different visions
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIEVAL ART

Introduction to Environmental Narratives and the Eremitic Turn

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Introduction

The remote and untamed environment of the desert has long prompted fascination, across cultures, geographies and centuries of human history. We each came to be enthralled by the desert through our respective dissertations—Denva's on a fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the *Vitae patrum* from Naples (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS. M.626) and Amelia's on a late thirteenth-century tabernacle now at the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh. Responding to a rising scholarly interest in the desert, we were inspired to organize a panel at the 2023 Leeds International Medieval Congress, "The City, the Desert and the Eremitic ideal." The papers at this session explored the interconnections between images and religious ideas, presenting the eremitic as a powerful exemplar, contested way of life and idealised historical narrative. At the Renaissance Society of America in 2024, Denva participated in a panel entitled "Picturing Eremitism and Cenobitism in the Early Modern Period," that considered the cultural, historical, and social phenomena underlying the representation of eremitism in the early-modern period and the artistic challenges that these iconographies posed. This special issue has emerged from conversations begun at these conferences and continuing in their wake. While

both panels delved into the locus of the eremitic experience and its representation in text and image, they also raised questions: How did visual representations of the desert and the eremitic life reflect medieval beliefs about, and attitudes towards, the environment? What was the experience of inhabiting and interacting with the desert, whether as a real or imagined place? How did images, objects, and architecture work to invoke such an experience, often in settings far removed from the desert, and to what ends? In varying ways, the articles in "Environmental Narratives and the Eremitic Turn" respond to these questions. We hope they will prompt reflection on medieval perceptions and representations of the environment and the potential for the desert to alter understandings of the self.

Before we turn to the existing literature, a note on terms. In present (English) usage, 'desert' is a climate-science term referring to an area of low precipitation, which tends to invoke hot, arid, sandy regions like the Gobi or Sahara. Its Latin root, "desertum," does not describe a specific climate, but was used to refer to any place understood to be uninhabited, abandoned, or *deserted*. The term was used throughout the Middle Ages in Europe to refer variously to environments of dense forest, mountains, or sea, in addition to the sandy deserts of North Africa and the Middle East; it is perhaps more closely captured in the modern term "wilderness."[1] We, and the authors of the articles here, often use the terms "desert" and "wilderness" interchangeably, recognising the historical and semantic resonance of the former. Of course, the desert environments under discussion in this issue are interesting precisely because they were only conceptually abandoned. They were "uninhabited" only in relation to the concentrated populations of the cities, frequently because the land was difficult to cultivate, or did not easily sustain life. In part because of this perceived environmental hostility, the desert became closely associated with religious withdrawal, extreme physical and spiritual endurance, and the potential for divine revelation. The articles in this special issue consider its lived experience – the eremitic life – whether in solitude or in community. They also foreground the wilderness itself, which continues to resonate across wide geographies and temporalities, through compelling textual, visual or architectural narratives.

The eremitic way of life has a long and fascinating history. It is an important aspect of many major religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. In the religious and spiritual traditions of South Asia, which relate to one of the papers in this special issue, the principle of ascetic renunciation and associated withdrawal is crucial.[2] Differing attitudes towards the transient world

between religious sects determined varying forms of ascetic practice and degrees of separation from society for the renunciate seeking enlightenment.

