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Masculinity and monasticism: an exploration of the ways in which traditional hegemonic masculinity was reconciled with the challenges of monasticism

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The Late Antique and early medieval periods saw the growth of monastic communities in the West, as ideas about asceticism and cenobitic monasticism spread from Egypt. At the same time, a strict system of hierarchical gender identity operated in the Roman Empire, in which masculinity, and in particular, elite masculinity, was dominant. This article will explore the ways in which monasticism initially provided a threat to the hegemonic masculinity of its day before considering how it adapted, particularly considering differences in dress, labour and the public voice. It will conclude that through these adaptations, the two concepts were largely reconciled, allowing those who identified into the masculine elite to adopt monastic lifestyles with enthusiasm, eventually becoming dominant in monastic communities at the expense of women and non-elite men.

When monasticism first began to transition to the West, it was, perhaps surprisingly, adopted with great enthusiasm by a number of aristocratic Roman women, such as Paula and Melania.[1] Their male counterparts were, however, slower to adopt this new lifestyle. This may be because monasticism's model of manliness conflicted with traditional Roman masculinity, making monastic life unpopular amongst men who were unwilling to give up not only their social positions and freedoms but also a key part of their identity. For women, the dynamics were different; their limited power in the secular world meant that adopting a monastic or ascetic lifestyle was, potentially, a means to self-empowerment. Women could reduce their subjugation under men, whether as

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[1] Paula and Melania were two of the earliest examples of aristocratic women who adopted an ascetic lifestyle. Paula is known for her involvement with the theologian Jerome, with whom she settled in Bethlehem after some scandal involving the death of her daughter. Melania the Elder was, like Paula, a young widow and early adopter of the ascetic life; unlike Paula, she did not gain Jerome's favour due to her views on the Origen controversy. Both women are notable as they were from very wealthy families but nevertheless adopted a lifestyle based on the denial of earthly pleasures.

wife, daughter or mother. Indeed, Lina Ecktenstein, writing in the late nineteenth century, drew a parallel between her contemporaries fighting in the suffrage movement and women in the late Antique and early medieval periods who adopted the monastic life. Ecktenstein wrote: 'the woman of today, who realises that the home circle as at present constituted affords insufficient scope for her energies, had a precursor, in the nun who sought a field of activity in the convent.'[2] In contrast, elite men in the secular world did not face such constraints on their power and self-expression. Adopting a monastic life, therefore, involved markedly different motivations for men; this analysis will observe the consequences involved in adopting the monastic lifestyle and how such a shift could be reconciled with their sense of male identity.

Jenny Moore states 'that gender roles and relationships developed through time, varied across regions, and were determined by aspects of social status and position in the life cycle. We should think in terms not of a single universal gender system but of a multiple gender system'.'[3] For example, a Roman aristocratic male in the fourth century would have considered himself radically different from an Egyptian male peasant or woman of a similar background. Roberta Gilchrist argues that gender is a 'socially created and historically specific' concept, which intersects with class to form hierarchical social structures. [4] Elite Roman masculinity, then, was a distinct form of masculinity, applied to the upper classes of late Antique Roman society; it can be defined as much by what it was not as by what it was.

The Latin word for manliness is *virtus*, which has as its root 'vir', meaning man. *Virtus* means far more than simply one's gender identification as male, rather it is associated with the ideal conduct of a man.[5] *Virtus* was an ancient classicising value which allowed Rome to be what it was; in a speech by Cicero in 43BC, he stated 'with this *virtus* your ancestors conquered all Italy first, then razed

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[2]L. Ecktenstein, *Woman Under Monasticism: chapters on saint-lore and convent life between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500,* (Cambridge, 1896), ix.

[3] J. Moore, ''Death Makes the Man'? Burial Rite and the Construction of Masculinities in the Early Middle Ages', in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1998), 37.

[4] R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: the Archaeology of Religious Women* (London, 1994), 1.

[5] M. *McDonnell*, *Roman Manliness*: *Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge, 2006), 2.

Carthage, overthrew Numantia, brought the most powerful kings and the most warlike peoples under the sway of this empire'.[6] Slaves and women are not associated with *virtus*; rather, it signifies a hegemonic masculinity that applied only to elite and powerful men.[7] Hegemonic masculinity is formed and challenged by the Other, that is, those who it marginalises and excludes; Julia Smith includes 'barbarians, elite women, eunuchs, slaves or political opponents' as examples of those excluded by hegemonic masculinity; nevertheless, these groups also compete with it and its self-proclaimed place in the hierarchy.[8] Monasticism is one such challenge to these ideas.

