How was the ascetic life redefined in the period after Chalcedon?

Introduction

The 'ascetic life' first popularised by the desert Fathers in the 'Scetes' desert of Alexandria (its namesake), expanded to become a powerful force in Eastern Christianity that exerted much popular adulation and ecclesiastical influence. As Susan Ashbrook Harvey (1998) summarises, this was an "era of flamboyance"[1] with figures such as Simeon the Stylite, Z'ura, and Anthony of Egypt, commanding great influence, particularly amongst their rural surroundings. Asceticism and monasticism quickly became a source of anxiety for Roman emperors, being treated as a source of social contagion that threatened civil stability and ecclesiastical unity. Thus, emperors (notably Marcion and Justinian) increasingly preoccupied themselves with the goal of bringing monasteries under episcopal control. This was primarily through monastic legislation such as the fourth canon of the Council of Chalcedon and Justinian's *Novels*.

In this essay we will first seek to assess the influence of imperial legislation on shaping the orthopraxy of the 'ascetic life'. We will seek to demonstrate that while it is difficult to ascertain the influence of monastic legislation on ascetic orthopraxy, it is certain that the goal of excluding ascetics from the social and political life of the empire failed. As Benedicte Lesieur (2011) argues[2], monastic legislation achieved a "pyrrhic victory"[3]. This will lead us to the second part of our argument in agreement with Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Phil Booth (2014); that ascetic life redefined itself in ways that were increasingly integrated with (rather than excluded from) the temporal and cosmological aspects of Eastern Christianity. We will seek to demonstrate this in three ways: i) that monks and monasteries played a vital role in responding to 'crisis events', particularly during the sixth century, ii) that ascetic practise redefined itself as incorporated into the liturgical life of the worshiping community, and iii) that for many ascetic movements, this incorporation placed the eucharist at the centre of monastic life.

Legislation: The Council of Chalcedon and Justinian's *Novels*.

The imperial preoccupation to regulate ascetic life tends largely from an anxiety by the late antique establishment towards what was seen as an increasingly unruly monastic movement[4]. Only two years prior to the Council of Chalcedon, at the 'Robber's Council' of Ephesus II, the church fathers had witnessed the beating and subsequent death of Flavian of Constantinople at the hand of the Syrian ascetic Barsauma and his monks. Monks commanded a great deal of institutional influence. Nestorius encapsulates the issue in his description of Eutyches: "although he was not a bishop, he granted himself another role, thanks to imperial power: that of bishop of bishops. It was he who directed all

[1] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pg. 523

[2] Benedicte Lesieur (2011), "Le monastère de Séridos sous Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: Un monastère conforme à la législation impériale et ecclésiastique?" *REB 69*

[3] Daniel Neary, 'The Image of Justinianic Orthopraxy in Eastern Monastic Literature,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 25 (2017), 147

[4] Daniel Neary, 'The Image of Justinianic Orthopraxy in Eastern Monastic Literature,', pg. 122

the affairs of the church"[5]. Nestorius reminds us that institutional definitions were also at stake at Chalcedon as well as doctrinal definitions[6]. Not only were ascetic movements powerful, but unreliable, and as Harvey argues, charismatic and flamboyant. The 'wandering' men took on extreme practices of self-mortification and fasting as well as reputations as miracle workers. Many scholars of Late Antiquity studying the popular topic of "the relationship between charismatic and institutional authority[7] have argued that emperors sought to "curb the perceived excesses of monks"[8] and bring the monks under episcopal control for the sake of guarding against civil unrest[9].

As Daniel Caner argues, "the council of Chalcedon in 451 marked a watershed moment in the official church policy toward monks"[10]. While, as Charles Frazee (1982) reminds us[11], these were not the first imperial laws to approach the definition of ascetic life (such as the council of Gangra), they were certainly the most codified and extensive. Indeed, the 4th canon specified that i) monasteries must comply with the will of the bishop: "*let no one construct or establish anywhere a monastery or house of prayer against the will of the city's bishop"*, ii) that monks are subordinate or "*hypotetachthai*" to their bishop, iii) that they must remain in solitude: "*let them embrace tranquility and attend to fasting and prayer alone"*, iv) that they are under the provision of the bishop, and v) that failure to comply will lead to excommunication. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this legislation evinced a tangible 'redefinition' of the ascetic life, particularly considering the divisive reception of Chalcedonianism.

