ATHANASIUS' VITA ANTONII

A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

BY

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Few patristic works have fired the imagination of generations of readers like the *Vita Antonii*, a work written by Athanasius some time between 356 and 362. Quite aside from its propagation of asceticism and the impetus that it gave to early monasticism, the *Vita Antonii*, as a piece of literature, became the definitive hagiographical model. Previous study of the work has been largely given over to discussion of Antony’s historicity and his place in the early development of monasticism¹ or to analysis of the literary background to Athanasius’ biographical enterprise.² My aim in this study, however, is to examine Athanasius’ literary portrayal of Antony the hermit in terms of the broader fourth-century context in which it was written using the Weberian sociological model of the charismatic figure and of the routinization of charisma.

Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii* is a multi-faceted work. It is at once a work of pious edification, a handbook for monks in the guise of a narrative (Preface) and a piece of Christian apologetic useful for monks to read to Pagans (Ch. 94). Beyond these concerns the work had its part to play in the ecclesiastical politics of the day and was written during a period when Athanasius was a hunted fugitive. Having been deposed by force from his much prized see of Alexandria and fleeing the forces of the Arian emperor Constantius, Athanasius took refuge in the Nitrian desert and fought back with the pen. The *Vita* was written during a period of intense polemical activity in which Athanasius was fighting his heretical opponents with a literary barrage. It was during these years that Athanasius wrote his *Apologia ad Constantium* (357), his *Apologia de fuga* (357) and his secret *Historia Arianorum* written in 358 for the monks of Egypt. The *Vita Antonii* however was a public work designed, as its epistolary preface shows, for free circulation among monks
overseas, most probably in the western provinces (Ch. 93). The *Vita*
must be seen in the general context of Athanasius' literary campaign of
polemic and self-justification, but since it cannot be dated accurately,
its exact chronological relationship to the works that surround it cannot
be established. ³ This work of hagiography allows Athanasius the op-
portunity to portray the already celebrated hermit Antony mouthing
fierce polemic against the Arians, enjoining his followers to respect the
orthodox hierarchy and prophesying first the present Arian troubles
(356-362) and then, of course, the eventual victory and restoration of
the orthodox party in the more distant future. Finally by depicting An-
tony as the new Elijah and himself as the Elisha who inherits the cloak
of the master, Athanasius is able to claim the spiritual legacy left behind
by the hermit. The bishop-author becomes a type of successor to An-
tony who has now passed from sight.

Sociology has much to offer the student of early Christian life and
literature as Hans Frhr. von Campenhausen's important study of the
first three Christian centuries has illustrated. While avoiding the black
and white of the Weberian absolutes of "Office" and "Charisma", he
has studied within an essentially Weberian framework, the relationship
of the functionary to the charismatic type of authority, of the priest to
the prophet, of the "champion of the sacral system" to the "witnesses
to direct religious experience". Campenhausen's study ends in the third
century, but projecting his findings on into the fourth century, he sees
the church's effort to absorb monasticism as a new task which she and
her officials had to tackle. For Campenhausen, both "divine commis-
sioning" (office) and "special divine endowment" (charisma) derive
from Christ Himself and are both in some way part of His revelation to
man, but often are in tension within the life of the church.⁴

In the fourth-century figures of Athanasius and Antony we see the
same tension between priest and prophet once again. Indeed Antony, at
least as he is portrayed in the *YA* fits almost perfectly Weber's descrip-
tion of the archetypal charismatic figure who thrives outside the normal
institutions of social organisation. The wonder-working of such an in-
dividual poses a threat to the appointed leaders or bureaucratic holders
of institutionalised religious power whose position is based upon valid
ordination and consecration and who may not be able to demonstrate
such impressive evidence of charismatic gifts. Now Athanasius,
although a man with more than a little theatrical flair, and an impressive
personality in his own right, qualifies in Weberian terms as a