To identify the challenges posed by monasticism to the identity of elite men in late Antiquity, therefore, requires us to identify certain characteristics of elite Roman masculinity. These can be examined to give us some idea of how 'maleness', the state of being identified as a man, was perceived and why monasticism may have posed a threat. It is through power relations that elite masculinity was structured, and these power relations are manifest in a number of ways: dress, sexual relationships, and the possession of a public voice amongst others. For each of these areas, monasticism expected a standard which was markedly different to that experienced in the elite, secular sphere.

Dress, the first of these manifestations, is a difficult area to examine. Mary Harlow's study considers the problems involved in assembling textile remnants: much of the material is no longer available and so we are left to reconstruct dress from literary and artistic sources.[9] Nevertheless, dress is an important marker to study, as through people's attire we may observe tangible processes of othering, processes which also serve to define elite masculinity. The Romans are referred to in sources as the *gens togati;* those who wear togas, while non-Romans are the *pallati*; those who wear the Greek-associated *pallium*. Barbarians were known as *bracati*, or trouser-wearers. The term *a toga ad pallium* was used to mean the

[6] Ibid., 3.

[7] Ibid., 167.

[8] J.M.H. Smith 'Introduction: Gendering the Early Medieval World', in *Gender in the Early Medieval World,* ed. L. Brubaker and J M H Smith (Cambridge, 2006), 19.

[9] M. Harlow, 'Clothes maketh the man: power dressing and elite masculinity in the later Roman world' in *Gender in the Early Medieval World,* ed. L. Brubaker and J.M.H Smith (Cambridge, 2006), 45.

transition from a higher social position to a lower one.[10] Such terminology shows the importance of dress in the aristocratic Roman world. One's social and ethnic identity is inextricably linked to their clothing and visual presentation. These ideas were also reflected in law, for example, the prescriptions in *Justinian's Digest* meant that 'to dress inappropriately would cause censure.'[11] Those who did not dress according to these prescribed standards 'cast doubt upon their manliness in general' and were considered 'inferior and feminised.'[12] That is, to dress in a way other than that prescribed by society at large had legal and social consequences; conformity to the norm was key if one wanted to maintain his status.

For monks, however, dress served a far more practical purpose. It did not confer status; rather, it was intended to serve 'as a prophylactic against effeminate oozings and troublesome erections.'[13] Monks could be identified by their dress in the same way as elite Roman men were by theirs, but the purpose behind it was different: one was identified as a monk, a member of a particular order or community, not as a Roman or a member of the elite. Henrietta Leyser argues that the *Rule of St. Benedict* was well suited to the 'systematic obliteration of all class distinctions within the monastery.'[14] All monks dressed uniformly, and as monks came from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, this meant that when abandoning the Roman style of dress and adopting the monastic one, one abandoned too the visual markers of status and, in effect, a component of their identity. While the removal of distinction based on class may have attracted men from the lower echelons of society, the nobility were unlikely to be attracted to a lifestyle which involved rescinding their superiority, and risking their masculinity.

By virtue of being male, Roman aristocratic men had the right to a public voice, giving them a platform which allowed for the exercise of power and masculinity. This right to employ one's public voice in certain spaces, for example, the temple, the forum and law courts, is described by Lynda Coon as 'a marker both of the

[10] Ibid., 47.
[11] Ibid., 48.
[12] Ibid., 44.
[13] L. Coon, 'Gender and the Body' in eds. T.F.X Noble and J.M.H Smith, *Cambridge History of Christianity III: Early Medieval Christianities c 600-c1100* (Cambridge, 2008), 448.
[14] H. Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England, 450-1500* (London, 1996), 26.

masculinity of the speaker and his political authority.'[15] Masculinity and political authority go hand in hand, at least when considering elite men. The denial of a public voice to women, children and slaves showed their status as supposedly inferior beings. By removing the public voice, one removes their access to political authority and representation. Thus, by speaking in public forums, and accessing political authority, men were able to demonstrate that they were indeed men, and belonged to that small but powerful subset of society: the masculine elite.

Sexual activity was another mark of elite Roman masculinity. Due to low life expectancy among the general population (only four in every 100 men lived beyond the age of fifty), reproduction was encouraged through a combination of social pressure and imperial legislation.[16] While bachelors did exist in aristocratic circles, they were rebuked by emperors and encouraged to marry, partly in order to keep demographics stable.[17] Sexual activity was a way of proving a man's virility, of ensuring the continuation of his family line and of demonstrating power. Caroline Vout argues that 'if sex is *imperium*, then power… is penetration.'[18] Men were seen as sexual agents, as penetrators, and as performers, whereas women were sexual receivers, taking a passive role which denied them agency. If engagement in sexual activity can be seen as a display of male power and dominance, then having such activity forcibly denied to one (or being expected to deny it to oneself) would sit uneasily with an elite Roman man.