What is clearer, as Daniel Neary and Benedicte Lesiuer argue, is that after Justinian's *Novels*, monastic life began to mould itself to the isolated and controlled coenobitic imperial model. We can observe this in the hagiographies produced by Eastern monastic authors. Indeed, Lesieur argues in his study of the Seridos monastery of Thavatha (near Gaza) that *Questions and Answers* of Barsanuphius and John reveals a monastery seeking actively to mirror Justinian legislation, even in physical design (*Novels 133*). Further, Hartmut Leppin suggests that the *Life of Sabas* and *The Life of Euthymius* by Cyril of Alexandria present "archetypal Justinian monks", living closely in accordance with the orthopraxic model prescribed in *Novels.* However, we ought to read these hagiographies with a hermeneutic of suspicion; I argue that it is highly likely that these hagiographies were recast to fit with Justinian's orthopraxic model. Indeed, not only do Cyril's *Lives* recycle, and sometimes directly quote imperial religious policy, but make unlikely references. For example, *Sabas* condemns Theodore of Mopsuestia, even though his writings weren't anathematised (as one of the 'Three Chapters' authors) eleven years after Sabas' death. Further, Neary suggests that it is unlikely that Barsanuphius was even alive at the time of Eustochius' investigation into the Seridos monastery. As clear incentives exist to create the appearance of the orthopraxic credentials of post Justinian monasteries, particularly considering their financial dependence on bishops, we ought not to take these hagiographies at face value.

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[5] Daniel Caner, 'Monastic Patronage and the Two Churches of Constantinople', in *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2002), pg. 209

[6] Daniel Caner, 'Monastic Patronage and the Two Churches of Constantinople', pg. 209

[7] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pg. 523

[8] Daniel Neary, 'The Image of Justinianic Orthopraxy in Eastern Monastic Literature,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 25 (2017), pg. 122

[9] Daniel Neary, 'The Image of Justinianic Orthopraxy in Eastern Monastic Literature,', pg. 126

[10] Daniel Caner, 'Monastic Patronage and the Two Churches of Constantinople', pg. 206

[11] Charles Frazee (1982), "Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation on the Monastic Life from the Fourth to Eighth Centuries," in *CH* 51, pgs. 263–79

Not only are 'Justinian' hagiographies historically circumspect, but there is a great deal of evidence that imperial legislation was actively avoided. *The First Panegyric on Abraham* (of Farshut) presents a "saint whom out Fathers … bequeathed their rules", refusing, unlike Pacharis, to "carry out every order of the emperor"[12]. Further, the *Life of Z'uri,* a Mesopotamian stylite, portrays a radically different account to Cyril's. Here, Z'uri is charismatic and independently minded, living a life that is loyal only to the orthopraxic model of the pillar and engaged closely with the affairs of the world. Indeed, Z'ura in no way adheres to the coenobitism laid out in *Novels 5*. While it may be tempting to try and negotiate between these two radically different historical narratives, we ought not to shy away from these tensions. Indeed, I argue that the schismatic reception of the imperial attempt to redefine the ascetic life is to be expected considering the divisions that occurred after Chalcedon, and the association of Roman emperors, like Justinian, as Chalcedonian oppressors.

The Failure of monastic exclusion: Ascetic life not excluded from society.

Having argued that the impact of monastic legislation was not monolithic, and that the regional diversity of the 'ascetic life' remained, here we will seek to demonstrate that the overall goal of secluding and diminishing the 'ascetic life' into coenobitic, isolated monastic communities largely failed. This was due to the increased relevance of asceticism in the context of the 'crisis' events of the sixth century as well as the integration of ascetic life into Christian liturgy, and particularly the eucharist.

The crises of the sixth and seventh centuries exerted a great deal of influence on the role of monasteries and wandering ascetics within the Christian community. This 'crisis' period of late Antiquity saw the Justinian plague of ca. 541 and the Samaritan revolts of 529 and 556, as well as the general economic and military corrosion of the empire at its edges. As Lucy Parker (2022) convincingly argues, these changed redefined the ascetic life as the hagiographers made increasingly ambitious claims of the influence and status of 'holy men'. As Parker observes, the holy men of the fourth century are typically described as performing miracles for "individuals or small groups of people"[13],but "caveats about the limitations of saint's abilities soon disappear from most hagiography" as we see ascetics such as the fifth century Simeon the Stylite the Elder performing miracles for whole cities and the sixth century *Life of Severos* depicting its hero as "guardian of the city of Antioch"[14], protecting his people "like Moses he would stand against the wrath of God" (*Life of Severos*). Thus, it is the 'crisis events' of the empire that elevate the role of ascetics as temporal protectors as the "midway between heaven and earth"[15].

It is likely that this role was aided, ironically, by the stipulations of imperial legislation. Indeed, Justinian's *Novels* stressed the association between monastic prayer and the success of the empire. While we might postulate that this was to encourage separation and seclusion from the outside world, it had the opposite effect; the ascetic life becomes increasingly integrated with public

[12] Daniel Neary, 'The Image of Justinianic Orthopraxy in Eastern Monastic Literature,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 25 (2017), pg. 144

[13] Lucy Parker, 'Hagiography and the Crises of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', in *Symeon Stylites the Younger and Late Antique Antioch: From Hagiography to History* (Oxford, 2022), pg. 206

[14] Lucy Parker, 'Hagiography and the Crises of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', pg. 206

[15] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pg. 524

life, or at least, this is the presentation we receive from hagiographic texts. For example, the *Life of Daniel the Stylite* (late 5th century) includes Daniel's reassurances to Leo that "God had promised to preserve Alexandria against Vandal attack"[16]. Similarly, as Lucy Parker uncovers, Leo I tried to uncover the body of Simeon the Stylite the Elder "in order for their kingdom to be protected by his prayers"[17], and Simeon the Younger is said to have healed Justin II's daughter, and Theodore of Sykeon, Maurice's child of an "incurable disease"[18]. These developments have even led Helen Saradi to suggest the appearance of the 'national saint'. Nevertheless, it is certain that the ascetic life did not disappear from public life after Chalcedon but became increasingly integrated as the role of ascetics defined itself in relation to the health of the empire.

