



Base of the column of Saint Simeon the Stylite, ca. 20 miles northwestern of Aleppo, Syria. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Pooping in Public: Syrian and Egyptian Desert Fathers as Textual Constructs

Andrew Cole

JAMES *REALLY* HAD TO USE THE BATHROOM. Yet he was surrounded. He lives on the side of a mountain in the open air, without “cave, or hut, ... or obstructing wall.” Making matters worse, he had become a tourist attraction.

And it wasn't just his daily constitutional - he was sick with the kind of flux that hurts the bowels and causes you to run to the nearest bathroom as *fast* as you can. The day was hot. The day was still. He stood in the beating sun; a drop of sweat rolling off his face.

This crowd was larger than normal. Word had gotten out about his illness and the countryside had swarmed. They waited for him to drop dead. They wanted to collect his body.

Nature presses him to evacuate; shame holds him back.

James reminds himself that this pain keeps him humble and honest - this is the kind of bodily torment that he had determined to endure years ago when he dedicated his life to God. He resists the growling

urges of his ailment and maintains his vigil before the crowd.¹

James's situation is odd. Yet from within the contexts of the Late Antique and Early Medieval Worlds, James of Cyrrhestica filled a familiar role in his society, that of the holy man.

James of Cyrrhestica's story survives in the *History of the Monks of Syria*, a chronicle of saints'-lives written in the fifth century by Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus (d. 457).² From Late Antiquity through the Middle Ages, hagiography, a genre of religious anecdotes that recount the stories, miracles, and lives of holy men and women, was popular; we have numerous surviving examples of hagiographic collections and some of those produced in Late Antiquity have thus far been largely understudied. Although historians have mined these works to construct an image of the Late Antique world and the role of holy men and women within it, researchers are yet to analyze how these texts functioned. Without such an analysis, it is difficult to understand the division between reality and the writer's constructed, textual world.

Like all writers, the authors of these texts wrote with purpose, adjusting their depictions to match their goals. These purposes allow for the emergence of textual constructs: representations of reality that are meant to achieve an author's purpose. These changes can be small - for instance, a writer may make a friend attractive and an enemy ugly - yet they are significant when trying to understand a bygone world. Therefore, to reconstruct the past, it is important that historians understand the textual constructs behind their sources. For this purpose, I compared two late antique hagiographic collections - the *Historia Religiosa* [*History of the Monks of Syria*] of Theodoret of Cyrrhus and the *Lausiac History* of Palladius (d. ca.457) - to understand the unique,

multifaceted purposes of each author. I will demonstrate that Palladius uses his *Lausiac History* to provide a moral guide for his fellow Christians and that Theodoret serves as an impresario to the often-radical figures of the Syrian desert; a role that forces him to constantly justify, explain, and defend his monks.³ This paper does not seek to uncover every possible purpose, and instead hopes to concentrate on a few of the overarching reasons that Palladius and Theodoret wrote their texts.

What is a monk?

Individuals like James of Cyrrhestica show that the monks described in these hagiographies are characters unfamiliar to modern readers. Therefore, it is necessary to first understand the holy man himself. Late Antique monasticism - or, more accurately, Late Antique monasticisms - consisted of a variety of lifestyles and practices exhibited by monks [and also nuns] when they entered the "desert."⁴ Despite this variety, for the most part, monks left society to avoid the distractions of life and dedicated their minds towards the worship of God and their "ethical obligations within his cosmos."⁵ Once in the desert, monks meditated, prayed, and disciplined their bodies. Monks saw their bodies as distracting appendages that obnoxiously turned the mind away from God. It did not matter if the distraction was hunger, sexual attraction, exhaustion, or diarrhea; any bodily qualm turned the mind away from God and, therefore, was something to be overcome. For this purpose, many monks turned to bodily torment: James of Cyrrhestica forbade himself to poop for long hours of the day; Eusebius of Teleda - another of Theodoret's protagonists - refused to leave his hermitage for forty years; Simeon the Stylite did not eat for forty days

¹ This anecdote comes from Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria* XIII, trans. R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 134-135.

² R. M. Price, "Introduction," in *A History of the Monks of Syria*, trans. R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Press, 1985), xiv-xv.