The Vestal Virgins were committed to sanctity, and so the idea of religious chastity was not unknown in Rome; however, such a commitment was specifically designated as a role for women. Mary Beard argues that the Vestal Virgins are painted very much as women, with feminine language; they are variously conceptualised as wives or mothers , just as nuns in Christian thinking are seen as the 'Bride of Christ' or referred to as 'Mother'. [19] In Christian monasticism, however, chastity was expected of men as well as women. *The Rule of Augustine*, a late fourth century text, states that 'it is wrong, however, to desire women or to

[15] Coon, 'Gender and the Body', 434.

[16] P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in early Christianity (*New York, 1988), 6.

[17] Ibid., 7.

[18] C. Vout, *Power and Eroticism in Imperial Rome* (New York, 2007), 19.

[19] M. Beard, 'The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins' (1980) 70 *The Journal of Roman Studies.*

wish them to desire you.'[20] Therein, it was not only the act of copulation which was forbidden, but also the desire for it. This contrasts starkly to the normative Roman tradition, which encouraged the pursuit of sexual activity, albeit within certain confines, as a mark of virility. The ascetic and exegetist Jerome (347–420 CE) criticised Roman men for their sexual behaviour, saying that 'among the Romans, men's chastity goes unchecked, seduction and adultery are condemned, but free permission is given to lust to range the brothels and to have slave girls.'[21] He paints a picture of Roman masculinity as synonymous with sexual licentiousness, though this must be interpreted with care given that his perspective is somewhat distorted by his belief that all sexual activity is destructive.

Elite Roman masculinity was, therefore, concerned with demarcating oneself out as above the rest of society, as evidenced through dress and the utilisation of a public voice. It involved adopting a strict hierarchical and determinist viewpoint, in which elite men sit at the top and other groups are portrayed as naturally inferior. Peter Brown argues that 'in the second-century AD, a young man of the privileged classes of the Roman Empire grew up looking at the world through a prism of unchallenged dominance. Women, slaves and barbarians were unalterably different from him and inferior to him.'[22] As such, conceptions of masculinity were linked to the biological determinist view that elite men were naturally superior to othered groups. Roman masculinity, in particular, relied on the ability to exercise the power gained as a result of this superiority and the display of this power through dress and other means.

Differentiating oneself from the Other was necessary in order to maintain one's social and economic status. Elizabeth Schlüsser Fiorenza argues that a particularly Roman misogyny arose as a result of men 'whose psychic and economic reality were heavily determined by daily competition, and who therefore sought to maximise the 'natural' difference between women and men in order not to be

[20] G. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford, 1988), 89.

[21] M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2001), 164.

[22] Brown, *The Body and Society,* 9.

replaced by women.'[23] If men were not seen as (and believed themselves to be) recognisably and naturally different from women, they risked losing their basis for their political, social and economic power.

If elite Roman masculinity is concerned with inherent superiority, displayed through the othering of those who do not or cannot display various markers of maleness, it is clear why the elite Roman male might have rejected monasticism as a structural threat to familiar masculinity. The monastic lifestyle conflicted in a number of ways with the conception of elite Roman masculinity, as this analysis has intimated. Monasticism provided an alternative to traditional hegemonic definitions of masculinity. Aaron Raverty suggests that those who adopted a monastic lifestyle were 'susceptible to gender-variant assignment;' that is, monks were a separate class of man and by adopting a monastic lifestyle, they relinquished their masculinity.[24]

As well as their renunciation of sexual activity and different style of dress, monks had to work, and by doing this, any privilege they once had due to being aristocratic and male was gone. St. Anthony's ascetic quest has been described as 'self-imposed annihilation of [his] social status'[25] This example is one which many elite Roman men were unwilling to follow. Some monastic work included stereotypically female activities, which Raverty calls 'gender role mixing'. [26] Examples of monks taking on these characteristics and roles more typically associated with women can be found in the *Rule of St Benedict.* St. Benedict writes about the need for monks to exercise 'gentleness'[27] and to 'love the young.'[28] Beyond these traditionally feminine roles, monks were also called upon to perform manual labour, meaning that they had to take on the role of another othered group in society: the peasantry. For aristocratic men, this would be antithetical to their carefully constructed superiority. Manual labour removes the individual

[23] H. Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, 1991), 76.

[24] A. Raverty, 'Are we monks or are we men? The monastic gender model according to the Rule of St Benedict' (2006) 18 *Journal of Men's Studies,* 269.

