Miraculis Virgo: The Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève and the Cult of Geneviève in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

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Introduction

During his abbacy at Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, Étienne de Tournai (1176–1192) delivered a sermon on the occasion of Geneviève's feast day to a body of scholars and canons. He impressed the distinctiveness of their gathering upon his listeners: "On this day, the presence of the body of our virgin makes the joy of our city both ordinary and remarkable, for though her memory is present in other places during the benediction, here her presence resides in passion and gladness; in other places her feast day is celebrated annually, but here it is observed daily and without end."1 This statement provides insight into the development of Geneviève's cult during the High Middle Ages. A female saint who died at the close of the fifth century, Geneviève became famous for saving Paris from the Huns in 451.2 Her postmortem cult flourished in the ninth century in intellectual centers in the orbit of the Carolingian

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1 “Commune gaudium civitatis singulare facit nobis hodie virginis nostrae praeuentia corporalis; nam etsi apud alios membra eius in benedictione est, apud nos praeuentia eius est in saevitia et iucunditate, apud alios est festivitas annua, apud nos continua et quotidianae.” Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève, Paris [hereafter BSG], ms. 239, 12. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Latin are my own.

court and among Parisian clerics who claimed that her relics had saved their city again during the Norman siege of 885. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, the liturgy of religious houses both within and beyond Paris honored Geneviève as one of the wise virgins from the parable of Matthew 25. By the twelfth century, readings for Geneviève's feast day were entered into liturgical books from Albi, Angers, Cambrai, Lyon, Noyon, Tours, Arezzo, Ivrea, Lucques, Verceil, Fulda, Cornwall, and Winchcombe. Nevertheless, behind this vast expansion of Geneviève's cult was the fact that she was, fundamentally, a Parisian. Her rise paralleled that of Paris as one of the most prominent political, intellectual, and religious centers in the Latin West. Geneviève's reputation as the protector of this great city, the "most universal and lofty city in the Frankish kingdom," contributed to her notoriety across Latin Christendom.

This success story should give the historian pause, however, for Geneviève's eventual position as the "patroness of Paris" was far from a foregone conclusion even after the miracles she reportedly worked on behalf of the city. In Paris, Geneviève's cult was only distinguishable from the late ninth through the early twelfth centuries in the liturgy, and her relics were inaccessible to all but the small community of canons within her

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3 Latin editions of the Miracula Sanctae Genovefae post mortem can be found in Acta Sanctorum, 3 January:1:147–51; and L. M. B. Saintyves, Vie de Sainte Geneviève: Patrone de Paris et du royaume de France. Suivi de l’histoire de l’abbaye, de l’église et des reliques de la sainte, le tout accompagnée de notices, de notes historiques et critiques et de pièces justificatives (Paris, 1846), cxiii–cxxvii. There are many factors in the ninth-century vitae and miracula to suggest this Carolingian connection, the foremost being the manuscript tradition itself. An account of the siege of 885/86 and Geneviève's accompanying miracle is provided by Abbon, Le siège de Paris par les Normands, ed. Henri Waquet (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1942).


5 Amiet, Culte liturgique, 119–23.

abbey's walls. During the eleventh century, however, King Robert the Pious placed the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève under royal protection. Thereafter, the Capetian family endowed the community with several large properties, making it one of the (if not the) dominant landholders on the Left Bank. In 1107, Pope Pascal II granted the abbey exemption from episcopal oversight, making the abbot of Sainte-Geneviève "virtually a second bishop of Paris" by ensuring that the abbey had unrestricted jurisdiction over its properties and parishes.

This entitlement to *nullo mediante* (freedom from episcopal interference) allowed the abbots to collect all taxes within their domain directly and to perform rites traditionally performed by the bishop and cathedral canons in the city, including delivering extreme unction and recognizing the legitimate ties of marriage. The exemption from episcopal jurisdiction also allowed the abbey to elect and appoint critical members of its own leadership, including abbots, deacons, and parish priests. From the early twelfth century until 1231, the abbots also were allowed to autonomously issue the *licentia docendi* (license to teach) to scholars studying on the Left Bank under such prominent masters as Peter Abelard, Robert of Melun, Guilbert of Poitiers, Peter Helias, and John of Salisbury; many of these

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10 In 1035, Henry I renewed this privilege, a liberty confirmed by Louis VI in 1118 and by Louis VII in 1161. Ibid., 18–20.
students and masters later became the abbey's most wealthy and devoted benefactors. By the thirteenth century, the abbots of Saint-Geneviève were such an important political and religious presence in the city that they were appointed by the royal family to invest new bishops of Paris with the insignia of their office and to withhold the episcopal miter and cross from elected bishops who refused to vow publicly to respect the abbey's independence.