³ Impresario is the term used for the leader of a circus. The idea is that, like the impresario, the bishop author was attempting to make those in his organization - holy men and women - and himself look good. See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 10.

⁴ It is important to note that this term is a misnomer and a textual construct drawing more on monastic tradition than truth. While our modern imagination may place holy men and women in the desert, the reality of Late Antiquity was that monks and nuns lived on the outskirts of society often in large communities of their own making; for instance, 5,000 monks lived on Mount Nitria just outside Alexandria; Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, ch. 7, trans. Robert T. Meyer (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 40.

⁵ Jamie Kreiner, *The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell Us about Distraction* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2023), 21.

(supposedly).⁶ Philoromus - who appears in Palladius's work - wore heavy chains; Ammonius burned himself with a hot poker; Macarius of Alexandria went twenty days without sleeping.⁷ All of these practices were meant to achieve the same end: to separate the mind from the body and its distractions. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the degree of bodily mortification and what it meant to fight bodily distraction depended on the individual.



Icon of Simeon the Stylite, painted around 1667.
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Though holy men and women theoretically left society when they adopted their new lifestyle, they still played a key political role in their local communities. As historian Peter Brown has demonstrated, the

emergence of the holy man and woman was a response to changing power dynamics in Late Antique Syria, Theodoret's world. Shifting power relations resulted in the loss of clear local authority in the villages of the Syrian desert, creating a void that could best be filled by the leadership of an outsider.⁸ The hermit, who dedicated his life to living in the deserts near civilized communities, lived as an eternal outsider and thus became the perfect individual to fill this role.⁹ This gave monks increasing local political authority best exemplified in the story of the monk Macedonius the Barley Eater. Macedonius repeatedly interfered in the local politics of his home - interceding at court to prove that a man used magic to put a demon into a little girl. He also interceded with a general who wanted to destroy a nearby town.¹⁰ The holy man was influential, powerful, and political - adding secular authority to their otherwise religious roles.¹¹

The Texts

Theodoret of Cyrrhus wrote the *History of the Monks of Syria* around 440 AD.¹² Theodoret grew up surrounded by monks, a result of his mother's religiosity, and frequently visited many of the individuals he would later write about.¹³ Following the death of his parents, Theodoret became a monk and lived a monastic lifestyle until he died.¹⁴ In 423, Theodoret was elected bishop of Cyrrhus, combining his monastic existence with episcopal authority.¹⁵ The *Historia Religiosa* tells only the stories of the monks and nuns from within and nearby his diocese of Cyrrhus. He describes these monks and nuns as the shining "stars in the east" that reach "the end of the earth with their rays."¹⁶ The *Historia Religiosa* consists of thirty chapters (recounting the lives of thirty monks and three nuns). Each of these chapters is relatively long when compared to those in the *Lausiac History*.

⁶ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XIII, ch. 5, pp. 134-135; *ibid.* IV, ch. 6, p. 52; *ibid.* XXVI, ch. 12, p. 165.

⁷ Palladius, *Lausiac History*, ch. 11.3, p. 47; *ibid.* XVIII, ch. 3, p. 59; *ibid.* XLV, ch. 2, p. 122.

⁸ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-110, at 84-87.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 83-87.

¹⁰ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks* XIII, pp. 102-105.

¹¹ Brown, "Rise and Function," 80-101.

¹² R. M. Price, "Introduction," xiv-xv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Theodoret, *History of the Monks*, Prologue.9, p. 7.

Palladius of Galatia wrote the *Lausiatic History* around 420, approximately twenty years before Theodoret wrote the *History of the Monks of Syria*.¹⁷ The *Lausiatic History* is a collection of seventy-one often very short hagiographies recounting the stories of various individuals, many of whom Palladius met during his own time as a monk.¹⁸ His work displays a wide variety of monasticisms of hermits, cenobites, nuns, radical ascetics, and more.

Unlike Theodoret, Palladius presents an overview of a large swath of the Mediterranean - from Rome to Palestine to Egypt - all places he explored in his time as a wandering monk. I would argue that in writing this diverse text, Palladius intended to construct an inclusive monastic landscape, capable of capturing not only those holy men and women on the extremes, but also those who never withdrew from society. There are significant differences between the expansive, diverse world of Palladius and the small, harsh monastic landscape of Theodoret. This is no accident but is a product of the two authors' divergent purposes. For Palladius, who meant to provide a moral guide to his readers, having a large number of simple and applicable stories was to his benefit. In contrast, Theodoret meant for his collection to demonstrate his own greatness and the greatness of those monks under his authority. Therefore, it made sense for him to write long, detailed hagiographies of individuals under his own episcopal supervision.

