rupts Christian pilgrims, and she inverts the apostolic mission by "hunting for the souls of young men." The unrepentant harlot is like the female prophets denounced by the prophet Ezekiel for leading the weak into apostasy: "Will you hunt down souls belonging to my people?" (Ezekiel 13.18). Mary's *vita*, like Pelagia's, mocks the charity, chastity, and pilgrimages of most holy women. The harlot-saint's autonomy results not from celibacy but from carnal corruption. Her philanthropy and charity take the form of the free bestowal of her body on Christian pilgrims; she undertakes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land by offering herself as payment for the voyage. Mary's conversion to the life of extreme penance, however, transforms her unruly body into a disciplined receptacle of God's grace. Only the conversion of sexually depraved women, such as Mary of Egypt and Pelagia of Antioch, could teach Christian audiences that redemption is possible even for the most loathsome sinners. The *vitae* of eastern holy men suggest the opposite; only superhuman hermits can hope to bridge the gap between the temporal and the divine. The sacred fictions of reclusive females, however, soften the militancy of male texts by allegorizing the metamorphosis from Eve to the Blessed Virgin, from human perdition to ecumenical redemption.

5

"Through the Eye of a Needle"

Wealth and Poverty in the Lives of Helena, Paula, and Melania the Younger

In the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, wealthy widows house, nourish, and finance the prophetic and apostolic missions of God's most holy men. In Hebrew scripture, a wealthy woman from Shunem provides a sanctuary for Elisha: "So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food. And she said to her husband, 'Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God, who is continually passing our way. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there'" (2 Kings 4.8–10). God commands a widow of Zarephath to feed Elijah, and she brings the holy man water in a vessel and a morsel of bread (1 Kings 17.8–13). In response to the piety of both these ministering women, Elisha and Elijah resurrect their sons (2 Kings 4.34; 1 Kings 17.22). In the gospels and Acts, prosperous women support Jesus' ministry and the apostolic missionary movement by supplying their own households as neophyte *ecclesiae* and by offering food and drink to God's votaries. Jesus himself commends a poor widow who donated two copper coins to God: "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mark 12.41–44; Luke 21.1–4).

Late antique hagiographers blend the sacred lives of Roman patrician women with biblical depictions of female patrons of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. The fourth- and fifth-century corpus of texts that comprise the Helena legend, Paula's *epitaphium*, and Melania the Younger's *vita*, contain dramatic accounts of philanthropy, pious projects, and patronage of the cult of martyrs and saints. These lives advertise the mobility, independence, and empowerment of imperial women who convert to the

life of radical self-abnegation. Helena, Paula, and Melania possessed vast properties and incomes. The Augusta Helena even earned the right to distribute the imperial fisc, and her image was reproduced on gold coins.[1] In their sacred biographies, each of these three wealthy women literally becomes the "poor widow" praised by Jesus for having impoverished herself to support God's missionaries. The hagiographers detail the patricians' heroic almsgiving, self-imposed poverty, and their exchange of fine silks for coarse goat hair. All three lives embody Jesus' commandment to "sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourself with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in heaven that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys" (Luke 12.33). In addition to engaging in sensational acts of charity, Melania the Younger preaches and proselytizes; her life in particular usurps many of the sacred *topoi* of the male priesthood.[2]

The same hagiographers, however, temper these provocative images of women's philanthropic, ascetic, and pastoral power by introducing the biblical motif of the chaste, abstemious, charitable woman who combats female depravity and apostasy by remaking her body into a vessel of repentance. Helena, Paula, and Melania all exorcize the demons of feminine self-indulgence through their philanthropy, ministry to the poor, and ascetic attire. They thereby reverse the patristic theology of the cosmetic. Their male hagiographers use these more traditional *topoi* of female piety to emphasize that, although Helena, Paula, and Melania were saintly women, their holiness remains distinct from and subordinate to that of men. Together these three *vitae* serve as spiritual medicine (*remedia*) for other aristocratic women who cling to the feminine vices of lust and vanity.

The three *vitae* are also part of a larger discourse on the post-Constantinian conversion of the late Roman aristocracy. Scholars of late antiquity have focused on how fourth- and fifth-century texts present the ascetic transformation of the imperial elite. Feminist scholars have emphasized the revolutionary prominence of women among this illustrious group of abstemious saints.[3] In fact, the late antique church did rely heavily on the benevolent patronage of great patrician matrons.[4] Nonetheless, aristocratic women appear in hagiographical discourse not merely on account of their historical role in endowing the neophyte church, but because their conversion to the life of apostolic poverty enabled Christian rhetoricians to insert the evangelical leitmotif of inversion into their sacred biographies. By empowering those who could not enter the ritualistic precincts of the Senate, Christian writers augur the eschatological obliteration of political, social, and sexual hierarchies.[5]

Hagiographers also rework established imperial ideology by transforming loyalty to the state, emperor, and family into allegiance to a heavenly kingdom and to a spiritual family comprised of Christ, the saints and martyrs, and the church.[6] Much of Roman law was directed at maintaining familial inheritance, but patrician Christians purposely obliterate ancestral properties and precious objects to impoverish their heirs.[7] Hagiographers refashion building projects, donatives, almsgiving, and other republican and imperial forms of civic philanthropy into pious contributions to the cults of saints and martyrs. Church writers convert the political and ceremonial travels of the imperial family (*itinera principum*) into Christian pilgrimage.[8] For women, love of a heavenly groom, Christ, replaces devotion to an earthly husband, and patrician authors modify the feminized classical virtues of chastity, humility, and piety into Christian *charismata*.[9]

Helena: Madonna of a New Empire[10]

The textual turning point for the refashioning of secular, imperial ideology into charismatic, Christian rhetoric is Eusebius of Caesaria's *Vita Constantini* (c. 337). In the *Vita Constantini*, the bishop of Caesaria places the tumultuous political events of the early fourth century within the larger rhetorical framework of the death of the pagan empire and the rebirth of a Christian *basileía* on earth. In 312 CE, a celestial vision of a blazing cross and an inscription, "In this sign you shall conquer (*toúto níka*)," inspired Constantine to defeat his imperial rival, Maxentius, at the Milvian Bridge in Italy.[11] Constantine's sacred biographer, Eusebius, recasts the emperor's victory over his enemies and his subsequent metamorphosis as a Christian emperor within the context of a universal exorcism, the apocalypse, and the resurrection.[12] Constantine's defeat of his imperial rivals parallels the apocalyptic warrior angel's binding of the devil for one thousand years (Revelation 20.1–3). His triumph purges evil from the world, resurrects the God-centered *gloria* of the empire, and ushers in a Christian *pax Romana*. Eusebius describes Constantine as a "heavenly messenger of God" whose bejeweled presence dazzles the imperial court.[13]

