was in some kind of delirium. After Theodoret revived him, he brought

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[88]Ibid., IV.9, p. 54.

[87]Cf. *The Life of Saint Daniel the Stylite*, trans. E. Dawes and N. H. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints* (Oxford, 1948), LXII, pp. 44-45.

the ailing holy man a bowl of "barley gruel." But James stubbornly refused the food because it had been cooked. Theodoret finally convinced him to eat by appealing to the same ascetic philosophy that kept him from taking the food in the first place. Theodoret supposedly said to the dying holy man:

> Show consideration, father, for all of us, for we think your health to be preservation for all. For not only are you set before us as a model that is of benefit, but also help us by your prayers and procure us God's favor. If the disruption of your habits torments you, father (I continued), endure this [barley gruel] as well, for this too is a form of philosophy [i. e. mortification]. Just as when in health and desiring food you overcame appetite by endurance, so now when you have no appetite show endurance by taking food.[90]

In another instance, Theodoret describes a conversation his mother had with Macedonius, whom we identified as Saint Barley-eater. Theodoret's mother was an ascetic who, on a daily basis, took the Macedonius his food of ground barley soaked in water. When she became ill, the holy man advised her to take food. When she refused, Macedonius revealed that after forty years of eating barley, he had recently begun to take bread because he was getting older and could not endure his former diet (c. AD 390). The lesson Macedonius was trying to teach was that it was more important to bend the rules every once in the while if it meant living longer in the ascetic life. He felt that God would punish a person for allowing himself to die foolishly. In other words, it was important not to be too angelic, for God would punish those who arrogantly forgot their human limits. Still, Theodoret cannot resist ending this description by praising Macedonius for his forty years of inflexibility: "for forty years he had made barley his food. This itself is sufficient evidence of the man's asceticism and love of labor."[91]

Just as nicknames show that the community was trying to find a place for the holy man within their realm of experience, so his flexible and practical diet shows that he knew

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[90]Theodoret, *Religious History*, XXI.11, p. 137.
[91]Ibid., XIII.3, p. 101.

he was just breathing animal like the rest of us. Despite these mutual acts of accommodation, the community sometimes was a little wary of the holy man, sometimes downright hostile. After all, demons are the flipside of angels. Also, there were probably just as many bandits living in the hills and mountains as there were holy men.[92] It is obvious that both Theodoret and the holy man had to deal with a somewhat skeptical audience. He is worried that some may not believe his accounts of miracles: "If anyone does not believe what I have said. . ." or, that ordinary men "Taking themselves as the standard, . . . disbelieve the miracles of the men of God." There is mention of "those especially fond of mocking," and those who "admire only what they know [i.e. what they can see]."[93] Some of these comments seem to be aimed at a distant audience, one that perhaps was not as enthralled with the holy man as the folk who populate the *vitae* written about them. Other comments, however, seem to be specifically aimed at scoffers, hoax-hunters, or just the curious skeptic. These people were community members who wanted to see just what was behind this strange figure who lived near the village and performed miracles and gave advice.

Ascepsimas was one holy man who lived in a mud-walled cell that must have been open at the top, for Theodoret reports that one man, "out of malign curiosity," climbed a tree standing adjacent to the monk's cell in order to see what he "spent all his time doing." Apparently, the holy man cursed his skeptical visitor, rendering him paralyzed from head to toe. The curse was completely lifted only after the paralyzed man correctly gathered that the tree should be cut down so no others would attempt to peek in on the saint again.[94] The implication is that others would undoubtedly try to do so. And why shouldn't they? Here was a man who lived in a mud hut, who did not speak, and who only came out at night. Just what was he? Beyond slapstick element, this matter reveals a community

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[92]For an excellent look at the role of bandits in Asia Minor, cf. Keith Hopwood, "Bandits, Elites and Rural Order," in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, above note 78, pp. 171-87.

[93]Theodoret, *Religious History*, VI.11, p. 66; IX.11, p. 86; XXV.9, p. 158; XIII.1, p. 100 respectively.

