Charisma of Ascetic Saints in the Hagiography of the 12th Century

Edina Bozoky

Department of History, and Centre d’Etudes Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale, University of Poitiers, 86000 Poitiers, France; edina.bozoky@univ-poitiers.fr

Abstract: In the 11th–12th centuries, extreme ascetic practices reappeared in Western Europe, in particular, the wearing of hauberks and heavy iron chains, associated with penitence and eremitism. This article discusses the charisma of three ascetic saints of the 12th century: Bernard the Penitent (d. 1182), Wulfric of Haselbury (d. 1154/55), and Godric of Finchale (d. 1170). Their hagiographies were written shortly after their death. The authors emphasize that they were revered as holy men already in their lifetime. Their charismatic power was revealed by miracles of healing and prophecy, sometimes in visions. The manifestations of their charisma continued and even increased after their death and were transmitted and spread through their relics. Their mortifications and the signs of their holiness are comparable to those of the stylites and other hermits of Syria of late Antiquity.

Keywords: hermits; anchorites; mortifications; penance; miracles; healing; prophecy; visions; relics; stylites

1. Introduction

In the history of sainthood, according to the Epistles of Saints Paul, the term charisma means “the gift of God’s grace” for the benefit of the community, hence its use to designate the miraculous power of the saints (virtus) to perform healing, prophecy, and other beneficial actions such as charity and mercy. From a sociological point of view, charisma refers also to the power of attraction of some people, especially that of the saints.

All saints have charisma, and after their death, their charisma is transmitted through their relics. The charisma of the ascetic saints deserves special attention. The faithful considered that ascetic practices and mortifications erased the marks of sin and conferred on the ascetics a specific charisma. It was believed that their survival was only possible thanks to the direct intervention of God. Not only because of the manifestations of their thaumaturgical power, but also because of their force transcending the limits that ordinary men can bear, they drew the admiration and even fascination of the believers, already during their lifetime. In particular, the stilyte saints of the fourth and fifth centuries in Syria, with their spirits freed from the prison of the flesh and their bodies subjected to extreme privations and mortifications, were considered particularly capable of communicating with heaven, and from their charisma, to benefit the faithful who requested them.

Evagrius Scolasticus says that Symeon Stylite the Elder (d. 459) “placed between earth and heaven, he holds communion with God, and unites with the angels in praising him; from earth, offering his intercessions on behalf of men, and from heaven, drawing down upon them the divine favour” (Evagrius 1846, pp. 24–25). According to his Vīla, “His fame spread far and wide, and people flocked to him, not only from the neighbourhood, but even from a distance of several days’ walk, and they all desired to touch him and receive some blessing from the touch of his skin garments” (Festugiére 1959, p. 309). Theodoret of Cyrhhus explains that Symeon’s extreme asceticism, which attracted many people, could produce the conversion of unbelievers (Theodoret of Cyrhhus 1985, VI, 3–4, p. 64). Similarly, in introducing another ascetic, Romanos (a hermit near Antioch, attested in around the time...
of Valens, 364–378), he emphasises that “In addition to the greatness and the number of his labors the bloom of grace induced all to admire and honor him. From many he often drove out serious diseases, to many sterile women he gave the gift of children. But although he had received such power from the divine Spirit, he called himself a pauper and beggar. [. . .] On his departure from here and transference into the angelic choir, he left behind a memory not buried with the body, but flowering, flourishing, abiding inextinguishable forever, sufficing to profit those who wish” (Ibid., XI, 4–5, p. 95).

The stylites and other penitent hermits were considered as living saints. Even during their lifetime, their charismatic power was spread through their eulogies as well as through patches of their clothing. Hippolyte Delehaye has rightly formulated: “Who better than the stylite’s conditions of life entirely concentrated on his own soul? Yet the attraction of these hermits is irresistible. Everyone comes to them” (Delehaye 1923, p. CXCI).