The bishop of Caesaria, however, mitigates Constantine's militant, apocalyptic Christianity by including the life of the emperor's widowed mother, the Augusta Helena. Helena's philanthropy, humility, and ministry to the poor humanize Eusebius's supernatural portrayal of the divine Constantine.[14] According to Eusebius's account and her post-Eusebian legend, Helena transforms Jerusalem into a Christian city and miraculously

finds the relics of Christ's passion.[15] Fourth- and fifth-century sacred biographers recreate the historical persona of the elderly Augusta as a charismatic archaeologist whose excavations in Palestine fulfilled the prophesy of New Jerusalem: John "saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21.2).[16] Her journey to Palestine and her construction of several basilicas in Jerusalem and Bethlehem motivate subsequent pilgrimages by members of the imperial family and other patricians.[17] Eusebius's brief *vita* of the emperor's mother is one of the most influential models for later hagiographical depictions of charitable widows, empresses, and Germanic queens. By the ninth century, the legend of Helen's *inventio* of the holy cross was read aloud in western monasteries, read individually by erudite lay persons, and performed publicly during liturgical festivities surrounding the feast-day of the *inventio crucis*.[18]

Eusebius of Caesaria places the *vita* of Helena within the broader context of the *Vita Constantini*, and his narrative appeals to a diverse audience of both civic-minded pagans and Christians. Eusebius's Constantine embodies Roman filial duty, and his Helena personifies the deferential *pietas* of Roman matrons. At the same time, however, Eusebius connects the imperial pair with Christ and Mary: the bishop praises Helena for her obedience to the will of God, her "God-loving acts,"[19] and for giving birth to the Christ-like Constantine. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315–386), Ambrose of Milan, Paulinus of Nola (c. 354–431), Socrates (c. 380–450), and Sozomen (early fifth century) expanded on the Eusebian account of Helena's pilgrimage to Palestine, emphasizing above all Helena's miraculous discovery of relics of the passion.[20]

Helena appears in Book Three of the *Vita Constantini*, after a lengthy description of her son's discovery, cleansing, and restoration of Christ's sepulcher.[21] In Eusebius's version of the Helena legend, the Augusta furthers the work already begun by her son. Helena embarks on an unprecedented pilgrimage to the Holy Land (c. 326) to venerate the holy places associated with Christ's life and passion. There she dedicates and decorates two churches in Palestine, at the Cave of the Nativity and on the Mount of the Ascension.[22] She also places a statue of Christ on the Mount of Olives and constructs oratories on the summit.[23] According to Eusebius, the emperor augments Helena's philanthropy by offering gold, silver, and embroidered hangings to the new basilicas. In addition to overseeing the construction of basilicas associated with the birth and death of Christ, Helena tours the eastern provinces, where she dispenses alms to the poor

and frees prisoners and political exiles.[24] Eusebius assures his readers that Helena's *itinera* are undertaken in the full grandeur of imperial authority, although Helena dresses in humble attire and mingles informally with the crowds of pious who come to worship at the Constantinian shrines.[25] Helena dies at the age of eighty (c. 329) with Constantine at her side; the emperor honors his mother with a lavish funeral and buries her in the imperial tomb.[26]

Eusebius's hagiographical depiction of Constantine's mother serves a variety of didactic and political purposes. The bishop connects Helena's pilgrimage to the Holy Land with the more traditional *itinera principum* of the imperial family.[27] Her sojourn refocuses the spiritual attention of the empire on Jerusalem and on Christ's passion and resurrection. She is the active campaigner for Constantine's New Jerusalem. Because Helena, unlike Constantine, could travel without an armed escort, she exemplifies the charitable side of the new dynasty.[28] Eusebius includes the short *vita* of Helena within the life of Constantine to soften the militant life of the emperor. Her pilgrimage is one of healing and resurrection, thereby implicitly countering the narrative of violence and political chaos that dominates the *Vita Constantini*.

The bishop also fashions the imperial pair as Christ and Mary to further the rhetorical strategy of the birth of a Christian empire. Helena focuses her philanthropy on the two biblical places associated with the Madonna—the nativity at Bethlehem and the resurrection at Jerusalem. Helena, like Mary, gives birth to a godly son who honors her according to scripture.[29] The Christ-like Constantine defeats his depraved adversaries in emulation of the book of Revelation's account of the vanquishing of the devil. At the same time, Eusebius praises Constantine's filial piety and portrays Helena praying for her son and grandson in traditional Roman fashion. As presented by Eusebius, the figure of Helena is an appealing one for Christians and non-Christians alike. Her piety, humility, and philanthropy establish the hagiographical prototype for sacred portraits of aristocratic women, and her *itinera* in the Holy Land establish Christian pilgrimage as an essential aspect of women's sanctity.

The hagiographers who elaborated on Eusebius's abbreviated *vita* of Helena revise her mythical life in order to concentrate more fully on her connection with the relics of Christ's passion and her steadfast faith. The legend of the discovery of the holy cross first appears about twenty years after Eusebius's *Vita Constantini* in the liturgical writings of Cyril of Jerusalem.[30] Cyril's *Catecheses* (c. 350) details Jerusalem's unique Lenten and

Easter liturgical rituals. The bishop of Jerusalem was an important promoter of religious travel to the Holy Land.[31] In his *Catecheses*, Cyril claims that already by the mid-fourth century the wood of the cross had been distributed throughout the world, but he does not name the elderly Helena as instrumental in the dispersion. Its universal dispensation, the bishop states, is further proof of the efficacy of the resurrection.[32] Cyril's liturgical presentation of the salvific wood of the cross probably inspired later Christian writers to connect Helena's imperial pilgrimage to Jerusalem with the legend of the *inventio crucis*. One of the most detailed western accounts of Helena's charismatic excavation of the holy cross is by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who included a brief *vita* of Helena in his larger work, the *Oration on the Death of Emperor Theodosius* (395).[33]

Ambrose inserts the sacred life of Helena into the *De obitu Theodosii oratio* because he wanted to compare Emperor Theodosius's wife, Flaccilla, to Constantine's mother.[34] According to Ambrose, Helena travels to Jerusalem and surveys the places of the Lord's passion. The Holy Spirit inspires her to study the sacred topography and to unearth the holy cross. She journeys to Golgotha and begins an ecstatic conversation with the devil, whom she accuses of obscuring the *vexillum salutis*, the "standard of salvation." Ambrose uses the exchange between Helena and Satan to reinforce the importance of the Virgin Mary in the process of redemption; Helena warns the devil that he will be conquered by Mary, mother of the triumphant one (*triumphator*), who would eventually vanquish evil through his death on the cross. Helena compares her discovery of the sacred cross with Mary's birth of Christ: "Just as the holy woman gave birth to the Lord, I shall deliver his cross. I shall elevate the divine standard (*divinum vexillum*) from the ruins as medicine (*remedium*) for us sinners."[35]

Helena then orders the holy ground of Golgotha to be excavated, after which three crosses (*patibula*) and the inscription INRI ("Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," John 19.19) appear amid the debris. The Holy Spirit reveals to the Augusta which of the three is Christ's cross, the "medicine of immortality" (*remedium inmortalitatis*).[36] Helena also unearths two nails of the crucifixion; she weaves one into a horse's bridle fastening and the other into a crown of precious gems. Helena sends both the diadem and the bridle fastening to Constantine to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah: "There shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, 'Holy to the Lord'" (Zechariah 14.20), as well as that in the Psalms: "Thou dost set a crown of fine gold upon his head" (Psalm 21.3). Ambrose is clear about Helena's role in the Christian refashioning of the Roman empire: "The

Holy Spirit visited Mary so that Eve would be liberated: the Spirit also visited Helena so that emperors would be redeemed."[37] Mary is the *mediatrix gratiae* of humanity, while Helena is the mediator of grace for the imperial family and the universal empire. Ambrose names the emperor's mother as the chosen vessel of God's work and as the salvific force in Constantine's life. Constantine triumphs over the persecutors of the faith, and his mother's discovery of the "medicine of immortality" heals the divided empire. By weaving the nails of the cross into Constantine's crown and horse bridle, the two symbols of the emperor's judicial and military power, Helena insures that her son's rule will follow Christ's precepts.[38] Ambrose thus appropriates Eusebius's sacred portrait of Helena and reinterprets the legend in terms of Marian theology and the salvific force of the cross.

