

## The Eastern Christian ‘Desert Fathers’ and Monastic Identity at the Carolingian Abbey of Fulda

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This essay addresses the role of the eastern Christian, ‘desert fathers’ tradition in monastic identity at the Carolingian abbey of Fulda during the ninth century. The question underlying this choice of topic is how monasteries and monastics of the Carolingian period imagined themselves to be connected to the ‘original,’ geographically distant asceticism of figures such as Antony, Pachomius, and Paul of Thebes. In what ways did Carolingian monastics link this eastern Christian past to their own practices and institutions, and in what ways did Carolingian monks set their communities’ spiritual projects apart? More broadly, what value did the exemplars of desert asceticism continue to hold among monastic centers of the Early Medieval Latin West? How did the memory of monasticism’s beginnings—encountered through hagiographical texts, monastic *regulae*, and relics—shape later monks’ missions and collective identities?

Fulda provides a good case study for several reasons. First, Fulda was ‘the spiritual and intellectual jewel of the Carolingian empire’:<sup>1</sup> not only was the monastery founded on the instructions of the venerated Anglo-Saxon missionary Saint Boniface, whose disciple (Sturm) served as Fulda’s first abbot, but the abbey’s monks enjoyed a privileged relationship with the Carolingian court, receiving protection, immunity, and generous royal patronage in return for prayers on behalf of the emperor and his *regnum*.<sup>2</sup> Second, Fulda allows us to consider the issue of monastic identity through multiple lenses: the monastery produced a trove of different kinds of texts, among them the *Annales Fuldenses*, important hagiographies, details of charters and exchanges with the Carolingian court, and records of architectural programs. In this paper, we will focus on the *Vita Sturmi*, a hagiography set in the period of Fulda’s founding,<sup>3</sup> and on accounts of the layout of Fulda’s crypt.

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<sup>1</sup> Lynda L. Coon, "Collecting the Desert in the Carolingian West," *Church History and Religious Culture* 86, no. 1 (2006), pp. 136.

<sup>2</sup> Janneke Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c. 744 - c. 900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 50-55.

<sup>3</sup> Eigil of Fulda, "Vita sancti Sturmii," in *Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores II*, ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Avlici Hahniani, 1829), pp. 365-77.

As we will see, the abbey's crypt contained a carefully-curated set of relics tying the monastic community to the biblical and eastern Christian traditions. The abundance of material from Fulda has been the subject of detailed secondary studies, two of which will interest us in particular: Lynda Coon's article, 'Collecting the Desert in the Carolingian West,' and Janneke Raaijmakers' monograph, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c. 744 – c. 900*. An examination of the primary sources and recent scholarship demonstrates that the monks of Fulda sought to broadcast both to members of their own community and to visitors (especially pilgrims) the abbey's reverence of and continuity with the asceticism pioneered by the 'desert fathers.' The monks used remarkably *visual* means—including textual imagery and object displays—to build a concrete connection with the achievements of the early, eastern Christian ascetics.

The *Vita Sturmi*, composed by abbot Eigil ca. 818-22, highlights this visually-based approach. The hagiography relates Fulda's foundational story: on the advice of Boniface, Sturm sets out through the woods of 'Buchonia' (East Francia) to reach the monastery's divinely-ordained location. The landscape of Buchonia functions as a challenge to Sturm's devotion: Sturm is confronted by a vividly-described array of 'wild beasts,' a group of 'ferocious Saxons' who oppose his efforts to set up a sanctuary, and harsh, murky forests. As Coon has shown, the wooded landscape which Sturm must face in fulfilling his obligation to Boniface offers a Western European version of the Egyptian desert—and would have been recognized as such by Fulda's well-read monks. Eigil went to great lengths to portray Buchonia as an untouched wilderness: in stark contrast to the hagiographer's vision, archaeological surveys have revealed that Fulda was constructed on the site of a pre-existing *villa rustica*. This *villa* was destroyed around 700, and its ruins would still have been standing into the 740s, when Sturm founded the abbey; in fact, some of the remains of the *villa rustica* were occupied as late as the early ninth century—the time of the *Vita Sturmi*'s authorship.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Fulda was built in close proximity to two major trade routes, the Antsanvia and Ortessveca roads, which serviced merchants travelling to major urban centers like Frankfurt and Mainz.<sup>5</sup> As Coon has put it, 'The monks of Fulda... would have been struck... by the disharmony

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<sup>4</sup> Raaijmakers, pp. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Raaijmakers, pp. 28.

between the hagiographer's [Eigil's] invented topography and their own, intimate knowledge of the monastery's lush and well-watered hinterland.'<sup>6</sup>

