A Preliminary Controlled Vocabulary for the Description of Hagiographic Texts

David M. DiValerio

Department of History, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53201, USA; divaleri@uwm.edu

check for updates

Abstract: As a genre defined by its content rather than by its form, the extreme diversity of the kinds of texts that can be considered "hagiographic" often proves an impediment to the progress of comparative hagiology. This essay offers some suggestions for the creation of a controlled vocabulary for the formal description of hagiographic texts, demonstrating how having a more highly developed shared language at our disposal will facilitate both the systematic analysis and the comparative discussion of hagiography.

Keywords: comparative religions; controlled vocabulary; disciplinary innovation; hagiography; hagiology; sacred biography; sainthood; religious studies

---

The other core essays in this volume are dedicated to such important concerns as helping us to arrive at a more precise definition of hagiography; to be more reflective concerning the nature and the ethics of comparison; to re-center our understanding of the exemplary figure of the hagiographical representation; and to think about authorship and reception. The goal of this essay is to offer something more foundational and basic: to initiate a process of developing a controlled vocabulary that will foster the systematic description, analysis, and comparative academic discussion of hagiographic texts.

The working definition of hagiography that has been arrived at by this ongoing collaborative workshop—a text about the life of a figure regarded as holy by some subset of a population—while reasonable and seemingly innocuously-specific enough, in actuality designates a remarkably wide range of types of texts. As a genre defined by its content rather than by its form, there are no limits to what a hagiographic text may look like. (As has been noted elsewhere in this volume, the hagiographic text need not even be a literary text: Our working definition of hagiography by no means precludes oral text such as a song or an epic, a dramatic performance, or a non-textual work of art, such as a painting, statue, or a representation of some other sort entirely. For the purposes of this essay, I shall be referring specifically to literary texts, although what I herein propose could certainly be adapted to advance discussions of these other kinds of representations as well.) In the current state of the fields of Religious Studies, History, Medieval Studies, or what have you, when a scholar refers to the *Life* of an individual, his audience has no way of knowing, for example, whether this is a partially autobiographical text or something composed entirely by someone who lived centuries after the saintly figure in question; whether the text depicts only the saintly figure's moment of ascension, or the entire arc of her life; whether it is an emotive five-page sketch, or a three hundred page chronicle. These are distinctions that I believe impinge, at times quite profoundly, upon the kinds of issues raised in the other articles included in this volume.

Presently, the lack of a shared vocabulary for how to describe the formal features of hagiographic texts hinders us in our ability to study and make scholarly use of those texts: Scholars who are new to working with hagiography are often uncertain about how a particular text may fit into the broader landscape of hagiography; for those better-versed in the genre, we lack an efficient way to describe a particular text to one another, which impedes cross-tradition and comparative-minded conversation.

To further our collaborative project, a practical taxonomy of hagiographic texts, with a well-developed vocabulary for describing it, should be developed. Employing such a controlled vocabulary would allow us to more efficiently specify what kind of thing we are in fact referring to when we mention a *vita*, a *namtar* (Tibetan: *rnam thar*), a *vimokṣa*, a Passion, a *Life*.

The following might serve as the germ for such an endeavor, based on my experience of reading, translating, researching with, and writing and teaching about hagiographic texts, deriving from a wide range of historical periods and religious traditions. This quasi-taxonomical controlled vocabulary has been developed in part through conversations that have taken place during the workshop "Comparative Hagiology: Issues in Theory and Method," which met during the 2018 and 2019 meetings of the AAR. My goal here is to demonstrate the utility of a clear and durable taxonomic vocabulary for describing the formal features of hagiographic texts, the collaborative development of which—drawing on the expertise of scholars working on the full gamut of hagiographic texts—may be a possible future direction for this project.

Sara Ritchey's piece in this same volume displays an intent comparable to my own (Ritchey 2019). While I am here limiting myself to addressing formal aspects of hagiographic texts (I make a motion towards addressing the perhaps more fraught question of the *content* of these texts toward the end of this essay), the terms of Sara's index direct our attention to a series of important themes that cut across all the different layers in which all hagiographic production is embedded—touching upon formal qualities of a hagiographic text, but also its contents, its reception, its importance religiously, socially, and historically.

Part of the inspiration for developing this controlled vocabulary comes from Aviad Kleinberg's *Prophets in their Own Country* (1992). In that book, Kleinberg (1992) develops some very useful labels for referring to the different kinds of saintliness that have been exemplified by saintly figures over time, specifically concerning the different patterns of community interaction that historically figured into an individual's transformation from mundane being into a Christian saint: "the detached type," "the cooperative type," and so forth. I have found Kleinberg's taxonomy extremely useful in helping to progress my own thinking, writing, and teaching about sainthood, and believe that the study of hagiography (whether comparative or otherwise) could similarly benefit from having a basic vocabulary and taxonomy for describing and referring to these texts.