Theodoret

James's vigil continues. Yet, luckily, his close friend, the bishop Theodoret, is there to help. It takes until nightfall, but finally Theodoret is able to convince the eager crowd to disperse. Once alone, James takes the opportunity to relieve his hurting bowels. The next morning, James again stands in the sun. The situation repeats. As the sun rises, the crowd grows. As the crowd grows, his fever rises.

Theodoret knows he needs to do something. If James continues in this manner, he will die. Therefore, Theodoret claims that he cannot bear the sun. He asks to move to the shade. James encourages him

to do so but Theodoret refuses to enter the shade while James, his ailing elder, remains in the sun. In this way, Theodoret controls James. If James remains in the sun, he will cause Theodoret, his hierarchical superior, discomfort, something that is both rude and unkind. If he moves into the shade, something necessary for his health, he respects his bishop, excusing the violation of his oath.



Theodoret, in: André Thevet, *Les vrais portraits et vies des hommes illustres grecz, latins et payens*, vol. 1 (Paris: Chaudière, 1584).
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Upon entering the shelter, Theodoret notices that, despite his illness and despite his torment under the sun's rays, James wears heavy chains around his body. Recognizing the danger these chains pose to James's health, Theodoret immediately commands him with "words of enchantment" to remove the weights.¹⁹

We can simplify the story of James of Cyrrhestica as having four main purposes that support Theodoret's overarching function as an impresario.

First, Theodoret uses his text to glorify James of Cyrrhestica. By describing the throngs of onlookers

¹⁷ David F. Buck, "The Structure of the 'Lausiatic History,'" *Byzantion* 46, no. 2 (1976): 293-295.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ This anecdote is a continuation of that in the introduction in Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXI, c. 8, p. 134.

that surround him, he portrays James as a popular figure, using the bandwagon effect to benefit James's image. Not only this, but Theodoret goes out of his way to describe the depths of James's ascetic practice. He is radical in the extreme, unwilling to moderate even when illness commands him to do so. Even Theodoret, his superior, struggles to convince him to moderate. In this way, we can see Theodoret buoying up James as a genuinely great monastic figure, who is deeply committed to both his vows and the monastic lifestyle.

Second, Theodoret uses the story to defend Syrian monasticism. Despite the positive outlook that he communicates towards such commitment, the great victory of the text is not James's decision to continue as he did - sick, with his chains, in the sun - but the moment he relents to Theodoret's pressure and moderates. The monks in the *History of the Monks of Syria* are far more extreme than those in many other monastic traditions including, as we will see, the *Lausiaca History*. Theodoret may have felt the need to defend his monks' actions from potential detractors.²⁰ Theodoret's emphasis on James's decision to moderate when his life depended on it seems to be a type of defense. Through James, Theodoret shows that the monks of Syria can moderate out of necessity or obedience, demonstrating a way that monks can safely practice the radical asceticism of his home province.

Third, while Theodoret is glorifying James of Cyrrhestica and defending the monasticism of Cyrrhus, he does so in such a way that he is also glorifying himself. Despite the radical nature of his ascetics and their commitment to God, a wise leader with "words of enchantment" can make them moderate.²¹ Theodoret makes it clear that as a bishop, he has control over his monastics.

Fourth, by praising James' decision to moderate Theodoret extends his power over the future. When future monastics read the *Historia Religiosa* in an attempt to understand their origins and the actions of their great forebearers, they will recognize James's greatness and emulate his actions, including his decision to obey his bishop and moderate. Texts impact the future, and through the textual construct of James

of Cyrrhestica, Theodoret created future obedient, moderate monks. Though Theodoret glorifies James of Cyrrhestica by portraying his dedication to his craft, the fact that the story centers around moderation suggests the complexities of Theodoret's position and purpose in writing - Theodoret hopes not only to glorify but to justify.

