

**MEDIEVAL COLLECTIONS OF SAINTS' LIVES**

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## MEDIEVAL COLLECTIONS OF SAINTS' LIVES

### ABSTRACT

A *Legendarium* is a single or a multiple-volume manuscript containing hagiographic biographies, i. e. the lives of saints. This ARG will examine the development of *legendaria* in the Middle Ages, the various types of manuscripts and how these sources can be used for medieval literature and history.

### INTRODUCTION

Medieval *legendaria* are mostly unedited and anonymous. A complete history of medieval Latin *legendaria* has yet to be published, and would require a complete survey of the huge number of surviving manuscripts. Relevant scholarship includes Albert Poncelet's essay on Petrus Calo's *Legendarium* (1910), Guy Philippart's *Les légendiers latins et autres manuscrits hagiographiques* (1977, also see his articles), and the work of François Dolbeau (1981). Two important online sources for Latin hagiography are the database [BHLms](#) and its connecting project [Légendiers latins](#) (coordinated by Guy Philippart, University of Namur, Belgium).

Collections of saints' lives are important as:

1. They reflect the communal cultural and spiritual background of a community, whether this is either religious or ecclesiastical, or with a local or wide geographical remit.
2. The way in which single *vitae* were collected is evidence of the hagiographic ideal for a particular time and place.
3. All saints' lives have a common denominator among the different individual spiritual experiences.

### HISTORY

Legendaries can be traced from the eighth century, although earlier precedents can be found: Eusebius of Caesarea's *Historia ecclesiastica* (d. 340), the *Vitae Patrum* ("Lives of the Fathers", 4th c. Egypt), and the valuable hagiographic library of Venantius Fortunatus (d. 609), described in a poem of 400 verses. In the Anglo-Saxon world there was a flourishing hagiographic tradition, which included authors such as Aldhelm (d. 709, *Carmen de virginitate*), and Bede (*Martyrologium*, composed in 725-731). All these authors collected biographies and passions of saints (both in prose and in verse), and their works are early attempts to transmit a hagiographic corpus, either local (as in the case of Bede) or based on a universal idea (as in the case of Eusebius).

Legendaries of saints' lives appear in the second half of the 8th c. It is debatable whether they were created for liturgical purposes. Modern scholarship leans towards considering these great collections as part of the historical narration of a community. Although

many of these saints' lives were organised in liturgical order, in everyday practice they were more widely used as readings during monastic meals (*in mensa*). Legendaries grew in size and number until the 13th c. From then on, the number of large legendaries decreased and disappeared around the 15th c. They were replaced by the popular 'abridged' legendaries. These were first created around 1230-1240 and soon superseded the bulky traditional *legendarium* (often in multiple volumes). This kind of legendary was widespread across Europe and survived the arrival of printing. While the large legendaries are linked to monastic *scriptoria*, the abridged ones were created for the preaching needs of the new mendicant orders. Often called *Legendae novae*, they were produced in large quantities in non-monastic *scriptoria*.

### TYOLOGIES

There were two types of hagiographic collections in the Middle Ages: *libelli* and *collectiones*. The *libellus* (small book) is a single and independent codicological unit, dedicated to a saint or to a very small group of saints. In contrast, a *collectio* presents a large collection of saints' lives.

A *collectio* can be either a *legendarium* or a *lectionarium* (a hagiographic lectionary). The first includes a number of complete or abridged lives, while the second includes only shortened readings (*lectiones*) for the Daily Office. *Lectioes* were standardized and became fixed texts around the 10th c.

Hagiographic manuscripts included mixed forms, made up by two or more types of hagiographic texts. Here are some possible combinations:

*Lectioarium officii* = *lectionarium hagiographicum* + *lectionarium homileticum* (collection of patristic homilies and sermons for the Office). Every *lectionarium* is formed by a sanctorale that follows the liturgical calendar of the community that commissioned it.

*Homiliarium-legendarium* = *homiliarium* (collection of homilies) + *legendarium*, generally arranged by following the sequence of the months in a year, so that each saint is connected to the day of his or her liturgic feast.

*Legendarium-martyrologium* = *legendarium* + *martyrologium* (collection of martyrs' lives to be read during the Office at *hora prima*). In this case, the lives are inserted either at the end of each month, or at the exact date, following the text of the *martyrologium*.