Ultimately, this accumulated autonomy and wealth led the community of Sainte-Geneviève into a prolonged and public conflict with the bishops of Paris. This conflict with the cathedral and how the canons of the abbey leveraged Geneviève's relics and protection during public rituals permitted the community to make bolder claims regarding the saint's relevance to the city as a whole. The miracula that describe these public demonstrations of Geneviève's special concern for Paris testify to the important role played by hagiography in the negotiation of power between the bishops of Paris and the canons of Sainte-Geneviève as well as in urban power struggles more generally. The miracula and the liturgical reminiscences that invoked their most poignant episodes created a new public image for the saint and defined her role as the "protectress of Paris," a reputation that increased her fame throughout Christendom.

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Public Processions: The Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève and the Bishop of Paris in Conflict

Moshe Sluhovsky and François Dolbeau have drawn attention to the role of public invocations and miracle tales in the abbey of Saint-Geneviève's attempts to remain free from episcopal visitation and jurisdiction.\(^{12}\) They pay particular attention to the so-called "miracle of the burning sickness" in 1129, and they note the polemical spirit of the miracula describing it (see below). Neither analyzes many of the tale's most striking assertions, however, and we have yet to grasp the full consequences of this invocation for the increasing devotion to Geneviève and the emerging identity of her abbey. Further examination of the miracle of 1129 and the hagiographical accounts describing it reveal not only a defense of the abbey's independence, but a negotiation of rights, privileges, and powers between bishop Étienne de Senlis, King Louis VI, and the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève. The abbey's account of the miracle contains a series of fabrications and exaggerations intended to strengthen the community's alliance with the king of France, to place the abbey above and outside of the cathedral's authority, and to challenge the power that the bishops of Paris had gained as stewards of the cult of the Virgin Mary. In a time of increased devotion to the virgin mother of Christ, the canons argued that, though Mary was \textit{notre dame} in a universal sense, Geneviève was Paris' true lady and mother. The miracle tale and the procession it described also set in motion a pattern of public ritual that allowed the canons of Sainte-Geneviève to legitimize their privileged position in Paris through constant public enactment.

As mentioned previously, the decision of Pope Pascal II to exempt the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève from episcopal oversight led to numerous conflicts between the cathedral and the

community over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth
centuries.\footnote{Sluhovsky, \textit{Patroness}, 20.} After his investiture in 1124, Bishop Étienne de Senlis grew increasingly displeased over the canons' ability to perform the sacraments of marriage and extreme unction within their parishes. In an effort to coerce the abbey into giving up its privileges, he placed the entire Mont-Sainte-Geneviève under interdict. In 1202, Bishop Eudes de Sully, a former abbot of Sainte-Geneviève, threatened to repeat this action when the canons forced him into signing an acknowledgement of their independence as he sat down to table during a celebratory feast.\footnote{Ibid., 21; Adrien Friedmann, "Notre-Dame et les paroisses de Paris au XIIIe siècle," in \textit{Huitième centenaire de Notre-Dame de Paris: recueil des travaux sur l'histoire de la cathédrale et de l'église de Paris} (Paris: Libraire Philosophique J. Vrin, 1967), 53–59.}

A good many of these conflicts came to an end through papal intervention, but for centuries the canons of the abbey were compelled to fend off episcopal threats to their autonomy.