[94]Ibid., XV.3, p. 115.

trying to understand their local holy man, to see if he was human, whether he spent his time doing human things or whether there was something strange and divine happening. Above all it was a community trying to find a context, a familiar ground, in which to root the holy man. Sadly for this curious man, he did not exactly get the answer he came for, but there are other examples showing some holy men were more vocal and instructive when confronted with the curious.

The best example comes from the life of the famous pillar-sitter Simeon. A deacon from a nearby village came to Simeon's pillar and asked whether he was "a man or a bodiless being." Why do you want to know, Simeon asked. The deacon replied: "I hear everybody repeating that you neither eat nor lie down, both of which are proper to men–for no one with a human nature could live without food and sleep." Simeon allowed the man to come up to him by climbing a ladder, showed him a puss-oozing ulcer he had developed, and told him that he did, in fact, eat. "After seeing and marveling at the excess of the wound and learning from him that he does take food, he came down from there..."[95] Here was proof positive the holy man was human. It was a man on top that pole, not a god. Furthermore, it was this common humanity that gave him his "popular" canonization, and subsequent fame. Theodoret adds: "he is extremely approachable, sweet and charming, and makes answer to everyone who addresses him, whether he be artisan, beggar, or peasant."[96]

Having entered the community, figuratively if not physically, the holy man was just as subject to community sanctions as anybody else. The example of Simeon is an exceptional one, for he became more well-known than many of his predecessors and contemporaries. Thus, he had a following that was both local and international and was not actually attached to any specific community. But as the above example shows it was still important for the pilgrims who visited the holy man to try to find some human context into which they could locate him. Since not everyone in a village could travel to see the

[95]Ibid., XXVI.23, pp. 170-71.
[96]Ibid., XXVI.25, p. 171.

holy man, the few that could undoubtedly were 'debriefed' of their experience when they returned to their communities. In cases of more locally-famed ascetics, the quality of 'holiness' was not a concrete, eternal relationship. If the holy man was felt to be a threat to the community, no matter what his previous status, he could then be held accountable for some alleged crime. Palladius, a holy man near "a large and well-populated" village, was almost lynched when the community believed he had murdered a visiting trader who had been in the village for a large fair. According to Theodoret's account, Palladius was framed by a greedy murderer who dumped the body in front of the holy man's door in the middle of the night. The next day "the news circulated and the whole fair talked of the event, all hastened together, broke down the door and called on the godly Palladius to answer for the murder." Palladius was able to pick the real murderer out from the crowd (in a manner that is very dramatic). After the real perpetrator had been identified, the community was able to breathe a collective sigh of relief and life could go on as normal after the threat to the community was vanquished. As a result the holy man acquired even more holiness: "The godly Palladius, who was already remarkable, naturally became, as a result of this, still more remarkable, for the miracle was sufficient to show the man's familiar access to God."[97]

Murder was a crime that was strictly human. Gods do not murder for petty cash, only humans do. Furthermore, only humans can be held accountable for their evil, gods cannot. So if a holy man could be suspected of robbery and murder, it is apparent, then, that the holy man was considered to be somewhat part of the community, or at least subject to its conventions. But, again, he was just an almost-member, half man and half angel (grumpy pagan perceptions of the holy man not withstanding[98]). And as this example

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[97]Ibid., VII.2-3, pp. 69-70.

[98]The picture, of course, would not be quite complete without Libanius, who was openly hostile to the holy men. In 385 AD, Theodosius outlawed pagan sacrifice at most temples. Many ascetics took it upon themselves to destroy temples in the countryside. Most that were targeted were on the estates of landowners. As a landowner, and a pagan on top of that, Libanius was very upset at holy violence. Since holy men were increasingly becoming known for the denial of basic human needs, such as food and drink, Libanius based his attack on the holy men on attempting to reverse this perception. Accordingly, he depicts the holy people as indulgent in almost every way:

shows, his ambiguous status was therefore his strength: on the one hand he was close enough to the community that a power base could evolve, and on the other, through his acts he appeared to possess a "familiar access to God" which did not completely alienate him from his access to humanity, or rather, humanity's access to him. It is a confusing notion to digest, that a man could be 'almost' one thing and 'almost' another, and that together both 'almosts' could be the basis of his holiness. Perhaps another way to illustrate this in-between role is through Theodoret's reports of the intra-community struggles that took place over many of the holy men, alive and dead. The living example comes from the *vita* of Salamanes. For an unmentioned reason, Salamenes decided to leave his original community and took up residence in a suitable mud hut in a village across the river. Espionage followed as each community competed for the presence of the holy man.