Each *legendarium* had a commissioner, who planned the hagiographic framework, and an editor, who edited or adjusted earlier hagiographic models. Both these roles could be done by the same person. Sometimes the commissioner, editor, and author are known. Guy Philippart distinguishes between legendaries composed by an editor and those composed by an author. In contrast to an editor, an author did not merely adjust earlier saints' lives but instead re-wrote the text. The legendaries of authors can be studied in editions or in surviving manuscripts, and there are even extant autograph manuscripts in a few cases. Regarding legendaries created by editors or compilers, the date of composition, provenance and hagiographic models are harder to establish.

## Abridged Legendaries

Every editor or author of a legendary took earlier saints' lives and put them in their collection by adjusting and changing them. An abbreviator was an editor who modified his models substantially, and reshaped the hagiographic sources. Modern scholarship is divided on whether these legendaries are an evolutionary restyling of early models (Dolbeau 1981) or a brand new collection category, created to answer the new hagiographic demands of the 13th c. (Degl'Innocenti 2012). Abridged legendaries had two novel features: firstly, even if anonymous, they all had a prologue, which explained the criteria for the inclusion of the lives in the collection, and thus were not mere compilations. Secondly, they were intended as a tool to transmit hagiography to the laity.

Abridged legendaries were widespread and replaced the traditional legendary between the 2nd and 4th decade of the 13th century, as the traditional legendary did not meet changing spiritual needs. From a literary point of view, abridged legendaries are interesting case studies, as each abbreviator shaped his collection, and every single life was inspired by a number of earlier hagiographies, although their connections with the new text could be short-lived. The new text could be a model for future hagiographers or collectors of hagiographies. Regarding the abbreviation itself, it does not only vary from one author to another, but even an individual author could modify his compilation method in the same legendary, as is the case of Bartholomew of Trento.

Abridged legendaries are among the most popular legendaries of the Middle Ages. For example, James of Varazze's (d. 1298) *Legenda aurea* was copied in hundreds of manuscripts and translated into every major European language. In the same period, other Dominican authors compiled collections of rewritten saints' lives, such as John of Mailly (d. 1254-1260), Bartholomew of Trento (d. 1250-1254), and Rodrigo of Cerrato (c. 1272).

John of Mailly's *Abbreviatio in gestis sanctorum* was the first compilation of abbreviated saints' lives. It was written shortly after 1225, possibly in Auxerre, first revised in 1234 when John of Mailly was admitted into the Dominican Order, and revised again in 1234 in Metz. John intended to furnish his brethren with a convenient preaching tool, which included only non-apocryphal lives.

Bartholomew of Trento wrote the *Liber epilogorum in gesta sanctorum* to assist Dominican preaching. It is a complete cycle of abbreviated Lives, with a regional focus, as the *sanctorale* is characteristic of the Trento diocese and of the nearby dioceses. It includes autobiographical notes, mostly praising his own efforts and criticizing his hagiographic sources, and the saints' lives resemble sermons.

The Spanish Dominican Rodrigo of Cerrato was more a compiler than an author. He started to write the *Vitae sanctorum* in the second half of the 13th c. He wrote a second version which absorbed new information from James of Varezze's *Legenda aurea*. It survives in only three known manuscripts, all written in Spain:

1. London, British Library, Addit. 30057 (end of 13th c.-14th c.)
2. Madrid, Biblioteca Universidad Complutense, 156 (13th-14th c.)
3. Segovia, Archivo y Biblioteca de la Catedral, Vit. 28 (13th-15th c.).

Compared to his predecessors James of Varazze used a larger number of sources and wrote in a clear and erudite manner. The *Legenda aurea* (*Golden Legend*), written between 1260 and 1266, had a greatest success of any legendary. It was considered for centuries the *legendarium* par excellence.

There is no complete manuscript list for the anonymous collections, which form the majority of abbreviated legendaries. Albert Poncelet (1910) and Guy Philippart (1977) wrote surveys on the subject, with the addition of three manuscripts by François Dolbeau (1981). Nevertheless every new manuscript catalogue may add more unknown anonymous legendaries. For example, the recently published catalogue of the hagiographic manuscripts held by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana adds more manuscripts (Guglielmetti 2007). A comprehensive outline of the vernacular and Latin hagiographic sources, included in the anonymous legendaries, can be found in the reference book *Hagiographies*.

The innovation of abbreviating saints' lives in these collections did not mean that there was any novelty regarding the saints included in these collections, which were overwhelmingly ancient and traditional saints, and a sign of the stability of cultural traditions in medieval society.