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, we can see a resurgence of eremitism in Europe. (L'eremitismo in Occidente nei secoli XI e XII 1965; Sheils 1985; Vauchez 2003). There are several hypotheses to explain this phenomenon: the influence of the Gregorian Reformation, which advocated the ideal of the evangelical life; a change in religious sensibility, which emphasized the possibility of individual spiritual perfection outside of religious institutional frameworks; and the development of devotion to the humanity of Christ and in particular to his Passion. The mortifications and privations of ascetic hermits not only had to atone for their sins and those of others, but also to imitate the sufferings of Christ. The retirement into solitude of hermits, anchorites and other ascetics did not mean that they were cut off from the world: they gave advice and comfort to those who came to them (Vauchez 1994, pp. 82–86).

Some hermits and anchorites wore coats of mail (lorica) and iron chains, and engaged in penitential practices such as fasting and mortifications1. Peter Damian reports Dominic Loricatus’ (d. 1060) self-flagellation and wearing of a coat of mail. In the 11th century, several ascetic saints had the same practice: Bertulf of Ghistelles (d. late 11th century), Simon of Crépy (d. 1082), Hugues of Semur (d. 1109), and Guillaume of Firmat (d. 1103).

In the 12th century, the series of ascetic saints continued: Girard of Saint-Aubin (d. 1123), Etienne of Muret (d. 1124), Godric of Throckenholt (d. between 1133 and 1145), Wulfric of Haselbury (d. 1154/55), Etienne of Aubazine (d. 1159), Godric of Finchale (d. 1170), Bernard the Penitent (d. 1182). And in the 13th century: Laurent Loricatus (d. 1243), and in the 14th: Martin of Genova (d. 1343).

In this paper, I examine the specific charisma of three saints loricati, first of all Bernard the Penitent, followed with the dossiers of two English saints, Godric of Finchale and Wulfric of Haselbury. This choice is made because of their contemporaneity, the richness of their hagiography and the specific use of their relics. After presenting their ascetic practices, I attempt to show by what phenomena their charisma was revealed during their lifetime and after their death, and finally, how their charisma was transmitted and spread through their relics.

The Life and Miracles of Bernard the Penitent or Bernard of Sithiu, a native of Maguelone in Languedoc, was written by John, a monk (and later abbot in 1187) of Sithiu, shortly after the saint’s death in 1182, at the behest of the abbot of St Bertin, Simon, and at the request of the other monks (Vita B. Bernardi poenitentis, Acta Sanctorum, Apr. II, pp. 674–97). The Life and Miracles of Godric of Finchale is a contemporary account by Reginald of Durham (Reginald of Durham 2022); the Life of Wulfric of Haselbury was written by John of Forde around 1184, some thirty years later than the saint’s death, but based on living oral testimonies (Abbot of Forde John 1933): “everything that John writes down, every scrap of information, comes to him by word of mouth (see Introduction (Abbot of Forde John 1933, p. 69))”. The writing down of the deeds of recently dead men of God attests to the desire for the rapid recognition and diffusion of their sanctity.
2. Retreat to a Hermitage, Ascetic Practices

Originally from Maguelone, Bernard committed crimes that are not specified, and a severe penance was imposed on him in 1170 for seven years (fasting, barefoot travel). He made several pilgrimages, to Compostela, Rome, Jerusalem and even to the tomb of St Thomas in India, before arriving at Saint-Omer (in Artois, northern France). He settled in a small house near the abbey church of Saint-Bertin, where he could go at will. At the end of his life, he donned the monastic habit in the monastery Saint-Bertin. His hagiographer describes his mortifications. He filled the cracks in his feet with liquid wax; he slept in a bed made of pointed stones; he fasted and distributed to the poor and sick what he obtained by begging (I, 9–15)². But his main mortification consisted of wearing iron instruments of penance around his neck and body, chains, cîlice and hauberk, which he hid under tunics of skin and wool (I, 11). His penance was completed by frequenting recluses and monks, and he learned the Psalter.