[25] Brown, *The Body and Society,* 214.

[26] Raverty, 'Are we monks or are we men?', 273.

[27] St. Benedict, *Rule of St Benedict in English*, trans. Timothy Fry (Minnesota, 1982), 92.

[28] Ibid, 29.

from their lofty public sphere as orators and forces them to work the land alongside those of mixed social backgrounds.

Not only could non-elite men participate in monasticism or the ascetic life in the same way as their elite counterparts, but so too could women. Many of the great early ascetics were female, such as Paula and Melania (see n.1). Brown argues that 'women and the uneducated could achieve reputations for sexual abstinence as stunning as those achieved by any educated male.'[29] Women were able to exercise certain levels of power in monastic communities, as abbesses of double houses in particular. An important example of female monastic achievement can be found in Hild, the leader of a double house at Whitby in the seventh century. It was at this site that the synod which decided whether the English church would follow the Roman or Celtic tradition of dating Easter occurred; a pivotal event in the development of the English church.[30] Within monastic institutions, women and those of low birth could excel, as the traditional, elitist conception of masculinity was relegated to a position of less importance.[31] Those who keenly identified their worth with hegemonic masculinity would find the monastic alternative difficult to grasp and unappealing.

There were other, more practical, reasons for aristocratic Romans' uneasy feelings towards monasticism. Examples of formerly great patrimonies giving up all their wealth, as a result of decisions to adopt ascetic lifestyles, made monasticism seem like a huge danger to observing families. In one instance, Melania the Elder gave away the entirety of her wealth before becoming an ascetic.[32] In a more extreme case, Blesilla, the daughter of Paula, arguably adopted such an extreme ascetic lifestyle under the tutelage of Jerome that she died. Monasticism did not only pose

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[29] Brown, *The Body and Society,* 61.

[30] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Bertram Colgrave (New York, 2008), 154.

[31] This was not the case for the entirety of the medieval period; as segregation along gender lines in monasteries became more common (particularly due to the influence of Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury from 668) women found their role being diminished, but certainly in the early period many of the key figures, both in England and on the continent, were women.

[32] M. Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: from the Desert Fathers to the early Middle Ages*, (Oxford, 2000), 61.

a threat to elite Roman males' sense of self and masculinity, it was also a threat to the wealth, and even health, of the individual. Upon commencing an ascetic lifestyle, they would have to rescind any claim to family wealth and inheritance under monastic rules regarding private ownership.[33]

Despite the numerous challenges that monasticism posed to hegemonic masculinity, evidence shows that there was an increasing adoption of the movement amongst elite Roman men and, consequently, an increasing renouncement of Rome's masculine hierarchy. Raverty notes that 'by the beginning of the fifth-century, monasticism had become the new Christian masculine ideal.'[34] This can be seen by the foundation of monasteries by Roman aristocrats, for example, Lérins was founded by the Gallo-Roman nobleman Honoratus.[35] Many of the monks at Lérins in the early fifth-century went on to become bishops; a sign of the ever closer ties between monastic culture and episcopal power. Domination of the episcopate aided the aristocracy's monastic venture; they transposed their power and voice from the secular to the religious realm by becoming bishops. This shift was further condoned by the Council of Chalcedon which declared all monasteries to be subject to authority of the bishop of their diocese.[36] Evidence of monastic uptake among the male aristocracy can also be seen at Martin of Tours' monastery; although he was not from the aristocracy, his charismatic style of leadership drew many aristocratic monks to Marmoutiers.[37]

It is clear that something changed in monastic life in order to make it attractive, when it had once been the antithesis of masculinity. This occurred, in part, through the incorporation of secular elite Roman masculine elements into monastic culture. This allowed monks to retain their status as men, albeit 'men with a somewhat restructured masculine gender status that would have stretched the boundaries of the normative masculinity of his day.'[38]

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[33] Raverty, 'Are we monks or are we men?', 276.
[34] Ibid, 269.
[35] Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 82.
[36] Ibid, 96.
[37] Ibid, 61.
[38] Raverty, 'Are we monks or are we men?', 278.