Regarding general organization, the early collections follow the liturgical calendar (John of Mailly, Bartholomew of Trento, James of Varazze), while the later ones, following the general trend of legendaries, are alphabetical, as is the case of Juan Gil de Zamora's *Legenda sanctorum et festivitatum aliarum de quibus Ecclesia sollempnizat* (late 13th c.).

There are connections between abridged hagiography and the encyclopedic genre: Medieval hagiographers, including James of Varazze, used as a source the 900 lives included in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum* (first half of 13th c.).

## Internal structure of legendaries

Legendaries can be classified on the basis of their internal structure into:

- A. collective, based on the overall organization
- B. individual, based on the order of the singles lives into the *legendarium*

Regarding the whole organization (A) there are two categories and four sub-categories of legendaries:

- specialized, subdivided into:
  - local
  - categorical
- general, subdivided into:
  - systematic
  - atypical

Regarding individual organization (B) there are three categories:

- without order
- liturgical order
- no liturgical order, for example:
  - chronological
  - alphabetical
  - hierarchical

Dolbeau (1981) created the following table on the internal organization of legendaries. The columns indicate the overall organization and the rows the internal classification of each collection of saints' lives:

	Specialized Legendaries		General Legendaries	
	1	2	3	4
	Local	Categorical	Systematical	Atypical
<b>A Without order</b>				
<b>B Liturgical order</b>				
<b>C Not-liturgical order (hierarchical, alphabetical, chronological)</b>				

## A. Overall organization - a. Specialised legendaries

A specialised legendary is a collection of a number of saints' lives, which all share distinctive features.

These collections include

- local legendaries
- categorical legendaries

Local legendaries contain saints' lives based on their link to a specific community. This could be the same monastery, place, reliquary or religious order. These common features may be unclear if the basis for the collection is lost. For example, the order in legendaries composed according to the sequence of altars dedicated to each saint in a particular church might be hard to understand if that church no longer exists or if the dedication of altars for each saint has changed.

Categorical legendaries are based on a single category of saints: apostles, martyrs, confessors, women, popes, bishops, monks, friars and so on. Their structure is clearly recognizable and remains constant over time.

## A. Overall organization - b. General legendaries

General legendaries are collections of all kinds of saints. They include:

- atypical legendaries, with no distinction between the saints
- systematic legendaries, where the saints' lives are organized in a series of categorical legendaries

Systematic legendaries are based on hierarchy, where each virtue deserves an equal reward, so that martyrs have the highest level of sanctity, followed by the apostles, popes, confessors and so on.

## B. Internal organization

Regarding internal organization, this evolved from the hierarchical structure in the very early legendaries to later legendaries which reflected current religious sentiment. For example, saints' lives in alphabetical or chronological order are popular from the 13th century, while legendaries with or without liturgical order occur throughout the Middle Ages.

While liturgical legendaries could be used during the Divine Office and for services, non-liturgical legendaries, such as those in alphabetical or chronological order, reveal new uses for hagiography. In this case, the *legendarium* becomes a tool like encyclopedias and *exempla* collection.

	Specialized Legendaries		General Legendaries	
	1	2	3	4
	Local	Categorical	Systematical	Atypical
<b>A Without order</b>	Ms Laur. Plut. 20.6	Graz, UB 412	Ms Saint-Omer 715	Ms Reg. lat. 481
<b>B Liturgical order</b>	Bartholomew's <i>Liber epilorum</i>	Ms clm 3810	Bernard Gui's <i>Speculum</i>	<i>Liber de nataliciis</i>
<b>C Not-liturgical order (hierarchical, alphabetical, chronological)</b>	<i>Liber notitiae sanctorum Mediolani</i> (alphabetical)  Ms Laur. Plut. 18.21 (hierarchical)  Ambrogio Taegio's <i>De insigniis</i> (hierarchical)	Gerhard of Frachet's <i>Vitas fratrum</i>	Bernard of Brihuega's <i>Gesta</i>	Antonino Pierozzi's <i>Chronicon</i>

The chronological order of saints' lives in a legendary places hagiography as part of ecclesiastical history, first seen in the work of Bernard of Brihuega (d. 1284), canon and *magister* who wrote for King Alfonso X of Castile. In his *Gesta et passionis sanctorum*, the legendary is structured in chronological order, and is both systematic and hierarchical. It begins with the life of Jesus, followed by the apostles, martyrs, confessors, ending with the holy virgins. This structure shows continuity between Jesus and his imitators. Bernard's work can be situated in column 3C of the table.