Wulfric of Haselbury was ordained priest but spent most of his time hunting until he met a beggar who persuaded him to change his life. In 1125, he received permission from the Lord of Compton to become an anchorite in the village of Haselbury (South Somerset), in an uninhabited cell adjacent to the parish church.

He died in 1154 or 1155. Apart from his frugal diet of oats, Wulfric kept vigil at night in the church; his bed, where he rested so little, was made of tree branches. At first, he wore a horsehair shirt, and later he acquired a hauberk. One of his most famous miracles was the shortening of his hauberk. It was too long, but it could be cut with scissors as easily as if it were cloth³.

A similar miracle of shortening the hauberk is told in the Life of another hermit, Godric of Throckenboll, who wore a hauberk for seven years (Licence 2006, pp. 15–43; Ridyard 2001, pp. 236–50).

Godric of Finchale was born around 1065 in Walpole, Norfolk, and became a long-distance merchant, travelling abroad. He acquired a fortune which he gave up after pilgrimages to Rome, the Holy Land and Compostela. He received permission from Ranulf, Bishop of Durham, to retire as a hermit at Finchale in Durham Forest where a holy man named Aelric became his spiritual master. After Aelric’s death, Godric returned once more to the Holy Land where he visited the hermitages of Judea and then he settled at Finchale, three miles from the shrine of St Cuthbert. Reginald of Durham became his confessor. He died a centenarian in 1170. For 50 years he wore a very rough hair shirt and an iron hauberk on his naked body. He had worn out three hauberks (c. 28)⁴. His diet was most austere: he mixed flour from his crops with ashes to make bread (c. 29); he also cooked herbs without salt and fat and dried them (c. 30). He also starved his body by keeping vigils; he slept on the bare ground, placing a stone under his head (c. 32). On cold nights he went to the river, undressed, and entered the cold water: “he offered himself all night as a living sacrifice to the Lord (c. 33).” Once when his body was covered with sores, he ordered them to be covered with salt (c. 82).

3. Manifestations of the Charisma in Vita

André Vauchez noted that “Of all the saints we meet in medieval canonisation proceedings, hermits are the ones who perform the most miracles during their lifetime.” (Vauchez 1988).

The charismatic power of the three loricati presented in this article was manifested by a particularly high number of miracles.

According to his hagiographer, the holiness of Bernard the Penitent was already revealed during his lifetime: he extinguished a fire with the sign of the cross (I, 16); and he blessed the sowing of wheat which then produced a particularly abundant harvest (I, 23) (Céline 1998). Three of his healings were preceded by his apparition in a vision. A nun named Gertrude, suffering from an intolerable pain in her leg, saw Bernard in a vision: he signed her and restored her to health (I, 17). A man named Elbode, with a contracted leg, saw the saint appear in a vision: he touched and signed his leg. He went to the saint who
took him to a secret place and marked his leg with the sign of the cross (I, 18). Similarly, a woman suffering from headaches was told in a vision that she should have her head signed by the saint (I, 19).

For two miracles, the hagiographer calls Bernard “the second Elisha”. Bernard resuscitated a drowned girl: he took her in his arms, signed her three times by genuflecting three times (I, 21), just as Elisha had given life to a boy by laying on him (II Kings IV, 32–35). Similarly, he healed a leprous woman by signing her (I, 22), a miracle which the hagiographer parallels with Elisha’s healing of Naaman (II Kings V, 1–14).

The death of Bernard was announced to a monk in a vision: he saw the saint enter the church of Saint Bertin dressed in priestly vestments; in the church, a multitude of people sang praises (24). The saint was anointed in the habit of a monk. Just before his death, he cured a boy suffering from worms by touching him (II, 27).

As for Wulfric of Haselbury, the historian Henry of Huntingdon proclaimed him a living saint some twenty years before his death (c. 1135). He said that although in his time miracles were very rare, whenever they were performed, they were most glorious. And he wanted to make public the glorious record of a man whose living spirit still survived: this was Wulfric who always wore a hauberk; when the first one fell apart, he put on a new one which was too long, but which he was able to cut without difficulty. Many religious rejoiced to have rings of the holy hauberk, and the famous story has travelled everywhere through all parts of the kingdom (Henry of Huntingdon 1996, pp. 694–97; Licence 2011, pp. 180–81).