Later Christian theologians and historians further Ambrose's exegesis of the *inventio crucis* and Helena's role as the *mediatrix gratiae* for the empire. In the early fifth century Paulinus of Nola, a Christian bishop and poet, received an unusual gift. According to Paulinus's *Epistle 31* (402), the remarkable holy woman, Melania the Elder (d. 410) brought the bishop a piece of the holy cross from Jerusalem.[39] This charismatic souvenir of the Holy Land inspired the bishop to ponder the spiritual significance of the *lignum crucis* and Helena's role in its miraculous discovery. Paulinus elaborates on Ambrose's metaphorical presentation of Helena as the mediator of grace for the empire, claiming that Constantine "deserved to be the prince of the princes of Christ as much through the faith of his mother as through his own."[40] Helena, like the charitable widow commended by Jesus for impoverishing herself to enrich God, emptied the imperial purse to embellish the House of God.

Paulinus duplicates Ambrose's account of the charismatic excavation of the three crosses. Paulinus, however, uses a miraculous event and not mere inspiration by the Holy Spirit to verify Christ's cross. Helena orders that each of the three crosses be placed on the body of a dead man. The first two crosses fail to revive the body, but the third resurrects the corpse just as Jesus had animated Lazarus.[41] Paulinus claims that the cross is only exhibited publicly during the festival of Christ's passion, but that some pilgrims are allowed to see it on a private basis. According to Paulinus, the bishop of Jerusalem also reserves the right to distribute fragments of the wood as gifts to important pilgrims, including Melania the Elder. Paulinus asserts that the wood of the cross is divided on a daily basis but that its weight miraculously never diminishes. His presentation of the legendary life of the Augusta Helena, like Ambrose's, symbolically transforms Con-

stantine's widowed mother to the status of the charitable widows of sacred scripture. The imperial matron's devotion to the dead body of Christ and the material remains of his crucifixion also emphasize women's connection with the ritual care of Jesus' body. Finally, Helena, like the Madonna, carries the hope of universal salvation within her in the form of the Christian emperor, Constantine, and her discovery of the "medicine of salvation" results in the miraculous distribution of the healing wood of the cross.

Two Constantinopolitan ecclesiastical historians, Socrates and Sozomen, also embellish the *cultus* of Helena, and they incorporate many of the narrative constructions found in Ambrose's *De obitu Theodosii oratio* and Paulinus's *Epistle 31*.[42] According to Socrates and Sozomen, celestial dreams guide Helena to Jerusalem, where she destroys a statue of Venus and a pagan temple and unearths the three crosses. Both Socrates and Sozomen claim that Helena discerns the true cross by curing a dying woman with it. Helena encloses part of the cross in a silver case at Jerusalem, and she sends the remaining section to Constantinople. Constantine, according to Socrates, places the *lignum crucis* in a public statue of himself to protect the capital city. And, he states, after Helena dedicates churches at Jerusalem and Bethlehem, she prays in the company of pious nuns and ministers to them at table.[43] Sozomen adds that, while Helena is in Jerusalem, she gathers together the holy virgins of that city, orders a feast to be held in their honor, waits upon them at table, and washes their hands.[44] Later Roman empresses, in imitation of Helena's humble service-piety, humanize the Christian monarchy by visiting the sick, nursing the maimed, and working in soup kitchens in Constantinople.[45] The image of the imperial woman who ministers to virgins and feeds the poor would influence later depictions of early medieval royal women who supposedly engaged in similar domestic activity.

Hagiographers recreated the Helena legend to magnify a growing Christian interest both in pilgrimage to the Holy Land and in the efficacy of the relics of the passion. By the time of Socrates and Sozomen, the pious matron of Eusebius's narrative had been transformed into a charismatic holy woman. Eusebius, Ambrose, Paulinus, and the two eastern historians compare Constantine and Helena to Christ and Mary, and they humanize the imperial family and the empire through the dutiful life of the Augusta. Her discovery of the holy cross parallels the Virgin's birth of Christ in that both acts miraculously propagate universal redemption. According to her *vitae*, Helena is a charismatic mediator of grace for the empire. Eusebius, however, is not concerned with the tangible remains of the cross of the

crucifixion. For him, the artistic symbol of the New Empire is the *labarum*, the military standard adopted by Constantine after his vision of the cross in the sky. Constantine's obligation, imposed from heaven, was to rescue the empire, hence his focus was necessarily political and public. Helena's equally sacred task was to restore the physical cross to the Christians of the empire, to pilgrims of all degrees in Jerusalem. For Constantine, the cross was a warrant of imperial redemption, whereas for Helena it was medicine for sinners. For the emperor, the cross was a weapon, and his later biographers incorporate the nails of the crucifixion into the emperor's armor, but for Helena it represented the restorative powers of the "wood of salvation." In Eusebius's hagiographical discourse, the actions of the emperor and his mother—militant and humble, political and devotional, triumphant and charitable—together represent the ideal of the Christian empire.

Paula: Roman Virtues and Christian Charisma

In the 380s the noble Roman woman Paula emulated Helena's journey to the Holy Land. Jerome, Paula's close friend and spiritual advisor, recorded her pilgrimage and her pious life in an *epitaphium* that he composed some twenty years after her journey.[46] His account of Paula—no doubt heightened and idealized to suit his exegetical purposes—describes her transformation from a self-indulgent patrician to a philanthropic recluse. He uses the *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae* (404) to display brilliantly the Christian rhetoric of inversion, the reworking of Roman Republican virtues, and the comparison of patrician women to the charitable widows of holy scripture.[47] Jerome presents Paula's sacred biography in the form of a letter to her daughter, Eustochium, who was also an ascetic. Jerome's narrative of Paula's life employs the classical genres of funeral elegy, panegyric, and biography.[48] Like Suetonius, the biographer of the Caesars, Jerome arranges his *vita* topically, focusing on family, voyages, administration, and personal habits, each of which he inverts in the service of Christian rhetoric. In many respects, Jerome's symbolic chronicle overturns classical gender constructions: Paula abandons her children, makes an independent pilgrimage to Egypt and the Holy Land, constructs monasteries in Bethlehem, studies languages and scripture, administers a religious community, and engages in rigorous *askesis*. Jerome, however, moderates this radical portrait of his disciple's spirituality by introducing the image of the chaste widow from sacred discourse, Pauline directives on the role of women in the church, and the theology of the cosmetic.

