The *Vita* of Syrus of Genoa (BHL 7973): hagiographical insights into the society of early medieval Genoa

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This article analyses the structure and content of the *Vita* of St Syrus of Genoa (BHL7973). A new dating of the earliest manuscript copy and contextualization of its episodes demonstrates how the *Vita* redefines civic authority in Genoa by transferring moral and protective power from imperial to episcopal hands. The study provides three main insights: the use of plague imagery and the basilisk episode to express communal anxiety and divine protection; the role of the miracles of St Syrus in shaping civic identity amid Byzantine decline; and the later reworking of the text to solicit elite patronage during the eleventh-century revival of Genoa. These insights reposition the *Vita* as a key document for understanding the society of early medieval Genoa and its Mediterranean connections.

Keywords: early Middle Ages; St Syrus; hagiography; Genoa

The central section of the thirteenth-century hymn *Ad matutinum*—one of several late medieval hymns in praise of St Syrus of Genoa—celebrates the fundamental role of the saint in liberating the city from the threat of a basilisk, which the saint commands to return to the sea:

Syrus, through the hand of Christ

showed his bond with the people

and protected them from harm,

he ordered the beast, fierce by nature,

a sad and terrifying basilisk with furious eyes,

directly to the sea,  
where it remained banished by his word.[[1]](#footnote-1)

St Syrus is traditionally regarded as the first bishop and patron saint of Genoa and occupied a central place in the religious and civic imagination the city throughout the Middle Ages. He was celebrated in hymns, civic histories, political orations, public oaths, church frescoes, sculptures, and in numerous namesake churches across Liguria.[[2]](#footnote-2) His cult remained vital until the fourteenth century, when it was eclipsed by that of St George, who would come to symbolize the mercantile ambitions of the maritime republic. Yet despite his former prominence, Syrus has remained curiously neglected in modern historiography. The *Vita sancti Syri* (BHL 7973) has never been translated or critically edited and the origins of his cult remain obscure and has remained, for the most part, a curious hagiographical artefact that relegates the saint and his life to the shadows of modern historical consciousness.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The neglect of Syrus in modern historiography contrasts sharply with his medieval renown and largely stems from the scarcity of sources for Genoa between the sixth and tenth centuries. His *Vita* thus provides one of the few windows into the social and political world of the city for this transformative period when waning imperial power was supplanted by ecclesiastical authority. Syrus was depicted as both a civic protector and moral reformer and examining the historical and political dimensions of his actions reveals the underlying changes in Genoese society during the transition from Byzantine to Lombard and Carolingian rule.

This article contextualizes two versions of the *Vita of St Syrus*: an earlier recension preserved in the ninth-century *Leggendario bobbiese* and a later eleventh-century edition used by the Bollandists.[[4]](#footnote-4) It proposes a new dating of the original text during the period of Byzantine rule (535–641), argues that the narrative of the *Vita* reflects the consolidation of ecclesiastical authority in early medieval Genoa, and reveals how hagiography could be re-purposed centuries later to legitimize a new communal ethos defined by mercantile identity and elite patronage. This contextualization illustrates how the narratives of plague, civic salvation, and miraculous events reframes the evolving relationship between secular and ecclesiastical power. By tracing these themes through both recensions, the study demonstrates how the *Vita* offers a unique lens into one of the least documented periods of Genoese history.

# Syrus and Genoa in the Early Middle Ages

There is no concrete evidence for the historical Syrus. The dates of his episcopate are uncertain, and some historians have voiced concerns on whether he even existed. Some have also suggested that his hagiography was a retelling of the earlier *Vita* of St Sirus of Pavia, whose episcopate in the city north of Genoa during the fifth century was roughly co-temporal with that claimed for Syrus and whose own hagiography has a similar structural and thematic character.[[5]](#footnote-5) This paper will demarcate three periods of early medieval Genoese history to properly contextualize the *Vita* of Syrus: Byzantine Genoa (535–641), Lombard Genoa (641–774), and Carolingian Genoa (774–961). The city was a much different place during these periods than the commune that dominated the late medieval Mediterranean commercial sphere following the annexation of the *Regnum Italicarum* by the Holy Roman Empire in 961.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although the written sources of the early medieval period are slim and sporadic, they are nevertheless revealing. Recent archaeological work has furthermore supplemented these sources and has provided new insights into the history of Genoa and of early medieval Italy in general.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The analysis of documentary and archeological sources by Neil Chrsitie illustrates that the coastal Liguria (represented by the cities of Genoa, Albenga, Savona, and Luni) formed a militarized Byzantine province for nearly a century following the Gothic War of 535–554. His analysis of traditional documentary sources, the epigraphic records of military officials such as Tzittanus (568) and Magnus (591), and the sixth-century reconstructions of major basilicas, attest to sustained imperial control over the region until the conquest of Rothari in 643.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Byzantine administrators were welcomed by the nobility of Liguria, and the military would subsequently use the city of Genoa as a base for expansion into Pavia and Milan.[[9]](#footnote-9) The sources are largely silent about the sociopolitical character of Liguria during the first three decades of Byzantine rule (ca. 550–580) and it also appears that parts of the region were still under Frankish control during this period.[[10]](#footnote-10) Genoa’s importance appears to have been modest during this time, with its port functioning mainly as a waypoint linking the more powerful cities of Milan and Pavia. But it would quickly assume an important position in the western Mediterranean Empire after the Lombard conquests of 569, when the city sheltered a series of Milanese bishops who were unreceptive to the Arian beliefs of the Lombard dukes. Paul the Deacon described how the Lombard king Alboin “took all the cities of Liguria except those which were situated upon the shores of the sea [so] the archbishop [of Milan] Honoratus… fled to the city of Genoa.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The letters of Gregory the Great reveal the ecclesiastical, diplomatic, and civic activities of several Milanese bishops who participated in this voluntary exile, in particular Laurentius (573–93), Constantius (593–600), and Deusdedit (elected 600). These bishops played pivotal roles in maintaining orthodoxy (especially regarding the Three Chapters schism), mediating between Byzantine and Lombard authorities, and overseeing the administration of Ligurian dioceses.[[12]](#footnote-12) Gregory also mentioned a holy Syrus in his *Dialogues*, describing an incident in which the corpse of a corrupt cleric named Valentinus was dragged out of the Genoese “church of the blessed martyr Syrus” in the middle of the night by two demons following his entombment earlier that day.[[13]](#footnote-13) This may be the strongest piece of evidence for the existence of a historical Syrus in Genoa, although there is no conclusive identification of this “blessed martyr” with the specific saint.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The era of Byzantine administration ended when the Lombards conquered the Ligurian coast in 643. Paul the Deacon described how the Lombard king “Rothari captured all the cities of the Romans which were situated upon the shore of the sea from the city of Luna in Tuscany up to the boundaries of the Franks.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The Empire managed to retain their capital in Ravenna after 643 but, as Timothy Greogry notes, the war left “the countryside desolate and the Romano-Gothic society of Theodoric in ruins.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This conquest caused Bishop Giovanni il Buono (641–69) and his court to end their voluntary exile in Genoa.[[17]](#footnote-17) This return to Milan was not only the withdrawal of the bishop but the transfer of an entire ecclesiastical administration, such as clerks, scribes, clerics, and fiscal administrators. This event effectively stripped Liguria of its metropolitan apparatus and literate elite and undoubtedly impoverished its subsequent ecclesiastical culture.[[18]](#footnote-18) An eleventh-century legend claimed that a Bishop named Giovanni had transported the relics of Syrus from Genoa to the town of Desio during this return to Milan, where he subsequently founded a church containing not only these relics, but also relics of the Virgin Mary and the Apostles.[[19]](#footnote-19) This sensational account was likely a late medieval fabrication and is thus unsuitable as a reliable source for either Giovanni or Syrus.[[20]](#footnote-20) Another bishop named Giovanni of Genoa was mentioned as a participant in the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680 and Paul the Deacon recounted the translation of the relics of St Augustine from Sardinia to Pavia by Liutprand in the 720s, a transit that might have required passage through the town of Genoa.[[21]](#footnote-21) Local legends—likely propagated by Jacopo da Varazze in the thirteenth century—claimed that Augustine’s relics spent a considerable length of time in Genoa before their final deposit at Pavia but these must also be taken with a grain of salt.[[22]](#footnote-22) A group Christian refugees who fled Spain during the Muslim conquest and settled on Ligurian coast in 711 provide more evidence of relics passing near Genoa. These refugees had brought the relics of St Fruttuoso with them and subsequently established a new monastery in Portofino in his name.[[23]](#footnote-23) But the participation of Bishop Giovanni in the Council of 680 and the supposed transit of the relics through Liguria do not really attest to the vitality of the region. The silence of the written sources during the seventh and eight centuries, on the contrary, suggest a region in social and economic decline. Later Lombard Genoa clearly lacked both the vigorous religious culture of the Milanese exile and the vigorous imperial culture of the Byzantine period.

If the Lombard period seems particularly languid for Genoese society, then the Carolingian era seems positively lachrymose in comparison. Henri Pirenne has famously proposed the bifurcation of the medieval Mediterranean during this era into an Islamic zone oriented towards Baghdad and a Byzantine zone oriented towards Constantinople. This structural transformation, according to Pirenne, shifted the socioeconomic nexus of western Christendom away from the sea and northward into the Germanic homelands.[[24]](#footnote-24) It certainly would have certainly contributed to the increased economic isolation of Genoa. Recent historical studies have challenged Pierenne’s claims by arguing that cultural and economic interchange continued in the western Mediterranean during the eighth and ninth centuries, but it remains unclear whether this interchange included the port cities of the Ligurian coast. John McCormick notes that commerce in the eighth and ninth-century Tyrrhenian Sea was centred around Naples and Rome (through the port of Ostia), with evidence of marginal trade in Pisa, and reports no evidence of commerce along the Ligurian coast.[[25]](#footnote-25) Leslie Brubaker has also argued that Mediterranean exchange in this period consisted of discrete and sporadic elite interactions rather than a continuous commercial network. [[26]](#footnote-26) This fragmentation of exchange helps to explain the commercial decline of Carolingian Genoa: as trade contracted to a few symbolic and elite circuits centred on imperial and papal hubs, a secondary port like Genoa, lacking a royal or ecclesiastical court, naturally fell into decline.