> [T]he inhabitants of his village of origin, crossing the bridge of the river by night and digging through his cell, seized and carried him, neither resisting nor ordering it, along to their own village, where at daybreak they built a similar hut, where they immediately immured him. He maintained silence as before, saying nothing to anyone. But after a few days the inhabitants of the village on the other side, also coming by night and digging through the cell, led him back to themselves, while he made no protest, neither struggling to remain nor returning back eagerly.[99]

Thus we see that the holy man was not only part of the community, but actually became associated with the it's identity despite what he thought or wanted.

> this black-robed tribe, who eat more than elephants and, by the quantities of drink they consume, weary those that accompany their drinking with the singing of hymns, who hide these excesses under an artificially contrived pallor--these people . . . attack the [pagan] temples with sticks and stones and bars of iron, and in some cases, disdaining these, with hands and feet ...the priests must either keep quiet or die (*Oration 30*, trans. A. F. Norman, VIII)

Instead of being half-starved, the monks, according to the pagan Libanius, were over-stuffed elephants. It was a cheap shot and Libanius knew it. There were plenty of pious holy men around the city of Antioch which were famous (cf. Theodoret, *Ecclesisatical History*, trans. B. Jackson, IV.25) He had no real reason to defame the holy men, except for his political position as a pagan official and his economic interests as an owner of an estate.

[99]Theodoret, *Religious History*, XIX.3, pp. 129-130.

We might then be able to anticipate the problems that occurred when the holy man died, for the body, or pieces of his person, were felt to carry on his power. His holiness remained living in his corpse, hair, and even his shabby tunic.[100] Communities fought for the right to keep these things near them. In one case, even before the death of their holy man, some took the liberty of building "a great tomb a few stades away in the neighboring village," while Theodoret "prepared a grave for him in the shrine of the triumphant Apostles." The holy man himself simply wanted to be buried on a mountain.[101] During the funeral procession of another, led by no less than the emperor:

> Everyone both of the country and of the adjoining region pressed forward to enjoy his blessing; many rod-bearers accompanied the bier, to deter through fear of blows those who tried to strip the body of its clothing or who wanted to take pieces therefrom. One could hear some singing psalms, others dirges; one woman with sighs called him patron, another foster-father, another shepherd and teacher; one man in tears named him father, another helper and protector. With such eulogy and lament did they entrust to the tomb this holy and sacred body.[102]

Though the scale was much larger in this case, the death of the holy man in all cases provided an opportunity for eulogizing, that is for the individual and collective commemoration of his personal help as well as his contributions to the community as a whole. For our purposes, these eulogies can provide an answer to the question of how the holy man was integrated into the community, and can ultimately show the two-sided nature of his power. The answer that has been brewing lies in the ambiguous status of the holy man, that is his place in the community as an almost-member and his place among the heavens as an almost-angel. During the funeral procession, many were trying to be near the corpse, some evidently intent upon taking pieces of the holy man's clothing (or whatever else they could grab) back home, for these little worthless pieces cloth or hair

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[100]Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, p. 321.
[101]Theodoret, *Religious History*, XXI.30, pp. 144-45.
[102]Ibid., XVII.10, pp. 123-24.