Jerome begins his *Vita Paulae* by detailing the holy woman's splendid aristocratic lineage. Paula's family, the exegete states, is the blood kin of the scions of the Republic, the Gracchi and Scipii, and the *Iliad*'s Agamemnon. Paula marries Toxotius, also from a senatorial family, and gives birth to five children. After the death of Toxotius, Paula dedicates herself to the life of self-abnegation. Jerome depicts her imitation of the charitable widow praised by Christ. Paula depletes her ancestral inheritance and engages in spectacular acts of charity, for, as Jerome exclaims, "what dying poor man did she not wrap in her own vestments?"[49] And like the wealthy women in the book of Kings, the gospels, and Acts, Paula provides sanctuary for important holy men who attend Roman church councils.[50] These men inspire her to travel to the deserts of Egypt and Palestine. Along with her daughter, Eustochium, she departs from Italy in the mid-380s.

Paula's *itinera* to Pontia, Cyprus, Antioch, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nitria in Egypt fit the symbolic pattern of other charitable women's journeys to the sacred sites of Christian history.[51] She visits the island of Pontia and prays at a shrine dedicated to the early patrician martyr, Flavia Domitilla, who had been banished by Domitian because she was a professed Christian.[52] Paula, Jerome claims, tours the cells that had been inhabited by Flavia during her "long martyrdom."[53] The patrician widow then visits her spiritual mentor, Bishop Ephiphanius, in Cyprus. While in Cyprus, Paula frequents the local monasteries and bequeaths money to each.[54] She then travels to Antioch in search of another famous holy man, Paulinus, after which she leaves Antioch riding a donkey instead of being carried by eunuchs.[55] From Antioch, she continues to the Holy Land where the proconsul of Palestine offers her official lodging, which she refuses in favor of a stark cell. In Palestine she tours the holy places of Hebrew and Christian scripture, particularly sites associated with biblical women, such as Caesarea, where the four virgin daughters of Philip prophesied (Acts 21.8–9), Diospolis, where Peter raised the charitable widow Dorcas (Acts 9.36–41), the home of Mary and Martha, who sheltered and served Christ (Luke 10.38–42), and the well where Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman (John 4.7–30). Like Helena before her, Paula focuses on places associated with the birth, ministry, and resurrection of Christ. She journeys to Emmaus, where the resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples (Luke 24.13–53), and she visits Christ's sepulcher, the holy cross, the scourging column, and the stable of the nativity.[56]

During her pilgrimage, Paula experiences a number of ecstatic visions. As she stands before the cross, she beholds the body of the dead Christ hanging upon it.[57] She kisses the boulder that the angel had rolled away from the tomb (Matthew 28.2; Mark 16.3–5; Luke 24.2–3; John 20.1). In the Holy Sepulcher, the matron licks the cold stones upon which Christ's corpse had lain.[58] In Bethlehem, Paula mystically envisions Jesus' early life, from his birth to the flight into Egypt. Obviously, early pilgrimage was more than a visual experience; it involved all of the senses and often resulted in a ritual absorption of the sacred events that had occurred at the pilgrimage sites.[59] For Paula, the Holy Sepulcher, the cross, and the Cave of the Nativity were all "living icons" of the faith where mystical experience continuously recreated sacred narrative.[60]

After her vision of Christ's birth and resurrection, Paula sails to Egypt to visit the Egyptian God-men at Nitria, where a throng of ascetics and bishops greet the austere matriarch.[61] She visits the cells of numerous hermits, and Jerome declares that she perceives Christ in the countenance of each one. After her tour of the humble dwellings of the great heroes of the desert, Paula returns to Bethlehem, where she lives in a hostel, wears the garb of a simple servant, and refuses to enter the Roman baths. She sleeps on the hard ground and covers her body with a goat-hair blanket. In Bethlehem, Paula serves as a spiritual mother for the noble women under her charge, while in her convent, she studies Hebrew, Greek, and theology.

In 404, the fifty-six-year-old Paula takes to her bed with a serious illness. Her daughter Eustochium nurses her mother both physically and spiritually, alternating between Paula's chamber and the Cave of the Nativity, where she prostrates herself and prays to Christ to allow her to accompany her mother in death. Jerome is present when Paula makes the *signum crucis* over her lips and commends her spirit to the heavenly bridegroom.[62] Her funeral is a lavish affair, attended by the bishop of Jerusalem, priests, monks, and virgins, who chant psalms in Greek, Latin, and Syriac. After a week-long ceremony, Paula is buried beneath the church located next to the Cave of the Nativity.[63] Jerome informs the virgin Eustochium that her mother's life was not merely one of self-abnegation, it was a life of slow martyrdom.[64] At the end of the *vita*, Jerome bids farewell to Paula, telling the dead woman that his little *epitaphium* will be a monument that will outlast those built from precious metals.[65]

One of the main preceptive purposes of Jerome's *Life of Paula* is to overturn the classical *topos* of the pious Roman matron. By inverting the traditional norms of the Roman aristocracy, Jerome presents a radical portrait of his spiritual pupil. Paula's holy life represents a vindication of Christ's teaching that "you cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16.13).

The literary construction of the ideal classical matron centered on women's role in the family, which involved worshiping family cults, caring for a husband, rearing children, and maintaining the estate.[66] Jerome remakes this traditional family-centered *topos* into a God-centered, charismatic model. The hagiographer begins with a description of Paula's noble lineage, but then states that her rejection of this illustrious, Republican genealogy glorifies God. She reluctantly produces children for Toxotius, but in doing so she fulfills Jerome's teaching that marriage is acceptable because it produces more virgins for the church.[67] Jerome asserts that Paula "preferred Bethlehem over Rome and having fled her golden dwelling, she exchanged it for a shapeless one formed of vile mud."[68] She forsakes her *domus* to go on a pilgrimage, just as she replaces affections for her earthly husband with love for a divine groom who calls out to her: "Arise my love" (Song of Songs 2.10).[69] Her most intimate physical experiences occur in Christ's tomb where she rolls about on the floor in an ecstatic frenzy.[70]

Two of Paula's children, Pammachius and Eustochium, took up the life of self-abnegation, and it is to them that Jerome addresses post-mortem eulogies of their mother.[71] Her granddaughter, "little Paula," Jerome proclaims, is destined to follow Paula's charismatic life, for even as a baby she miraculously sang Alleluia from her cradle.[72] Paula's maternal instincts, however, are focused not on her children but on her spiritual disciples and on the Baby Jesus, whom she mystically envisions sleeping in his cradle in Bethlehem.[73] Jerome professes that the widow's abandonment of her children was "against nature" (*hoc contra iura naturae*); yet in doing so, Paula adheres to Christ's celestial commandment to forsake relations and property to earn life eternal (Mark 10.29–30).[74]

Jerome's most dramatic reversal of the classical *topos* of the Roman matron is his depiction of Paula's impoverishment of her heirs. Roman legislation insured the smooth transfer of property and incomes between generations, but by ignoring ancestral custom, though not legal obligation, Paula earns treasure in heaven.[75] Jerome emphasizes that Paula knowingly deprives her children of their inheritance and leaves the pious Eustochium in debt.[76] The Roman matrons of classical discourse also practiced philanthropy and expended vast sums on widows, orphans, and the poor. Jerome ridicules such women for lavishing money on flatterers and living in luxury.[77] In contrast, Paula's charity is unmitigated and uncontrolled. She intends to become a beggar. In an excess of zeal, she even borrows more money at interest to fuel her insatiable desire to throw off the burdens of wealth.[78] In a short time, her appearance and habits reflect Paula's squandering of her family's wealth. She exchanges her patrician silks for rank goat hair, neglects the baths, and reduces her body to squalor. She refuses a soft bed in favor of an animal-hair mat and fasts to remake her aristocratic body into a vessel of repentance. Paula prefers God's professional poor—hermits, monks, and virgins—over senators. She even rejects the hospitality of the proconsul of Palestine, an old family friend.[79] Paula studies Hebrew, scripture, and the patristics, neglecting classical poets and grammarians. Her death, funeral, and burial further alienate the matron from her Roman ancestry, as she is entombed not in a family mausoleum but with Christ in Bethlehem. Paula's mourners include her spiritual family (comprised of bishops, nuns, monks, and the poor), who bemoan the loss of their "mother and nurse."[80] Jerome thus uses the traditional genre of funeral eulogy to applaud Paula for rejecting the values of the Roman *domus* and embracing those of Christ's sepulcher.[81]