The possession of Geneviève's relics was the most important advantage that the canons of the abbey leveraged in this quarrel. The body of the saint formed the center of the community's liturgical life, and promises of her protection were exchanged for the wealth and freedoms that the abbey enjoyed. In response to episcopal threats, the canons sought to render their abbey inviolate by soliciting the aid of their saint. Through numerous mobilizations of her relics during times of extreme crisis, the canons extended Geneviève's spiritual protection out from the inner sanctum of their abbey across the Left Bank and into the Île de la Cité. These processions made Genevieve's relics accessible to the laity and to other religious communities, and they allowed the canons to demarcate visually the spiritual jurisdiction that they claimed for themselves and their saint.\footnote{For a complete summary of both "ordinary" and "extraordinary" invocations, see Sluhovsky, \textit{Patroness}, 29–63.}

The first of these processions occurred in 1129 when Paris' wheat was poisoned by the fungus ergot and vast numbers of the population fell ill with what they called the "holy fire" or...
"burning sickness." A canon of Sainte-Geneviève wrote an account of the epidemic and the miracle that followed. In it, he recalled the efforts of Bishop Étienne de Senlis to end the disaster. The bishop led processions of the cathedral's relics, mandatory fasts, and communal prayers, but all these pious measures failed to provide a remedy; in desperation the bishop arrived at the abbey to request a procession of Geneviève's relics to the cathedral. After exacting an oath from the bishop that guaranteed the rights and autonomy of the abbey, the canons agreed to carry Geneviève's body in ceremony from the abbey to the Île de la Cité. The author claimed that in the cathedral more than one hundred sick men and women were cured after being allowed to adore and touch the reliquary. He also recorded that, following the miracle, a dispute arose over the possession of Geneviève's relics. While the canons of the abbey attempted to lead her body back to the Left Bank, the bishop and his chapter prevented their departure and demanded that Geneviève remain among the cathedral's arsenal of relics. The canons of Sainte-Geneviève had to force their way out of the resulting mêlée and fled to their abbey under cover of darkness. The account ended with a prayer of celebration and gratitude, and Pope Innocent II's introduction of a new feast day in honor of Geneviève's miracle.

Moshe Sluhovsky convincingly argues that this miracle tale was a work of propaganda designed to defend the abbey's freedom from episcopal authority. He bases his argument on the canon's claim that the procession of 1129 followed "the old tradition of solemnities from time immemorial"—a false claim, for there is no evidence to suggest that Geneviève's relics had

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17 "Erant autem qui sani facti sunt numero centum." Miraculum ardentium, Acta Sanctorum, 152:42.

18 Ibid., 152:44.
ever been conveyed beyond the abbey walls since 885. I would suggest, however, that there are two episodes in the tale that make more compelling statements about the abbey's claims to independence: first, the bishop's supplication at the abbey; second, the attempted theft of Geneviève's relics by the cathedral chapter. It is at these moments in the drama that the tensions between the bishop and the abbey are enacted in a way that brought credit to Geneviève and her community.

The author of the abbey's account constructed the details of the bishop's supplication at the abbey in order to prove that the episcopal see recognized and appreciated the weight of the abbot's authority. Sluhovsky argues, "The procession to Notre-Dame was a ritualistic innovation of the bishop." He ascribes agency to Étienne de Senlis (as does the author of the miracle tale), asserting: "It is important to repeat that Bishop Stephen [Étienne] inaugurated a new ritual. He came up with the idea of bringing Sainte Geneviève into the city only after other means had failed" (my emphasis). Upon closer inspection, however, it seems unlikely that any such negotiation or innovation occurred or that the bishop played a central role in the procession's genesis. In 1128, Étienne de Senlis placed Louis VI and his territories under interdict following a dispute regarding the transfer of a prebend. He was forced to flee Paris shortly thereafter. The bishop first took refuge with his friend Bernard of Clairvaux at Cîteaux and later travelled to the court of the count of Champagne, an enemy of the king. Étienne was not allowed to return to Paris until the end of 1131. Thus, if the miracle of the burning sickness actually took place in November 1129, it is highly unlikely that the bishop was present for it. It is also doubtful that the bishop would have sought aid from and acknowledged the autonomy of a monastery that was a close ally.

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20 Ibid., 23, 31.
of the king at this time—especially one that he felt moved to punish by interdict during his episcopacy.