were felt to have a divine power. This was the recognition of the holy man's angelic status. But at the same time, the eulogizers, whom Theodoret labels as "everyone of the country" and the "adjoining region," probably mostly peasants, were praising the holy man in very mundane terms: as a patron, foster-father, shepherd, teacher, father, helper, and protector. This was the recognition of his status as a person of the community. Just as we began with the question why Saint Barley-eater (and not Saint Macedonius Most Christ-like, etc.), a similar question crops up here as well: why, in a time of remembrance, were these mundane terms used to praise the holy man? The answer is similar as well, in that it was holiness based on the historical context of the people who "canonized" the holy man to begin with. But something more was needed to acquire the quality of holiness; as we saw, the holy man had to transcend, to be the antithesis, of this same historical context. Without this dual, and even contradictory status, the holy man could not have acquired the influence and role that eventually allowed him to set the pattern of holiness in the Byzantine world, and later for the stereotypical scholastic brotherhoods and nunneries of the Medieval period.

The Triumph of the "Barley-eater"

So far, with the exception of his role as a rural patron, we have dealt with the holiness of the ascetics in the abstract. Now it is necessary to discuss the challenge he posed to institutional authority. Some holy men stepped beyond their geographical, cultural, and social boundaries. By definition the holy man was a person of the desert. Literacy in Greek was not a requirement, and social and political standing were left behind with all of the rest of the other baggage of 'the world'. But despite this, there are more than just a few examples of the holy man acting with iron-fisted authority. The remarkable thing is that often even the imperial powers came to heel when the holy man put down his foot. In Weber's classic formulation, this was power in the sense of domination, in that others would obey. Other times, however, the holy man's rebuke was met with scorn and

violence, as in the case of Alexander the Sleepless, who was kicked out of Antioch after he (and his twenty-four hour continuous chorus) began to criticize the bishop and the resident military official (*magister militum*).[103] After all, he was only Saint Sleepless, that is holy in a "popular" sense, to those who supported him. The purpose here, however, is to look at one particular success story, asking the question: how did the local power of the holy man (the one based on his 'almost' status) allow him the exercise a dramatic ability to influence individuals who existed in more urbane and distant realms?

In Syria, perhaps the most famous and most widely discussed exercise of the holy man's power involves none other than Macedonius, or Saint "Barley-eater" as he is identified here. The incident was the famous Riot of the Statues, as it has been named.[104] Since Macedonius became a main player in the aftermath of the riots, a short examination of the riots is in order, for it shows how a ragged mountain man known for eating barley could become the savior of one of the largest cities of the Late Empire.

In February AD 387, a super-indiction to the land tax (*collatio lustralis*) was announced to the council members and other notables of Antioch.[105] Since the councilors were primarily responsible for the collection of taxes, there was naturally some dissent, especially since the burden was already heavy. A crowd had gathered outside the *dikasterion*, a place for debate near the residence of the imperial governor (*Comes),* where the councilors were discussing the new tax. The grumblings of the crowd were quickly whipped into a frenzy by a professional group of agitators, the theatrical claque.[106] A riot began. Images of the emperor and his family were stoned and his statues were torn down and dragged through the streets. By noon it was all over. The rioters were arrested and

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[103]I suspect that the criticisms that got Alexander kicked out of the city were those directed against the bishop and not those against the military official. Vööbus, *The History of Asceticism*, p. 189.

[104]For a fuller treatment that will be given here cf. Robert Browning, "The Riot of AD 387 in Antioch: The Role of the Theatrical Claques in the Later Empire" *Journal of Roman Studies* 42 (1952): 13-20; Rev. C. Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. 1 (Maryland, 1959), pp. 259-83; G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 426-33; Liebeschuetz, *Antioch*, pp. 164-66; and recently Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (Madison, WI, 1992), pp. 105-17.

[105]Liebeschuetz, *Antioch*, 164.

[106]Robert Browning, "The Riot of AD 387 in Antioch."

trials were immediately held. Many were thrown to wild animals or burned alive. The remainder were thrown into prison. But because defacing the imperial image amounted to sacrilege as well as high treason, further punishments were feared.

