Research Papers

“St. Jerome in His Study”
by Domenico Ghirlandaio, c. 1480
Female Asceticism: Pious Devotion and Challenge to Gender Expectations

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In a time when most men looked down upon women as the inferior and weaker sex and expected them to devote their lives mainly to the service of their husbands and other male leaders, an interesting group of women latched on to an ever-increasing religious movement stirring within the Roman Empire of the fourth century CE. This Christian movement, known as the Ascetic Movement, denied human pleasures, and many of its followers adopted a monastic lifestyle to assist in keeping themselves committed entirely to this rejection of pleasures. Mainly virgin or widowed noble women, part of patrician and aristocratic families, chose this path of a simple existence and self-control. These women became models for the ascetic lifestyle and devoted themselves entirely to God and His word rather than to earthly distractions. They created monasteries for women and men, traveled to the Holy Land, educated others and became permanent students of the holy word of God. They emerged from the woodwork...
of this traditionally male society and took on roles that appeared very dissimilar from the usual female roles. Their extreme way of life caused them to become something other than just simple mothers, wives, and homemakers. On occasion, these widows and virgins joined the company of men as equals, and sometimes their admirers thought of them as having transcended their own sex; some of them even achieved eventual sainthood within the Roman Catholic faith. Motivated by the desire to glorify God and achieve holiness and piety, this group of aristocratic Christian women chose the path of asceticism and challenged, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the traditional Roman female role to the extent that they sometimes even earned the title of being “honorary males.”

Contrary to popular thought, the ascetic movement did not only renounce sexual lust (porneia) or strictly adhere only to chastity, but it also renounced all earthly pleasures. The completely unselfish doctrine of asceticism denied any act of gratification and empowerment in order to attain a higher spiritual state.¹ In order for their spiritual and religious facets to grow in strength, the ascetic disciples ignored the sinful distractions of life at all costs. Ascetic followers avoided characteristics such as pride, greed, impatience, hate, and inhospitality and replaced those sinful traits with humility, love, and unselfishness. They ate simple and fulfilling meals and avoided extravagance and gluttony; some ascetic followers even went as far as to rarely eat meals or eat only small and simple

meals. They rejected lavish clothing and excessive possessions and replaced their ostentatious belongings with the simplest of things, mostly simple sacks or frocks. Some adherents gave away their entire collection of possessions or donated them to the Christian cause, but not all of the followers behaved in such an extreme way. To help the faith grow, some ascetic adherents donated their land or property for the use of monasteries or academies for the faith. To avoid becoming greedy with money, the ascetic followers gave alms consistently and never spent money in a wasteful manner. A certain number of followers even lived life in complete poverty, contributing all their belongings to God and leaving themselves practically nothing. They uttered prayers regularly and devoted most of the day to studying the scriptures. Some followers even learned Hebrew so they could more fully understand and delve into the scriptures. A few followers traveled far into the desert and became hermits while others voyaged to the Holy Land to begin a new life. No matter what methods used to attain an ascetic lifestyle, asceticism usually remained unselfish and fulfilling in a spiritual way. Four influential women—Macrina the Younger, Marcella, Paula, and Melania the Younger—emerged as strong leaders from this movement of unselfish ascetic followers. Though each of these women lived completely different lives, they all devoted their time to God and his commandments in extreme ways and served as inspirations for generations to come.

The first of these influential women, Macrina the Younger, also known

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2 Valantasis, 794.
3 Ibid.
as the Mother of Greek Monasticism, took her first breath as the eldest child of
Christian parents in around 325 CE in modern-day Turkey.\(^4\) Gregory of Nyssa
wrote, “a woman was the starting-point of our story, if indeed one may call her a
woman, for I do not know whether it is appropriate to call someone a woman
who was by nature a woman, but who, in fact, was far above nature.”\(^5\) Gregory,
Macrina’s devoted brother, decided to write about her life and much of what is
known about Macrina comes from his writings.\(^6\) His documents written about
their family indicate that she received a very prosperous and studious upbringing.
Her father, a very renowned man, practiced law, and her mother, Emmelia, gave
her a thorough Christian education at home.\(^7\) Furthermore, Macrina learned a
great deal from her well-known Christian grandmother, Saint Macrina the Elder.\(^8\)
In his writing, Gregory spoke of her as a person undeserving of the label of a
weak female: “this person was a woman—if indeed she was a woman, for I am
not sure it is right to refer to someone by their sex when she has transcended her
sex.”\(^9\) Because of her intelligence and beauty, Macrina did not go unnoticed in
her community.\(^10\) She blossomed into a well-bred, virtuous, exceptionally

2010), 20.