The plague that ravaged the Mediterranean for more than two centuries beginning in 541 also hit Genoa particularly hard, resulting in significant regional depopulation that persisted for the subsequent two centuries.[[27]](#footnote-27) The subsequent shift of Carolingian naval power towards the Tuscan coastline further isolated the Ligurian region.[[28]](#footnote-28) There was nothing to distinguish Genoa from nearby towns like La Spezia, Savona and Sanremo. It was merely another minor port in a minor region. Contemporary accounts of Genoa during this time usually focused on its relation to the Islamic world. The *Annales Regnum Francorum* described how a certain Count Adhemar of Genoa fought valiantly against the Saracens in Corsica in 806, ultimately losing his life.[[29]](#footnote-29) The city was sacked in the winter of 934–5 if one accepts the testimony of Liudprand of Cremona who stated that in Genoa, a city “some eighty miles distant from Pavia, a spring overflowed most copiously with blood, clearly suggesting to all a coming calamity. Indeed, in the same year, the Phoenicians arrived there with a multitude of fleets, and while the citizens were unaware, they entered the city, killing all except women and children.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In this narrative Genoa was located through its spatial relationship to Pavia, suggesting that the city had become so insignificant that the Ottonian reader might need to be reminded where it was.

# The Vita of St Syrus

The surviving documentary evidence reveals how Genoa, once a provincial centre of late Byzantine administration, gradually receded in importance as imperial and regional powers shifted during the subsequent Lombard and Carolingian periods. This paper will now argue for the composition of the *Vita* of St Syrus in the early seventh century, during the final phase of Byzantine rule in Liguria (ca. 600–640). This argument rests on aligning the internal themes with the ecclesiastical and political reality of Byzantine Genoa, particularly its concern for ecclesiastical unity, civic protection, and opposition to heresy. The following section analyses these motifs to show how the narrative logic and theological emphases of the *Vita* reflect the religious and administrative conditions of early seventh-century Genoa.

The *Vita* of St Syrus of Genoa (BHL 7973) published in the *Acta Sanctorum* was edited from a copy made from a parchment codex comprising a *Leggendario* of local saints housed in the sacristy of San Lorenzo in Genoa.[[31]](#footnote-31) The fifteenth-century humanist Bonino Mombrizio had earlier transcribed the same the codex for his *Sanctuarium seu vitae Sanctorum* (published circa 1480) but the codex he and the Bollandist used is now lost.[[32]](#footnote-32) The only extant manuscript copy of the Vita is contained in the *Leggendario bobbiese*, a late ninth-century codex from the monastery at Bobbio which collected approximately one hundred early medieval hagiographies. It is now housed in the Vatican Library.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The *Vita* of Syrus begins an author named “Pusillus” describing himself as a person of meagre intelligence, neither educated nor particularly eloquent, and oppressed by the burden of his worldly sins.[[34]](#footnote-34) He sets out to recount the life of the blessed Syrus in order to improve the moral conduct of his community and cleanse his own spirit. He introduces the saint in the second chapter, noting his birth in the rural village of Imiliana[[35]](#footnote-35) that now houses an eponymous church dedicated to Syrus. At infancy the saint became an oblate to the bishop of Genoa named Felix[[36]](#footnote-36) and later, as a young man, he was ordained as deacon.[[37]](#footnote-37) The saint experienced his first miracle during a performance of the Eucharist ritual in Genoa. As the host was raised, Syrus observed a gleam of light shine forth from it, in which he glimpsed the right hand of God. Stunned by this miraculous apparition, he immediately prostrated himself upon the ground until Felix completed the Eucharist.

Fearing that the miracle experienced by the Syrus would imbue him with an unholy sense of pride, and perhaps annoyed by his intrusion into the Eucharist ritual, [[38]](#footnote-38) the bishop Felix exiled him to the village of Matutiana.[[39]](#footnote-39) There Syrus would join a “vice-bishop” named Hormisdas and assist him in healing the sick and performing general good works.[[40]](#footnote-40) Their success in these deeds brought Syrus to the notice of an Imperial tax collector named Galio, whose daughter had been possessed by a demon.[[41]](#footnote-41) Syrus successfully exorcized the demon from the girl and the grateful Galio offered him a significant a grant of land for his service: a grant that included villages, tenants, and a chapel dedicated to St Peter, located around the present-day town of Taggia.[[42]](#footnote-42) The hagiographer is silent on whether Syrus accepted or refused the grant. After some unspecified time in Matutiana, Felix recalled Syrus to Genoa to assist him in “rescuing the commoners from error”: a phrase suggesting the persistence of Arian, or perhaps pagan, beliefs within the city.[[43]](#footnote-43) Their endeavours ultimately proved very successful: the hagiographer notes that the church was strengthened and flourished because of their combined efforts. Syrus was subsequently elevated with great public acclaim to the position of bishop upon the death of the blessed Felix.[[44]](#footnote-44)

At this point the hagiographer reaches the central part of the Syrus legend: the freeing of Genoa from the threat of the basilisk. The inhabitants of Genoa are described as being afflicted—and dying in great number—by the breath of a basilisk lying in a well near the nave of the Basilica of the Apostles.[[45]](#footnote-45) Syrus implored the citizens to pray and fast alongside him for three days, after which he led a procession of the faithful to the well containing the basilisk. Lowering a bucket into the well he ordered the basilisk to turn its breath upon itself and depart from the city. After returning the bucket to the surface, Syrus lifted it into the air at which point the beast leapt out and displayed its horrible appearance to the stunned congregation.[[46]](#footnote-46) The appreciative crowd praised Syrus by singing Psalm 90:13 in unison—“thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk, and thou shalt trample underfoot the lion and the dragon”[[47]](#footnote-47)—upon which the saint asked for silence and then again ordered the basilisk to return itself to the sea. Interestingly he did not kill the creature, but the hagiographer reiterates that, with its breath blocked by the invocations of Syrus, the basilisk no longer had the power to harm people.

The narrative then leaps ahead to events immediately following the death of Syrus—which occurred on the sixth of July, the same day as the martyrdom of Peter and Paul—and in particular the post mortem miracle of the bloody shroud. As the pallbearers carried the body of Syrus from the chapel after his funeral, the saint was rushed upon by the massed crowd of mourners who attempt to tear away pieces of his clothing. This chaotic event was witnessed by a Libyan sailor who noticed that blood had begun to flow from the saint’s nose, upon which he, in a pious gesture, removed his turban and discreetly wiped up the offending substance. The sailor then returned to Libya—having completed his business in Genoa—and was immediately greeting by a throng of sick people who rejoiced upon his arrival, having been divinely forewarned about the relic in his possession. The sailor told the infirm crowd how he had wiped blood from the nose of Syrus and then produced the blood-stained cloth, which immediately healed who touched it. The *Vita* concludes with a local African bishop witnessing these post-mortem miracles, which inspired him to establish a local church in the name of St Syrus into which the contact relic was placed, and which continued to perform miracles for the residents of the unnamed Libyan community.[[48]](#footnote-48)

# Dating the *Vita*: Historiographical Approaches and Methodological Divergences

The accurate dating of the *Vita* of St Syrus is crucial to understanding both its historical purpose and the insights into the society it portrays. Four primary attempts have been made to establish its chronology, each employing different approaches. The Bollandist editor, writing in the late seventeenth century, used textual and philological comparison, attributing the composition of the *Vita* to the eleventh century. Arturo Ferretto, writing in the early twentieth century, combined linguistic and historical analysis to place its composition in the mid-fifth century.[[49]](#footnote-49) Giorgia Vocino, writing in the early twenty-first century, applied comparative textual and thematic analyses to situate the *Vita* within the Carolingian period.[[50]](#footnote-50) Antonio Placania, also writing in the writing in the early twenty-first century, applied codicological, linguistic, and lexical analyses to to situate the *Vita* within the Carolingian period.[[51]](#footnote-51) These analyses reveal how differing methodologies have produced contrasting interpretations of the *Vita*’s origin and require a closer examination of the evidence and reasoning behind each approach.

The Bollandist editor noted that early modern Genoese tradition (writing in the late seventeenth century) attributed the *Vita* of Syrus to Bishop Oberto, who served from 1052 to 1078. He accepted that Oberto was “most likely” the author while acknowledging that parts of the text appear much older.[[52]](#footnote-52) Unaware of the earlier recension preserved in the *Leggendario bobbiese*, he assumed that the version transcribed by Bonino Mombrizio was the earliest extant form of the *Vita*. The passage he found hardest to reconcile with an eleventh-century authorship was the episode of the *nauta Libycus*, or “Libyan sailor.” Believing that communication with North Africa would have been impossible after the Muslim conquest (an assumption not necessarily correct), the editor was troubled by the implausibility of a Libyan sailor active in Genoa who later founded a Christian church in Muslim North Africa. He proposed two rationalizations: first, that the story might have been copied from a much older source written before the Islamic conquest; and second, through a tenuous philological argument, that *Libycus* might not refer to Africa at all but to *Liburnum* (modern Livorno) or even to the *Libici*, a northern Italian people mentioned by Livy and Pliny.[[53]](#footnote-53) These conjectures, unsupported by manuscript evidence, can be summarily dismissed. The episode clearly troubled the Bollandist, who recognized its historical and linguistic inconsistencies but nevertheless remained convinced that the *Vita* was written by Bishop Oberto, or at least finalized during his episcopate.

