MEMORY AND HAGIOGRAPHY:
THE FORMATION OF THE MEMORY OF THREE
THIRTEENTH-CENTURY FEMALE SAINTS*

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All memory, whether “individual,” “collective,” or “historical”
is memory for something,
and this political (in a broad sense) purpose
cannot be ignored.1

The cult of a saint is by definition a form of a process of memorization. In this kind of religious practice people remember someone whose life was exemplary and in whose lifetime miracles happened (in vita), and/or after his or her death (post mortem). Hagiography also constitutes a written genre, and these texts were made in part to conserve the memory of a holy person. As Sofia Boesch postulates in her manual on sainthood:

The hagiographic production appears as a conscious construction of the historical memory of a reality, and the holders of this reality are exceptional persons, extraordinary events, and sacred places.2

One can recall the memory of a saint by reading about the saint’s activities, and there are further forms and channels in which the memory of a holy person can survive. These include relics, locations specific to the saint’s life, and the church consecrated to the name of the saint.

Important studies have been undertaken by medievalists that examine the development of cult through case studies pertaining to medieval memory. One such example is Luigi Canetti’s monograph about Saint Dominic’s hagiography entitled “The Invention of Memory,” in

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2 “La produzione agiografica si presenta come consapevole costruzione della memoria storica di una realtà, i cui portatori sono personaggi eccezionali, eventi straordinari, luoghi sacri,” Sofia Boesch Gajano, La santità (Roma–Bari: Laterza, 1999), 37.
which the author introduces his analysis with the following theoretical proposition:

I am [...] aware of the fact, that the case of Saint Dominic and the Dominicans represents primarily a valid case study concerning the crucial problems of the testimonies, and the modalities of its transmission, and consequently primarily concerns the meanings and forms of the memory.3

In this current work I will investigate three basic case studies. All of them originated in the thirteenth century, which was the period when the canonization process was formalized as a judicial investigation to memorialize a person as a saint. This was approximately the same period during which the inquisitorial procedure against heretics had become a centralized and formalized process.4 The first among my cases is that of Elizabeth of Hungary (or Elizabeth of Thuringia), who represents one of the most famous female saints of the thirteenth century in all of Western Europe. The two other examples can be defined as special because neither of them represents a “typical” case of sainthood, since Margaret of Hungary was not canonized until the twentieth century. Guglielma of Milan is the third, and although she was venerated, she was never canonized since she and her followers were condemned as heretics.

These three cases share common features in addition to the fact that all of them originated in the thirteenth century. First, in each of them a judicial level process is present—be it canonization or inquisition—which is essential for our investigation. It is important to note that although the objectives of canonization and inquisition seem opposed to one another, in the later Middle Ages the two juridical procedures showed structural similarities, and it is not accidental that both were

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