Furthermore, Étienne de Senlis was an admirer of the reformed rule of the Cistercians and had become an ardent reformer and advocate for the Augustinian rule as it was practiced at Saint-Victor in Paris. The abbey of Sainte-Geneviève was a wealthy and unreformed community of secular canons, and its abbot acted in the capacity of a secular lord over numerous wealthy properties. A charter of Robert the Pious invested the community with numerous \textit{praefecturae}, a term generally found during the eleventh century in Norman documents regarding the administration of baronies. Ecclesiastical and monastic reformers were concerned with precisely this sort of wealth and overlap with the secular world. Given these circumstances, it is likely that the canon of Sainte-Geneviève exaggerated and perhaps even fabricated the bishop's supplication in the miracle tale. If a procession during the Middle Ages could operate as "an instrument for establishing the fundamental contexts of time, space and authority within which social relations and political identity are enacted," the bishop's petition in the story represents his subjection to the abbey's authority.

The episode regarding the attempted theft of Geneviève's relics also served the abbey's ends. The bishop's evident greed and his inability to prevent the relics from returning to Sainte-Geneviève were thinly veiled attempts to demonstrate the abbey's continued independence from episcopal control. Patrick Geary has shown how tales of relic theft could be used to argue

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for a saint's predilection for one community over another. The failed attempt of the bishop to retain the relics of Geneviève within the cathedral was a clear statement of the saint's unwillingness to allow either her body or her abbey to be placed under episcopal authority. Thus, this scene and the description of the bishop's supplication forcefully implied the abbey's autonomy. While Sluhovsky has drawn attention to the author's claim that the procession followed preordained rules, these episodes were what made that assertion defensible, and they were critical components of the abbey's "propaganda efforts" as it struggled to defend its freedoms.

In the decade following the epidemic of 1129, a canon of the cathedral composed a miracle tale that disagreed with the abbey's version in a number of respects. He did not mention a negotiation between the bishop and the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève, for instance, and he certainly did not describe a scene in which the bishop vowed to respect the rights of the abbey in exchange for the saint's aid. The account did not refer to an attempted theft; rather, Geneviève's relics seemed to arrive and depart of their own accord. The cathedral canon cast Mary as the true heroine in the miracle's success. He asserted that Geneviève appeared on the scene after the Virgin Mary had successfully effected a cure and that the sick had been healed through Christ's affection for the church of "his pious and pre-elected mother and eternal virgin." The author's acknowledgement of the new feast day in honor of Geneviève was tinged with irony, and he continued to emphasize that it was in the church of Mary, the genetrix dei, that the miracle took place. By placing the church

28 "... noster Iesus Christus per beatam ac dilectissimam sponsam suam Genovefam virginem, in ecclesie pie ac preelecte matris sue et perpetue virginis." Dolbeau, "Miracle des Ardents," 156, 166.
in which the miracle occurred center stage, the canon established Mary as the true intercessor and miracle-worker.²⁹

The differing accounts of the miracle of 1129 influenced the relationship between the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève and the bishops of Paris. Though parts of the abbey's miracle tale appear to be fabrications, the text justified a new ceremonial pattern that publicly cast the canons of Sainte-Geneviève as peers of the cathedral chapter.³⁰ After the events of 1129, the abbots of Sainte-Geneviève refused to allow Geneviève's relics out of the abbey for any reason unless canons of the cathedral delivered to them a formal petition from the bishop.³¹ The abbots further stipulated that the relics of Saint Marcel, the ninth bishop of Paris, should arrive to escort those of Geneviève during processions in addition to or as a replacement for the bishop himself.³² The abbots were particularly insistent on this formality. When Louis IX ordered all of the relics of the city to pay homage to a fragment of the Crown of Thorns in 1239, the abbot refused to send those of Geneviève because the bishop had neglected to bring Saint Marcel to fetch them.³³ In addition, a ritual was created to ensure that the cathedral respected the abbey's possession of Geneviève's relics. After the relics were displayed for the allotted time in Notre Dame during an invocation, the ritual was concluded once the canons of the cathedral had carried Geneviève to the Petit-Pont and ceremoniously returned her to her stewards. Though these procedures were mutual expressions of trust and goodwill, they were also part of the efforts of the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève to rebuff the cathedral's challenges to its authority.