The exceptional charisma of Wulfric of Haselbury is emphasised in several passages by John of Forde. In him, the natural gift he had was transformed into a gift of grace by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit:

“And the Lord gave his saint the choice gift of faith to quench all the flaming darts of the evil one, because he was of a trusting spirit, looking to God in confidence and leaning on him in any and every need. […] This purity of faith was refined, and one might say overlaid with gold, by a certain holy and sincere simplicity which had been his from his mother’s womb, but by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit this gift of nature was made a gift of grace.”

John of Forde relates 17 healings, 45 prophetic miracles of Wulfric and 42 “manifestations of God’s power or presence,” among them several dreams and revelations (see Introduction (Abbot of Forde John 1933, pp. 54–55)).

Heavenly signs revealed his holiness. In a dream, Wulfric saw Jesus and the apostles. St. Peter called out: “Get up, hurry and follow us”. In his haste, he dropped the container of oil in his hand, and the oil spilled onto his robe and the ground. Later he received the interpretation of his dream from Robert Pullus: “God has appointed this place to be glorified through you by the grace of healings and by the accomplishment of signs: it is the oil poured out of your hand in this place and on your clothes (I. 11).” One night when he prayed before the altar of St. Michael, an angel took his soul to heaven where he saw the glory of God and the hope of the saints (I. 18). In another vision, his heavenly visitor assured him that his home in heaven was already ready (I. 20). When he prayed, a light was seen in the church (2. 5, 6).

The hagiographer notes that Wulfric was “filled with the Holy Spirit like a vessel that poured out oil” on men, and women of every kind started to flow towards him for a variety of reasons: to be healed, but also to worship him, or for his gift of prophecy and the knowledge of secret things:

“So it was that, just as his interpreter foretold, he was inwardly filled by the Holy Spirit like a vessel brimming and spilling over, so that his name might be, at God’s call, an oil poured out. From then on men and women of every kind started to flow towards him by a variety of reasons ranging from a hoped-for grace of healing to a reverence for holiness. The fragrance of the prophetic gift drew some: these came to see, to speak with, and to hear the words of a man with
the spirit of prophecy, through him to question the Lord directly, and to consult him about the dark uncertainties of things they had to bear. 6

He received visitors at the window of his cell. Kings Henry I and Stephen were among his visitors.

The fame of the ascetic Godric of Finchale also spread during his lifetime; many people came to visit him to be comforted by him. Godric also had the knowledge of distant and future things.

“Like Wulfric, he was treated as a living saint.” (Licence 2011, pp. 186–87)

Reginald of Durham records a great number of miracles that Godric of Finchale performed during his lifetime. When the River Wear flooded, he ordered the water not to flood his gardens but to flow towards the rocks on the opposite side; on another occasion, the water threatened his buildings; he made a cross of branches to stop the water (c. 48).

On several occasions, he used his objects to respond to the requests of people in pain. He gave his belt to the husband of a woman who had given birth three times to stillborn boys. He told him that at the time of the next delivery, his wife should put the belt around her (c. 104). He also cured a woman suffering from constipation with his belt. The brother of the subprior of Durham asked him for a gift. Godric cut up a belt that an old monk had once sent to him. Shortly afterwards, the piece of belt stopped the nosebleed of a cleric (c. 142). The same object also saved a woman in childbirth. The bread blessed by Godric cured a man who had lost the power of speech (c. 154).

