

## Introduction



On the first Sunday of Lent, February 14, 1305, the Dominican friar Giordano da Pisa offered as an exemplum Christ's withdrawal to the desert (Matt. 4:1).<sup>1</sup> In the Gospel, Christ, having recently been baptized by John the Baptist, is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit. There, he faces formidable temptations at the hands of the devil. Enticed by material wealth and physical sustenance, Christ also undergoes a challenge to his ego during his forty days and forty nights in the desert. His heroic feat of self-denial is commemorated each year during Lent. Temptation is felt acutely in the Lenten season, a time of penance and self-renunciation, and the city, Giordano tells his listeners, is rife with enticements.<sup>2</sup> The only solution, Giordano argues, is to follow Christ's example and withdraw to the desert. The desert of the Bible, however, was a long distance away from the city of Pisa. To bring it nearer, Giordano reimagines the desert for his listeners. No longer is it a dry and barren wasteland, the native habitat of lions and panthers.<sup>3</sup> "The desert," says Giordano, "could be your cell, your house, your room; wherever you leave the world and reconnect with Christ in your house, the desert could

be a corner in your home."<sup>4</sup> Bringing the desert into a geographically and even temporally remote setting was not a new gesture. The desert had long been viewed as more metaphor than specific geographical location. Already in the fourth century, the church father and theologian Basil had equated the desert with the monastery. The monastery, Basil explained, is the true Carmel where Elias lived, the true desert where John the Baptist received the revelation of Christ and of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> What makes Giordano's conceptualization of the desert remarkable is that it extended outside the walls of the monastery. The spiritual ideal of withdrawing to the desert was now offered to the laity.

When Giordano invited his listeners to withdraw to the desert, he was not alone. The eremitic life—typified by the third- and fourth-century saints known as the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers—was presented as a spiritual ideal not only for mendicant friars who struggled to balance the *vita activa* with the *vita contemplativa*, but also for the laity, who were encouraged to embrace and imitate the Desert Fathers and Mothers by withdrawing to their own "desert" and devoting themselves to prayer, contemplation, and *lectio divina*, or meditative reading with

the goal of developing a closer relationship with God.<sup>6</sup> Coinciding with this resurgence of interest in the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers was the sudden and unprecedented emergence of images of the desert saints. With few exceptions, the *Vitae patrum* (*Lives of the Desert Fathers*) had inspired very little pictorial representation in the West. Much of the imagery that predates the fourteenth century is based on eastern exemplars of portrait likenesses of the most celebrated Desert Fathers.<sup>7</sup> The images that began to appear in the fourteenth century, however, go beyond portrait likenesses to constitute visual narratives that recount the saints' lives through sequences of illustrations. In a variety of media, every aspect of the desert saints' lives is depicted in exquisite detail, amplifying the reach and presence of the desert saints in the literary and visual culture of the period.

This study examines a singular witness to the rise of the eremitic ideal and its impact on the visual culture of late medieval Italy: New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.626, a richly illustrated fourteenth-century copy of the *Vitae patrum* from Naples.<sup>8</sup> While scholars have considered how images participated in the rise of the eremitic ideal by allowing the faithful to go *in eremo* (into the desert) and by working as *imagines agentes*, prompting the viewer to recall exempla heard previously in sermons or during the evening *collatio*, they have focused primarily on wall and panel paintings, leaving illustrated copies of the *Vitae patrum* unexamined.<sup>9</sup> But these illustrated copies, which are often far more extensive in their visual narratives than the pictorial programs of wall or panel paintings, deepen our understanding of certain aspects of the written *Lives* that are only alluded to in wall and panel paintings. Illustrated in the kingdom of Naples around the year 1336, Morgan MS M.626 is distinguished from other illuminated manuscripts both by

the quantity of the illustrations—272 images illustrate the lives of more than thirty Desert Fathers and Mothers—and by the characteristics of its visual narrative. The illuminators of the Morgan manuscript provide the viewer with an expansive visual narrative that depicts (and often recommends) the process by which the saint achieved his or her sanctity or closeness with God.