²⁹ "... in ecclesia beate Dei genetricis et perpetue virginis Marie in qua hoc miraculum factum est." Ibid., 167.
³⁰ The process for a procession of Geneviève's relics is outlined in a fifteenth-century sacramentary of the abbey, examined in detail in Sluhovsky, Patroness, 93–96.
³¹ Ibid., 94.
³² Sluhovsky, Patroness, 87.
³³ Ibid., 94–95; Dubois and Beaumont-Maillet, Sainte Geneviève, 105–06.
The miracula also created a lasting association between the Virgin Mary and Geneviève, which significantly enhanced the saint's prestige. Every year on 26 November, the entire diocese of Paris celebrated the miracle of the burning sickness according to the abbey's version of events, which emphasized the primary role played by Geneviève in the epidemic's conclusion. Though it is difficult to imagine that the abbey intended any irreverence toward the mother of Christ, it bolstered its claims with two arguments: first, that Geneviève was the appointed defender of Paris and a heavenly intercessor who was constantly attentive to the city's needs; second, that the body of Geneviève could be seen and touched during processions and invocations and was incontrovertibly present within the city walls. In contrast, the Virgin Mary's body had ascended to heaven, thus her presence was immaterial. Both miracle accounts emphasize Geneviève's body while Mary is identified through her church. Recalling the excerpt from de Tournai's sermon that began this article, we see this attention to the body of Geneviève reflected in his claim that Paris was glorified because of "the presence of the body of our virgin." Thus, through the presence of her body and her special love of Paris, Geneviève became *virginis nostrae* while Mary remained beholden to all creation.

During the thirteenth century, the liturgical readings for Geneviève's feast day were enhanced to articulate the claim that the saint existed as a defining characteristic of Paris and was the dominant celestial protector of the city. The nine standard lessons read during the Divine Office in the diocese of Paris recounted Geneviève's miracles in defense of Paris, particularly her protection of Paris from the Huns in 451, her defense of the city against the Normans in 885/6, and the miracle of the burning sickness in 1129. All the miracles were cast as evidence that

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35 "... virginis nostrae praesentia corporalis." BSG, ms. 239, 12.
she who "resides on the mountain of Paris blessedly reaches out from her summit from whence sublime floods of blessings and good health do not cease to flow to those who ask for her gifts in good faith." Devotees repeated that, because of Geneviève's special concern for Paris, "it is fitting that we abandon our whole mind to devotion, seeing as she herself prays constantly for her people and for the entire city." In the liturgy Geneviève was likened to a rose whose odor is that of health and whose blossom "spreads its dew on the glory of the city." Thanks were due to her because "she saves the renowned city of the Parisians, the principal city of the most Christian kingdom, all the erudite masters living there, and all of Christendom from every peril." These readings asserted that Geneviève's intercession and protection were integral to the health and prosperity of Paris and communicated this message to the city's parishioners.

Conclusion

In a very real sense, the liturgical and hagiographical texts produced by the canons of Sainte-Geneviève created a textual community in which both the clergy and the laity were introduced to the principal characteristics of Geneviève's cult and invited to participate in and adopt the abbey's language of power during the Mass and in public invocations of the saint. If, as Susan Boynton argues, it is the case that, "in the discursive space of the liturgy, the sacred was inseparable from the political, and

37 "Unde merito in montis Parisii veritice extitit collocate ubi honorifice sublimate non cessat gratiarum et sanitatum emitter flumina his qui in fide eius deposcunt largitiones, . . ." Amiet, Culte liturgique, 35.
38 "Unde et oportet illi nos tota mentis devotione committere quoniam ipsa est que assidue orat pro populo suo et pro tota civitate, . . ." Ibid.
39 "Flos sudans rorem descendit ad urbis honorem et super hunc florem Deus inspiravit odorem. Flos virgo ros grata salus odor aura salutis." Ibid., 63.
40 "Et revera dignum est Genovefam laudibus honorari que Parisiorum incultam urbem regni christianissimi precipuam totiusque christiani incolatus magistrum eruditissimam totiens a tantis que periculis liberavit." Ibid.
the boundaries between the insider and outsider were porous," then the political and spiritual program initiated by the canons in the twelfth century through various miracula was meant for and reached an audience beyond the cathedral, abbey, and monasteries through the liturgy. The conflict between the bishops of Paris and the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève as performed in the public procession of 1129 and in subsequent invocations of the saint generated a public forum in which devotion to Geneviève could be experienced and the claims of her abbey expressed. These texts and rituals give us a glimpse into the role that hagiography and liturgy could play in shaping power struggles between religious and secular communities in complex urban contexts.