4. Charisma Post Mortem

Bernard the Penitent died on 19 April 1182 and his body was placed on a litter (funeral bier) outside the church. The crowd scenes that began then revealed how Bernard’s charisma was perceived by the inhabitants. Countless people came to his body; many sick people lay under his litter and many were healed (I, 28). In order to obtain his relics, they tore his clothes. At the time of his funeral, they wanted to break his litter and obtain his laces and other pieces of his clothing (I, 29). After his burial, the crowds at the tomb continued. As there were no more relics to distribute, the monks secretly decided to open his tomb, from which they removed the hauberk, the cilice and the iron chains. They washed the body in water, which became a remedy. The body exhaled a sweet smell and shone with a white colour (I, 31).

The miracles after the burial continued daily; 125 are reported by the hagiographer (note that they were performed over a short time). He notes that those who invoked Bernard and could not go to his tomb could still be helped by him (II, 17). In connection with a miracle at the tomb where the empty vessel was filled with wine, the hagiographer again compares Bernard to Elisha who performed a miracle by filling a widow’s vessels with oil in order to be able to pay off a debt owed to a creditor (II Kings IV, 1–7).

Among Bernard’s miracles, a significant number were performed during a vision. A woman who slept by the tomb saw in a vision two men dressed in white carrying the body of the saint on his litter; she tried to grasp a piece of the cloth covering the litter, and with this effort she woke up and was cured (II, 3). A woman from Arques with contracted legs saw the saint by her bed who promised her health (II, 7). In another case, the saint appeared in a vision and healed by making the sign of the cross (II, 22). A monk of a Cluniac priory had two visions: he was in the part of the church of St. Bertin where the saint was buried and saw a very great light (II, 31). A monk who slept near the tomb had several visions (II, 36). A young adulterer, after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, committed sin again. He came to the tomb of the saint where he felt his clothes burning. After having done penance again, he returned to the tomb where the saint spoke to him (II, 42–43). A woman whose body was swollen all over saw the saint appear to her and tell her to go to him. She had herself carried to his tomb (II, 48). A woman of Saint-Omer who had two contracted hands saw a venerable man appear one night, who advised her to go to the church of Saint-Bertin where Saint Bernard was. She put her head and arms inside Bernard’s mausoleum (II, 53). A sick couple invoked the saint; a venerable man appeared to them and told them that if they
offered candles to the saint, they would recover their health (II, 60). The saint also appeared to a sick man suffering from fever (II, 71).

On the death of Godric of Finchale, miraculous phenomena were witnessed in nature: a delicious fragrance was felt in the air and in the woods, and for two months the trees, leaves and fruits exhaled a honey-tasting liquid:

“At the same time, the heavenly citizens became happy at the passing of such a great man, and also the airs of the skies were found to be bursting with a wonderful outpouring of sweetness. Indeed, the airs of the skies in all the adjoining woods became sweet-smelling, because the trees and branches, the woods and the leaves and the fruits and the grasses appeared to be dripping, perspiring and running with sweet dew in a heavenly way. For two whole months they retained this taste and the appearance and the savour and the feel and the touch and the perfumed smell of honey (c. 314).”

He was buried by the monks of Durham in his own oratory, and before the end of the century they established a priory on the site of his hermitage.

Reginald of Durham reports 225 post mortem miracles of Godric. During the decade of the 1170s, pilgrims to Finchale presumably exceeded a thousand (Licence 2011, pp. 188–89).

