

# THE MARTYR, THE TOMB AND THE MATRON: GENDERING THE PAST, 313-794



My proposed study will examine the gender dynamics surrounding one aspect of late ancient and early medieval memorial practice: the cult of martyrs. An indeterminate number of Christians were executed by Roman imperial authorities before the conversion of emperor Constantine to Christianity early in the fourth century. Despite the "precedent" of cults of the dead in antiquity, memorialization of the martyrs was not inevitable. Martyr memorialization in the fourth century and after was not inevitable, spontaneous or natural, but was politicized, purposeful and functional.

Human behavior and decisions are often heavily influenced by beliefs concerning what has happened in the "past." Therefore, control over representations of the past can be a source of great influence in society. Furthermore, when the medium for representation of the past is the shrine tomb of a deceased saint, the person who controls the monument benefits from an additional source of power, in that holy corpses have been widely perceived as instrumental in the production of miracles. Memorial practices connected with martyr cults involved construction in two senses: construction of the past in the guise of remembering it, and construction of a physical shrine.

During the early middle ages, both women and men were able to memorialize the dead. In memorializing the martyrs of Roman imperial persecutions, female and male cultic impresarios both constructed/represented the Roman past as a period marked by persecutions of Christians, and constructed tomb-centered power bases for themselves. Furthermore, "historically" speaking, both female and male martyrs were available for commemoration after 313. Yet, preliminary impressionistic evidence indicates that female commemorators of the post-Constantinian centuries devoted themselves almost exclusively to perpetuating the memory of male martyrs, whereas the female martyrs who have been successfully memorialized owe their cults to male impresarios. I plan a systematic examination of the production of tomb-centered martyr cults and of the memorialization of Roman-era martyrs during the fourth through the eighth centuries. Only at the end of the eighth century did Charlemagne and his key advisors seriously limit (intentionally or unintentionally) women's ability to memorialize the holy dead by establishing the first of a series of ever-stricter ecclesiastical (therefore, male) controls on the recognition of "genuine" cults. The Carolingian legislation of 794 is thus the «MDRV»terminus ad quem of the study of gender and martyr memorialization.

In the last few years, a number of (female) historians have emphasized the importance during the early middle ages of female authors (both certain and supposed) and female patrons in the creation of historical narratives which treat women as an active part of the historical picture. However, if my preliminary impressions concerning the commemoration of martyrs are correct, at least some women seem to have used their positions of influence to represent the past as male, or to highlight males as historical agents.

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