The Genoese historian and archivist Arturo Ferretto produced the first detailed study of the *Vita* over a century ago. He dated its composition to the mid-fifth century and argued that the recension edited by the Bollandists was several copies removed from the original.[[54]](#footnote-54) His deduction rested on both historical and linguistic analysis. Beginning with the episode of the Libyan sailor, Ferretto claimed that its inclusion indicated a composition prior to the Muslim conquest of Africa, when the Roman Church still flourished in the region. He proposed that the author composed the *Vita* during the exodus of African bishops to Italy in the 430s, suggesting that these exiles might have informed him about the “bloody turban” and the African church dedicated to the saint.[[55]](#footnote-55) Ferretto also analyzed the *Vita*’s language. He noted that in the early Church bishops often employed *notarii* to record their acts, explaining the author’s emphasis on having the *Vita* written by a *notarius* in plain style.[[56]](#footnote-56) He pointed to the frequent use of *sacerdos* and *sacerdotum* to denote bishops and episcopates, terms he believed typical of the fourth and fifth centuries, and to the word *oraculum* for the chapel of St Syrus at Molassana, a term that would have been natural in late antiquity but anomalous in the eleventh century.[[57]](#footnote-57) Finally, Ferretto observed that the text omits any mention of Bishop Landolfo’s translation of Syrus’s relics to San Lorenzo (1019–34), an omission he considered decisive against eleventh-century authorship.[[58]](#footnote-58) Having thus limited the composition to the fourth or fifth century, Ferretto made a speculative leap to identify the author. Citing a letter of Bishop Eusebius of Milan to Pope Leo I in 451 and signed by bishop Pascasio of Genoa, he noted that the name *Pascasius* begins with the same letter as *Pusillus* (the name given as the author in the *Vita*) and concluded, on this rather tenuous comparison, that Pascasius was the author of the hagiography.[[59]](#footnote-59)

The *Vita* of Syrus returned to the historiographical shadows for most of the twentieth century, but it has slowly re-emerged within several recent studies. In 1988 Jean-Charles Picard briefly described the *Vita* in his discussion on the cult of St Syrus and, unlike Ferretto and the Bollandists, noted its appearance in Vat. lat. 5771. This led him to suggest a *terminus ante quem* in the late ninth century.[[60]](#footnote-60) In 2002 Nicholas Everett mentioned the *Vita* of Syrus in his examination of the *Vita* of Sirus of Pavia, the earliest recension of which was also contained in the same Bobbio codex. He notes the vagueness of the reference to the African church, suggesting that a composition contemporaneous with the Christian presence on the continent would have likely provided the name of the town or church, and thus raising issues with Ferreto’s fifth century dating.[[61]](#footnote-61) In 2003 Maria Gabriella Angeli Bertinelli also mentioned the Bobbio codex but her study generally retraces the analysis of Ferretto, arguing for an initial version composed by Pascasio that was copied an indeterminate number of times, resulting in *Vita sancti Syri* of Vat. lat. 5771, which was then finally copied by the Genoese bishop Oberto.[[62]](#footnote-62) This was the state of Syrus scholarship at the end of the twentieth-century.

In her doctoral thesis on saints and holy places in the Carolingian Empire, Giorgia Vocino re-examined the *Vita* of Syrus to determine whether it should be placed within the Carolingian tradition of episcopal hagiography. Building on the recognition by Jean-Charles Picard and Nicholas Everett of the existence of two distinct recensions of the *Vita*, she compared the version preserved in the *Acta Sanctorum* with that contained in the ninth-century *Leggendario bobbiese*.[[63]](#footnote-63) Although the two versions are textually very close, sharing most of the narrative sequence and wording, Vocino identified a crucial divergence that significantly alters previous interpretations. The entire section describing the events during Syrus’s exile to San Remo is absent from the Bobbio codex and as such, the identification of the *coepiscopus* Hormisdas, the exorcism of the daughter of Galio, and the donation of property were not conveyed in the earliest recension.[[64]](#footnote-64) This leaves only a single miracle performed by Syrus during his lifetime—the banishing of the basilisk—while retaining the *post mortem* contact miracles associated with his bloody turban. On the basis of these textual divergences and her linguistic and thematic analyses, Vocino situates the composition of the original *Vita* within a broad chronological span extending from the late sixth to the first half of the ninth century but concludes that the preponderance evidence points to its composition during the Carolingian era.

Vocino interprets the episode of the basilisk as an allegory of Arian heresy, consistent with other late-antique anti-Arian hagiographies such as the *Vita* of Eusebius of Vercelli. She notes that the self-description of the author as *orthodoxus, catholicus fidei et amator rectae* implies the presence of doctrinal error, giving the text a polemical tone, and accordingly proposes the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great as a *terminus post quem*.[[65]](#footnote-65) She observes that while Gregory mentions the church of St Syrus in the *Dialogues* (when discussing the corrupt rector Valentinus) he makes no reference to the basilisk episode and argues that he would have mentioned such a striking miracle if it had already been known.[[66]](#footnote-66) Comparing the *Vita* of Syrus with the *Vita* of Pavia, Vocino concludes that the two are contemporaneous products of the Carolingian renewal of episcopal hagiography, noting that the relationship between Felix and Syrus deliberately inverts that of Sirus and Iventius to rhetorically assert the apostolic legitimacy of Genoa over Pavia.[[67]](#footnote-67) Her dating rests on cumulative evidence by noting the following: the *oblatio puerorum* motif, which presupposes Carolingian ecclesiastical norms; the presence Carolingian administrative vocabulary such as *curtes cum massariciis*; and stylistic and ideological affinities with ninth-century episcopal *Vitae* from Milan, Brescia, and Pavia. Vocino sees the *Vita* of St Syrus as belonging to a Carolingian traditional of hagiographical writing that functioned as a form of institutional self-promotion and political legitimation under Frankish rule and therefore situates the *Vita*’s composition within the Carolingian era (ca. 774–877), while acknowledging that it may incorporate earlier narrative traditions.

+++ ADD PLACANIA HERE +++

Antonio Placanica, writing about a decade after Vocino, provides a sustained philological and codicological study of the *Vita*. He argues that the *Vita* is a composite text whose earliest layer was composed between the late seventh and early eighth centuries during the period of Lombard Genoa, and that the inserted section identified by Vocino was added during the tenth century when the Genoese Church sought to consolidate its territorial and spiritual patrimony. Placanica begins by confronting the fundamental difficulty of reconstructing the early episcopal chronology of Genoa, which even by the thirteenth century had fallen into obscurity. The famed chronicler Jacopo de Varazze admitted that the names and episcopates of the early medieval bishops were already lost by the thirteenth century in his *Chronica civitatis Ianuensis* and only identifies Valentinus, Felix, Syrus, and Romulus from this period.[[68]](#footnote-68) Placanica next situates the *Vita* within a small pre-Varagine Genoese hagiographic corpus that included the *Sermo de Sancto Valentino* (BHL 8458) and a *Vita Sancti Romuli* (BHL 7335).[[69]](#footnote-69) He reconstructs a long textual genealogy demonstrating that all later copies ultimately depend on the ninth-century Bobbio codex, which was written in a Carolingian-minuscule hand but preserves earlier orthography.

Placanica then employs a rigorous linguistic and stylistic analysis of the *Vita* to suggest a vocabulary and syntax characteristic of seventh and eighth-century ecclesiastical Latin.[[70]](#footnote-70) He suggests that the hagiographer’s preference for words such as *antistes* and *sacerdos*, the use of the term *vocatio* to denote death, and paratactic constructions devoid of subordinating conjunctions all reflect an idiom that had not yet undergone the linguistic reforms of the Carolingian Renaissance.[[71]](#footnote-71) Planicana also notes the persistence of Byzantine administrative terminology, such as *fiscus* and *exactor*, and the absence of later feudal or monastic diction. These features, combined with the absence of rhythmic prose or standardized orthography, point to a composition rooted in the late-antique rhetorical continuum of northern Italy rather than in the reforming Latin of the ninth century. Placanica then provides a comparative analysis to illustrate that the structure of the *Vita* of Syrus—the oblation of the saint as a child, his exile to Matutiana, his miracles among the sick, and his triumph over the basilisk—parallels similar tropes in sixth and seventh-century Lombard hagiographies such as the *Vita* of Syrus of Pavia and the *Vita* of Philastrius of Brescia.[[72]](#footnote-72) He synthesizes this codicological, linguistic, and contextual evidence to suggest a composition in the late seventh or early eighth century, during the period of Lombard Genoa.

The analysis of this section illustrates numerous strategies to date the composition of the Vita of St Syrus. The Bollandists placed it in the eleventh-century hagiographic tradition, while Arturo Ferretto argued for a much earlier late antique composition, with Giorgio Vocino advocating for a Carolingian redaction of the text and Antonio Placania for its composition during the Lombard period. This paper acknowledges the vital insights provided by these studies but offers a different date range of composition. It will build upon these earlier studies by focusing on narrative analysis and historical contextualization to assert that the recension preserved in the *Leggendario bobbiese* originated earlier than the Lombard and Carolingian eras but later than the fifth century, with the episodes reflecting a period of transition between Byzantine and Lombard rule. In this view, the Carolingian features suggested by Vocino—such as administrative vocabulary and institutional imagery—are best understood as later interpolations rather than elements of the original composition, which belongs to a milieu still shaped by the administrative structures and theological concerns of Byzantine Liguria.

These four studies illustrate how that the *Vita* of St Syrus has been read and understood through the lenses of textual transmission, language, paleography, codicology, and historical context, yet they have not fully addressed the insights it offers into the social landscape of medieval Genoa. The persistence of conflicting chronologies underscores the need to conduct careful historical contextualization with a close reading of the text. The following section examines the *Vita*’s themes, characters, and settings to uncover the society that produced it and to lay the groundwork for a new, more precise dating.

# Narrative insights and a new dating

The Janus-like structure of the *Vita*, with the first six chapters gazing northward toward the mountainous Ligurian hinterland and the last three southward toward the sea and the African coast, reveals two symbolic orientations of medieval Genoese identity. The first orientation reflects an inward-looking clerical world under Milanese ecclesiastical influence. The second orientation projects an outward-looking mercantile horizon defined by long-distance Mediterranean exchange. These dual orientations converge at the death and canonization of Syrus, which marks the point of the societal transformation of the Genoese identity. The *Vita* thus presents his sanctification as the moment when Genoa itself is reborn, transformed from a subordinate episcopal satellite of Milan into an autonomous civic body. As such, the hagiography not only provides evidence of medieval historical realities but also acts a narrative framework for how Genoa imagined its own emergence as a centre of power.

The following analysis examines four key episodes of the *Vita* to explore how this narrative transformation is articulated and historicized with a comparative eye towards parallels and analogues in other early medieval Italian hagiographies. The analysis is organized around four critical episodes in the *Vita*: first, the curious emphasis placed by the hagiographer on authorship and literacy; second, the relationship between the saint and the citizens of Genoa; third, the confrontation between the saint and the basilisk; and fourth, the episode of the African sailor who witnesses the death of Syrus and transports his contact relic abroad. An examination of these themes on an individual basis reveals unique aspects of the sociopolitical landscape of medieval Genoa and the challenge of definitively dating the text. But when these episodes are read in conjunction—and alongside some of the crucial insights of Ferretto, Vocino, and Placanica—they suggest a narrower chronological horizon, situating both the composition of the *Vita* and the establishment of the cult of Syrus within the era of Byzantine Liguria (535–641).