Two centuries later the Florentine Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi (1389-1459) - a Dominican friar, disciple of John Dominici and a living example of Observant practice - wrote the *Chronicon*. In this text, he divided the history of the world into six eras, and placed the biographies of righteous men in each era. The hagiographic ideal was based on the founding fathers of monasticism, such as St. Benedict, re-founding fathers such as St. John Gualbert, the founders of the new orders such as St. Francis and St. Dominic. and by great prophets, like St Catherine of Siena and St Bridget of Sweden. Antonino's text can be placed in the 4C column.

Column 1C could contain the alphabetic and local *Liber notitiae sanctorum Mediolani* (14th c., in ms. Milan, Biblioteca Capitolare, II E 2 8), which collects lives of saints venerated in the Milanese diocese, and the Hieronymus of Raggiolo's hierarchical Legendarium in ms Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana Plut. 18.21 (second half of 15th c., dedicated to Lorenzo the Magnificent). This text contains the lives of some Vallumbrosan saints, starting John Gualbert, the founder of the Order and most important person for the author, and up to friars and hermits. After John Gualbert, the order starts with bishops and abbots (e.g. Atto of Pistoia) and ends with holy Vallumbrosan women (Verdiana, Humilitas and Berta).

Gerard of Frachet created a specialized and categorical legendarium: the *Vitas fratrum* (2C). This covered the first holy friars of the Dominican order and was in opposition to

Franciscan hagiography, focused around St. Francis. Gerard not only praised Dominic's sanctity, but also the sanctity of a group of early friars who had made the Dominican Order holy and renowned. Gerald thus created a collective hagiography based on a collective origin myth.

In 1A a local florentine *legendarium*, ms. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 20.6, abridges the lives of local saints used for preaching at the cathedral in Florence. Specialized categorical legendaries, such as ms Graz, Universitätsbibliothek, 412 (9th c.), present the lives of martyrs without a specific order. Also see the *passionale* in ms Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 3810 (10th c.), which is organised *per circulum anni* (in liturgical order), (column 2B).

An interesting example of general and atypical legendarium (4A) without a clear order of saints' lives is in ms Vatican, BAV, Reg. lat. 481. This collection includes the *Navigatio Brendani* (BHL 1437) and biographies of eastern saints, including Minias Florentinus (BHL 5965b), German bishops such as Godehardus, bishop of Hildesheim (BHL 3582, second life by Wolferius), Leodegarius, bishop of Autun (BHL 4852b, Life by Ursinus), Aldegundis abbot of Maubeuge (BHL 245), Iuliana v. m. Nicomediae (BHL 4523d), the Martyrs of Antinoi in Egypt (BHL 4529), Pachomius ab. Tabenna (BHL 6410, Life by Dionysius Exiguus), Symeon (monk in Mount Sinai, afterwards a recluse in Trier: BHL 7963, Life by Eberwin of Trier), and Mamertinus, abbot of Auxerre (BHL 5200).

Regarding legendaries by authors, these developed in the course of the medieval period into precisely ordered general collections. For example, Bernard Gui used a liturgical order for the saints' lives in his *Speculum*, arranged systematically (column 3B). Ambrogio Taegio's (end of 15th - start of 16th c.) *De insigniis* (ms Rome, Archivum generale Ordinis Praedicatorum, XIV.354 and XIV.3.55), a collection devoted to the holiness of preachers (column 1C), is organised hierarchically. The Dominican saints are grouped into four hagiographic groups: the first book is entirely devoted to the Virgin Mary, the patron of the order, the second to St. Dominic, the third covers the followers of St. Dominic in 8 *distinctiones*: early brothers (III.1), popes (III.2), martyrs (III.3), authors (III.4), saints (III.5-6), penitent women (mainly St. Catherine of Siena, III.7), and nuns (III.8). The fourth book is a long conclusion on the good name of the Dominicans. Taegio shapes Dominican history into a theological dimension, with a genealogical interpretation based on God's salvific plan, and on the tree of Jesse, a popular Dominican theme. As Taegio's legendarium is only on Dominican saints, it can be classified as "local" and placed in the 1C column.

Systematic legendaries were very widespread in northern France and in the valleys of the Moselle and Moselle between the 12th and 13th c. Generally they contain four types of saints: apostles, martyrs, confessors and holy women. An example of the many manuscripts that comprise this kind of legendarium, see column 3A: ms. Saint-Omer, Bibliothèque municipale, 715 (three books, 12th c.).