Throughout the *vita* Jerome equates Paula to the charitable women of the Bible. Like the widow of Zarephath and the wealthy woman of Shunem (1 Kings 17.8–13; 2 Kings 4.8–10), Paula offers her Roman *domus* to traveling holy men, and she supports monasteries in Cyprus, Egypt, and the Holy Land. In Jerome's rendition, she is the poor widow whom Christ praises for her charity, for Paula "disinherited herself upon earth so that she might find an inheritance in heaven."[82] Paula, who ministers to the poor and instructs her virgins on clothwork, is also the Roman personification of the Hebrew charitable woman who spins wool and extends her hand to the destitute (Proverbs 31.19–20).[83] Jerome compares Paula to the widow Dorcas from Acts; during Paula's funeral ceremony "the widows and the poor showed the garments that Paula had given them," just as Dorcas's mourners displayed her handmade garments to the apostle Peter (Acts 9.36–42).[84]

This homiletic image of Paula also reinforces the pastoral epistles' commandments concerning the role of women in the church. Jerome describes Paula as submissive and silent, welcoming the scriptural authority of men.[85] Her symbolic life personifies the teachings of 1 Timothy (2.11–12): "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent." 2 Timothy (3.6–7) warns that certain women are easy prey for profligate preachers who entice "weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth." Jerome states that a depraved heretic had attempted to seduce Paula by attacking infant baptism and bodily resurrec-

tion. Paula wisely refused to confront the apostate and begged the learned Jerome to intervene on her behalf.[86] Both Paula's exegetical modesty and her recourse to the wiser male conform to Jerome's notion of the evangelical commandments concerning Christian widows: "She must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way" (1 Timothy 5.10). She is the opposite of the impious widow described in 1 Timothy (5.5–6), who is "self-indulgent" and therefore "dead even while she lives." In fact, the *Life of Paula* teaches other aristocratic women how to eradicate feminine self-indulgence and remake the patrician body into a vessel of grace.

Jerome's concluding lesson in the *Vita Paulae* concerns the patristic theology of the cosmetic. Paula's life is spiritual medicine (*remedium*) for the extravagance of classical Roman matrons because her philanthropy and *askesis* eliminate women's natural propensities toward bodily sin. As a master of cosmetic rhetoric, Jerome claims that Paula ravaged her body to punish her flesh for its former adherence to avarice and self-indulgence. Paula reportedly told Jerome that she must disfigure her face since it had once been painted with rouge and white lead; that she must mortify her body, which had enjoyed years of sensual gratification; that she must scar her cheeks with a river of tears to obliterate hours spent in merriment; that she must don a mantle of fetid animal hair as penance for her former opulent garb; and that she must now serve Christ as she had formerly satisfied her earthly husband.[87] Jerome uses the ascetic image of Paula to counter the negative stereotype of the self-indulgent matron, who veils the outside of her body with jewels and fine silks but leaves her soul full of "rotting bones."[88] Asceticism reduces Paula's body to a skeletal state in the service of reversing Eve's fall from grace and exterminating the postlapsarian feminine vices of vanity, avarice, and lust. Jerome's depiction of the Roman matron mortifying her flesh is a lesson for his patrician contemporaries on the necessity of refashioning the body into a vessel of repentance.

The *Life of Paula* transforms traditional Roman virtues into Christian *charismata* and recasts the charitable patrician as one of the wealthy widows of sacred discourse. It features the submission of women to the authority of holy men and reinforces the patristic theology of the cosmetic. Like Eusebius's *Life of Helena*, Jerome's sacred biography of Paula appeals to ascetic-minded Christians and educated Romans alike, but its resonance with those audiences was surely subtle and disturbing. On the one hand, a Roman reader would have admired aspects of Paula's piety. Eustochium, the only offspring who labored with Paula, is shown by Jerome to exemplify ancestral filial obligations of "obedience, support, and company."[89] Paula herself is depicted as invariably chaste, charitable, and respectful of male authority.[90] In this regard, she is a Christian counterpart of Lucretia, the ideal matron of Roman literature, whose piety is evident in her weaving and whose vow of chastity leads to her death.[91] Even the ascetic-minded Christian would have to acknowledge that certain Roman virtues, the fruit of an ancient pagan tradition, spoke to Christian concerns. On the other hand, a Roman audience certainly would have been deeply scandalized by Paula's behavior—abandoning her children, squandering their inheritance, forsaking her patriarchal *domus*, and exalting Bethlehem over Rome, the *caput mundi*. Jerome clearly intended to shock a conventional Roman audience with his depiction of a matron of the senatorial order licking the stones of Christ's sepulcher and writhing ecstatically on its floor. Nothing could be more alien to the moderation and discretion treasured by traditional Romans.

Jerome's portrait of Paula thus embodies considerable tension, appealing in a certain way to Roman pieties in the very act of affronting them. Paula's sacred fiction is structured both to evoke recognition of continuity between Roman values and Christian commitments and to force the reader to contemplate the abyss between the old way of life and the new dispensation. The historical Paula, whatever she may have been like and whatever she actually did, disappears irretrievably in that gap.

Melania: Through the Eye of a Needle

The *Life of Melania the Younger* extends the spiritual motifs established in the sacred biographies of Helena and Paula. The *vita*, by her confessor, the priest Gerontius, takes the hagiographical *topos* of the abstemious, charitable woman to its charismatic extreme while adhering to the patterns of classical panegyric, biography, and Hellenistic romance.[92] Melania was a member of one of the most prominent senatorial families of the late Roman Empire and her grandmother, the "thrice-blessed" Melania the Elder, was an ascetic, pilgrim, and a patron of monasticism in Jerusalem.[93] Gerontius, who accompanied the younger Melania on her travels to Africa, Constantinople, and the Holy Land, provides an allegorical account of one patrician woman's descent into symbolic poverty and extreme asceticism. More than any other late antique holy woman's life, Melania's *vita* usurps sacred *topoi* of the male priesthood. Melania engages in spectacular acts of philan-

thropy and astounds the imperial family with her miraculous way of life. Yet Gerontius appears to be ambivalent toward his benefactor's unrivaled patronage of the church, and he consistently pairs her charitable deeds with Jesus' teachings on the dangers of attempting to buy salvation (Matthew 6.1–2, 7.13; Luke 18.24–25). In the *vita*, Gerontius is criticizing the spirit of Melania's *caritas*: "If I give away all I have and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13.3).

