

**THE DOROTHEA LEGEND: ITS
EARLIEST RECORDS, MIDDLE
ENGLISH VERSIONS, AND
INFLUENCE ON MASSINGER'S
"VIRGIN MARTYR". A DISSERTATION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649032082

The Dorothea Legend: Its Earliest Records, Middle English Versions, and Influence on Massinger's "Virgin Martyr". A Dissertation by Joseph Martin Peterson

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JOSEPH MARTIN PETERSON

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Chapter the First.

Introduction: Origins of the Saints' Lives in general.

As Günter says in the introductory chapter of his "Legenden-Studien", the legends of the saints are, *cum grano salis*, older than the saints themselves. Their prototypes originated in the era preceding Christian martyrdom. Many features of these stories are, for instance, variations of the miracles of the canonical and apocryphal books of the Bible. The literatures of the Orient, especially their supernatural and miraculous elements, have likewise contributed their quota to the lives of the saints. As the cult itself, the worship of saints, has been traced back in practically all its features to pre-Christian institutions and influences¹⁾, so are the marvellous stories found recorded in the martyrologies, without doubt in far the greater number of cases, traceable to sources anterior to the Christian era.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss the authenticity of the saints' lives, but it is, nevertheless, a question which every serious investigation of this kind gives rise to. It seems to lie in the very nature of such a study, to endeavor to come to some conclusion in regard to the origin of the person, whose life has been celebrated in the literatures of many nations and through many centuries of time. A conclusion of that kind, when based on a logical foundation, gives the whole investigation a more definite

¹⁾ Ernst Lucius, Die Anfänge des Hellenkults in der christlichen Kirche.

and finished appearance and renders it more satisfactory both to investigator and to reader.

That such a procedure, to search for an authentic basis of the life of some particular saint, may frequently lead to negative rather than to positive results, is almost self-evident, when the manner and time of production of the saints' lives are taken into account.

The historical sources of the lives of the saints were the calendars¹⁾. These were records which every church kept of its bishops and martyrs, written, as far as the great mass of the early martyrs is concerned, in the briefest form possible: the bare name of the martyr and, at the most, the date and place of suffering²⁾. When and where these calendars originated is difficult to determine, as additions were made from time to time³⁾. The earliest calendars extant are from the fourth century⁴⁾, and it is doubtful whether any of these contain the genuine lists of the pre-Diocletian age, as it may be assumed that all these records, together with other matter of a like nature belonging to the church, were destroyed under the devastating fury of the tenth persecution⁵⁾.

These circumstances make the authentic facts known of the martyrs, who suffered during the great persecutions, very uncertain. And these conditions were not improved in the post-Constantine age, when the question of authenticity seems to have been lost sight of in the efforts then put forth by every church to multiply at all hazards the number of martyrs⁶⁾. Numerous names were then added to the list of martyrs, the origin of which would be

1) Smith and Cheetham, *Christian Antiquities*. Art. Calendar.

2) Achelis, *Die Martyrologien*, pp. 3-4.

3) Smith and Cheetham, *Christ. Antiq.*, *ibid.*

4) *Ibid.*

5) *Ibid.*

6) Achelis, *Die Martyrol.*, p. 74.

impossible to account for¹⁾. Former members of the church and other persons were given a place among the sufferers²⁾. Many names owe their origin to a misunderstanding due to a clerical error, to an interpolation, or otherwise³⁾, where names of cities and places, of heathen heroes, were transformed into names of Christian martyrs⁴⁾.

In view of these facts, how was it possible for such a prolific literature to spring up in all languages of Christendom, containing such detailed accounts of the lives of the saints? Achelis answers this question in his excellent treatise on the history of the martyrologies, when he says: "Betrieb-same Kleriker hatten Romane ersonnen, in denen die bekannten Namen in antiker Staffage fungieren als Virtuosen der Tugenden, auf die die Kirche des Mittelalters am meisten Wert legte⁵⁾."