European and Anglo-American scholarship on the Christian tradition, relevant to the other papers in the issue, has long acknowledged the ideological pull of the desert. Classic texts such as *The Body and Society* by Peter Brown and *Ascetics, Society and the Desert* by James Goehring study the late-antique phenomenon of eremitic withdrawal in the deserts of Syria and Egypt, based on the influential literary tradition which emerged from this context.[3] Carlo Delcorno, Erik Saak and Andrew Jotischky have discussed the enduring legacy of this literature and the eremitic way of life across Europe and the contested Holy Land in the Middle Ages, while Darlene Hedstrom Brooks' *Desert Ascetics of Egypt*, published in 2023, grounds discussion of the legendary lives of early desert saints and hermits in recent archaeological discoveries.[4] Alice-Mary Talbot, Derek Krueger and Claudia Rapp have shed light on forms of monastic life in the Byzantine Empire, calling attention to the autonomy of individual monasteries and the tendency towards eremitic retreat.[5] The compelling interest of the historical desert, and its associated ascesis (Gr. *askēsis* 'training', or exercise; often involving rigorous self-discipline), has also prompted theoretical reflection, by Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and, more recently, Geoffrey Harpham, Virginia Burrus and Christopher Roman.[6] The sometimes extreme forms of self-denial practiced by inhabitants of the desert have been read, by these authors and by others, as bearing a radical, counter-cultural potential. While the desert and its inhabitants have much to offer to revisionist histories of religion and society, more remains to be done to consider the eremitic traditions of diverse religions in dialogue and to build a more comprehensive, integrative history of the desert and the eremitic life across disciplines and cultures.

Scholarship on pre- and early modern images of the desert and the eremitic life has considered Italian, Byzantine, and northern European sources. While many of the papers in this issue address other regions in Europe and beyond, the Italian sources are both abundant and relatively well-studied and thus are frequently referenced. Since the 1950s, historians of Italian art have been fascinated by the painted narratives, depicting scenes from the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* or *Vitae patrum*, which were popular in central Italy from ca.1300-1500. Ellen Callman was one of the first to draw scholarly attention to the images she termed "Thebaids," so called because they were thought to depict ascetic communities in Thebes.[7] In her investigation she identified roughly a dozen wall and panel paintings and placed them within the context of religious revivals that, "focused on emotional values of faith and a life imitative of Christ's, qualities which are the essence of the eremitical

existence."[8] Her work has since been expanded upon by Anne Leader, Chiara Frugoni, Eva Frojmovič, Maria Corsi, and, most notably, Alessandra Malquori.[9] Scholarship on the Thebaids has focused mostly on the fresco at the cemetery complex known as the Camposanto in Pisa (ca. 1336–1342), although considerable inroads have been made on the controversial Uffizi Thebaid, which has been dated to the fifteenth century and attributed to Fra Angelico.[10] Following Frugoni and Frojmovič's studies, Lina Bolzoni has more recently placed the fresco within the context of vernacular preaching in the early Renaissance, arguing for the work as taking part in the mnemonic "web of images" that, in her interpretation, constituted late medieval spirituality.[11]

In the existing scholarship on images of the desert, including our own, narrativity is a persistent theme. Narrativity is the ordering of past events, not simply in terms of chronology, but to construct and communicate meaning to a specific audience. Cynthia Hahn describes hagiographic narrative as "a project that aims to match a collection of words to one central fact: the ineffable holiness of a saint."[12] The same is true of ascetic literature, which includes hagiographies (such as the *Life of Paul* by Jerome) in addition to travel writing (e.g., the *Lausiac History* by Palladius), and collections of sayings (known as the *Apopthegmata patrum*).[13] In each case, the author or compiler aims to express the collective holiness of the desert saints, framed by the environment in which they live. The visual narratives draw from, without simply illustrating, these literary sources. They often interweave multiple narratives in order to express the profusion of holiness which flourishes, miraculously, in the inhospitable environment of the desert. In her recent monograph, *Illuminating the Vitae patrum: The Lives of the Desert Saints in Fourteenth-Century Italy*, Denva considers the impact of illuminated manuscripts on the private devotional lives of medieval Italians. By exploring how the narrative illustrations of one of the most fulsomely illuminated manuscripts of the *Vitae patrum* from the fourteenth century (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS. M.626) instructs viewers in spiritual virtue; she argues that the fourteenth-century reader did not have to withdraw to the wilderness to emulate the Desert Fathers and Mothers. In a forthcoming article in *Gesta* (Fall 2025), Amelia discusses an unusual late thirteenth-century tabernacle featuring a narrative scene of eremitic life and death, surrounded by scenes from the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. She argues for its origins in illuminated manuscripts of the Orthodox monastic treatise *The Heavenly Ladder*, and for the relevance of its iconography to contemporary religious dissent, within and beyond the Franciscan Order in the years around 1294. The stories told in the sources–whether literary or visual–amplify the environment inhabited by the desert saints. They describe its shape and character, its initial hostility to life, its separation