Gerontius begins the *Vita Melaniae* by claiming that his heroine had attacked the sins of senatorial rank by entering the angelic life and by despising the world.[94] Melania's external way of life and physical appearance exemplify her piety; she engages in intense vigils, sleeps on the ground, mistreats her body, and wears inexpensive clothes. In her youth, Melania vows herself to eternal marriage to Christ, although her family forces her at age fourteen (c. 399) to marry the patrician, Valerius Pinian.[95] Melania tries to persuade Pinian that they should remain chaste, but he insists she bear two children to inherit the couple's vast patrimony. Melania gives birth to a girl, and afterwards begins to mortify her flesh by refusing to go to the baths and by wearing rough goat hair under her patrician silks. Pinian persists in his desire to have another heir, and bishops advise Melania that she should adhere to the apostle Paul's injunction that those who are already married should uphold their wedding contract (1 Corinthians 7.27). Melania submits to the will of the holy advisors and becomes pregnant once again. She spends the night before giving birth in her private oratory, where she keeps the vigil for the feast of Saint Lawrence and prays to God that he deliver her from worldly burdens.[96] The next day, she gives birth to a son who immediately dies. Melania thereupon becomes so despondent that Pinian begs God to restore his wife's health. Her depression impels Pinian to take a vow of chastity, and when their daughter dies, the couple becomes zealously ascetic. Melania celebrates her long-awaited charismatic life by renouncing all her lavish silk clothing.[97]

Both parental opposition to their new, abstemious lifestyle and the threat of barbarian invasions cause Pinian and Melania eventually to flee Rome. The twenty-year-old Melania and her slightly older husband move into one of their family's villas outside the city. On the suburban estate, the couple begin their *askesis* and dress in sordid clothing.[98] The hagiographer explains that they do not immediately imitate the austerities of the Egyptian and Syrian desert, preferring instead a gradual taming of their pampered flesh.[99] They open their *domus* as a hostel for travelers and, like the Augusta Helena, they visit the sick, relieve the sufferings of the poor, and free prisoners. The hagiographer reports that Pinian's brother, Severus, attempts to thwart the couple's dissipation of the family's patrimony by inducing their suburban slaves to revolt.[100] Melania, through the mediation of holy bishops, gains an audience with the Empress Serena to head off slave disturbances in her various estates, which are scattered throughout Spain, Italy, Africa, and Britain.[101]

Serena, moved by the physical appearance of the austerely dressed Melania, agrees to intervene on her behalf and informs Emperor Honorius of the machinations of Pinian's brother. The emperor decrees that all of Melania's and Pinian's provincial properties would be sold by local officials, with the couple receiving the total proceeds.[102] In return for Serena's patronage, Melania and Pinian offer her gifts, but the devout empress responds that receiving benefactions from saints is an act of sacrilege because it robs the poor of future alms.

Gerontius itemizes Melania's and Pinian's rejection of the burdens of enormous wealth and their spiritual rebirth as God's poor. Pinian's annual income is 120,000 pieces of gold in addition to the payments from the sale of Melania's properties. The sacred biographer enumerates the charitable distribution of the holy couple's entire income.[103] He even describes with lavish detail one of their most luxurious estates, which included sixty-two households, expensive statues, and an enormous pool from which bathers could view the sea.[104] The saintly patricians sell this palatial estate just before the barbarian invasions,[105] and Melania uses the proceeds to purchase monasteries, decorate altars with silks and silver, and buy islands, which she then turns over to holy hermits.[106] When the Gothic warlord Alaric enters Italy and ravages Roman suburban estates, Melania and Pinian flee to North Africa. Before they reach the coast of Africa, they assist an island that has been blockaded by the Goths by offering the invaders a ransom of 2,500 gold coins. They also provide an additional 500 coins to feed the starving inhabitants.[107]

Pinian and Melania arrive in North Africa (410), sell their remaining property there, and engage in ministry to the poor. When they visit important bishops, including Augustine of Hippo and Alypius of Thagaste, they are advised to use their money to build and finance monasteries in North Africa in order to obtain a "memorial in both heaven and earth."[108] They choose to live in Alypius's town of Thagaste, where Melania occupies herself with the study of scripture, the decoration of Alypius's church with costly goods, and the construction of two large monasteries.[109] Upon completion, Melania provides each monastery with an income to support 80 monks and 130 nuns.

According to Gerontius, this largess finally relieves Melania of most of

her earthly riches. At last she can devote herself to matters of the spirit and to governing her convent at Thagaste. He recounts the saint's fasts and meals of moldy bread, her devotion to scriptural exegesis, her fascination with the *Lives* of the desert fathers, her strict administration of the women's community, and her sackcloth bed and vigils.[110] Amid all this activity, her *askesis* rivals that of the most austere hermits of the Syrian desert. She immures herself in a small wooden box and prays without being able to move.[111] In Gerontius's *vita*, Melania is an awe-inspiring ascetic, a proficient scribe, a linguist, a model abbess, and a dedicated missionary. Gerontius maintains that the humble Melania describes herself as a "useless servant," fit only to wash the feet of saints.[112]

Melania rules over her monastery in Thagaste for seven years before she decides to take up the *via crucis* to Jerusalem (c. 416–417). Pinian, Melania, and her mother, Albina, stay at the Constantinian church of the Holy Sepulcher and employ local officials to distribute alms on their behalf.[113] By this time, Gerontius emphasizes, the couple is so liberated from the burden of riches that they consider enrolling themselves on the church's poor registry.[114] Eventually Melania determines to make the journey to the Egyptian desert to witness the ascetic lives of Christ-like hermits. She finances the pilgrimage with money from the liquidation of her Spanish holdings.[115] Before leaving for Egypt, Melania instructs her mother to build a small cell on the Mount of Olives so that she can move into it when she returned to Jerusalem. In Egypt, Melania distributes gold to God's unblemished anchorites, visits the cells of famous holy men, and meets with the abbot of Tabennisi. She also makes the arduous journey to the birthplace of Christian monasticism, Nitria, where the holy fathers welcome her "as if she were a man."[116]

Upon her return to Jerusalem, Melania secludes herself in the tiny cell her mother has completed on the Mount of Olives. Sitting on sackcloth and ashes, she refuses all visitors except Albina, Pinian, and her cousin Paula, who come to seek Melania's spiritual advice.[117] Gerontius claims that Melania endures fourteen years of strict *askesis* in this narrow vault and that, when she finally emerges, he sees huge lice fall from her sackcloth.[118] After the death of her mother, Melania establishes a women's monastery in Jerusalem, humbly relinquishing the administration of the ninety-member convent to another woman.[119] The convent is devoted to the conversion of prostitutes to the life of holy chastity, and Melania gives sermons to the sisters on the virginity of the soul and the requisite spotlessness of the brides of Christ.[120] She also erects an oratory and altar in the monastery

and obtains the relics of the prophet Zechariah, the protomartyr Stephen, and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste.[121]

While the holy woman is busy with these various projects, her earthly husband and spiritual brother, Pinian, dies (c. 432). Melania enshrines his remains in an aposteleion she had constructed, and she descends into it to pray and keep vigils for four years. Gerontius contends that when Melania emerges from this period of intense mourning she directs him to procure stones for a new monastery to be built on the Mount of the Ascension.[122] She also commissions the monks of the Mount of the Ascension and the aposteleion to chant the liturgy for both Albian and Pinian. After completion of the second *coenobium* in Jerusalem, Melania and Gerontius travel to Constantinople to convert the holy woman's uncle Volusian, a former Roman prefect.[123]