The most important element which reconciled elite Roman masculinity with monasticism is the idea of self-control. This was a 'masculinising and classicising value.'[39] It was seen as a male virtue, as shown in numerous writings; for example, the testimony of Galen promotes the stereotype that while women were quick to anger, men were able to control their tempers. Galen stated that his father had been 'the most just, the most devoted and the kindest of men. My mother, however, was so very prone to anger that sometimes she bit her handmaids.'[40] An extract from a third-century Latin school exercise book also demonstrates the importance of self-control as a masculine trait; it describes the speech of a father to his misbehaving son, stating 'one who gives counsel to others must know how to rule himself.'[41]

Self-control in the field of sexual activity was also important. Though a full family life - and by extension, sexual intercourse - was encouraged for men, and Vout's thesis that power is penetration must be considered, over-indulgence in such things was seen as dangerous. Hypersexuality was disapproved of and seen as a feminine vice. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius wrote that 'sins of desire, in which pleasure predominates, indicate a more self-indulgent and womanish disposition.'[42] For an aristocratic Roman male, to be able to control one's desires and tempers was important. The same applies to overindulgence in food; while rich food was a mark of wealth and therefore a mark of eliteness, controlling one's intake demonstrated core masculine virtues. Likewise, while sexual activity was important in displaying virility and manliness, to allow desire to overpower oneself was seen as feminine and weak. Self-control is also a core tenet of monasticism, and it was increasingly stressed as monastic leaders and writers tried to encourage the male elite to join their crusade.

As with self-control, discipline and hierarchy were very important to elite Roman society, and these were taken and adapted by the writers of monastic rules. This is particularly true of the *Rule of St Benedict*, written in the sixth-century. Coon states that 'the Benedictine hierarchy parallels the social pyramid' of the classical

[39] Coon, 'Gender and the Body', 440.
[40] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 12.
[41] Ibid., 22.
[42] Ibid., 95.

Roman world.[43] Boys under the age of 15, who were not yet 'men', were at the bottom of this hierarchy, just as 'not-men' (whether women, slaves or those men who did not fit into hegemonic concepts of masculinity) were at the bottom of the secular order.[44] *Regulations for a Monastery* outlines ideas of regiment and obedience: 'all are to obey with fidelity, honour their father after God, defer to their superior in a manner worthy of holy men.'[45] These are ideas which elite Roman men would have been familiar with, as they were also important in secular society. The military language throughout the *Rule of St Benedict* would also have enticed such men. Raverty states that the 'military ethos' pervading the work is an 'emulation of the martial role' and that elements of a 'masculine soldier gender role', such as the insistence on rank, are present throughout the *Rule of St Benedict*.[46] While the creators of the monastic rules did not copy the Roman hierarchical model in its entirety, they did draw on it to create parallels within their religious orders.

As well as incorporating elements of elite masculinity into monasticism, concessions were made for aristocratic men. The *Regulations for a Monastery* allowed monks to consume wine at weekends, relaxing the strictness of the laws.[47] In Augustine's *Praeceptum*, the idea is elucidated that those who 'come to the monastery from a more comfortable manner of life' should be allowed some extra comforts due to having 'altered their lifestyle in order to embrace the present one' more than brothers from poorer backgrounds.[48] This was not the case at all monasteries and in all periods. Seventh century Whitby, for example, is recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* as being far more reminiscent of the early church: 'no one was rich, no one was in need, for they had all things in common and none had any private property'.[49] Shifts away from egalitarianism, such as those made by Augustine, may have encouraged those from elite backgrounds to join monasteries, partly by allowing greater material comfort than they otherwise

[43] Ibid., 441.
[44] Ibid., 442.
[45] Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule*, 77.
[46] Raverty, 'Are we monks or are we men?', 281.
[47] Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule*, 77.
[48] Ibid., 87.
[49] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 211.

would have been allowed, but also because it separated them, at least in part, from those of less well-off backgrounds.

Manual work was another issue that discouraged aristocrats from becoming monks. Many monasteries allowed monks to abstain from manual or agricultural work, for example, 'the monks of basilical monasteries in Italy and Gaul did not live the type of common life practised in the stricter monasteries.'[50] They were supported by the diocese financially and so did not have to perform manual work. This was more attractive to aristocrats. At Marmoutiers, ascetic life was easier than elsewhere as manual labour was not expected of all monks.[51] Former peasants performed manual labour, whilst aristocratic monks copied manuscripts. These concessions aided the transition of monasticism from something that primarily attracted elite women to a place in which men could, and did, exercise their own power in a realm alternative to the secular.

Monasticism competed with an established tradition of elite Roman masculinity. However, concessions made by both ideological systems allowed these elites to find their own place within the ascetic society of the monastery. Eventually, these men came to dominate, synthesising a new, alternative masculine identity. This new masculinity provided the opportunity for elite men to expand their power into the religious world, while retaining certain aspects of how their secular identity was structured. Monasticism, which once risked undermining the substantive tradition of male identity, offered a new site and form from which to express that identity. Through exercising self-control, bound within an increasingly strict system of hierarchy and discipline, men could indeed become monks, without renouncing their masculine identity.

[50] Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 93.
[51] Ibid., 63.

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