The remarkable illuminations in Morgan MS M.626 enable us to consider how the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, written in the fourth and fifth centuries, might have been made relatable and realizable for audiences of the fourteenth century. *Illuminating the "Vitae patrum"* not only sheds light on the enduring legacy of the desert saints and their impact on the West but also describes an important function of the images inspired by their lives. Taking the written *Lives* as their point of departure, the illuminations display selected scenes of the *Lives* that exemplify the desert saints' embrace of the contemplative life. In this way, the visual narrative emphasizes the value of the contemplative life and presents its various practices as virtues. By exploring how the rich narrative illustrations of M.626 instruct their viewers in spiritual virtue, this study reveals that the fourteenth-century reader did not have to withdraw to the wilderness to emulate the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Informed by the illuminated manuscript, he could attain their virtues by imitating their practices: cultivating a posture of total reliance on God, developing the skill of spiritual focus, and performing penance. In broadening our understanding of the *Lives*' applications, *Illuminating the "Vitae patrum"* offers a new way to consider the legacy of the Desert Fathers, showing how images in particular allowed the *Lives* to speak to new audiences.

To place Morgan MS M.626 within the context of the rise of the eremitic ideal, this introduction begins with a historical overview of the resurgence of interest in the

Desert Fathers at the dawn of the fourteenth century, shedding light on the use of images in the pursuit of a contemplative life. It then moves to a discussion of the Morgan manuscript, situating it within its Neapolitan context. While the illuminators drew from the rich visual culture of Angevin Naples, the Morgan manuscript is an exemplary and rare work; MS M.626 is the only extant copy of its making. It thus presents a unique opportunity to understand how the lives of the Desert Fathers were made engaging and accessible to the lay reader.

### The Resurgence of the Desert Fathers and the Rise of the Eremitic Ideal

Morgan MS M.626 was produced during a great resurgence of interest in the Desert Fathers that began in the thirteenth century. Obligated to combine the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*, mendicant friars sought to balance the increasing demands of a life devoted to ministering to the laity by turning, once again, to the ascetic hermit saints who had inspired their tradition.<sup>10</sup> Though the mendicants are notable for their idealization of the Desert Fathers, theirs were not the only religious orders that turned back to the models and guides that had inspired their tradition. The community and life propagated in the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* influenced the structure, the ethos, and the practices of several eremitic orders, such as the Camaldolese, the Vallombrosians, and the Carthusians.<sup>11</sup> Yet the mendicant orders' emulation and propagation of the lives of the Desert Fathers was particularly strong. The rise of the eremitic ideal is most notably seen in the hagiography that actively shaped these orders' practice and way of life. The Dominican-authored *Vitae fratrum* (ca. 1255–60) directly recalls the late antique *Vitae patrum* in structure, motifs, and tone.<sup>12</sup> A hagiographical treatise intended to function as a

teaching aid, the *Vitae fratrum* also defined the order of preachers' collective identity. Drawing comparisons between the order's most celebrated saints and the Desert Fathers, the Dominican friar Gérard de Frachet positioned the preachers as the "new" Desert Fathers.<sup>13</sup> As itinerant preachers, the Dominicans recalled the Desert Fathers in their liminality, yet their desert, as they defined it in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was far larger: it encompassed the city and its environs, as the Dominicans operated within cities, at the margins of cities, and outside cities as well.<sup>14</sup> The battles the friars waged against their personal demons, lust and temptation, were now fought in the challenging world of delights that was the metropolis.

