In 1969 the Catholic Church decided to remove many names from its canon of saints. Among the exclusions was St. Thecla, who had enjoyed a very long and successful existence for someone whose origin was a work, The Acts of Paul and Thecla, denounced as early as the late second/early third century as a forgery. In recent years the apocryphal New Testament works and the role and importance of the women they depict (of whom Thecla is a prime example) have received considerable scholarly attention, with arguments over their origin and to what extent, if at all, they reflect real people and events.\(^1\) It is not my intention to add another contribution to the numerous analyses of why Thecla and her adventures caught popular imagination, especially in the east. The twin emphases in the Acta on asceticism and the virginal heroine seem to me adequate explanation. This article has a different and more limited purpose: to see what use the church fathers made of Thecla and how, as a result, her official acceptance was ensured for seventeen centuries despite the fact that her biography never became part of the church canon.

The earliest patristic reaction we know of is that of Tertullian, who might have been expected to praise Thecla’s determined virginity. Instead, he was completely hostile; she was depicted as teaching and baptising, leading women to imagine they could do the same. Tertullian was writing to combat a heretical woman who argued that baptism was unnecessary, and he was anxious to prove that Christians should be baptised, but only by those authorised. Obviously Thecla was as dangerous as his heretical opponent, so it was crucial for Tertullian to emphasise that the Acta of Paul and Thecla, in which her deplorable behaviour was recorded, were spurious, the author an Asia Minor priest dismissed for his forgery.\(^2\)

If Tertullian hoped to consign Thecla and her adventures to oblivion he undeniably failed, even in Africa itself, for a generation later
Cyprian wrote of the devil baptising through a woman. By the fourth century Thecla had become an exemplar of virginity for those church fathers who were anxious to promote asceticism. Yet in the west, the adulation can almost be regarded as perfunctory. Thecla is a name, rather than a person. This is particularly evident in the case of Ambrose, who of all churchmen should have been most enthusiastic, for the comparatively new and extremely large and expensive cathedral in the heart of Milan was dedicated to St. Thecla, the city’s patron. He refers to it as simply the basilica nova, hoc est intramurana, quae maior est (in contradistinction to the basilica Portiana outside the walls), but there is no reason to think it was not Thecla’s church in his time. This basilica, which remained the cathedral of Milan until 1461, had naturally been the seat of Ambrose’s predecessor, the Arian bishop Auxentius.

We can only speculate as to why Thecla became the patron saint. It is tempting to suggest she came west with Auxentius, the Cappadocian appointed to Milan in 355 from Alexandria. Krautheimer has suggested, however, that her cathedral was started between 345 and 350 under Constans and completed, perhaps hastily, in time for the Synod of Milan in 355.1 Auxentius became bishop only after Dionysius’ deposition at that Synod. It may be, however, that the dedication to Thecla was thanks to the new bishop. It certainly fits an eastern origin. If so, it helps to explain Ambrose’s actions. He successfully defied an imperial order to surrender the basilica to the Arians, but his later building activities were surely linked to his desire for Catholic churches that had never been contaminated by heresy. Martyrs’ relics were naturally needed, and his discovery in 386 of the bodies of Gervasius and Protasius, followed immediately by healing miracles, must have gone a long way to upstage Thecla’s cathedral.6 Ambrose in fact was buried with them in the church that later bore his name, not in the cathedral.

The three sermons Ambrose put together for his sister Marcellina under the title De virginibus were composed early (he says he was not yet three years a bishop’), and in them he gave Mary as an example of how to live, Thecla an example of how to die.8 Ambrose also accepted at least part of the Acta, the lioness’ defence of Thecla in the arena at Antioch.9 He may well have reasoned as we know his disciple Augustine later did, that some of the apocryphal (i.e. secret) books contained parts that were true.10 At the same time, however, it is significant that Ambrose’s version differed from the original story and was more appropriate to his theme, for Thecla was saved by her virginity, not her