On several occasions, Godric of Finchale appeared in visions to people he would heal. Shortly after his death, a Cistercian monk asked for some of the hairs from Godric’s beard; a year later, he fell ill and put the hairs in water, then fell asleep. He then had a vision: he seemed to be sitting in a large vessel full of warm water; on its surface there seemed to have been some toxic mass, or a slimy concentration of fish or worms. Then the man of God Godric arrived and purged this pollution with his hand, and he walked around the vessel. When the monk woke up, he was cured (c. 350). An old man, having been Godric’s servant, was suffering from pain in his left arm. On the night of the Assumption, he was transported in a dream to the communal house of Finchale and saw his master before him. The servant began to beg him if he would to take pity on him. Godric blew on his arm three times and told him to go to his tomb in Finchale and rest his sick arm upon it (c. 458). A woman with a contracted hand and a sick body was taken to Godric’s tomb on the eve of the anniversary of his burial (depositio). At night she saw Godric enter the church and sing with the monks. She called on him for mercy. Then the tomb of Godric opened; he entered and closed it. She wanted to follow him, thrusting her hand towards him; she caught it against the sarcophagus. When she woke up, her hand was healed (c. 510). An old and sick carpenter had placed his faith in Saint Godric. He had a vision at night. He saw a person dressed in a white tunic enter his room and walk around the walls of the house for a long time, looking at him with kindly eyes; after that he went out. After a small interval, he came back with a companion, taller in stature than he, and also dressed in white clothes. He frequently blessed and signed the sick man. Then they went out, but returned bringing with them many others; two of these were dressed in white hooded garments; others wore grey clothes, and some others were adorned like bishops and priests. A splendid brightness emanated from each one of them. They turned together to the highest part of the house as if they were going to celebrate mass. Godric poured water over the hands of the celebrants. When the mass had ended, two of the men dressed in grey went out, four dressed in silk remained; all the others went out. As they walked, their feet did not touch the earth and a ray of light shone from beneath their feet. In the end, only Godric and his first companion remained. Godric walked around the house until midnight. When he left, the sick man was healed (c. 572–573).

5. Transmission of the Charisma through the Relics

Bernard’s charisma continued to operate through the water that washed his dead body (in French, vinage) and through his vestments and instruments of mortification. In only one case did the bodily remains—the hair—of the saint act: a monk dipped the hair in water, opened the swollen mouth of the sick man with a knife and poured in the water (II, 50). The liquid was drunk in several cases (II, 3, 5, 24, 46), but it was also used by pouring it into
the ear of a woman who had a worm (II, 8); a mute man swallowed dust from the tomb and drank the liquid (II, 11); in the case of a deaf woman, dust from the tomb was applied to the ears and then washed with the liquid (II, 39). Touching the eyes of blind persons, Bernard’s (unspecified) clothes (exuviae) healed them (II, 2). A matron who had given the saint shelter kept his cap, shoes and other objects as relics; a woman with a swollen and ulcerated leg went to her house and was healed by the affixing of one of the saint’s shoes to her thigh (II, 16).

Bernard’s instruments of suffering, representative objects of his specific charisma, became instruments of healing. When the abbot of St. John of Therouanne, suffering from a headache, came to the dedication of the church of St. Bertin, the abbot had his head touched with the saint’s hauberk (II, 29). A merchant who lost his goods and his son in a storm at sea lost his mind. In the shrine of the saint, he kissed the tomb and was signed with the relics of Bernard (II, 46). A hydroptic girl was signed with the chains of the saint (II, 54). A child who fell into the water was taken by his mother to the saint’s tomb and was signed with the saint’s relics (II, 69). Even the stones of Bernard’s bed conveyed miracles: a Scotus took a stone that was part of the bed of the saint. He touched with it his sick part, and then fell asleep; he woke up healed (II, 29). A woman suffering from sarcoma placed such a stone under her head, fell asleep and was cured (II, 35). A monk of St. Bertin made the sign of the cross with a stone of the saint on the leg of a young English man who limped (II, 51).

Godric’s bones have disappeared, but several medieval lists of relics attest that portions of his beard, some hairs and objects that belonged to him were kept in Finchale, including pieces of his tunic, coat of mail and other clothes, and his belt (see Introduction (Reginald of Durham 2022, pp. XCIII–XCIV)).

According to Reginald of Durham, after Godric’s death many people wanted to have something of his as a memorial, because rumours of his sanctity was widespread (c. 23). The chaplain Godfrey of Keslo obtained some rings from his hauberk. Later, when he was distributing alms to the poor, he met a young girl with a swollen body; her mother asked him if he had any relics of Godric. The chaplain took some rings from the hauberk, washed them and offered the drink to the sick girl. Reginald of Durham notes that this was the beginning of the signs through which the Lord revealed the merits of Godric after his death (c. 350).