After the presentation of this partial and tentative controlled vocabulary—the elements of which are given in **bold**—I show some examples of how texts may be described using this vocabulary, then discuss possible further avenues for this project to explore.

It is crucial to note that many hagiographic texts will be found to not fit neatly into these categorizations, or to fall into different opposing categorizations simultaneously. Such is the nature of hagiography, a genre that veers naturally toward palimpsestic productions. Although upon close examination, texts will often be found not to conform to these categories, the controlled vocabulary may still provide a useful heuristic. As will be seen, the discussion of how a text does not fit into one of these categories may be just as illuminating as a discussion of how one does.

A reader may harbor the expectation that a hagiographic text should, with whatever degree of specificity, tell the story of its subject's entire life—from birth to rise to holiness to death. But by no means do all or even most hagiographic texts conform to this, as they in some cases pick up in, say, early adulthood (as in Leontius's *Life of Symeon the Fool*); or address only select moments of the subject's life, or even only a key turning point that then stands in for the whole life (as in the *Passion* of Perpetua and Felicity) (Tilley 2000). Thus a particular hagiographic narrative might be described as **birth-to-death**, **episodic**, or **partial**. Buddhism provides us with examples of hagiographies that in fact span **multiple lifetimes**.

A foremost consideration for beginning to make sense of or describe a hagiographic text is who wrote it, and on what authority. On these questions, we see a remarkably wide range of possibilities. Hagiographies have commonly been written shortly after the lifetime of the saint; sometimes long after the lifetime of the saint; and only rarely during the life of the saint. Primary authorship can

be by the hand of someone who never knew or encountered the saint, or by an associate of the saint, often a devotee or a disciple. In some cases, the saintly figure has been directly involved in some aspect of the creation of the text, perhaps giving a retelling of her life to a particular witness, which then provides some of the material for the hagiographic text. Many hagiographic texts will be found to be partially **auto-hagiographical** (or **pseudo-auto-hagiographical**, as the case may be). Completely auto-hagiographical accounts include Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Yogananda 1998), and the *Life* of the Tibetan yogin, Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (1781–1851) (Ricard 2001). In the majority of cases, the text in question is determined to display a combination of these possibilities: The text perhaps contains quotations or narrative elements related by the saintly subject; descriptions or mentions of things observed and/or heard by individuals close to the saint, or members of her broader contemporary public. These fragments will be woven together by an author who comes later (or much later). Thus, hagiographic texts are almost always polyvocalic. To describe the composition of a hagiographic text, we might make use of such terms as: **antemortem**, **posthumous**, or **belated**; **witness-derived**, **witness-absent**; **disciple-derived**; **saintly subject-derived**, **subject-absent**. We might add a further sub-designation for saintly subject-derived hagiographies: those in which the saint is quoted (**subject-quoted**). The French *Life* of the Iroquois Jesuit saint Catherine Tekakwitha was written in 1717 by Pierre Cholenec, who had been her confessor, making him a particularly intimate witness to her story. The text would be witness-derived, but as Cholenec knew of Catherine's life based in large part on what she herself told him, the *Life* may also be considered saintly subject-derived (Greer 2003). This raises the question, suitable for further study and reflection, of what particular issues may be raised when a hagiography is written by its subject's confessor.

Closely related to the above, while in some instances it may be that a hagiographic text can be determined to have been an entirely original composition, it will much more commonly be found to be a reworking of earlier materials—whether from narrative fragments or from a complete text, or multiple complete texts (or a complete text, plus other source material; or multiple complete texts, plus other source material; and on and on). In some cases it is clearly apparent which prior sources provided which content in the later hagiography, while in others that material may be reworked quite drastically, rendering the influence of that earlier source material invisible to anyone who has not closely researched the materials in question. In some cases it may prove impossible to make a determination, with the seams between the different potential source materials rendered invisible to us. It can be observed that in recent decades, much of the scholarship about hagiography has been focused specifically on what can be made of those seams when they do become visible. All of these considerations become vastly more complicated when the source material in question is not written text but oral (or of any non-written medium). To describe the basic substance of a hagiographic text in relation to prior texts, we might refer to it as an **original composition**, derived from **reworked** material, or **drastically reworked**. It may be worth adding another designation for when a hagiographic text draws directly from pre-existing hagiographical sources, but those that are about a different saint entirely. Here we can cite the example of how, in writing his (first) *Life* of Francis of Assisi, Thomas of Celano (c. 1185–c. 1265) characterized Francis in ways that drew directly and quite obviously from Sulpicius Severus's (c. 363–c. 420) *Life* of Martin of Tours (Regis et al. 2004; Hoare 1995). In this way, any hagiographic text existing within a tradition may influence, directly or indirectly, those that follow. When this phenomenon is clearly on display, we might refer to a given text as **hagiographic canon-derived**. (A complication to this is the fact that hagiographies of Buddhist and Christian saintly figures almost always bear distinctive markings of the lives—and *Lives*—of the respective founders of those traditions. The degree to which they do so, however, varies widely, a consideration that those widely read within these respective traditions will likely develop a keen sense for.)