## Authorship and literacy

The *Vita* of Syrus begins with some rather curious reflections on its own authorship and the ideals of literacy. The hagiographer emphasizes his own lack of education, eloquence, and intelligence, as described earlier, and instead simply refers to himself as an “investigator of Divine Scriptures.”[[73]](#footnote-73) He furthermore states that he had ensured that the *Vita* was recorded by his notary in a simple style as not to conceal the truth in grandeur and false flattery. These passages demonstrate the deliberate rejection of the classical literary ethos—with its veneration of rhetoric and eloquence—in favour of “the simplicity of words.”[[74]](#footnote-74) They reflect the emerging ideals of ecclesiastical authority during the late sixth-century—particularly evident in the writings of Gregory the Great—that classical education had little significant intellectual or moral value to Christian leaders.[[75]](#footnote-75) Instead, we see the increasing centrality of the reading of scripture as the only necessary intellectual requirement for the officers of the Church. The use of a *notarius* to record the text also suggests that the author may have been an official of high standing and probably reflects authorship during the period of the exile of Milanese bishops in Genoa, when literate professionals would have been active in local ecclesiastical court.[[76]](#footnote-76)

## The saint and the religious community

The recurring episodes depicting the relationship between Syrus with his immediate religious community and the wider civic community pervade the entire *Vita*. These scenes evoke a landscape of contested belief in which Arian doctrines, along with traces of older pagan practices, threaten the unity of the Christian community in Liguria.[[77]](#footnote-77) In this manner the hagiographer presents the mission of Syrus as both doctrinal and pastoral, reaffirming Nicene orthodoxy in a region with heterogenous theological and ritual traditions and situating Syrus as a trusted civic leader. His miracles and good works illustrate this elevation to dual civic and spiritual authority, framing Syrus protecting the diocese of Genoa from both internal schisms and external perils. The hagiographer makes his ascendance explicit when Syrus, recalled from his exile in San Remo, is instructed to “recall the commoners from error through his predication.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Syrus works together with Bishop Felix after his return, restoring orthodoxy until the Genoese church is “flourishing and rejoicing in the strength of its members.”[[79]](#footnote-79)

This motif of conversion to correct belief through a combination of miracles and episcopal preaching appears broadly in early Italian hagiography of the late fifth to seventh centuries, when the Nicene faith was still consolidating itself against Arian beliefs and residual pagan rituals. In the *Vita* of Zeno of Verona, for example, the saint saves a man and his oxen from drowning in the rapids of the fast-moving Adige River, which was described as under the influence of the devil. Having been thwarted in his attempt to drown the man, Satan then threatens Zeno by exhorting that he is “prepared to go into the unknown lands around these parts to obstruct you,” which was possibly a reference to the continued observance of pagan rites in the hills and valleys surrounding Verona. The saint then destroys the remaining pagan shrines upon his return to Verona, an act that angers the population who still held a deeply felt connection to these places.[[80]](#footnote-80) This illustrates the hybrid character of late antique Christianity, with its incorporation of pagan ritual and places, and the threat that these lingering threads of paganism represented to the ecclesiastical community over the following centuries. Likewise, in the *Vita* of Vigilius of Trent, the saint is consecrated as a bishop “outside the walls of Trent” before returning to the city, where he corrects the errors of the citizens, who would later build a church in his name in appreciation.[[81]](#footnote-81) Vigilius then proceeds to the countryside surrounding Trent, which the hagiographer states was still “constricted by the practice of diabolical traditions”, where he is also successful with episcopal preaching.[[82]](#footnote-82) This entrance of Vigilius into Trent after his consecration, together with his successful preaching both inside and outside the city, parallels the actions of Syrus.

The hagiographer states that Syrus was elevated to the bishopric by “the entire *common people* of the city of Genoa, unanimously and with consenting voice”[[83]](#footnote-83) (my emphasis) after the death of Felix. When the citizens were subsequently threatened by the breath of the basilisk, they looked to Syrus to lead the procession to the well and expel this threat to the city.[[84]](#footnote-84) The same dynamic is also seen in XXXth-century Vita of Cetheus, where the entire population of Amiternum, now San Vittorino in the province of Pescara, makes a 200 km westward trek to Rome to retrieve the saint, who had taken refuge in Rome from Lombard rule. Cetheus then leads the procession back to the city where the Lombard nobility, faced with the influence of the saint over their subjects and a possible threat to their civic authority, prostrates themselves before him to repent for their past sins.[[85]](#footnote-85)

These examples provide additional clues to contextualize the *Vita* of Syrus. They suggest a religious environment still negotiating the threat of rule and the persistence of pagan customs. Its communal themes of public preaching, conversion and civic purification correspond most closely to the period from the fifth to seventh century, where Nicene orthodoxy was still contested in north Italy…. ADD THE LOMBARDS HERE WHO ARE THE THREAT…. The tensions between forms of belief that animates the narrative of communal salvation in the Vita rules out the Carolingian period as a possible date of composition, since Nicene orthodoxy had been firmly entrenched and normalized by this time. The trope of Syrus leading a large community procession has, furthermore, has parallels in the *Vitae* of Zeno, Vigilius, and Cetheus, all of which have been dated between the seventh and eighth centuries.[[86]](#footnote-86)

## The confrontation with the basilisk

Much has been made of the appearance of dragons and creatures of the same genus, such as basilisks and snakes, in medieval literature as symbolic of paganism and the Arian heresy.[[87]](#footnote-87) But apart from the somewhat formulaic invocation of the Trinity in the opening chapter of the *Vita* of Syrus, there is no further specific mention of heresy nor is there any concern on the part of the hagiographer—or the saint himself—about the metaphysical nature of the three hypostases. TIE THIS IN WITH PREVIOUS PARAGRAPHS ON COMMUNITY=THREAT OF HERESY The notion that the basilisk is primarily symbolic of the Arian heresy is thus not on particularly strong ground with regards to Syrus. Indeed, in other hagiographies, the Arian heresy is either directly addressed or alluded to symbolically through an unusually strong emphasis on explicating the relationship between the Son and the Father. The central theme of the *Vita* of Eusebius of Vercelli, for example, is the role of the patron saint as an explicit and vigorous defender of the Trinitarian orthodoxy.[[88]](#footnote-88)

In his analysis of the *Vita* of Sentius of Bieda, Nicholas Everett also expressed some doubts concerning the reflexive association of dragons with the Arian heresy, or even paganism, in the medieval Italian hagiographical tradition. Vocino’s association of the basilisk in the *Vita* of Syrus with Arianism is made in this reflexive manner. Everett asserts that the dragons in these works may be more indicative of external threats to the community that can only be overcome by the saint and his Church. It is interesting that both Ferretto, Vocino, and Placanica spend very little time examining the central miracle of the *Vita*—one that eventually saturated the physical and mental world of medieval Genoa through sculpture, painting, poems, and songs—the banishment of the basilisk by Syrus.[[89]](#footnote-89) I would suggest that any future efforts at contextualization must focus on this aspect of the *Vita* above all others. It may be necessary to forego an Arian interpretation of the basilisk for a more nuanced interpretation based on the actions taken by the saint with regards to the basilisk.

The hagiographer specifies that it was the “breath of a very powerful serpent” that was causing undue harm to the community, and later reiterating that the “people were destroyed by the breath of the serpent.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Here we have the recognition that mass death was being caused by something in the air. The habitation of the basilisk in the local well—the source of fresh water and thus symbolic of the health of the community—also emphasizes its danger to the livelihood of the entire city.[[91]](#footnote-91) The allusion here is that while the breath of the basilisk was poisoning the air, the beast was also capable of poisoning the water, reflecting the medieval trope and common fear of well-poisoning. The metaphor of the breath of the basilisk reflects the perception that an airborne pathogen was inflicting widespread harm in the community, and there are several historical passages in relating to the plague infecting Liguria during the sixth and seventh centuries. The plague that ravaged Constantinople in 542–543 so vividly reported by Procopius was said by the same author to have spread over the entire Byzantine Empire, which at this time would have included the Ligurian coast as one of its major outposts in Western Europe.[[92]](#footnote-92) Subsequent occurrences of the plague or, to be accurate, plague-like diseases, are also attested by Paul the Deacon. The year 565 seemed a particularly devastating one in which “a very great pestilence broke out, particularly in the province of Liguria” as Paul vividly describes the transformation of the Ligurian coast into a virtual wasteland where “pastoral places had been turned into a sepulcher for men, and human habitations had become places of refuge for wild beasts.”[[93]](#footnote-93) He also describes the plague of 590 as beginning with extreme flooding in Liguria and other regions of Italy, leading to the appearance of a dragon on the Tiber followed by a “a very grievous pestilence …[that] wasted the people with such a great destruction of life that out of a countless multitude barely a few remained.”[[94]](#footnote-94) This was the outbreak that killed Pelagius II and elevated Gregory I to the papacy. Although the plague of 593 was confined to communities on the north Adriatic, the outbreak of 680 was so severe that it resulted in significant de-urbanization in Pavia, where the “citizens fled to the mountain ranges and to other places, and grass and bushes grew in the market place and throughout the streets of the city.”[[95]](#footnote-95) Given the close geographical proximity of Genoa and Pavia—not to mention their close religious, commercial, and political ties—there was likely similar depopulation in Genoa and the Ligurian coast.[[96]](#footnote-96) The experience of the plagues of 542, 565, and 590, coupled with the Lombard conquest of 641 that not only ended Byzantine settlement of Liguria, but also resulted in the return of the exiled bishops, along with their administrative staff, to Pavia and Milan, must have contributed towards a radically depleted population by the middle of the seventh century. Perhaps the silence of the Genoese sources during the late seventh century reflect the fact that there was not much left to write about, or perhaps more to the point, not many qualified individuals left to do the writing.

I would therefore submit that the basilisk episode primarily symbolizes the sixth-century plagues that our sources describe as devastating the region of Liguria. The narrative implies that secular authorities—embodied by the distant and often ineffective Byzantine military aristocracy—were unable to shield the community from the recurrent scourges of the plague. Yet it is not presented as a struggle between civic and episcopal power; rather, the hagiographer situates Syrus in a world where secular governance has receded and is largely absent, leaving a vacuum of protection and leadership. The saint steps into this vacuum and leads the population in a ritual procession, confronting the basilisk in full public view and restoring both health and communal order. The popular trust invested in Syrus thus transforms him into the symbolic guardian of the diocese and the city. The episode demonstrates the assumption of civic responsibility by the ecclesiastical authorities at a moment that witnessed the decline of traditional secular political structures.