from established, secular society, and its potential for transformation. The desert is the site of ascetic endeavour and of divine intervention. In important ways, it imprints itself on the lives and bodies of the eremitic saints. The desert becomes a protagonist in the stories, opening possibilities for new ways of being, and permitting a fundamental re-imagining of the self in relation to the community, the environment, and the divine.

The papers in this special issue consider the *locus* of eremitic experience, the spaces and places that defined solitary and cenobitic forms of life. The environmental turn in medieval studies has ushered in scholarship that examines not only the ways in which humans interact with nature but also the agency of natural elements, their ability to "speak," to reveal the anxieties and desires of the human experience.[14] In historian Richard Hoffman's words, environmental history, "brings the natural world into history as an agent and object of history."[15] Medieval art historians have only recently adopted ecocritical approaches. Focused primarily on the iconography of nature and the landscape, earlier studies have treated the environment as a passive agent to be acted upon. More recently scholars have stressed the material agency of the environment. For example, Anne Harris has encouraged a focus on matter as in the raw materials used to make sculpture and other objects.[16] In her study on the sacred objects at *Chapel of Saint-Fiacre, Le Faouët*, she argues that a focus on *ecomateriality* allows scholars to attend to how raw materials "sustained the paradox and anxiety of the physical representation of the divine for late medieval audiences."[17] In the present issue several scholars employ an ecocritical approach to their study of the wilderness. The desert is its own character in the life of an ascetic where it frequently functions as a proving ground. Ecocritical approaches attend to the material conditions of the wilderness and ask the question: what can we learn about human relationships with nature through exploring the desert as both motif and environment?

Summary of Essays

Depictions of eremitic life were not simply imaginative creations of an idyllic past. They were also visual sources that prompted specific forms of devotional memory and action. In "Between the Mountain and the City: Eremitical Life and Death in the Camposanto, Pisa," John Renner takes as his focus the fresco cycle at the Camposanto funerary complex in Pisa. Analyzing the depictions of hermits throughout the cycle, he argues that the hermits, depicted doing various activities that center both the *vita contemplativa* and *activa*, are central to understanding how the fourteenth-century viewer was intended to view the cycle. Renner shows

that both the hermit influential in the creation of the cycle, Giovanni Cini, and the imagined hermits in the frescoes provided models for the faithful in ideal behavior. Cathleen Hoeniger also considers the Pisan Camposanto fresco, but focuses on the desert landscape, not as 'backdrop' or frame, but as an integral part of the visual narrative. She takes an ecocritical approach, arguing that the topography evokes the arid deserts of Egypt, and the river at the fresco's lower edge the Nile, thus permitting a viewer access to the historic journeys of paradigmatic hermit saints both physical and spiritual. Gallant approaches the Thebaid iconography through the lens of mnemonic practices and the spiritual journey. In her analysis of the Thebaid at Santa Marta in Siena, a medieval convent that housed Augustinian nuns from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, Gallant argues that the representations of monks and eremitic saints across the fresco forms a cohesive edificatory program that is activated through walking.