A hagiographic text might be composed with the expectation that it will circulate on its own, independently, as a stand-alone text. Alternatively, a hagiographic text may be composed for and then circulated as part of a compendium (such as the compendia of Chinese and Korean Buddhist biographies often referred to as *The Lives of Eminent Monks*, or the Taoist collections *Traditions of*

Exemplary Transcendents). In these cases, it may be found that non-negligible elements of the text's meaning are derived from either its mere placement within such a collection, or from the actual specific contents of the texts amongst which it is placed. Many hagiographic texts that once circulated independently are at a later point in time placed within a compendium. The repackaging of a once-independent text can be a significant moment in the making of meaning. The original text may thus be described as **stand-alone**, or **compendium-dependent**. As a variation on this, the earliest, fragmentary *Lives* of the Tibetan saint Milarepa (1028/40/52–1111/23) were written to accompany a body of advanced and highly secret tantric teachings, such that the biographical text circulated as attached to another body of literature (Quintman 2014). We might describe such a hagiographical text as having been written and/or circulating in an **appendixical** manner.

We might also include the simplistic but significant designations of *Lives* in **prose**, **verse**, or **prosimetrum** (alternating prose and verse)—a style encountered in hagiographic texts with a surprising frequency, across languages and religious traditions. Within the latter category, we may encounter texts that are essentially in verse, with sections of prose, or, more often, texts that are essentially prose, with sections of verse (most often at the beginnings and/or ends of chapters, or the beginning and/or end of the text itself). These and other basic formal features (like whether or not the work has sections or chapters) are worth taking note of in describing a hagiographic text.

As an example of this controlled vocabulary's being put to use, if I were to give a conference presentation that focused on the *Life* of the Tibetan yogin Künga Zangpo, better known as the Madman of Ü (1458–1532), I might describe it as a **birth-to-death** chronicle, with chapters, in a **prosimetrum** form (DiValerio 2016). From the time of its first printing, it traditionally circulated as a **stand-alone** text (despite having been republished as part of a collection of religious biographies in 1972). The *Life* is partially **antemortem** (the longer Part I of the text having been written and block-printed when its subject was only thirty-six) and partially **posthumous** (the shorter Part II having been written five years after its subject's death). It is **witness-derived**, **disciple-derived**, and **saintly subject-derived**, and indeed **subject-quoted**. It is best thought of as an **original composition** but may also to a limited extent be understood as a **reworked** text, as it draws in parts from an earlier account, in the form of notes taken by the saintly subject's nephew.

We can compare this text with the account of another "mad" saint: the *Life of Symeon the Fool* by Leontius. Written around the middle of the seventh century, between fifty and a hundred years after its subject's death, this is a **posthumous**, **partial** account, written as a **stand-alone** text (Krueger 1996). A consideration of how best to categorize the text in terms of the source material used by Leontius brings to light some important issues for the genesis of this text: Although portions of the text are presented as having been related by Symeon, Leontius does not claim to have himself witnessed Symeon but to have written the *Life* based on someone else's written eyewitness account (a claim that scholars broadly accept as a falsehood, most likely reflecting authorial conventions of Leontius' day). More likely is that the brief tales of Symeon's exploits that make up the second part of the text are gathered from oral traditions (which may make the text in part **witness-derived**), while the first half of the text seems to be an **original composition** by Leontius, while parts are (simultaneously) ostensibly **saintly subject-derived** (including many direct quotations). Regardless of whether or not we ultimately accept this material as having originated from the saint, for comparative purposes, the fact that the text *claims* to relate what the saint himself said is significant.

The brief biography of the Taoist "transcendent" (*xian*) Xiang Mandu, related within a polemical essay by Ge Hong (283–343 CE) (contained within the collection *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity: Inner Chapters*; *Baupuzi neipian*), is an **partial** hagiography, telling only of its subject's miraculous journey through the heavens, having flown there on a dragon from his mountain retreat (Campany 2009, pp. 136–137, 251–252). The story having been in circulation for hundreds of years before Ge Hong's time, this particular version of the story was written **belatedly**, derived from **reworked material**. The text may be best considered **compendium-dependent** (having been transmitted in various different compendia before Ge Hong's). The majority of the text is presented as Xiang

Mandu's own first-hand account of his experience, making it (ostensibly) **saintly subject-derived**, **subject-quoted**, and ostensibly **autohagiographical**. The fact that this account is provided amidst Ge Hong's making an argument about Xiang Mandu's being a charlatan further complicates the matter.