The body of Wulfric of Haselbury was disputed between the monks of Montacute, and the Haselbury priest Osbern, who lived near Wulfric and was the main informant for John of Forde. Osbern managed to bury Wulfric’s body in a safe place in the church.

After the death of Wulfric of Haselbury, a revelation described by the hagiographer as angelic occurred. A chubby pilgrim appeared to the priest Osbern and asked him for something that had belonged to Wulfric as a token of his holiness. Osbern replied that he had nothing, apart from liturgical objects, but that it was not possible to give them. The pilgrim replied: “In your chest you have the dish and spoon he used to eat with. Give me these.” After the pilgrim left, Osbern regretted giving them to a stranger; he ran after him, but could not find him. Osbern became persuaded that the visitor was more than a human being. Perhaps the visitor wanted to teach with what devotion Wulfric ought to be venerated, and that the objects that belonged to him and that we hold cheap are not to be disprized (3, 45). Wulfric twice appeared to the wife of a man suffering from stomach trouble, ordering her to go to Haselbury church and take dust from his tomb, and then, diluted with water, to give it to her husband to drink (3, 46, 47).

In John of Forde’s time, the rings from the shortening of Wulfric’s hauberk were still kept by pious people who regarded them as a gift, a testimony to holiness or a guarantee of health, in other words a sacred and safe deposit (1, 10). As for Wulfric of Haselbury’s hauberk, a year before his death it fell off; with the help of a boy, he managed to put it back on his shoulders, but suddenly blisters appeared on his body. At the bishop’s command, he had to remove the hauberk and never wear it again; it was kept wrapped in a cloth as a relic (3, 41).
Similarly, some time after the death of Godric of Throckenholt, travellers passing near his abandoned hermitage found the rings of his disintegrated hauberk and took them away. Other pieces of the hauberk were kept by a woman; people suffering from fevers were brought to her. She put the rings in water and gave it to the feverish persons to drink, and they were cured (§ 23) (Licence 2021, p. 715).

6. Conclusions

I began by referring to a remote similarity between the Syrian ascetics and the extreme asceticism of the early Middle Ages. To conclude this paper, I point out several similarities with Syrian stylites.

A similar comparison can also be made concerning the charisma of the twelfth-century hermit ascetics with their relics. Not only were the Syrian ascetics venerated as living saints, but their charisma was also spread through their ‘relics’, already during their lifetime. At the dwelling place of Symeon the Stylist the Elder in Tel-neshin, “he flow of visitors kept increasing. Everyone wanted to touch the saint and to take away as a relic some piece of his leather tunic” (Delehaye 1923, p. XXVII); after his death, “the iron collar, to which, as the companion of its endurance, the famous body has imparted a share of its own divinely-bestow honours; for not even in death has Simeon been deserted by the loving iron” (Evagrius 1846, I, XIII, p. 28). Theodoret of Cyrhus testifies to the charismatic power of Peter the Galatian’s (a hermit in Galatia and later at Antioch, d. c. 403) girdle: many people “constantly took the girdle to heal the sick; and everywhere gave proof of the power of his grace” (Theodoret of Cyrhus 1985, IX, 15, p. 87). According to the ancient Life of Symeon the Stylist the Younger (d. 592), he gave a ‘eulogy’ made from the dust collected under his column, with the imprint of his image; he also distributed eulogies made from the dust of his column to the poor of Antioch; he gave blessed wands to his disciples, by means of which they worked cures in his name; a Georgian priest obtained some of his hair, which he set in a cross; this relic worked many miracles (Van der Ven 1962–1970, t. II, § 231, 163, 169). Similarly, Luke the Stylist (d. 979) performed miracles by means of “eulogies, blessed bread or holy water, a piece of cloth that he used, a piece of his belt, a cross that he made with his own hand. To keep the demon away, strips cut from his hand towel must be attached to the wall in the form of a cross” (Delehaye 1923, p. CIV).