\(^5\) Gregory of Nyssa, “A Letter from Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa on the Life of Saint
Macrina,” in *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism
in the First Six Christian Centuries*, ed. Joan M. Petersen (Kalamazoo, Michigan:

\(^6\) Joyce Salisbury, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World* (Santa Barbara,
California: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 568.

\(^7\) White, 20.

\(^8\) Salisbury, 568.

\(^9\) White, 22.

\(^10\) Ibid., 20.
beautiful and delightfully modest woman. At the age of twelve, she entered into an engagement with a man handpicked by her father.\textsuperscript{11} Not long after their engagement, Macrina’s young fiancé died and suitors lined up to receive the chance of marrying her. Macrina proved herself a headstrong and determined young woman by rejecting all the offers of marriage put before her. Moreover, she claimed she would remain a widow (a virgin one at that) forever and devote the rest of her life to God.\textsuperscript{12} This countercultural choice appears to have been her own decision, one possibly influenced by the faith of her grandmother and her Christian upbringing, not a decision made based on exposure to male ascetics.\textsuperscript{13}

After her decision to lead a simple life, she began devoting herself to serving her mother by helping to manage her mother’s property and raise her younger brothers whom she inspired in their spiritual lives.\textsuperscript{14} Because of her holiness, generosity, and love of learning, she attracted many women who came to live with her and assume the same life of simplicity, humility and Christian devotion.\textsuperscript{15} When her father passed away, Gregory explained that Macrina replaced him as head of the household and successfully converted her mother to the ascetic style of life by inspiring her mother to adopt a plain existence separated from material possessions.\textsuperscript{16} Macrina then established frugality,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Salisbury, 569.
\textsuperscript{13} Gregory, 54.
\textsuperscript{14} White, 20.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 26.
\end{flushright}
worship, study, manual work, and unceasing prayer as the main rules of the household.17

Macrina remained not only a leader in ascetic life to her mother and other women, but she also succeeded in converting her brothers Basil and Peter and founded a monastery for men and women in Annesi.18 She involved herself in charity, aiding starving children, and intense Biblical study. Additionally, Gregory spoke of her as a sort of “male woman” or “honorary male” that led others to a life of simplicity and devotion.19 She filled her days with extreme asceticism and prayer, intentional poverty, charity, compassion and tranquility until she died in around 380 CE with Gregory close by her side.20 By devoting herself to the ascetic movement, Macrina unknowingly challenged the traditional female role of the Roman society. She controlled her own household, lived a simple life free from earthly pleasures, converted men to her faith and earned the admiration of many male Christians (especially her brother). Macrina truly represented the antithesis of the average Roman noblewoman.

Another female leader during the ascetic movement, Marcella, paralleled Macrina’s footsteps by also devoting her life to God and defying the traditional female role. However, Marcella adopted this lifestyle due to the leadership of male Christians, as opposed to Macrina who chose this path based on her own

19 Burrus, 58.
20 Salisbury, 569.
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piety. Marcella, born in Rome in around 325 CE, became one of the first Christian women to accept a monastic lifestyle and establish a domestic religious community there.\(^2\) Not much is known about Marcella besides what Saint Jerome wrote about her in a few of his letters. According to Jerome, before Marcella dedicated herself to the ascetic teachings, she married a good husband and took on the duties of a wife. But everything changed when her husband died after only seven months of marriage.\(^2\) Instead of accepting the proposal of an older and wealthier man, Marcella decided to dedicate the rest of her life to chastity. The teachings and writings of Athanasius of Alexandria and his successor, Peter II, possibly first inspired Marcella to make the choice to dedicate her life to purity and unselfishness.\(^3\) As Jerome stated, it was “from these that Marcella heard of the life of the blessed Antony, then still alive, and of the monasteries in the Thebaid founded by Pachomius, and of the discipline laid down for virgins and widows.”\(^4\) Moreover, Athanasius’ work as a bishop and ascetic lifestyle perhaps motivated Marcella to become an avid student of the Bible.\(^5\) From then on, she chose to live a life of destitution, chastity and biblical study. Her mother, Albina, and later her companion Principia joined her and continued to live a simple life while inspiring other women to adopt a similar

\(^2\) Petersen, 101.
\(^2\) Ibid., 108.
\(^3\) Ibid., 101.


\(^5\) Petersen, 101.
life, among them Paula and Eustochium. In a time when Romans considered wealth and possessions very important aspects of life, Marcella’s rejection of those ideals and acceptance of complete poverty seemed very queer and defiant to the rest of her society.