Finally, we argue alongside Susan Ashbrook Harvey (1998) and Phil Booth (2011) that in the period after Chalcedon, the ascetic life became increasingly integrated with the liturgical life of the worshipping community, and particularly with the eucharist. This can certainly be observed in the *Life of Daniel the Stylite* which reports both his ordination, role as patron of the emperor, and reciprocal bond with the Constaninopolitan Patriarch[19]. Similarly, the *Lives of Cyril of Scythopolis* also seek to convey his ecclesiastical integration as the patron of Justin II and interaction with the bishops of Seleucia and Antioch[20]. Susan Ashbrook Harvey's argument that, after Chalcedon the hagiographies place "extraordinary emphasis on the integration of the ascetic practice into the liturgical life of the worshiping community, both monastic and civic" is acutely accurate[21].

For the stylites in particular, Harvey argues that this liturgical integration is centred around the relationship between their orthopraxy and the eucharist[22]. As such Harvey disagrees with Peter Brown's conclusion that it was the unique "ritualised activity" that constitutes the "stylites defining ritual context", but instead it was the "eucharistic liturgy of the gathered body of the church, the collective presentation of the Christian salvation drama"[23]. Indeed, there is much evidence for this claim. For example, the Syriac *vita* of Simeon the Stylite structures his daily practices in the very form of the eucharist[24]. Further, In Sophronius' *Miracles of Cyrus and John* and the *Pleophoriae of John Rufus*, the eucharist is central for establishing not only the "integration of the stylites into the liturgical life of the worshipping community", but the distinct efficacy and righteousness of *their* rites of the eucharist, in comparison to the non-efficacious Chalcedonian eucharist. Thus we must remind ourselves that while *integration* into the liturgy is stressed, this ought not be interpreted as the implicit acceptance of ascetic stylites of the ecclesiastical (Chalcedonian) establishment. On the contrary, the ascetic life of the stylites, as represented by Sophronius, Moschus, and Maximus

[16] Lucy Parker, 'Hagiography and the Crises of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', in *Symeon Stylites the Younger and Late Antique Antioch: From Hagiography to History* (Oxford, 2022), pg. 207
[17] Lucy Parker, 'Hagiography and the Crises of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', pg. 207
[18] Lucy Parker, 'Hagiography and the Crises of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', pg. 208
[19] Phil Booth, 'Toward the Sacramental Saint', in *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), pg. 25
[20] Phil Booth, 'Toward the Sacramental Saint', pg. 25
[21] Phil Booth, 'Toward the Sacramental Saint', pg. 25
[22] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pg. 530
[23] Phil Booth, 'Toward the Sacramental Saint', pg. 27
[24] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity,' pg. 530

abandons hitherto claims to "spiritual independence of ecclesial realities" in favour of a "more integrated model" that seeks to establish its unique righteousness[25].

Conclusion.

In conclusion, we have sought to navigate the multiple trends of self-identification that developed during the period after Chalcedon. While imperial legislation from the council, and later, in Justinian's *Novels* did exert a great deal of influence on the orthopraxy of the ascetic life, particularly since the economic interests of the monks were intertwined with their episcopal patrons[26], we ought to read the hagiographies detailing their uptake with a degree of suspicion. We suggest that the "new era of unity"[27] that Daniel Craner reads into the post-Chalcedonian era of the ascetic life is only partial and hagiographic accounts of acceptance should often be read as mere *prima facie* impressions, and *trompe l'oeils* (illusions) that hide the continuance of much orthopraxic diversity and schismatic rejection of any attempts at legislation. Moreover, we have suggested that the imperial goal of monastic seclusion and control was ephemeral. The association of monasticism with the success of the empire, coupled with the 'crisis moments' of military incursions, economic downturn, and the Justinian 'plague' led to an increasing integration of the ascetic life into public life. Additionally, we have considered the ways in which many monasteries and hermetic groups such as the stylites redefined themselves in relation to the liturgy, and in particular to communion and the eucharist. Despite restrictive imperial legislation the unique identities of ascetic groups remained intact, if not more clearly demarcated, particularly in response to orthopraxic legislation, and a rejection of the stipulations imposed by 'Chalcedonians'.

[25] Phil Booth, 'Toward the Sacramental Saint', pg. 33

[26] Daniel Caner, 'Monastic Patronage and the Two Churches of Constantinople', in *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2002), pg. 241

[27] Daniel Caner, 'Monastic Patronage and the Two Churches of Constantinople', pg. 241

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