## The Libyan sailor

The story of the African sailor is the final thematic aspect that provides insights for the contextualization of the *Vita*. First and foremost, we can largely dismiss the Bollandist philological speculations on the meaning of *Libyae Provinciae*, as it is obvious from several clues in the narrative that the Libyan sailor is probably not from a nearby town on the Italian coast.[[97]](#footnote-97) First he is described as wearing a turban which would correspond to the typical early medieval African headdress influenced by Berber culture.[[98]](#footnote-98) Second, he is indirectly described as being in Genoa to conduct commerce with the intent to set sail back to his own land once business is complete.[[99]](#footnote-99) The motif of the contact relic—in this case, the bloody shroud that continued to perform miracles in some land quite distant from the homeland of the saint—is also seen in other early medieval hagiographies. In the *Vita* of Vigilius, for example, a group of Dalmatian merchants collected some blood of the saint that had spilled on the road during his funeral procession with a linen cloth. They then brought the bloodied shroud with them—supposedly back to Salona—where the relic continued to provide a conduit for sprit of the deceased saint to perform miracles.[[100]](#footnote-100) This story of the African sailor thus reflects Genoa as a part of a larger Mediterranean Christian community and would have appealed the portion of the population engaged in long-distance trade and for whom cross-cultural contacts were normative.[[101]](#footnote-101) It also served to remind Genoese merchants that the spirit of Syrus would accompany them on their long and often dangerous voyages.

The emphasis placed on the sailor as a pious Christian—and the description of the Libyan province containing a bishop, church, and large congregation—emphasizes that the hagiographer was writing for an audience that would not interpret these events as anachronisms. Ferretto’s dating of the *Vita* to the middle fifth century places its composition during the peak period of aggression between the Vandals and the Roman Empire: a period that witnessed the sack of Rome in 455 and the decisive Vandal victories against western initiatives in 460 and 468.[[102]](#footnote-102) Given this historical backdrop it is difficult to believe the hagiographer would portray the North African merchant in such a positive civic and ecclesiastical light. Vocino does not dwell on this aspect of the narrative other than to say that it prevents us from dating the text to the period following the Muslim conquest of Carthage in 698.[[103]](#footnote-103) The emphatic Christian colouring of this final part of the *Vita*, however, suggests a periodization for the text outside that of Vandal Libya (429–585) and before the establishment of Islamic Libya (from 698): that is, during the period of the Byzantine exarchate of Carthage during the seventh-century.

# A New Dating

The above analysis of four central aspects of the narrative—the authorship, the saint and his relationship to the community, the banishment of the basilisk, and the story of the African merchant—as well the salient observations about the silence of Gregory by Everett and Vocino, suggests that the text can be dated through the process of conjunction. Consider the following table.

Table 1: Dating the episodes in the Vita Syrii

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Historical context** | **terminus post quem** | **terminus ante quem** |
| Milanese bishops in Genoa | 568 | 641 |
| Pre-Carolingian Genoa | --- | 774 |
| The era of plagues | 543 | 750 |
| Byzantine exarchate in Africa | 585 | 698 |
| The silence of Gregory | 604 | --- |

The concatenation of these dates suggests a *terminus post quem* of 604 and a *terminus ante quem* of 641. Everything in the narrative fits in quite nicely into this period. Milanese bishops and their administrative apparatus would still be operating out of Genoa, explaining the use of the notary to write down the hagiography. The initial resistance of the populace to the preaching of Felix and Syrus would reflect the period where there was still widespread scepticism and resistance to Christianity among the non-elite segments of society. The story of the basilisk inflicting disease and death upon the community would resonate well with the recent memory of the devastating plagues in 542, 565, and 590. And the narrative of the Libyan trader bringing the contact relic of St Syrus back to Africa would seem neither anachronistic nor sacrilegious after the successful reestablishment of Byzantine rule in North Africa in 585.

The composition of the *Vita* of Syrus in the early seventh century thus serves to offer a new vision of community and political authority for the early medieval Genoese population. This new community was not bound together by allegiance to the distant imperial or local civic authorities, since both authorities had proven themselves quite powerless in preventing the widespread destruction inflicted by the basilisk. This new community was instead bound together by the new Christian faith and its allegiance to the Pope and his ecclesiastical representatives. Only through placing their trust in St Syrus were people of Genoa able to overcome the calamities inflicted upon them, and only by continuing to place their trust in ecclesiastical representatives will the Genoese people deliver themselves from the future threats to the community.

These analogues emphasize episcopal authority and civic protection rather than monastic asceticism, placing the Genoese text firmly within the episcopal model of sanctity that, as Nicholas Everett, Jean-Charles Picard, and Antonio Placanica have argued, emerged in Italy after the Gothic wars

# The inserted section

The revival of Genoese fortunes following the sack of 934—in which the city transformed itself, in the words of Steven Epstein, from “practically nothing to something”—was accompanied by emergence of the cult of St Syrus.[[104]](#footnote-104) The identification of the inserted section of BHL 7973 by Giorgia Vocino can provide additional insights into the historical context behind the eleventh-century reinvigoration of the saint. I will argue that themes of elite patronage and donations of property in this section link the revival of the cult of St Syrus with the establishment of the monastery of San Siro and the cathedral of San Lorenzo.

At the same time, Placanica identifies later insertions—the reference to the co-bishop Hormisdas and to the estate of Tabia offered by the imperial tax collector Galio—as tenth-century additions corresponding to documentary and notarial language of land donation (*curtis*, *massaricii*, *familiae utriusque sexus*). These formulae mirror contemporary property charters from Liguria and reveal how a later redactor adapted the saint’s legend to express the Church’s fiscal and territorial claims. The linguistic stratum of these interpolations differs markedly from the primitive text, suggesting a second recension produced when the Genoese cathedral redefined its patrimony following Lombard and Carolingian rule.

The motif of elite patronage occurs immediately in the inserted section after the exile of Syrus to Sanremo, when he was called to the home of Galio the tax collector to exorcise a demon from his daughter.[[105]](#footnote-105) The size of the gift given by Galio to Syrus for the successful exorcism implies that Galio was an important Imperial representative in the region. This mingling of saints with Imperial elites is a common theme in early medieval civic hagiography. St Zeno of Verona, for example, similarly exorcised a demon from the daughter of the Emperor Gallienus (253–268) and St Apollonaris of Ravenna similarly revived the daughter of the consul Rufus.[[106]](#footnote-106) The inserted section reflects the donation of property and income to local ecclesiastical entities by wealthy elites—an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the later medieval period.[[107]](#footnote-107) When Syrus successfully exorcised the demon from the daughter of Galio, he was provided with an estate “with villeins and families of both sexes dependent on his jurisdiction, with a chapel built therein in honour of the Blessed Peter.”[[108]](#footnote-108) The donation of property to a saint was another common theme in later medieval hagiography. In the *Vita* of St Barbatus, for example, which was likely composed during the early tenth century, the saint was offered an endowment from duke Romuald of Benevento of “estates and serfs from every city in his province” for ensuring civic stability.[[109]](#footnote-109) The language of estates and villeins in the inserted section of the *Vita* of Syrus certainly hints at a late medieval view of property and suggests a tenth or eleventh century date of composition, when this vocabulary of rural societal structure became more common in northern Italy.[[110]](#footnote-110)

Two contemporaneous events warrant a brief examination: the establishment in Molassana of the monastery of San Siro in 1007 and the translation of the relics of St Syrus to the cathedral of San Lorenzo in 1019.[[111]](#footnote-111) New monasteries and cathedrals required significant quantities of capital and the emphasis in the inserted passage regarding the donation of property and income was certainly composed with an eye towards patronage. During the Carolingian period the Church remained a relatively minor property holder within the realm of Liguria, unlike the situation in Milan and Pavia, with their strong central ties to both the Lombard and Carolingian kingdom and where ecclesiastical authorities were powerful political forces and substantial landholders.[[112]](#footnote-112) But this began to change with the transformation of Genoa from minor Milanese suffragan to Mediterranean naval power during the eleventh century.[[113]](#footnote-113) The reintroduced *Vita* of St Syrus would therefore appeal to the emboldened political elites of Genoa, for whom the motif of the saint exorcising the demon from the patrician’s daughter might seem appealing. It would also appeal to the increasingly influential merchant class, who could relate to the Mediterranean transit of the relics and find solace in the belief that St Syrus would protect them on long commercial voyages. The previously austere Genoese church also became the recipient of many significant donations during the eleventh century. For example, one marquis Oberto (not the aforementioned bishop) donated a vineyard outside the city walls to the monastery of San Siro by in 1014.[[114]](#footnote-114) The spouses of a certain Lamberto and Oza—two aristocrats of the Obertan dynasty—donated a significant amount of land and income to the monastery in 1023.[[115]](#footnote-115) And yet another Oberto gave gifts of land and income property to the monastery in 1053.[[116]](#footnote-116) With regards to the church of San Lorenzo, we have the intriguing donation of property at San Remo in 980 by the bishop Teodolfo in the form of a public spectacle witnessed by a large gathering of religious figures, which might have influenced the tale about the donation of land and income to Syrus during his exile there.[[117]](#footnote-117) These examples demonstrate the increased importance of elite patronage to the ecclesiastical culture of late medieval Genoa: thus the impetus for reviving the cult of St Syrus and the reissuing of an updated hagiography (perhaps the *Vita* may have even influenced some of the donors). It appears that the much-maligned Bollandist may have been partially right in attributing the *Vita* to the eleventh century as clearly this latest recension was modified to appeal to the increasingly powerful elites of the merchant commune.