Besides her complete rejection of wealth, Marcella also took on other aspects of the ascetic lifestyle. In a lengthy letter to Principia, Jerome fully described the noble life of Marcella. He began by stating that Marcella took the ascetic doctrine to heart by rejecting wealth and rank; she sought the true dignity of poverty and meekness. She used her clothes to protect herself from the weather and not to show off her figure, she wore no gold or any kind of jewelry, she gave all of her money to the poor, she fasted regularly, and knew not the taste of wine. Marcella challenged the traditional Roman female role because, according to Jerome, “women of the world are accustomed to paint their faces with rouge and white-lead, to be resplendent in robes of silk, to pierce their ears and hang in them the costliest pearls of the Red Sea.” Besides rejecting the clothes and make-up of a noblewoman, she devoted herself to so much Biblical study that she exceeded many men in her knowledge of theology. Jerome pointed out that Marcella would often times debate with him over Biblical issues, and other men would sometimes ask her advice when a dispute arose over

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26 White, 58.
27 Petersen, 108.
28 Ibid., 110.
29 Petersen, 110.
30 Salisbury, 881.
Biblical matters. Jerome finished his letter by describing that Marcella died from wounds acquired from a severe beating; the beating occurred when Gothic soldiers ransacked her home during their conquest of Rome (around 410 CE). Besides his laments over her death, Jerome fully praised Marcella for everything she accomplished and considered her a woman of very great faith. Marcella proved herself a leader among the Christian faith, and she completely transcended her sex because, as Jerome stated, “in those days no highborn lady in Rome had made profession of the monastic life or had ventured—so strange and degrading did it then seem—publicly to call herself a nun.” Through patterning her life after the exemplar of male monasticism, she earned the respect of male church leaders like Jerome, and she provided motivation for other Christian women.

A close friend and confidant of Marcella, Paula the Elder, emerged as yet another leading female in the ascetic movement in fourth century Rome and further challenged the female role. While friends with Marcella, Paula’s entrance into asceticism more clearly paralleled Macrina’s journey, for Paula was influenced not by men but by her own dedication to God and the pious women around her. Paula entered life as a wealthy patrician (descendent of the Gracchi) in Rome around 347 CE. She and several other women frequently visited Marcella’s home, and Paula most likely gained her exposure to the doctrine of

\[31\] Petersen, 113.  
\[32\] White, 58.  
\[34\] Petersen, 123.
asceticism while there.\textsuperscript{35} She married Toxotius and bore him 4 daughters and one son.\textsuperscript{36} When he died, she decided to rededicate her life to a life of religion.\textsuperscript{37} Once again, most of the information available about Paula’s life exists in the writings of Jerome. Jerome sustained a very close relationship with Paula and her daughter, Eustochium, for quite a long time. She and Eustochium traveled through the Holy Land with Jerome and eventually settled in Bethlehem, where Paula would remain for the rest of her life in the monastery she founded. In a letter to Eustochium, Jerome praised Paula for her great faith and the poverty she brought upon herself by giving up all of her money.\textsuperscript{38} He even went so far as to state, “If all the members of my body were to be converted to tongues, and if each of my limbs were to be gifted with a human voice, I could still do no justice to the virtues of the holy and venerable Paula.”\textsuperscript{39} He then described how she gave up dazzling wealth in Rome for a mud house in Bethlehem. She treated everyone in a kind manner, and Jerome wrote, “What poor man, as he lay dying, was not wrapped in blankets given by her? What bedridden person was not supported with money from her purse?”\textsuperscript{40} Besides her characteristic of continual kindness, Jerome saw Paula as a person gifted with a great amount of humility. She also submitted fully to the ascetic lifestyle: she surrounded herself with virgins, wore

\textsuperscript{35} Petersen, 123.
\textsuperscript{36} Burrus, 61.
\textsuperscript{37} Petersen, 123.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{40} Jerome, “To Eustochium,” 129.
unremarkable clothing, rarely entered a bath, slept on a hard mat covered with goat’s hair, and spent most of the day in prayer. In many ways, Paula challenged the traditional female role by refraining from wearing make-up, dressing in fine clothes and styling her hair. She supposedly stated,

I must disfigure that face which contrary to God’s commandment I have painted with rouge, white lead and antimony. I must mortify that body which has been given up to many pleasures. I must make up for my long laughter by constant weeping. I must exchange my soft linen and costly silks for rough goat’s hair. I who have pleased my husband and the world in the past, desire now to please Christ.

Furthermore, Paula almost always forgot her sex, and thirsted for the chance to live among the male hermits and continue to sacrifice her life to God. Paula set up a monastery in Bethlehem and spent much of her life there with the other nuns. She used all of her money for others, and when she died she left Eustochium an overwhelming amount of debt to deal with. Paula, by the way she lived her life challenging traditional roles because of her extreme love for God, became a woman deserving the title of masculine and earned the respect and admiration of Saint Jerome.