According to Dolbeau, the most common type of legendarium can be found in column 4B column, i. e. the general atypical form in liturgical order, such as the so-called Châalis legendary or the *Liber de nataliciis*, which is the most complete example of 12th c. Cistercian legendary.

Singles Lives in BHLms.

## GEOGRAPHY OF THE LARGEST COLLECTIONS

Some collections have a widespread geographical diffusion, due the large number of saints in each collection.

The *Magnum Legendarium Austriacum* (MLA) was created in an Austrian (possibly Styrian) monastery at the end of the 12th century. It contains more than 500 lives, in six volumes, and other copies were created in present-day Austria and Bavaria. So far 21 manuscripts from this collection have been identified (see the list of exemplars in Ó Riain 2015). Apart from the seven Melk manuscripts, no complete copies of the text survive. Descriptions of all manuscripts can be found at [Manuscripta.at](http://Manuscripta.at) and at [VISCOM](http://VISCOM).

In Germany, the *Legendarium Trevirensis* was written c. 1235 as a reworked version of the MLA. The text survives in mss Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 9741 and lat. 9742 (basic descriptions at the [BnF](http://BnF)), Trier, Stadtbibliothek, 1151 (four volumes), Trier, Bibliothek des Priesterseminars, 35 and 36.

In Belgium, the *Legendarium Flandrense* was composed at the beginning of the 13th century in Flanders.

In France, the *Liber de nataliciis*, in six volumes, is preserved in 14 manuscript collections (see Rochais 1975).

In Italy, by the 11th century:

- the legendary for the church of S. Pietro in Rome (Digital reproductions available online: Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, [Archivio del Capitolo di S. Pietro, A2, A4 and A5](#))
- the codex [Amiatinus 2](#) (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana)
- a legendary possible from Arezzo (Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, II.I.412)
- some Florentine legendaries in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana ([Aed. 135, 136, 137](#))

In Italy, by the 12th century:

- the Lucchese Legendaries of the 11th-12th c., the most important of which have 95 Lives: Lucca, Biblioteca Feliniana, codex F, codex P+ and codex D (13th c.). Descriptions can be found in [CODEX](#)
- the Florentine legendaries, [Aed. 132](#) and [Aed. 139](#) (12th c.)
- Legendary of Bovino (Foggia), 13th c., 240 lives, possibly in three volumes, two in Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, [XV.AA.14](#) and [XV.AA.15](#)
- Legendary of S. Maria in Trastevere in Rome, mss Vat. lat. 1191, 1193 and 1194 (12th-13th c.)

## MANUSCRIPTS AND ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Philippart's inventory of the manuscripts legendaries [Légendiers latins](#)

Bibliotheca hagiographica latina manuscripta [BHLms](#)

Medieval Tuscan Manuscripts [CODEX](#)

Manuscripts in Paris, [Bibliothèque Nationale de France](#) and [Gallica](#)

Manuscripts in French University and Research Libraries [Calames](#)

Manuscripts in German Libraries [Manuscripta mediaevalia](#)

Manuscripts in Austrian Libraries [Manuscripta](#)

Online Medieval Manuscript Guide held in Wallonia and Brussels [CICWEB](#)

Catalogue Archives and Manuscripts of the British Library in London [BLAM](#)

Digitized manuscripts from heritage libraries in Flanders [Flandrica.be](#)

Medieval manuscripts in Dutch Collections [MMDC](#)

Manuscripts in [National Library of Spain](#) (Madrid) [BNE](#)

Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland [e-codices](#)

Digital Library of written cultural heritage [Manuscriptorium](#)

Digitized manuscripts in [Vatican Library BAV](#)

Digitized manuscripts from the Plutei fund in [Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana](#) in Florence [Teca digitale](#)

Digitized manuscripts in [University Library Graz](#)

Digitized medieval manuscripts maps [DMMMaps](#)

Find manuscripts of the *Magnum Legendarium Austriacum* at [VISCOM](#)

Find manuscripts of the *Legenda aurea* in [MIRabile](#)

Find manuscripts of the *Liber epilogorum in gesta sanctorum* in [MIRabile](#)

Find manuscripts of the *Abbreuiatio in gestis sanctorum* in [MIRabile](#)

Find manuscripts of the *Legenda aurea* in [MIRabile](#)

Find manuscripts of the *Speculum historiale* in [MIRabile](#)

Find the manuscript of the *Legenda sanctorum* in [MIRabile](#)

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