# Conclusion

The cult of St Syrus would reach its apex during the thirteenth century when a new *Vita* would be composed by the famed compiler Jacopo da Varagine (ca. 1230–98).[[118]](#footnote-118) After this point, however, Syrus would slowly become eclipsed by St George as the foremost patron saint of Genoa. By the fourteenth century the image of St George would come to represent the increasingly international city—in its flag (with the cross of St George), its famed public bank (the Casa di San Giorgio), and the Palazzo di San Giorgio constructed as the home of the first doge Simone Boccanegra—and Syrus would fade into obscurity. This study of the *Vita* of St Syrus not only demonstrates how hagiographies illuminate the historical circumstances of their composition, but how they can be easily repurposed, sometimes centuries later, for new political and social aims. In the case of Genoa, we see how the *Vita* of Syrus reflected the shift in public trust away from secular authority to ecclesiastical authority in the early seventh century, as well as how the revived eleventh-century *Vita* could be used as an appeal for patronage to the increasingly literate merchant and political class. It is thus incumbent upon the historian to reconsider this often-derided genre when studying the social and political history of medieval Italy.

1. The following abbreviations are used in this paper:

   *AASS Acta Sanctorum* (Paris, Victor Palmé, 1863–70).

   *ASG* Archivio di stato di Genova

   *ASLSP* Archivio della società ligure di storia patria

   *BAV* Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

   *HPM Historiae Patriae Monumenta* (Torino, Augustae Taurinorum, 1836–79).

   *MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (Hanover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1926–).

   *Vita Syri Vita Syri, Episcopus Genuae in Liguria* (BHL 7973) in *AASS Junii V*, 481–3.