It would, however, be a mistake to presume that these romantic tales were expanded to their present extent within a short period of time. Lucius, in his scholarly work on the origin of saint worship in the Christian church, compares the development of the legends of the saints to the development of the heroic legends. The heroic legend flourishes best in times of peace after great conflicts, when primitive peoples settle down to the forming of a nation. The national idea is nourished by the contemplation of the deeds of the past, and these easily become the object of popular thought and comment. Certain specific heroes become the centre around which all gravitate. Their exploits form the theme for the comments of the masses. Kindred elements are constantly being added, and through the combination and intermingling of all the different ele-

¹⁾ Lucius, *Anfänge des Heiligenkults*, p. 104.

²⁾ Id., p. 139.

³⁾ Achelis, *Die Martyrol.*, p. 244.

⁴⁾ Günter, *Legenden-Studien*, p. 70.

⁵⁾ *Die Martyrol.*, p. 4.

ments a chaotic whole is produced, which is finally reduced to order and a fixed form by the professional singer¹⁾.

In very much the same way did the legends of the saints develop. The age of the great persecutions was the period of conflict. Under Constantine that period came to an end. The church had apparently subdued heathendom, and this victory was especially attributed to those who had laid down their lives for their faith. In the age of peace which followed that of conflict, the names of the brave men and women who had especially distinguished themselves became known wherever the church had succeeded in planting its standard. Their fortitude, defense of the faith, and triumphant death, were told and retold by thousands. Popular elements of a kindred nature, colored more or less by the fancy of the narrator, were constantly being added, until a skilled writer, selecting the more prominent and important features, reduced the whole mass to a fixed form.

The custom, once introduced, spread with marvellous energy and rapidity. Every church desired the honor of having had its heroes. The number of recorded sufferers was however limited. A dearth of names arose, and it was in order to supply this want that methods like those referred to above were employed. A storehouse having thus been found, offering an unlimited supply, the number of martyrs increased by hundreds and thousands. These new names were also provided with a legend by being fitted into a general frame-work which by this time had become fixed in the history of martyrdom²⁾.

In this manner the authentic facts, handed down to posterity by the church of the persecutions, were distorted and to such an extent rendered unrecognizable that truth and fiction can never be fully separated, where the original sources are wanting to guide the investigator.

¹⁾ Lucius, *Anfänge des Heiligenkults*, pp. 84—85.

²⁾ *Id.*, p. 81. Cf. also Günter, *Legenden-Studien*, p. 90.

This fact is in our time well established by numerous investigations. But it is even plausible that the legends were not taken to be gospel truth in the age in which they were produced, but rather a form of literature written for entertainment¹⁾. If nuns and aspiring clerics were assigned the task of writing, or of recasting, certain saints' lives as a test in prose or metrical composition, it would seem to indicate that the question of form was of greater importance than the presentation of historical facts²⁾.

It now remains to refer briefly to the time when the legends were written. This is a question which can be answered only in a general way. It would in most cases be futile to attempt to date an individual life. New saints have been created throughout the entire Middle Ages and are still being created. But is it not possible to fix a date before which the legends cannot have been written? One of the most prominent features of practically all legends is the element of the miraculous. Now, Günter³⁾ claims that this element in the legends does not go back beyond the fifth century. Lucius⁴⁾ is more conservative in his opinion of this matter, saying that the miraculous element is sporadic in the early legends, but so much the more frequent in the post-Constantine age. If we strike a medium between these two views, we may safely say that the material of miracles was in full swing by the middle of the fourth century. Hence, from that time on is the era of the saints' legends.

With this brief general sketch of the origin and development of the saints' legends, we will close the present chapter and pass on to discuss the legend of St. Dorothea.

¹⁾ Günter, *Legenden-Studien*, p. 77.

²⁾ *Ibid.*

³⁾ *Legenden-Studien*, p. 64.

⁴⁾ *Anfänge des Heiligenkults*, p. 78.