Romuald then dwelt ... in the territory of Rainerius, who afterwards became Marquis of Tuscany. Now this Rainerius had put aside his own wife on the grounds of consanguinity and married the wife of a relative whom he had persecuted and killed. This is why Romuald, so that he would not become a participant in the crime, did not want to remain in the territory as a guest, but sent him a gold piece for water and another for wood. Although Rainerius refused them, preferring to give his property rather than to receive anything from the holy man, nevertheless he eventually accepted them rather than have Romuald leave.

When Rainerius had become lord of the region, he used to say that “Not the Emperor, not any other man, is able to strike great fear into me in the way that the appearance of Romuald terrifies me—before his face I do not know what to say, nor can I find any excuses by which I could defend myself.” In truth, the holy man possessed by divine gift the grace that whatever sinners, especially powerful men of the world, would come into his presence would soon be struck with internal trembling (“tremefactis visceribus”) as if they were in the presence of the majesty of God.

—Peter Damian, Vita Romualdi.

According to Peter Damian’s life of Romuald of Ravenna, written about fifteen years after Romuald’s death between ca. 1025 and late 1027, the very sight of the holy hermit so overwhelmed the future Marquis Rainerius that he could neither bear to face him nor to lose him. Rudolph Otto does not describe the “mysterium tremendum” more graphically. What terrors must have racket Italy at the turn of the millenium if Romuald’s very presence had this effect on all sinners!

Yet Romuald was no isolated figure. In the eleventh and early twelfth century, crowds of clerics and laymen, men and women, rich and poor flocked to the mountains and forests in what has been called a “Renaissance of eremitical asceticism.” Peter the Hermit (d. 1115), riding on his donkey, led tens of thousands of poor men to their deaths on the ill-fated “Popular Crusade.” Norbert of Xanten (d. 1134), barefoot and clad in skins, received from the
pope himself permission to preach throughout Europe, and ultimately founded the Praemonstratesian order and ascended to the Archbishopric of Magdeburg. Less fortunate was the similarly clad Henry of Lausanne (d. post 1136) whose authority to preach was revoked but who continued on a heretical career for many more years. Eilbert of Crespin (d. 1140) dwelt in a reclusory so surrounded by suppliants that it appeared to be a city under siege, a place where crowds of men too numerous to secure private confession would yell out their sins to the saint. Not only the hermit’s hagiographers but even the critics who disparaged the rabble (“vulgus”) who followed him attest his popularity. Perhaps its best witness is the new vernacular literature where the hermit, not the priest or monk, becomes the representative of the Church.

Why were Romuald and his fellow hermits so popular? Scholars have answered in different ways: medieval historians have made unsystematic observations, anthropologists and sociologists have abstracted the hermit’s social role out of his religious milieu, and religious studies scholars have developed a possible way to return it by focusing on the holy man’s presentation of Christ. In this study I indicate the achievements and limitations of these methods, and then propose a different approach to the problem of the hermit’s popularity—examination of the hermit as a religious symbol—which not only incorporates the best insights of the previous methods but also provides a basis for future studies of radical ascetics in general.

Medieval and Western Church historians have tended to analyze the hermit’s popularity descriptively and non-systematically. The resulting diversity is illustrated in the best available survey of the eleventh/twelfth century heremitical revival, the published reports of the conference on hermitism held at La Mendola in 1963. In the opening address Cinzio Violante suggested that the hermit became a familiar medieval figure because he had more opportunity than the monk to mix with the common people and because his non-conformity and extravagant excesses appeared marvelous to the popular mentality. Jean Leclercq noted that the hermit’s forest home was, in romances anyway, the refuge of lovers and the home of beasts who could lead hunters to him. Étienne Delaruelle implied that the hermit’s apostolic work, especially his evangelical poverty,