Palladius

When Palladius went to live with the monk Dorotheus, he had heard rumors that Dorotheus lived harshly. He was still surprised by the fortitude of the sixty-year cave dweller. Every day, Palladius and Dorotheus would go out and collect stones in the burning heat and build homes for the infirm. They averaged one a year. After a night of hard work, Dorotheus would eat six ounces of bread, a couple vegetables, and then sit there. In his time with Dorotheus, Palladius never saw him sleep. When Palladius asked Dorotheus why he was "killing" his "body," he simply responded: "it kills me, I will kill it."²²



Palladius of Galatia, *Lausiaca History*, Preface, manuscript. Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, Gr. 346, fol. 127, late 10th c. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

²⁰ For another example of Theodoret defending radical monk from detractors, see Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *History of the Monks* XXVI, pp. 160-172.

²¹ *Ibid.* XXI, ch. 8, p. 136.

²² Palladius, *Lausiaca History*, ch. 2.2, pp. 32-33.

Dorotheus' harsh lifestyle creates a difficult interpersonal relationship between the monk and his acolyte Palladius - a relationship that blurs the line between glorification and critique.²³ In this story, Palladius paints neither himself nor Dorotheus in the best of lights. In fact, Palladius describes Dorotheus' lifestyle as "squalid and harsh." Therefore, he is unable to live with him for the allotted three years.²⁴ Moreover, he describes himself, at least when he first arrived, as full of "suspicions" regarding Dorotheus' lifestyle.²⁵ His complaint, Palladius's early departure, and the air of suspicion between the two men reveal their human relationship: Palladius did not like Dorotheus or his harsh way of life. In this way, he differs from Theodoret. If Palladius was trying to glorify himself through his connection with Dorotheus, then he would not have mentioned that he was unable to keep up with the holy man or suggest their interpersonal strife. Despite failing to glorify himself, Palladius does use some of the chapter to discuss Dorotheus' ascetic skills, miracles, and wise words. Even though Palladius does not respect Dorotheus' lifestyle, he does respect his derision, devotion, and holiness, something that he thinks others reading the text should emulate.

Moral messaging again appears in the episode on "The Rich Virgin." An exceedingly wealthy virgin who has supposedly dedicated her life to God, hordes her income, hoping to give it as inheritance to the adopted children of her niece. Macarius, a local religious figure, inciting her greed, offers her some precious gems for 500 coins. The offer excites her so much that she throws the money at his feet without checking whether the gems were real. Time passes and Macarius never delivers the stones. When she inquires about them, he takes her to a hospital that he runs, showing her "the gems" she purchased - the health of those whom her money has saved from disease. The virgin returns home, ill from grief, recognizing the wrong she has done.²⁶ This story is a great example of the kinds of moral lessons recounted in the *Lausiac History*. Here, a warning against hoarding wealth for the sake of one's relatives is a valuable lesson for all greedy readers. The anecdote also encour-

ages wealthy donors to spend money supporting religious figures in their community. Being a monk or nun was expensive. Even though they hardly ate or drank, monks and nuns still needed to purchase food and water. If they were hermits or lived sealed up in a cell, they needed someone to bring them supplies. All these expenses added up, requiring monks to find some form of revenue - usually the support of outsiders.²⁷ Like many of the stories in the *Lausiac History*, Palladius uses "The Rich Virgin" to teach readers a moral lesson - in this case, that hoarding wealth that could go to a good cause - for example a religious hospital - is wrong and immoral.



Bejeweled Woman, personification of generosity. Byzantine mosaic, 5th c. Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Source: [Website of the Metropolitan Museum](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/object/1979.10.1)

Conclusion

When we look at the *Historia Religiosa* and the *Lausiac History* of Palladius, it is clear that each of the two works, even though they are similar on the surface, do quite different things with their stories. While Theodoret intended to use his text to uplift and defend his radical monks and nuns, Palladius used his writings to demonstrate the many ways to lead a holy, moral life. When we compare these texts with a keen eye towards purpose, we understand how the authors adapted their stories to best suit their needs. With this information, we can better use

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., ch. 6, pp. 37-40. This recounts the story of the rich virgin.

²⁷ Kreiner, *Wandering Mind*, 39-42.

the texts to reconstruct the past. Only by looking at textual constructs can we fully understand why James found himself fighting against pooping in public.

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