Heroic Virtue in Medieval Liturgy

Nils Holger Petersen

Introduction: Medieval Liturgies of Saints and Aristotelian Heroic Virtue

The purpose of the following pages is to discuss the relationship between the notion of heroic virtue as put forward by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1.1 on the one hand and moral religious ideals expressed in medieval devotions on the other. I shall give examples showing how liturgical celebrations of some saints involved moral ideals, considered to be saintly, which corresponded to and filled a similar function to the notion of heroic virtue.

As pointed out in the Introduction, and as further discussed by Erik Eliasson in his chapter on the Late Ancient development of the notion of heroic virtue, this notion was only sketched ambiguously by Aristotle, and was then further developed in Platonism, Neoplatonism, as well as by Late Ancient Christian writers such as Porphyry, Iamblichus and Augustine, each in their own way and all much influenced by Neoplatonism.

Thus, not least considering the huge impact of Augustine's writings as well as his church practices (recorded to a high extent through Augustine's sermons) for medieval (and later) theology and liturgy, it is not surprising that ideas about Christian saintly virtue that also corresponded to a received notion of heroic virtue can be found in the liturgies of medieval saints. In this chapter, however, I shall only briefly sketch a connection between the early Christian saint and the divine hero in a pagan Aristotelian sense, in order to explore more fully to what extent parallel ideals of heroic virtue are found in liturgies of medieval saints. In other words, the kind of reception history involved here is not one of a straightforward conscious application of the Aristotelian notion, but a mixed historical narrative of appropriation and further development. This development was influenced from many sides, in analogy with what happened with the Aristotelian notion itself.

Christian Saints as Christian 'Heroes'

In early Christianity, as pointed out by Erik Eliasson in the aforementioned chapter, a discourse existed concerning saints as Christian heroes, although this idea was qualified in a number of ways. Thus, not least, Augustine clearly...
distinguished between pagan heroes and Christian saints, at the same time as he suggested that saints could be called “our heroes”.¹

The distinction has been corroborated in retrospect by Peter Brown, one of the major contemporary academic authorities on saints' cults in pre-modernity. Brown has made it clear that there was a fundamental difference between the pagan cults of heroes and the Christian cults of martyrs. The Christian perception of martyrs built on their intimacy with God, as this was manifested through their deaths as human beings. Pointing also to adverse statements about the Christian saints' cults by Julian the Apostate in the mid-fourth century, Brown has made the following summarizing statement:

The martyr was the ‘friend of God.’ He was an intercessor in a way which the hero could never have been. Thus, in Christian belief, the grave, the memory of the dead, and the religious ceremonial that might surround this memory were placed within a totally different structure of relations between God, the dead, and the living.²

This, however, does not preclude that similarities between the concepts or mutual influences between these cults and notions might be found. Indeed, Brown acknowledges possible architectural influences on the early Christian memoria from grave houses built for heroes.³

Still, the implication would seem to be that one should not expect to find any direct reflection of the notion of heroic virtue in Christian devotional texts. Moreover (and as also noticed by Eliasson), while Augustine suggested that the martyrs could be called “our heroes,” one should also note his qualification, “if the ecclesiastical way of speaking would have allowed it”,⁴ thus implying that such a terminology would have been regarded as improper. This is not surprising in itself considering the general suspicion of anything pagan in the early church.

What I want to suggest in this chapter is not at all that Christian saints were similar to heroes of late antiquity, nor, as already stated, that the Aristotelian notion of heroic virtue had a direct reception in saints’ offices (or, more generally, in medieval liturgical offices altogether). The point is much more limited: in medieval saints’ offices, saints, and their deeds and moral characters, are

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1 Eliasson (this volume), at n. 44, and see Augustine, De civitate dei (X, xxi).
4 “si ecclesiastica loquendi consuetudo pateretur.” Augustine, De civitate dei (X, xxi).