Melania the Younger, the final female leader of the ascetic lifestyle, emerged as a major challenge to the female role in late fourth century Rome; for Melania, her grandmother proved to be the major influence shaping her

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41 Jerome, “To Eustochium,” 141.
42 Burrus, 64.
43 Ibid., 63.
44 Ibid., 64.
perspective. Gerontius, Melania’s biographer, praised this manly woman in his writings and stated, “Who would be able to give a worthy and clear account of the truly masculine acts of this blessed lady?” Melania began her life around 383 CE. At the age of fourteen, she married a man named Pinianus and became determined to make her life holier. At his urging, she bore him a son and a daughter, but both of their children died in infancy, and she felt as if their deaths signaled a message from God. Melania pled for him to leave behind his hope of heirs and reside with her as her spiritual brother rather than as a husband, and she also begged him to allow the gradual disposal of their vast family wealth. While waiting for Pinianus to give up the lavish lifestyle, Melania mortified her body by refusing to go to the baths and wearing goat hair under her patrician silks. After Pinianus agreed to devote himself to her way of life, she denounced all of her lavish clothing. She took a great deal of her silk garments, cut them up and transformed them into altar hangings. Likewise, Pinianus gave up his angora cloak for rough peasant attire. In addition to giving up her clothes, Melania began furiously fasting; it came to a point where she only ate on Saturdays and

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45 Palladius, 308.
47 White, 180.
49 Coon, 110.
50 Petersen, 294.
Sundays.\textsuperscript{51} She also dedicated most of her time to learning and memorizing the scriptures. She especially loved the Psalms, studying them daily and learning them by heart.\textsuperscript{52} Melania truly practiced a pious way of living and worshipping God as well as posing a challenge to the stereotypical female role.

Both Melania and Pinianus stemmed from wealthy senatorial families, and they both possessed a large fortune. Melania wished to dispose of their wealth, and eventually she succeeded and they both lived in great poverty.\textsuperscript{53} Gerontius recorded much of Melania’s life into a short account and much of what he wrote about her pointed to how much he truly respected her. Gerontius praised Melania and described her as possessing very masculine qualities. “It can truthfully be said that she was a woman of more than average feminine ability and that she had acquired a masculine, or rather, a heavenly cast of thought.”\textsuperscript{54} In around 408 CE, Melania and Pinianus left Rome for Sicily. After spending a couple of years there, they moved along to Africa for seven years. The couple finally settled in Jerusalem and stayed there.\textsuperscript{55} While Melania resided in Jerusalem, she founded a women’s monastery and a men’s monastery.\textsuperscript{56} Shortly after she founded the women’s monastery, Pinianus died and Melania secluded herself for quite a long time.\textsuperscript{57} She then set out to Constantinople to visit her

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Petersen, 295.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 295.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Gerontius, 320.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Petersen, 291.
\item \textsuperscript{55} White, 180.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Gerontius, 341.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Petersen, 293.
\end{itemize}
uncle and ended up converting him to the ascetic movement.\textsuperscript{58} Throughout her life, Melania gained the respect of the men she came in contact with. Additionally, she convinced her husband to take up a life of chastity and poverty, and she took on the role of the spiritual leader in the relationship; she also converted other men to the ascetic lifestyle. Because of her radical way of simplistic living (simple clothes, little food, etc.), she challenged the traditional female role and earned the title of a masculine individual.

The ascetic movement swept through Rome like a hurricane wind, bringing many noble Christian women into its grips. The movement attracted these women because they could become pious servants of God and dedicate their entire lives to him. But as they began stripping off the layers of extravagance and abundance from their lives, they challenged the traditional female role of Rome during that time.\textsuperscript{59} Macrina challenged this role by refusing to marry another man after her fiancé died and taking control of her own fortune. This caused her to earn respect from many men, and gain the title of “honorary male” from her brother Gregory. While Marcella made a choice similar to Macrina, she followed the conduct of male leaders; in contrast, Paula followed Marcella’s path rather than the model of male ascetics, and adopted a frugal life after her husband died. They challenged the female role by abandoning their clothing, hygiene, jewelry, possessions, and money. Paula even left behind a huge debt for her daughter to deal with. Similar to Macrina, Melania chose her

\textsuperscript{58} Petersen, 293.
\textsuperscript{59} Whether their challenge was intentional or unintentional will probably remain unknown.
own way to follow the ascetic faith, partially due to the influence of a pious grandmother. She gave away her family’s wealth, their clothing and all of their possessions. Regardless of what shaped their decision to choose the life of asceticism, these women proved impactful within Roman society, inadvertently challenging traditional gender roles with their piety and extreme dedication to God. As evidenced by the texts of ancient writers, some men considered these four nobles as masculine women, strong and independent. They attracted followers and brought many new people to the ascetic doctrine. This captivating ascetic movement in the fourth century Roman Empire left behind a reputation that still continues to this day. Furthermore, many of these “honorary males” masculine women earned eternal sainthood and remain considered some of the most influential leaders in the Christian ascetic movement.