Messengers were sent to Constantinople to report what had happened to Emperor Theodosius. Rumors spread that the most severe punishments were in store for the entire city. It was believed that Theodosius would have the city burned and left to be looted by the his soldiers. After the messenger reached Constantinople, the emperor dispatched two imperial officials to assess the situation. They also were given a preliminary set of punishments. Public baths, theaters, and the arena were to be closed; food distribution for the poor was to be halted; and the city was to be stripped of its rank as a *metropolis*.[107] The glory and livelihood of the city thus were at stake. According to Theodoret, upon arrival to the city, the two imperial officials, Elibichus and Caesarius, were met by a large number of ascetics who had descended from nearby Mount Silpius to command the officials to tell the emperor to be mild in his judgments. The holy men were led by Macedonius who succeeded in defusing the situation. Theodoret writes:

> As they [Elibichus and Caesarius] rode into the middle of town he [Macedonius] caught hold of one of them by the cloak and bade both of them dismount. At the sight of a little old man, clad in common rags, they were at first indignant, but some of those who were conducting them informed them of the high character of Macedonius, and then they sprang from their horses, caught hold of his knees, and asked his pardon. The old man, urged on by divine wisdom, spoke to them. . .[108]

The officials were right to be angry with the old man Macedonius. He should have been beaten or killed for his disrespect. What gave him the right to interfere in an official matter, let alone one as grave as treason?

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[107]Downey, *A History of Antioch*, 430.
[108]Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, XIX, 146; cp. *Religious History*, XIII.7, pp. 102-03.

Though by no means a fair chronology of the riots, the important information for our purposes is basically contained in the brief excerpt from Theodoret above. From it, we can glean a few clues into the process of constructing holiness and its transmission to a larger sphere.

1) Macedonius appeared like a wild man, clothed in rags.
2) The officials were annoyed at being bothered by such a despicable sight until they were told by *local* officials who and what this wild man represented.
3) When they realized what the holy man meant to the local people, they immediately allowed themselves to be influenced by his appeal.

These points seem obvious enough. But in the context of Antioch during the 380s and our discussion of how holiness was constructed, Theodoret's description very clearly shows that holiness was built locally. In other words, the ascetic's holiness, or in this case his divine authority, was not an inherent quality immediately visible to any and all who saw him. Macedonius never would have had power over the two officials if he did not have such a high reputation in Antioch and the surrounding countryside. We have seen that this reputation was built, at least partially, on being "known by all" as the "Barley-eater." Other aspects of his reputation were built through his contact with curial families and military officials.[109] No doubt his ordination as a priest in AD 385 had something to do with it.[110] The mixture of these elements, his fame as the "Barley-eater," his contacts among the curial families and the military, and his ordination, allowed him to descend from the mountain confident that his rebuke of the imperial ambassadors would not fall on deaf ears, or worse end in his unwanted martyrdom. For it was obvious that the officials would have brushed him aside had not the local officials intervened—Macedonius even needed an interpreter to communicate his rebuke to the officials for he could only speak Syriac. Thus the projection

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[109]Brown points out that Macedonius had contacts in the military before the riot, though I doubt we could go as far as calling these contacts his "clientele." cf. "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," note 8, p. 106.

[110]Poor Macedonius was duped into joining the ranks of the official church. Theodoret, *Religious History*, XIII.4, pp. 101-02.

of the holy man's power to a wider and more distant audience depended, almost exclusively, on his local reputation.

Though the stories of Macedonius rubbing elbows with the upper-crust of Antiochene society may be a more satisfying way of looking at how his reputation was built than among faceless peasants, we cannot ignore the role his diet played in provided the basis for this civic esteem. It is likely that most of the stories of Macedonius curing one official's wife or impressing a general, and other similar events, occurred within a relatively short span of time from about AD 380 to perhaps 400. But if Macedonius became an ascetic in around AD 350,[111] what was he doing in the mean time? He was building up his reputation among the countryside as a conqueror of the "cursed stomach," he was becoming known as the "Barley-eater." It is all the more significant when we see that food crisis was a pressing concern in the years before the riot of AD 387, occurring in the following years: 350, 354-55, 362-63, 375, 382-83, 384-85, and 386.[112] It was within this context of persistent food crisis, that Macedonius and other holy men rose to prominence in the communities surrounding Antioch. Theodoret shows the increasing movement of the holy man into higher visibility around the period of the late 370s:

> In the neighborhood of Antioch, Marianus, Eusebius, Ammianus, Palladius, Simeon, Abraames, and others preserved the divine image unimpaired . . . But the mountain [Mount Silpius] which is in the neighborhood of the great city [Antioch] was *decked like a meadow*, for in it shone Petrus, the Galatian, his namesake the Egyptian, Romanus, Severus, Zeno, Moses, and Malchus, and many others of whom the world is ignorant, but who are known to God.[113]

Though food crisis was part of the context, that is the historical predicament, in which the holy men of this period lived, this is not to suggest some sort of automatic relationship between food crisis and the "canonizations by the people." These were "popular" saints,

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[111]R. M. Price, translator of the *Religious History* being relied upon here, has offered these dates for Macedonius: born c. 330, became ascetic c. 350, ordained c. 385, death c. 420. cf. note 1, p. 108.

[112]Liebeschuetz, *Antioch*, pp. 126-28.

[113]My emphasis. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.2, pp. 128-29.

deemed holy for undoubtedly very specific and localized reasons. Nevertheless, it is an important context to consider, in light of our evidence that some were 'canonized' for their ability to conquer this societal dilemma of the "cursed stomach," but at the same time remaining a part of the community, as our example of Saint Barley-eater clearly shows.

Conclusion

E. R. Dodds, in his classic work *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965), with its obsession with examining the psychological dynamics of pagan/Christian relations, asks this question after briefly discussing various acts of self-mortification: "Where did all this madness come from?" At the time, his only answer was: "Again I do not know."[114] Dodds could not come up with an answer because he had limited the scope of his analysis by immediately dismissing the "popular" religion of the saints as a collective mental pathology. But the insight provided by Brazilian "popular" saints shows that holiness was bestowed upon individuals for historical reasons. The same insight when applied to Syrian "popular" saints, such as Saint Barley-eater, has revealed a material context for the "popular canonization" of late antique saints among a rural audience. The example of Macedonius, Saint Barley-eater, has shown that Homer's "cursed stomach," that is the recurring dilemma of hunger, may have been a basic, though not exclusive element leading to his "popular" sainthood. The material concerns of the peasants, along with Macedonius's seeming ability to conquer this societal concern, was perhaps very informative in the perceptions of the peasants who willingly came to him with their problems and concerns. Perhaps a brief example more familiar to the modern mind can better illustrate the relationship between material reality and spiritual belief: the sacred cows of India. Marvin Harris has been responsible for solving this "riddle of culture." He, despite many experts' exhortations that "cow worship is the number one cause of India's hunger and poverty," has shown that this seemingly irrational religious belief has in fact,

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[114]E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, p. 34.

rational, adaptive purposes: cows are worth more alive than dead for their living products such as milk, cheese, and dung.[115] Thus, material realities and expedience informs what appears to be an utterly destructive belief.

But it was not enough for the holy man to appear as a god-like conqueror of the concerns of his surrounding audience, especially of their problem of food crisis. He also had to seem human enough to be trusted by the community, and to seem approachable as a person who could understand his supplicants' concerns. Thus, on the one hand, the ascetic's holiness was composed of his seeming role in the divine, "imitating the life in Heaven." On the other hand, there was also the feeling that the holy man was an almost-member of the community. He was called "father," "patron," "helper," and "protector." Thus, he had a human relationship with the community as well as the feeling that he possessed a "familiar access to Heaven." This ambiguity was the basis of his power, one that was exercised locally through his role as a community adjudicator and a source of sound advice, and in a larger sense as a representative and protector of the often faceless people who surrounded him in the face of distant authority.

Probably the most basic insight provided by such an examination is in highlighting the simple fact that holiness was a quality that was given to an individual by an audience. Living in a particular historical context, the audience's criterion of holiness was based upon how the saint fit into or transcended this context.

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[115]Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (New York, 1974), pp. 11-32.

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