   Vincenzo Promis, ‘Leggenda e inni di S. Siro, vescovo di Genova’, Atti della società ligure di storia patria, 1ª serie 10, no. 4 (1876): 382, where the text of the hymn reads “Natura truce bestiam / Nulli dantem molestiam / Syrus in Christi digito / Nexum ostendit populo / Tristatus furens oculis / Basiliscus terribilis / Equor requirit profugus / Dictum iubentis protinus.”; see also Guido Maria Greves, ed., *Liturgische Hymnen des Mittelalters aus Handschriften und Wiegendrucken*, Analecta hymnica medii aevi 22 (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1895), 263; Domenico Cambiaso, *L’anno ecclesiastico e le feste dei santi di Genova nel loro svolgimento storico* (Genova: Società ligure di storia patria, 1917). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jacopo Varazze, *Legenda seu vita sancti syri episcopi Ianuensis* in Promis, ‘Legenda e inni’, 367–77, which contains transcripts of the late medieval hagiography and hymns dedicated to Syrus. The legend of Syrus and the basilisk became a favourite trope for late medieval humanists to describe Genoese resilience against outsiders, particularly the Milanese; see Giannozzo Manetti, *Elogi dei genovesi*, trans. and ed. Giovanna Petti Balbi (Milano: Marzorati Editore, 1974), 153–4. The civic history of the twelfth-century chronicler Caffaro also celebrates Syrus and notes the existence of public oaths to the Saint; see Caffaro, *Annali genovese di Caffaro e de suoi continuatori del MXCIX al MCCXCIII*, ed. Luigi Tommaso Belgrano (Roma: Istituto Sordo-Muti, 1890), 25. The legend of Syrus and the basilisk is also portrayed in an early modern fresco by Giovanni Battista Carlone in the church of San Siro; see Franco Boggero, ‘Gli affreschi di G. B. Carlone nella chiesa genovese di S. Siro: committenze, piano e tempi di lavoro,’ in *Studi di storia delle arti* (Genova: Istituto di storia dell’arte, 1977), 149–59; Luigi Alfonso, ‘I Carlone a Genova,’ *La Berio* 17, no. 1–2 (1977): 43–98. Along with the eponymous basilica in Genoa are the church of San Siro in Nervi, the church of San Siro di Struppa in the Bisagno valley, the church of San Siro in Mezzanego, the church of San Siro in Santa Margherita Ligure, the church of San Siro in Viganego, and the co-cathedral of San Siro in Sanremo, among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The English historiography is largely silent on Syrus and his cult. He warrants only a brief mention as a “fourth-century miracle worker” in Steven Epstein, *Genoa and the Genoese 958–1528* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 13. The standard Italian reference is Cassiano Carpaneto da Langasco, ‘Siro, vescovo di Genova’, in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum. Tomo XI: Ragenfreda–Stefano*, (Roma: Istituto Giovanni XXIII, 1968), 1238–9, which is rather thin in biographical detail. Recent histories that have addressed the saint forego any re-examination of the sources and remain dependent on nineteenth and early twentieth-century studies. For example, see Teofilo de Negri, *Storia di Genova* (Milan: Aldo Martello, 1968), 108, and the more recent study by Maria Gabriella Angeli Bertinelli, ‘Genova, fra Liguri e Romani, nell’Antichità’, in Dino Puncuh, ed., *Storia di Genova: Mediterraneo, Europa, Atlantico* (Genova: Società ligure di storia patria, 2003), 86–96, both of which follow this trend. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *BAV*, Archivio segreto, Vat. lat. 5771, fols. 266r–268v contains the ninth-century recension; *Vita Syri, Episcopus Genuae in Liguria* (BHL 7973) in *AASS Junii V*, 481–3, refers to the entry in the first Bollandist edition and is standard reference, hereafter referred to as *Vita Syri*. The nineteenth century edition (the Paris reprint of 1863–1870) has the identical text located in *AASS Junii VII*, 438–40. The Bollandist edition was copied from the edition published by in 1477; see Bonino Mombrizio, *Sanctuarium seu vitae sanctorum* (Mediolani, 1477), fols. 304v–305v; reprinted as Ibid, *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum* (Parisiis: apud Albertum Fontemoing, 1910), II, 549–551. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Carpaneto da Langasco, ‘Siro, vescovo di Genova’, 1238; Angeli Bertinelli, ‘Genova, fra Liguri e Romani, nell’Antichità’, 90; Alba Maria Orselli, *L’immaginario religioso della città medievale* (Ravenna: Mario Lapucci, 1985), 259–60. On Sirus of Pavia, see Filippo Caraffa and Angelo Maria Raggi, ‘Siro, vescovo di Pavia’, in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum Tomo XI*, 1239–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Angeli Bertinelli, ‘Genova, fra Liguri e Romani, nell’Antichità’, 46–109. Lombard rule in Genoa was established by Rothari about 80 years the Lombards had seized Milan its surrounding regions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Neil Christie, The Fall of the Western Roman Empire. An Archaeological and Historical Perspective (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); idem, From Constantine to Charlemagne: An Archaeology of Italy, AD 300–850 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Neil Christie, ‘Byzantine Liguria: An Imperial Province against the Longobards, AD 568–643’, Papers of the British School at Rome 58 (1990), 240–44. By “coastal Liguria” I am referring to the region roughly covered by the current province of Liguria. The territory recognized as ‘Liguria’ in early medieval sources encompassed a much larger swath of land that included much of the modern provinces of Piedmont and Lombardy as well as the cities of Milan and Pavia. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Neil Christie, ‘Byzantine Liguria: An Imperial Province against the Longobards, AD 568–643’, Papers of the British School at Rome 58 (1990), 231–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sihong Lin, “Justinian’s Frankish War, 552–ca. 560,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (2021): 413–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Paul the Deacon, *Pauli Historia Langobardorum*, in *MGH*, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, II.24. The English translation is by William Foulke from *History of the Langobards*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1907). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gregory the Great, *S. Gregorii Magni registrum epistularum*, ed. Dag Norberg (Turnhout, Brepols, 1982). The English translation is *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, tr. J. R. C. Martyn (Toronto, PIMS, 2004). See letters 3.26, 3.29, 3.30, and 3.31 to Milanese clerics in Genoa; letters 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.22, 9.187, and 9.235 to bishop Constantius in Genoa; letters 11.6, 11.11, 12.14, and 13.31 to bishop Deusdedit in Genoa. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, tr. Odo John Zimmerman (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), IV.55. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Angeli Bertinelli, ‘Genova, fra Liguri e Romani, nell’Antichità’, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, IV.45. Here the term “Romans” is to be read as “Byzantines.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Timothy Gregory, *A History of Byzantium* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 145–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Much of the information concerning the life of Giovanni il Buono comes from the poem *Hymno de S. Johanne bono Archiepiscopo Mediolani*, from the late eleventh-century or later. This source must be approached with extreme scepticism. See Baldassare Oltrocchi, *Ecclesiae Mediolanensis historia Ligustica* (Milano, Galeatiorum Typographio, 1795), 543–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ross Balzaretti, ‘Urban Life in Lombard Italy: Genoa and Milan Compared,’ in Thomas MacMaster and Nicholas Matheou, eds., *Italy and the East Roman World in the Medieval Mediterranean. Empire, Cities and Elites 476–1204: Papers in Honour of Thomas S. Brown* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 308–10; Thomas Brown and Neil Christie, ‘Was There a Byzantine Model of Settlement in Italy?,’ *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome* 101 (1989): 385–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. Desio was a commune approximately 20 km north of Milan. See also Massimo Brioschi, *Percorsi Desiani* (Desio: Città di Desio, 2006), 13–19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The relevant lines of the poem read “Ianuensis Pontifex Sancti Syri reliquas duxit ad Decium, et Ecclesiam aedificavit pii Iohannes stadium; cui Plebs sibi contulit primatus beneficium, ut in chori pariete scriptura e dat inditium, Apostolorum omnium, Syri, Mariae, variis Iohannes hanc magnificat sacrosanctis reliquiis.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, VI.48. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Harold Stone, *St Augustine’s Bones: A Microhistory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 33–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Luisa Cavallaro, ‘Le reliquie di san Fruttuoso e la leggenda della traslazione a Capodimonte’, in *Immagine del Medioevo: studi arte medievale*, ed. Anna Dagnino (Genova: De Ferrari, 2013), 33–42. Portofino is located approximately 90 km east of Genoa. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and* Charlemagne (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954), 152–85. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 182–97; 235–7, who states that “from Luni westwards along the Ligurian coast there is neither archaeological nor textual evidence for sustained eighth- or ninth-century maritime exchange” suggesting that Genoa was not a major (nor even a minor) commercial node in the eighth and ninth centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Leslie Brubaker, ‘The Elephant and the Ark: Cultural and Material Interchange across the Mediterranean in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries’, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 58 (2004): 175–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, II.4, III.24, and VI.5, discussed in detail later in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Benjamin Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *MGH*, *Scriptores*, *Annales regni Francorum*, 122. Paola Guglielmotti notes that the title of *comes civitatis Genuae* attributed to Adhemar might have been an honorific and not indicative of any administrative association with the city; see her *Ricerche sull’organizzazione del territorio nella Liguria medievale* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2005), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Liudprand of Cremona, ‘Retribution’ in *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2007), 142. The term “Phoenicians” is a rhetorical signifier used by Liudprand to identify Muslims. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Arturo Ferretto, ‘I primordi e lo sviluppo del cristianesimo in Liguria ed in particolare a Genova’, Atti della società ligure di storia patria 1ª serie, 39 (1907): 227–8. The Bollandist editor states that clerics associated with the Cathedral of San Lorenzo made an official transcript of the *Vita* in 1608. This 1608 transcript was then sent by the Theatine superior of San Siro named Marco Palescandalus to Cardinal Cesare Baronius in Rome for the inclusion of Syrus in the *Martyrology* (1583) of Gregory XIII. A second authenticated copy of the *Vita* was made on 11 May 1612 by the notary Giacomo Cunctis and survives in the Bollandist archives. It is this second copy that serves as the textual basis for the published edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Bonino Mombrizio, *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum* (Paris, Albertum Fontemoing, 1910), II, 549–51; Id., *Sanctuarium seu vitae sanctorum* (Mediolani, 1477), II, XXXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *BAV*, Archivio segreto, Vat. lat. 5771. The *Vita* of Syrus is transcribed on folios 266r–268v and remains undocumented in the manuscript catalogue. For a summary of the contents of the *Leggendario bobbiese* see Nicholas Everett, ‘The earliest recension of the Life of St Sirus of Pavia (Vat. lat. 5771)’, Studi medievali 43 (2002): 904–13. Everett dates the codex to the late ninth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Vita Syri*, col. 481c: “Idcirco ego Pusillus, Orthodoxus quidem Episcopus, nulla eloquentiae scientiaeque fultus doctrina, parvi quin imo ingenii…” I would suggest that the name Pusillus is merely a self-deprecating sobriquet that matches the tone in which the hagiographer addresses his intellectual shortcomings in the opening chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This is the present day Molassana or San Siro di Struppa, approximately 10 km north-east of the city centre of Genoa The editor notes the existence of a house in Molassana claiming to be the historical home of the infant Syrus. I visited Molassana in the summer of 2017 and confirmed the existence of the house, which was adorned with a historical plaque describing the residency of the saint, but the structure was clearly built in the nineteenth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ferretto, ‘I primordi e lo sviluppo del Cristianesimo in Liguria’, 215–6, claims there was a Felix as bishop of Genoa circa 349–381 and vehemently counters earlier claims by the Bollandists that placed Felix as active in the late 400s. See Promis, ‘Legenda e inni’, 359. Francesco Lanzoni argues that there is insufficient evidence—particularly the lack of a *Vita*— concerning Felix to make any claims regarding the date of his episcopate. See his *Le diocesi d’Italia dalle origini al principio del secolo VII* (Faenza, F. Lega, 1927), 835–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The hagiographer describes Syrus as “rising to the office of the ministry of the altar” (col. 481d: “officio ministerii altaris sublimaret”) which the Bollandist editor suggests as an indication that Syrus was “ordained a deacon by St Felix” (col. 481d: “a S. Felice ordinatus Levita”). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The Bollandist editor notes that the exile of Syrus was clearly a punishment for that untimely act of devotion (col. 483a: “In poenam scilicet turbati per intempestivam istam religionem”). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The village of Matutiana was located at the site of present-day San Remo, about 100 km east of Genoa. According to Antonio Canepa its first appears in the historical record in the early seventh century. See his ‘Note storiche Sanremesi ubicazione e successive denominazioni dell’antica villa Matutiana’, Atti della società ligure di storia patria 1ª serie, 52 (1924): 101–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Hormisdas is described in the *Vita* as a “coëpiscopum.” The Bollandist editor interprets this as equivalent to “chorespiscopus”, that is, a “vice-bishop” or rural deacon, whereas Francesco Lanzoni reads it literally as “fellow bishop.” Lanzoni connects this figure with the “beatus Hormisdas” mentioned in the *Vita* of St Romulus, who was buried “iuxta beatum Hormisdam” at Matutiana in the seventh century, and argues that both references concern the same person. He further identifies Hormisdas as a bishop of Albenga, ordained by Felix of Genoa; see Lanzoni, *Le diocesi d’Italia*, 838. Lanzoni also concludes that this Hormisdas was most likely a bishop of Albenga and was ordained by Felix of Genoa. The same identification was already proposed by Mariano Grimaldi in his *Santuario dell’alma città di Genova, dove si contengono le vite de santi protettori e cittadini di essa* (Genova: Appresso Giuseppe Pavoni, 1613), 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The description of Galio as “Galionis Fisci Exactoris” indicates that he was an important Imperial official in the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Vita Syri*, col. 481e: “Cui statim praefatus Galio curtem, quae Tabia nuncupatur, devotissime obtulit... cum massariciis, et familiis utriosque sexus suo iuri pertinentibus, cum capella inibi aedificata in honorem B. Petri...” Taggia is located about 10 km east of San Remo. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Vita Syri*, col. 481e: “...praedicatione sua plebem ab errore revocans.” [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Vita Syri*, col. 481f: “Post haec autem cuncta Plebs Ianuensis urbis, unanimiter et consona voce, sanctum ministrum Syrum in Sacerdotem subrogaverunt...” [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. This is the location of the Basilica di San Siro in modern-day Genoa. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The basilisk is described as a horrific creature with head having a crest in the likeness of a rooster. *Vita Syri*, col. 482a: “Erat autem nimis terribilis, cuius caput cristam habebat ad similitudinem galli.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Vita Syri*, col. 482a: “Super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis, et conculcabis leonem et draconem.” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Vita Syri*, col. 482e: “Quo viso Episcopus loci illius, una cum Christiana plebe, basilicam ad nomen eius fundaverunt: ibique sub tegmine templi sudarium condiderunt: de cuius tactu infirmi a languoribus curati sunt, et nunc usque in praesentem diem curantur.” [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ferretto, ‘I primordi e lo sviluppo del cristianesimo in Liguri’, 171–856. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Giorgia Vocino, *Santi e luoghi santi al servizio della politica carolingia (774–877). Vitae e Passiones del regno italico nel contesto europeo* (Ph.D. Thesis, Università Ca’ Foscari, 2009), 258–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Antonio Placanica, ‘Vita sancti Syri Genuensis episcopi antiquior (B.H.L. 7973),’ in *“Vera amicitia praecipuum munus”: contributi di cultura medievale e umanistica per Enrico Menestò* (Firenze: Edizioni del Galluzzo per la Fondazione Franceschini, 2018), 21–81. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., col. 481b: “Auctore verosimiliter Oberto Epsic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., col. 483e: “nisi pro Libya velis Liburnum intelligere, portum Hetruriae eodem in littore. Fuerunt quidem et Libici in Italia transpadana, quorum urbs Vercellae Livio ac Plinio nominatae…” [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ferretto, ‘I primordi e lo sviluppo del cristianesimo in Liguria’, 171–856. This extensive article contains an edition of BHL 7973 on pages 218–22. Ferretto provides no historical evidence on the existence of any previous versions of the hagiography. On Ferretto and his voluminous contributions to Ligurian history, see Emilio Pandiani, ‘Commemorazione di Arturo Ferretto’, Miscellanea di storia Italiana3ª serie, 22 (1931), 11–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ferretto, ‘I primordi e lo sviluppo del Cristianesimo in Liguria’, 222–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., 223–4; *Vita Syri*, col 481c: “...sed et meo Notario scribendam notavi; non in sublimitate, aut fallaci verborum adulatione, quibus semper veritas occulatatur ed defraudatur; sed tantummodo in simplicitate sermonum...”; see also Everett on notaries here…. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ferretto, ‘I primordi e lo sviluppo del cristianesimo in Liguria’, 224. The noun *sacerdos* appears eleven times in the hagiography, while *sacerdotum* appears seven times. The argument regarding the term *oraculum* is supported by Jan Frederick Niermeyer, ed., *Mediae Latinitatis lexicon minus: A Medieval Latin-French/English Dictionary* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 525–6, who does not provide any examples of the term used in this manner after the early 800s. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ferretto, ‘I primordi e lo sviluppo del cristianesimo in Liguria’, 225. On the translation of the relics by Landolfo in 1019, see Id., 430–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 225–6. The letter to Leo is the one and only mention (as far as I am aware) of Pascasio in the historical record. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Jean-Charles Picard, Le souvenir des évêques : sépultures, listes épiscopales et culte des évêques en Italie du Nord des origines au Xe siècle (Rome: École française de Rome, 1990), 601–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Everett, ‘The earliest recension of the Life of St Sirus’, 907. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Angeli Bertinelli, ‘Genova, fra Liguri e Romani, nell’Antichità’, 91–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Giorgia Vocino, Santi e luoghi santi, 258–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 261–2. The entire third chapter of the *Vita* is not part of the earlier manuscript and in its stead is the following prosaic account. Vat. lat. 5771, f. 267: “Quod vir dei non egre ferens, iussu patris laetus, ad locum qui vocatur matuciana perrexit ibique assiduis orationibus vacabat ita ut eius suffragiis egris salus prestaretur. Et post dies non multos pater ministrum precepit reverti.” [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *Vita Syri*, col. 481b. That is, the suggestion of an orthodox faith implies the existence of a non-orthodox faith; see Vocino, *Santi e luoghi santi*, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Vocino, *Santi e luoghi santi*, 263. The reference is Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, IV.55. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Vocino, *Santi e luoghi santi*, 270–1; furthermore, she suggests the analogue between the two texts was recognized by the compiler in Bobbio, who deliberately placed the two texts sequentially in the Lat. vat. 5771 codex. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Jacopo da Varazze, *Chronica civitatis Ianuensis ab origine urbis usque ad annum MCCXCVII*, ed. Giovanni Monleone (Roma: Tipografia del Senato, 1941), 230–54. Placania notes that these were obtained from Jacopo’s reading the *Vita* of Syrus and from the *Dialogues* of Gregory. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. … refs for these two… [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. … Thesaurus Linguae Latinae, Blaise’s Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens, and the Latinitatis Italicae medii aevi Lexicon [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *Vita Syri*, col. 481b: “divinarum Scripturarum perscrutator” [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., col. 481c: “sed et meo Notario scribendam notavi; non in sublimitate, aut fallaci verborum adulatione, quibus semper veritas occultatur et defraudatur; sed tantummodo in simplicitate sermonum.” [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Nicholas Everett, *Literacy in Lombard Italy, c. 568–774* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. The dearth of notarial culture in Genoa is reflected by a letter of Gregory sent to the Milanese clergy in Genoa in September 600. He writes that he was sending a notary to consecrate the new bishop Deusdedit as well as take care of various estate holdings and other ecclesiastical business, presumably because there was nobody there capable of performing this work; see *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, doc. 11.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. The lingering imprint of pagan custom and ritual in north Italy, particularly among Lombard communities during the early medieval period, is addressed in Stefano Gasparri, *La cultura tradizionale dei Longobardi: struttura tribale e resistenze pagane* (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo, 1983), 69–88, who suggests that pagan customs and beliefs persisted amongst the Lombard nobility well into the seventh century; Steven Fanning, ‘Lombard Arianism Reconsidered,’ *Speculum* 56 (1981), who suggests that the Lombards were pagans in the late sixth and early seventh centuries and had largely rejected Arianism before later adopting Catholic Christianity; in contrast, Marilyn Dunn, ‘Lombard Religiosities Reconsidered: Arianism, Syncretism and the Transition to Catholic Christianity,’ in *Heresy and the Making of European Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 102–4, notes widespread syncretistic practices and suggests the Lombards were religiously hybrid, mixing Catholicism, Arianism, and paganism, although she concedes that a substantial minority of Lombards adhered to ‘traditional’ beliefs; see also Raoul Manselli, ‘Gregorio Magno e due riti pagani dei Longobardi,’ in *Studi storici in onore di Otturino Bertolini* (Pisa: Pacini, 1973), 435–40, who speaks of the Gregory the Great and his view of Lombard pagan practices and Everett, *Patron Saints*, 47, who follows the recent scholarship and notes that the sources show that “Lombards were orthodox Christians, though clearly many professed Arianism… [and] no doubt some Lombards were pagan…” suggesting a belief system in constant flux and reflective of syncretistic practice; for Europe in general see Geoffrey Greatrex, ‘El paganismo en el siglo VI.’ in *Debats: Revista de cultura, poder i societat* 90 (2005): 79–85, who suggests that paganism was in decline during the sixth century but created enough concern to require severe imperial suppression, particularly by Justinian; and the survey of Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 32–73, who suggests that early medieval Christianity had difficulty capturing the hearts and minds of the common people. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *Vita Syri*, col. 481e: “praedicatione sua plebem ab errore revocans…” [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid., col. 481f: “Eorum ergo temporibus florebat Catholica Ecclesia, et laetabatur in suorum firmitate membrorum.” [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. *Il sermo de vita Zenonis* in *AASS Aprilis II*, col. 71d. The English translation is from Nicholas Everett, ed., *Patron Saints of Early Medieval Italy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2016), 60–7. St Zeno was active during the fourth century, and Everett places its date of composition in the period ca. 750–780. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Passio sancti Vigilii episcopi et martyris in Lamberto Cesarini Sforza, ‘Gli atti di San Vigilio’, in Scritti di storia e d'arte per il XV centenario di San Vigilio (Trento: Tipografia del comitato diocesano, 1905), 5–29. The translation from Everett, Patron Saints of Early Medieval Italy, 133. St Vigilius was also active during the fourth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Everett, Patron Saints of Early Medieval Italy, 133–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *Vita Syri*, col. 481f: “Post haec autem cuncta Plebs Ianuensis urbis, unanimiter et consona voce...” [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., cols. 481f–482a: “Tertia vero die, ad locum, ubi anguis iacebat, cum universa multitudine perrexit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Acta sanctorum de S. Cetheo, alias Peregrino, episcopo amitensi et matryre in AASS Junii II, cols. 689e–693b. Hereafter referred to as Passio Cethei. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Nicholas Everett, ‘The hagiography of Lombard Italy’, in Hagiographica 6 (2000): 49–126. On Zeno, see 87–92; on Vigilius, see 79–87; on Cetheus, see 110–13. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Everett, ‘The hagiography of Lombard Italy’, 101–2, notes how Eugenio Susi had extended the typical association with dragons to encompass Arianism; see Eugenio Susi, ‘La Vita Mauri Syri abbatus et Felicis eius filii apud Vallem Narci prope Naris ripam del codice Alessandrino 89’ in Hagiographica 2 (1995): 92–136. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid., ‘The hagiography of Lombard Italy’, 92–100. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. The episode of the basilisk receives minimal attention: just one sentence in Arturo Ferretto, half a paragraph in Giorgia Vocino, and one paragraph in Antonio Placanica. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. *Vita Syri*, col. 481f: “affligebatur populus a flatu validissimi serpentis” and later “serpentis flatu populus elideretur.” Note that the hagiographer interchanges the terms “serpens” and “basiliscus” to describe the basilisk. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), 62–4 discusses dragons as the causes of catastrophe in medieval European hagiography. In the *Vita Sentii* in *AASS Maii V*, cols. 70–72, we likewise see St Sentius confronting a dragon residing under the walls of the city, which is similarly symbolic of an external threat to the safety of the community. R. McN. Alexander, ‘The Evolution of the Basilisk,’ in *Greece and Rome* 10 (1963): 170–81, traces the myth of the basilisk from Roman and Egyptian antiquity through the early medieval period, where it was adopted by Christian moralists such as St Ambrose and Isidore of Seville. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Procopius, *History of the Wars, Books I and II. The Persian War* (London, Heinemann, 1914), II.23. The Byzantine period in Genoa spanned from circa 535 to 641, as mentioned earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Paul the Deacon, History of the Langobards, II.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid., III.24. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid., VI.5. This is the same year of the flood of the Adige River described in the *Vita* of Zeno that resulted in the miracle of the dry church. See *Il sermo de vita Zenonis*, col. 71f. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ross Balzaretti, ‘Monasteries, Towns, and the Countryside: Reciprocal Relations in the Archdiocese of Milan, 614–814,’ in *Towns and Their Territories Between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Gian Pietro Brogiolo, Neil Christie, and Nancy Gauthier (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000), 235–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. See note 50 for the Bollandist gloss on the term “Libyae Provinciae.” [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. *Vita Syri*, col. 482c: “Qui festinus tollens sudarium, quod habebat super caput…” In this context, *sudarium… super caput* refers to a headcloth or turban (the Berber “keffiyeh”). On Berber culture and clothing in and late Roman empire, see Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean 439–700* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60–2; on Berber dress see Yedida Stillman, *Arab Dress: A Short History From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 85–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Ibid., col. 482c: “...expleto namque negotio ad propria velificantem comitabatur eum prosperitas.” Byzantine Africa was a major source of wheat for the Empire; see Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Passio sancti Vigilii, translated in Everett, Patron Saints of Early Medieval Italy, 136–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. For example, St Ampelius was an anchorite who arrived in Bordighera, a Ligurian town about 150 km west of Genoa, from Thebaid in Egypt in the early fifth century, supposedly bringing with him the seeds of the palm trees now common in the region. See *AASS Maii III*, coll. 364–9. On the persistence of Mediterranean commercial exchange, see McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Ferretto, I primordi e lo sviluppo del Cristianesimo in Liguria, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Vocino, Santi e luoghi santi, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Epstein, Genoa and the Genoese, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. *Vita Syri*, col. 481e: “Inter quae Galionis Fisci Exactoris filiam, B. Syrus orationibus suis a daemonio liberavit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Il sermo de vita Zenonis, col. 71b; Passio Apollinaris in AASS Julii II, cols. 346f–347b. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. On the transfer of urban and rural properties to the church in medieval Italy, see Chris Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society, 400–1000* (London: MacMillan, 1981),80–114. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. *Vita Syri*, col. 481e: “cum massariciis, et familiis utriosque sexus suo iuri pertinentibus, cum capella inibi aedificata in honorem B. Petri...” [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. *Vita Barbati* in *AASS februarii III*, cols. 140c–d. The offer is refused by Barbatus in favour of ensuring that the shrine of the Archangel Michael at Gargano is placed under the jurisdiction of the archdiocese of Benevento. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. *Vita Syri*, col. 481e: “curtis cum massariciis.” Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, 659–60, traces the earliest appearance of the terms “massarius” (a serf provided with a tenancy of land) and “massaricius” (the property specific to a “massarius”) to eighth-century Lombard documents, with common usage appearing in the eleventh century. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. The Benedictine monastery of San Siro had existed earlier (established ca. 952) but did not become integrated with the church of San Siro—and thus associated with the saint—until 1007. See Sandra Machiavello, ‘*Per una storia della cattedrale di Genova: percorsi archeologici e documentari’* in Atti della società ligure di storia patria, 2ª serie, 10 (1997), 21–36. On the translation of the relics, see Ferretto, *I primordi e lo sviluppo del Cristianesimo in Liguria*, 430–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Guglielmotti, Ricerche sull’organizzazione del territorio nella Liguria medievale, 16–17; Lanzoni, Le diocesi d’Italia, 837. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Negri, *Storia di Genova*, 209–68. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. ASLSP, Manoscritti 55, Carte genovesi dei secoli X e XI, entry nr. 94, which is a nineteenth-century copy of a now-lost contract. A modern edition is available in Aurelia Basili and Luciana Pozza, eds., *Le Carte del Monastero di San Siro di Genova dal 952 al 1224* (Genova: Università di Genova, 1974), doc. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. ASLSP, Manoscritti 55, entry nr. 123. Basili and Pozza, *Le Carte del Monastero di San Siro*, doc. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. ASG, Archvio segreto 1525, Abazia di San Siro, mazzo I, entry nr. 28, dated 1053-05-04. Modern edition in *HPM*, *Charatrum*, doc. 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Guglielmotti, *Ricerche sull’organizzazione del territorio nella Liguria medievale*, 26. See the source in Dino Puncuh, ed., *Liber Privilegiorum Ecclesie Ianuensis* (Genova: Università di Genova, 1962), doc. 8. The original church of San Lorenzo was converted into the cathedral of San Lorenzo during the twelfth century. See also Alessandra Sisto, *Genova nel Duecento: il Capitolo di San Lorenzo* (Genova: Tilgher, 1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Varazze, *Legenda seu vita sancti syri*, 367–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)