The account of the saintly Cauḍayya provided in Harihara's thirteenth-century Kannada-language *Śivaśaraṇara Ragaḷegaḷu* ("Poems in the *Ragaḷe* Meter for Śiva's Saints") is an **episodic** hagiography, telling only a small part of the story of his life: a handful of specific tales of his enacting an extreme devotion to Śiva, and Śiva's eventually welcoming him into his divine abode of Kailāsa. The text is an **original composition** and is **compendium-dependent**. We do not know when Cauḍayya may have lived, or what relationship Harihara may have had with him—or indeed, whether or not he existed at all—leaving considerations of the relationship between the author and its subject indeterminate (Ben-Herut 2018, pp. 79–81).

As becomes clear from these four examples, hagiographic texts very frequently do not fit easily into the categories offered by this controlled vocabulary or will be indeterminate. But to discuss how a text may not fit into a particular category, or why that may be indeterminate, can be highly edifying about the text, and about the hagiographic process generally.

From the mere fact of writing this piece and thinking about this controlled vocabulary, a number of questions for future consideration have arisen. What can be made of the notable tendency toward prosimetrum in hagiographic compositions, across religious traditions and cultural and linguistic contexts? Does Buddhism strongly favor birth-to-death narratives over partial or episodic ones, while for other religions, different predilections can be observed? What are the contexts in which compendium-dependent hagiographical productions seem to be preferred? How might our understanding of a text like the *Legends of the Eighty-Four Mahāsiddhas* of tantric Buddhism change in consideration of the fact of there being such a strong tradition of hagiographical compendia produced by the Hindu *bhakti* tradition? As mentioned above: What particular issues may be raised when the author of a hagiography has served as confessor to its subject? And the thorny and perpetual issue: How to deal with the multilayered, polyvocalic nature of hagiographic texts that so often represent many distinct moments of accreted material?

This essay has begun the task of developing a controlled vocabulary for referring to the formal features of a hagiographic text (pending a broader concerted collaborative effort). We may in the future expand this project by taking up the task of developing a controlled vocabulary for describing features pertaining more to the intent and the reception of a hagiographic text, addressing more of the text's contents. For example, we may consider what vocabulary may be used to address to what extent the saintly subject emerges as a **distinct individual** or adheres to a **pre-existing model of saintliness**. Is the subject presented as a **perfected being**, or as **possessing human faults** and failings? To what extent does the text rely on accounts of the **miraculous**? Is the saintly subject portrayed in a way that **encourages imitation**, and/or **devotion**, or not? Is the text intended for a **broad public readership** or a **delimited** one? Does the text assume a particular **prior knowledge** among its hearers or readers? Does it appeal to a **specific elite**? Does the author signal an intention of creating a **definitive historical record** of the saint's life, or to appeal to the reader on a more emotional level? Having a controlled vocabulary would foster a systematic consideration of any of these questions.

Hagiographic texts tend strongly toward being complicated, difficult to describe. This is because of the elasticity of the genre as currently defined, but also because of these texts' typically polyvocalic and palimpsestic nature. Having a shared vocabulary will allow us to better locate individual texts within this diversity, and to more efficiently articulate questions and findings that arise from both inter- and intra-traditional comparison.

References

Ben-Herut, Gil. 2018. *Śiva's Saints: The Origins of Devotion in Kannada According to Harihara's Ragaḷegaḷu*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Campany, Robert Ford. 2009. *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

DiValerio, David. 2016. *The Life of the Madman of Ü*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Greer, Allan. 2003. Iroquois Virgin: The Story of Catherine Tekakwitha in New France and New Spain. In *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas, 1500−1800*. Edited by Allan Greer and Jodi Blinkoff. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 235–50.

Hoare, F. R. 1995. The Life of Saint Martin of Tours. In *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Edited by Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 1–29.

Kleinberg, Aviad. 1992. *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Krueger, Derek. 1996. *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Quintman, Andrew. 2014. *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Regis, J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds. 2004. The Life of Saint Francis (1228–1229). In *The Francis Trilogy of Thomas of Celano*. New York: New City Press, pp. 11–137.

Ricard, Matthieu. 2001. *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.

Ritchey, Sara. 2019. Dialogue and Destabilization: An Index for Comparative Global Exemplarity. *Religions* 10: 569. [CrossRef]

Tilley, Maureen A. 2000. The Passions of Saints Perpetua and Felicity. In *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*. Edited by Richard Valantasis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 387–97.

Yogananda, Paramahansa. 1998. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship. First published 1946.