In producing Fulda's foundational tale, Eigil prioritized an imagined, western adaptation of the eastern desert over an accurate rendering of the environment with which he and his fellow monks were familiar. This stylized, literary landscape not only reinforced the monks' commitment (supported by the royal court) to enforce Christian orthodoxy in the eastern part of the Carolingian kingdom, which the Carolingians viewed as a rough, less civilized region (in the *Vita Sturmi*, for instance, Boniface notes that Fulda was the very first monastic establishment 'in the eastern part of your [emperor Carloman's] kingdom'), but gave the abbey's monks a way of *visualizing* the connections between their own institution and the early Christian desert ascetics. The *Vita Sturmi* became the central text of Fulda's institutional identity; it was frequently read aloud during communal meals as a way of reminding the abbey's monks of their monastery's conception and of the future envisioned by the luminaries of the Bonifatian age.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the *Vita Sturmi*, the monks of Fulda used the 'built environment'<sup>8</sup> of their abbey to orchestrate their communal identity. The crypt provides a striking example of the importance the monks assigned to the great figures of desert asceticism: an entire eastern segment of Fulda's crypt was dedicated to the relics of individuals such as Antony, Athanasius, and Paul of Thebes.<sup>9</sup> The crypt anchored the abbey's church; in addition to memorials of the desert fathers, the crypt housed relics of Boniface and Fulda's past abbots. The crypt's numerous exhibits were thoughtfully placed: for example, the eastern crypt-altar containing the relics of Antony, Pachomius, and Paul of Thebes stood directly opposite a western crypt-altar honoring the central figures of western asceticism, such as Benedict of Nursia, Columbanus, Cuthbert, and Bede.<sup>10</sup> Directly above this western area, visitors could pay respects to the principal shrine of Boniface.<sup>11</sup> To supplement the physical presentation of the items in Fulda's crypt, the future abbot Hrabanus Maurus composed a

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<sup>6</sup> Coon, pp. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Raaijmakers, pp. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Coon, pp. 138.

<sup>9</sup> Coon, pp. 137.

<sup>10</sup> Coon, pp. 137.

<sup>11</sup> Coon, pp. 137.

series of poems (the *Tituli ecclesiae Fuldensis*) honoring the monastery's collection of relics. Fulda's monks worked with both object and text to create a visual timeline of monasticism, tracing an arc from the deeds of the Egyptian ascetics to the leaders of western monasticism to Boniface and the abbey of Fulda itself. The crypt display was meant to leave visitors (as well as the abbey's monks) with a sense that the spiritual project of Fulda had its genesis in the ancient, eastern Christian tradition, but that the monasticism practiced at Fulda had also been developed and amended by a long line of western predecessors. That the crypt embodied Fulda's group identity is made clear by a passage in the *Vita Leobae*, written by Rudolf of Fulda ca. 838, in which the hagiographer emphasizes the proximity of Leoba's burial to Fulda's crypt as a way of conveying her prestige and close links to the institution.<sup>12</sup> Rudolf suggests that inclusion in the abbey's crypt was a form of recognition granted only to those viewed as leaders and progenitors of Fulda's monastic mission.

The concept that Fulda's monastic practices merged the eastern Christian, 'desert fathers' heritage with western traditions is a feature of the *Vita Sturm* as much as of Fulda's crypt. One section of the *Vita Sturm* describes a trip undertaken by Sturm to the monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy, as a result of which Sturm reintroduced Benedictine 'customs, observances, and traditions' to the monks of Fulda. Evidently, this passage of the hagiography (and the journey it describes) was considered crucial enough to Fulda's identity that the *Vita Leobae*, produced almost two decades later, invoked it in an effort to play up Leoba's role in the monastery's founding: Rudolf makes a point of stating that Leoba accompanied Sturm on this journey. Not only the Benedictine, but the classical tradition thrived at Fulda: the abbey's monks (and especially individuals such as Eigil and Rudolf) were well-educated in Latin texts of classical antiquity, and several Fulda-based poets worked in dactylic hexameter in clear emulation of ancient models. There is even a possibility that the Western European wilderness of the *Vita Sturm* (meant to match the Egyptian desert) was informed by Vergil's depiction of the underworld in book six of the *Aeneid*.<sup>13</sup> Fulda provides us with an example of how the eastern Christian ascetic past was transmitted and received in conversation with other, sometimes non-Christian traditions which were equally familiar to western monastics.

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<sup>12</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, "Vita Leobae," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores XV*, ed. Georg Waitz (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Avlici Hahniani, 1887), pp. 118-31.

<sup>13</sup> I hope to elaborate on this point during my presentation.

## Works Cited

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