Moving from depicted environments to places inhabited and experienced, Julia Perratore and Dustin S. Aaron's essays focus on how buildings, landscape and environment interact to construct narratives of the desert over time. Perratore examines the *topos* of the desert as evoked at the monastery Saint-Guilhem-le-Dèsert in France. Her essay positions these dynamic, highly unusual evocations of water as enlivened conduits of monastic thought, channeling water's scriptural, hagiographic, and actual presences to connect the community to its past, present, and future. Aaron's article takes the reader through a backwards chronology of the Externseine rock formations in the Teutoberg forest, Germany. He argues that the site was *created* as a wilderness by its eremitic inhabitants and other human interventions, rather than discovered. Its identity as a wilderness, and associations with the Holy Sepulchre and myths of Germanic origins, have been constructed, adapted and interwoven across time. Aaron reminds us how the wilderness can be fetishized and politicised, right up to the present day. These papers and others complicate traditional views of the desert as untouched, a prelapsarian ideal realized.

Christian monastic community grew out of eremitic practice. The legends of the Desert Fathers and Mothers were an important aspect of the foundation legends and self-understanding of many religious Orders. It was invoked in the constitutions and way of life of reformed Benedictine orders such as the Camaldolese and Vallombrosans, founded in the eleventh century. The eremitic ideal was also important to the Mendicant Orders: the Augustinian Hermits, the Carmelites, and, to a lesser extent, the Franciscans and Dominicans. Alexandra Dodson considers the representation of Carmelite origins on Mount Carmel (present-day northern Israel)

following the Order's forced removal from the Holy Land after the fall of Acre in 1292. She looks closely at Carmelite legislation, alongside visual sources such as the predella of the *Pala del Carmine* by Pietro Lorenzetti (1329), and suggests that the solitude of the desert was additionally invoked through the built environment of Carmelite convents, which attempted to isolate the friars from the secular world of the surrounding city. Sara Wilkins examines the cult of the eremitical Mary Magdalene and its promotion by the Franciscans and Dominicans evident in south Italian visual sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These sources often represent the Magdalene as an emaciated ascetic, clad only in her hair, whose penance in the wilderness is rewarded with divine succour. Wilkins explores the close connection between the development of Mary Magdalene's legendary eremitical life in Provence, the promotion of her cult by the mendicants and the patronage of the Angevin monarchs.

Rebekah Compton and Sara Varanese both examine the wilderness as constructed space. Compton discusses the wilderness surrounding Camaldoli, a densely forested region of the Italian Appenines where the mother-house of the Camaldolese order was established in 1024. She employs an ecocritical approach to examine the profitable management of its resources by the monks, and its concurrent preservation as a sacred wilderness, considering visual and textual sources. Sara Varanese also examines a sacred arboreal landscape, this time in what is now Eastern India. She demonstrates the powerful association between the legends of Shiva and the self-understanding of the Pashupata, considering the relationship between ascetic practices, the building of Shaiva hermitages around Bhubaneshwar in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, and forest ecology. She demonstrates how this region, although radically altered by deforestation and urbanisation in recent years, retains a close association with the sacred forest hermitage of the ascetic deity, Shiva.

Finally, Amelia Hope-Jones looks at the kinds of friendships that emerged between male eremitic monks. Examining seemingly incidental details of Italian paintings and byzantine illuminated manuscripts through a queer-theoretical lens, she argues for the indeterminacy of eremitic friendships and for their potentially powerful, utopian, resistant positionality in the remote landscape of the desert.

Conclusions

While building on the existing scholarship, papers in this issue approach the desert anew. They are, in varying ways, multi-disciplinary, often integrating histories of art, religion, and literature, incorporating methods from the environmental humanities

and from philosophical theory. They deal with medieval Christian sources from Germany, France, Italy, and Byzantium, and sixth-century Pashupata temples in what is now East India. Many span a broad chronology, from the first centuries CE to the present day. Though all speak primarily to historical material, they position the desert as an active and continuing protagonist in the eremitic narratives considered. In our present context of climate emergency, when we are forced to take account of the threat posed by damaged and increasingly inhospitable global environments, these articles powerfully indicate the continuing resonance of the historical desert in our contemporary world.

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