On their way to the capital of the eastern empire, Melania enacts the first miracle of the *vita*: her prayers impel an official in Tripoli to allow the pious entourage to transport animals to Constantinople without proper documentation.[124] Gerontius observes that Melania later heals the Empress Eudocia's twisted ankle, exorcizes two female demoniacs, and miraculously aborts a dead fetus.[125] Melania remains in Constantinople for forty days, during which she enjoys the hospitality of the imperial chamberlain (*prepositus sacri cubiculi*) and impresses the imperial court with her charismatic appearance. Melania carries through the conversion of her uncle Volusian, and, immediately after his baptism and sudden death, an intense pain in her foot miraculously disappears. Indeed, Melania so inspires the imperial court that the Empress Eudocia subsequently visits her in the Holy Land.[126] At Sidon, Eudocia meets Melania at the martyrion of Saint Phocas, which was traditionally believed to have been the abode of the humble Canaanite woman whom Christ converted (Matthew 15.22–28). Eudocia acknowledges Melania as her spiritual mother and accompanies her back to Jerusalem, where the empress, in imitation of the Augusta Helena, mingles with Melania's virgins as if she were one of them.[127] The empress's submission to Melania's spiritual authority underscores the saint's elevated status in the eastern court.

At the end of the *vita*, Melania embarks on her last pilgrimage. She and her cousin Paula journey to Bethlehem to participate in the festival of the Holy Nativity.[128] Upon her return to the convent in Jerusalem, Melania preaches at the festival of the protomartyr Stephen. Before she dies (December 31, 439), she entrusts Gerontius with the supervision of her male monasteries.[129] She is entombed in the oratory she had dedicated to

the holy martyrs. The mourners spend the night singing psalms and reading from scripture, and Gerontius assures his audience that the apostles, prophets, and martyrs welcome this extraordinary matron into their celestial choir.

The *Life of Melania the Younger* is simultaneously an unprecedented account of one woman's authority within the late antique church and a striking narrative of the inversion of classical gender precepts. Melania's childhood misogamy and later vow of chastity contravene the celebrated maternal role of Roman patrician women. Her marriage is unconventional by late antique standards in that she controls her own destiny, finances, and travel. The most fundamental gender reversal in the *vita* occurs in the relationship between Melania and her husband. The hagiographers of widowed female patrons, such as Paula, Helena, and Olympias, were not forced to consider how to portray the relationship between husband and abstemious wife. In the *Life of Melania the Younger*, the hagiographer reduces Pinian to a passive subordinate who follows his wife's lead. Pinian is the "helpmeet" (*prostatis*) of the charismatic Melania, and there is no corresponding *Life of Pinian*, however saintly he supposedly was. Melania's husband barely utters an independent word after his conversion. In contrast, Melania hectors Pinian into celibacy, lectures him on asceticism, and upbraids him for his spiritual weaknesses. Melania is the charismatic leader revered by empresses and bishops, while Pinian is merely enrolled as one of her obedient acolytes.

By rigorously punishing her flesh with strict fasting, rough goat hair, and night vigils, Melania's *askesis* parallels the austerity of desert hermits. She imprisons herself in cells so small that she can barely move. In Alexandria, a holy prophet recognizes Melania as housing the spirit of a saint.[130] Her reputation as a prophet and saint enables her to perform such salvific miracles as exorcism. She also possesses the capacity of literally becoming the crucified Christ. When Melania's unbaptized uncle Volusian falls ill, she miraculously absorbs his pain into her own body, and, with his baptism and death, it vanishes in the same wondrous way. The symbolic meaning of this passage of the *vita* is that Melania, like Christ on the cross, experiences physical suffering to redeem sinners.

As does Jerome in the *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*, Gerontius uses Melania's *vita* to chastise the profligacy of secular women. He implicitly attacks the indulgent, lavish lives of Roman women by itemizing Melania's austere wardrobe.[131] Melania reportedly grows to despise silk garments so much that merely touching them causes her skin to break out. She dresses

in Antiochene-style garments which are less expensive than the Cilician style, and she is buried in what hagiographers regarded as vestments of salvation and virtue—the tunic, veil, belt, and hood of important saints.[132] In fact, Melania's acceptance of the theology of the cosmetic refashions her body into a vehicle of conversion. Gerontius reports that it is Melania's austere appearance that moves the imperial court, inspires the empresses Serena and Eudocia, and converts her uncle Volusian to Christianity. He also uses Melania's audience with the Empress Serena to reinforce Pauline strictures concerning women's demeanor. According to the hagiographer, members of the senatorial class uncovered their heads when they visited the imperial family, but Melania violates this convention to obey Paul's directive that "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head" (1 Corinthians 11.5).[133] Melania also refuses to change her sordid mantle, appearing before the empress instead in her salvific garb. Gerontius thus radically inverts ancient Roman custom, while championing Pauline legislation concerning women's physical appearance.

In Melania's *vita*, Gerontius is not so much praising the saint for her independent adoption of ascetic dress as he is using the theology of the cosmetic to admonish all women for sinful indulgences. Melania's fierce rejection of fine apparel is therefore a backhanded acknowledgment of women's propensity toward decadent self-gratification. Her refashioned ascetic attire belies an ancient *topos* in sacred writings of the adorned woman as the embodiment of sin. Her exchange of silk for goat hair stands as a kind of universal repentance for her sex, and Gerontius emphasizes that her veil and hood of haircloth served as punishments for her past life of luxury.[134] Her lice-ridden sackcloth validates her renunciation of the world and, like the sinful harlots who end their lives in claustrophobic cells, Melania immures herself in a cramped wooden box to repent for her past life. It is significant that her convent specializes in the conversion of sinful women to the life of renunciation. According to Gerontius, Melania believes that her substitution of haircloth for silk is akin to an exorcism of feminine profligacy.[135]

Gerontius's model of female sanctity stresses almsgiving, a conventional way for ancient women to wield power. This model, of course, was also shaped by the mythological life of Helena, which made the construction of basilicas and endowment of holy places a requisite part of a holy woman's *vita*. But Jesus had warned his disciples about the perils of inappropriate philanthropy: "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father

who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you" (Matthew 6.1–2). In his *vita* of the saint, Gerontius suggests that Melania was indeed sounding her own trumpet.

The hagiographer also provides such an abundance of detail about Melania's wealth and charity that it belittles her benevolence. Gerontius reports that Melania and Pinian had an income of over 120,000 pieces of gold, that their house was so expensive that not even the empress could afford to buy it, that the couple effortlessly bought entire islands, and that they shrewdly sold almost all their western properties at the very moment of the Gothic invasions. In fact, Melania's dissolution of her ancestral landholding could be described as a clever real estate liquidation.[136] Melania's enormous wealth allows her to privatize the holy: she owns relics and altars, builds private chapels and *oratoria*, buries Pinian in her own aposteleion, and possesses several monasteries.[137] One sometimes has the impression reading Gerontius's narrative that North Africa and the Holy Land were virtually littered with the consequences of her philanthropy. Indeed, the hagiographer implies that Melania was buying her way into the sacred without a clear sense of the contradictions of her position and the inappropriate nature of her actions.