7. Epilog

According to the hagiographers of the Middle Ages, “eremitical sanctity was probably the one that attracted the most spontaneous support from the faithful. The anchorite was crowned with the prestige of his ascetic exploits. His very survival, despite the privations and maceration he inflicted on himself, was a permanent miracle that could only be explained by divine intervention on his behalf. […] His thaumaturgical gifts made him, even during his lifetime, an extraordinary figure whom people sought to meet and to whom they turned with veneration (Vauchez 1988, p. 384).”

In the 12th century, a particular charisma was attributed to several loricati saints, due to the sufferings they imposed on themselves. They were assimilated with the most powerful thaumaturgist saints by ascribing to them an impressive number of miracles they had already performed during their lifetime, and even more after their death. Being attentive to others and having the gift of prophecy, they attracted the faithful, who sought consolation and advice from them. They were endowed with the charisma of being able to operate from afar, in visions, and their instruments of mortification were transformed into objects of healing.

But while the lay faithful were attracted to the hermits’ charisma, the Church was wary of excessive asceticism and its possible deviations. Since late Antiquity, excessive asceticism has been regarded by the Church as leading to the sin of pride. Similarly, solitary living outside institutional control was viewed with suspicion.

Therefore, it is not surprising that between 1198 and 1431, only one hermit was canonised, Peter of Morrone, Celestine V. “All the other causes remained in abeyance for
reasons we do not know. This exceptional proportion of failures contrasts with the enduring popularity of the holy hermits in the local cult (Vauchez 1988, p. 384)."

Our three loricati were not canonised, even though they enjoyed significant local cults. Impressed by Bernard’s miracles at his tomb, the abbot of Saint-Bertin built a new marble tomb for him, to which he transferred his body in 1182 (II, 4, 34). This act signified the recognition of his sanctity.

As for English candidates to canonisation, between 1161 and 1203, the four canonized saints (Thomas Becket, Dunstan, Edward the Confessor and Gilbert of Sempringham) “all had high-profile public roles”. We know that the Life of Wulfric of Haselbury was addressed in 1185 to Baldwin, Archbishop of Canterbury, former Abbot of Forde. “But no indication that the Life went further up the ecclesiastical ladder than Canterbury (see John of Forde 2011, p. 65).” Nevertheless, the local cult continued at Haselbury; Roger of Wendover reported “innumerable miracles” operated here (Abbot of Forde John 1933, pp. LXIV–LXVII).

Godric’s relics were conserved not only at Finchale, Durham, York and outside the immediate area of his cult, which “was not simply local and small (see Introduction (Reginald of Durham 2022, pp. XCIII–XCIV).” Godric’s fame is also reflected by the existence of a French version of his Vie (Reginald of Durham 2019).

In his masterful summary, André Vauchez gave the conclusion: “In the last centuries of the Middle Ages, the Roman Church seems to have grown increasingly wary of sanctity of the hermits . . . Its preference was for religious experiences conducted in a communal setting (Vauchez 1988, p. 387).”

Research on the loricati saints is just beginning. In this article, I have presented the main aspect of their charisma, and the manifestations of their miraculous power arousing the admiration of many faithful. A forthcoming study will focus on their relationship with secular and ecclesiastical society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 In his seminar at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Patrick Henriet studied the hagiography of these saints called loricati: (Henriet 2019–2021). Cf. also (Allen Smith 2008, pp. 572–602).

2 I quote the passages according to Joannes, monk of Saint-Bertin (1865).

3 The Life of Wulfric of Haselbury, I, 9: “Of the cutting of the hauberk. This was the first of the signs blessed Wulfric worked: itself a potent commendation of the power of God and of his own faith realized through the medium of another men.” Cf. (Henriet 2016, pp. 307–19).


5 The Life of Wulfric of Haselbury, 1, 2. “Of the grace of the inner man.”

6 The Life of Wulfric of Haselbury, 1, 11. “Of a foreglimpse of signs in a dream.”

References


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