Although charity was a legitimate, albeit resented, method for ancient women to gain influence, it is clear from Gerontius that Melania employed her riches to enforce her will. She bribes servants not to reveal that she is avoiding the baths, pays young women to be chaste, and offers money to pagans who convert to Christianity.[138] As a wealthy woman accustomed to compliance with her desires, she evidently did not consider whether the behavior she purchased from the prostitute and the pagan reflected a commensurate change of heart. The first minor miracle of the *vita*, the release of Melania's animals in Tripoli, reinforces the image of the saint as an obtuse philanthropist. Gerontius reports that both Melania's striking sanctity and a generous tip encouraged a local official to let her beasts go.[139] Gerontius asserts that the devil had taunted Melania about buying her way into heaven, a warning that may reflect the anxieties he felt about her position as a free-spending pauper.[140]

Gerontius declares that Melania and Pinian experienced a vision in which they painfully pass through a narrow slot in a wall. Clearly, this vision derives from Jesus' warning about wealth as an obstacle to heavenly life: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many" (Matthew 7.13). It is very difficult "for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!

For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18.24–25). The vision of Melania (and Pinian) is relevant to the most unsettling story Gerontius relates about the patrician saint. During Melania's pilgrimage to the cells of famous anchorites in Egypt, she attempts to give them gold when she sees their meager possessions.[141] When one indignant recluse asks Melania what purpose gold possibly could serve in the desert, she advises him to use it for alms. In response, the hermit cruelly chastises the heroine of the *vita* by pointing out that the poor did not retreat to the desert to then beg from ascetics who had rejected earthly wealth. Defiantly, the anchorite throws Melania's gold coins into a river. It is rare indeed for hagiographers to rebuke their own saints, who are generally admonished only for their behavior before conversion. Equally unusual is the word Gerontius uses to describe Melania's attempt to give alms to God's poor. He asserts that she gave gold to the hermit Hephestion, "on account of spiritual craftiness (*dià panourgías pneumatikēs*)."[142] The gospel of Luke (20.23) applies the term *panourgía* (cunning, craftiness, trickery) to the spies of the scribes and the chief priests, and Paul (1 Corinthians 3.19) uses the term to denounce those who place credence in the wisdom of this world and not the next. This revealing exchange between holy woman and venerable hermit suggests that Melania's understanding of the ascetic vocation is tenuous and that her connection with the inner circle of great holy men negligible.[143] Gerontius even goes so far as to liken the zealous benefactor to vain patrician women who travel to the Egyptian desert accompanied by a majestic retinue of eunuchs, animals, and churchmen.[144]

The hagiographer's ambivalent view of Melania was surely conditioned by his inclusion in her retinue and, having been appointed supervisor of her male monasteries, a recipient of her generosity. He is with her when she usurps the authority of the episcopacy by procuring relics of saints and martyrs, installing their remains in altars, reclothing sacrificial tables with silks, and preaching in her own sacred basilicas. He watches her order her family's silver collection to be turned into lavish church altars and observes her bestowal of these sacrificial tables on the deserving. He also sees great bishops such as Augustine and Alypius put in the dubious position of being the clients and economic dependents of a wealthy ascetic through Melania's financial patronage of North African basilicas and monasteries.

The most peculiar aspect of Gerontius's *vita* of Melania is his constant applause of the saint's poverty and asceticism in the context of her appar-

ently lifelong failure to rid herself of riches. Time and again, the hagiographer proclaims that Melania can finally embrace the ascetic life, all her wealth having been benevolently dispensed, only subsequently to portray his heroine acquiring more relics, endowing more temples, and paying for her retinue to visit yet another congeries of hermits. Even after fourteen years in a narrow vault on the Mount of Olives, Melania emerges not only with enormous lice on her sackcloth but with the wherewithal to endow a monastery, attend court in Constantinople, and obtain the relics of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste. Not long after she and Pinian contemplated enrolling themselves on the poor registry of the church in Jerusalem, she journeys to the Egyptian desert where she tries to foist gold on holy men. According to Gerontius, Melania was like the poor woman who offered Jesus her last copper coins, yet the hagiographer also informs his audience that Melania had fifty gold coins when she died—a princely sum at the time. In short, Gerontius's sacred fiction makes clear that Melania's "poverty" was more symbolic than real.

Of course, Gerontius may simply have been careless of consistency, and he may have been so impressed by the fortune Melania gave away that fifty gold coins seemed like a relative pittance. But it is more likely that Gerontius was truly ambivalent about his benefactor's deeds and thus could not avoid introducing tensions into his portrait of her. From his perspective, Melania did heroic good work and kept the ideal of the ascetic life before her. Despite her good intentions and relentless generosity, however, she failed to make the ultimate commitment that would have abolished the vices she formally abhorred. She was determined to force herself painfully through the eye of the needle, dispensing largess as she went, heedless of Jesus' teachings about the "narrow gate" and the devil's warning about buying her way into heaven. In doing so, she could not avoid becoming a scandal to the male hierarchy of the church, upon whom she bestowed so much charity. She never abdicated the role of a wealthy patrician woman bent on good deeds. With its ambivalence and inconsistencies, the *Life of Melania the Younger* stands as a late antique lesson on the depths of self-indulgence and superficiality that even the holiest of women must overcome to achieve their own redemption.

The *vitae* of Helena, Paula, and Melania highlight the prominent role of patrician women in the formulation of early Christian pilgrimage, the orchestration of the cult of the dead, the establishment of Bethlehem and Jerusalem as primary monastic sites, and the transmutation of Roman Republican values into Christian *charismata*. According to her legendary biographies, Helena became the unique arbiter of Christ's passion through her miraculous discovery of the wood of the cross. Her hagiographical image also served to humanize the militancy of Constantine's dominion over Rome: she is the Mary of a new empire, who dispenses the medicine of salvation throughout Christendom. The philanthropic and humble example of Helena influenced subsequent lives of patrician women who assumed the radical life of self-abnegation. Jerome's *Life of Paula* provides one of the most elaborate models of the inversion of Roman virtues: Paula destitutes her heirs, chooses mystical union with Christ over earthly marriage, reduces her elegant body to a withered corpse, and exalts the ascetics of Bethlehem over the senators of Rome. Gerontius's *Life of Melania the Younger* is an extraordinary account of how one patrician woman's philanthropy, missionary fervor, and salvific powers were accommodated within a male hierarchy.

These three lives, however, temper the iconoclastic power of Christian women by featuring the theology of the cosmetic, Pauline strictures on women's status in the church, submission to male authority figures, and the imitation of biblical women who serve holy men. The Helena myth reworks the discourse of the charitable widow of Hebrew and Christian scripture. Paula is the Roman Martha who ministers to holy men at table and the charitable wife of the book of Proverbs who extends her hand to the poor; she obeys Paul's pastoral epistles' commandment that women remain silent and submit to the authority of men. In contrast, Melania's life underscores the danger of female usurpation of male power. As a patrician philanthropist, she places holy men in the unusual position of being clients of a woman. Gerontius pairs Melania's outstanding ascetic deeds with her misguided charity. Finally, all three lives use the theology of the cosmetic in order to present their saints as vessels of repentance for the female sex. The *vitae* of Helena, Paula, and Melania serve as spiritual medicine for other aristocratic women who cling to the vices of vanity, lust, and self-indulgence.

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