The hagiographical treatise *Liber vitasfratrum* (ca. 1357) presents yet another example of the reach and influence of the Desert Fathers and the idealization of the eremitic life in the fourteenth century.<sup>15</sup> In writing the *Liber vitasfratrum*, the Augustinian friar Jordan of Quedlinburg (Jordan of Saxony) was almost certainly inspired by the *Vitae fratrum*, which had been written exactly a century earlier by the Dominican friar Gérard de Frachet. However, whereas Gérard drew comparisons between the Dominicans and the Desert Fathers based on the miracles of the order's noted saints, Jordan sought to compare the Augustinians to the Desert Fathers in every facet of their daily lives. In the *Liber vitasfratrum*, Jordan set out to instruct his brethren through the exemplar of the Desert Fathers. Using both positive and negative exempla from the *Vitae patrum*, the friar taught them how to be true and proper brothers of the order. Since the life of the brothers was formed from the life of the fathers, he reasoned, the Desert Fathers were the perfect exemplars.<sup>16</sup> The *Vitae fratrum* and *Liber vitasfratrum* are but two of several examples that illustrate the extent to which the ideal espoused by the Desert Fathers influenced the mendicant

ethos of the period. The historian Carlo Delcorno has also observed significant parallels between the life of the charismatic founder of the Franciscans, Francis of Assisi, and the *Life of Anthony*.<sup>17</sup> The Franciscans evoked the Desert Fathers outside the confines of hagiography as well. In his *laude*, the Franciscan Iacopone da Todi is heralded as the new Hilarion.<sup>18</sup>

The settlement of the mendicant orders initiated what Raphaële Preisinger has broadly described as “a transfer of monastic forms of life and piety onto urban environments.”<sup>19</sup> Given that among friars’ duties was the task of ministering to the laity, the eremitic ideal also found purchase outside the convent. Thanks to the popularity of the Dominican friar Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea* (ca. 1260), late medieval laypeople were familiar with the most esteemed of the Desert Fathers.<sup>20</sup> On the hermit saints’ respective feast days, the people heard readings from the *Lives* of Mary of Egypt, Marina the Virgin, Pelagia, Thais, Anthony, Paul the first hermit, and Macarius. They also heard stories of lesser-known Desert Fathers in sermons, which were delivered with increasing frequency in the vernacular. Jacques de Vitry’s *Sermones vulgares*, an outstanding “exemplum book” of the thirteenth century, is filled with exempla from the *Vitae patrum*. In several of his sermons, the Dominican friar Giordano da Rivalto exhorts his congregation to read the lives of the holy Desert Fathers.<sup>21</sup> The *Vita* of Anthony, he says, highly recommends a life of penance, of great abstinence, of constant contemplation.<sup>22</sup> Laypeople could read from the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* thanks to the vernacularization of the text by the Dominican friar Domenico Cavalca.<sup>23</sup> Stripped of scholarly digressions and rhetorical flourishes, Cavalca’s *Vite dei santi padri* (ca. 1320–42) was written for *uomini semplice*, or simple men, such as the less educated monk or the interested lay

reader. The translation proved a veritable bestseller. Extant manuscripts and inventory lists reveal that it was one of the most widely circulated texts of the late Middle Ages. Underlying Giordano’s injunction to read from the *Lives*, then, is the idea that the faithful should see these Desert Fathers as exemplars, or models of piety that they should aspire to emulate. Letters of spiritual direction affirm this idea—the *Lives* were recommended reading not only for those who sought a mystical union with God but also for those who wanted to stir within themselves “a greater love of virtue.”<sup>24</sup>

Moved by the exemplar of the desert saints, some of the faithful withdrew from society. The laywoman-turned-saint Umiliana de’ Cerchi (1219–1246) withdrew from an engaged and active life in the city, including time spent distributing alms to the poor, to live *in eremo* in her family’s tower in the center of Florence.<sup>25</sup> While under the strictest self-discipline and asceticism, she imagined herself living like the Desert Fathers and Mothers, “in the craggy mountains and in the desert in solitude.”<sup>26</sup> Umiliana’s “desert” became the space where her sanctity was forged and revealed, the site of her transcendental experiences with God. Through her exemplar, God showed that “no one from the greatest to the least would have any excuse that he could not serve God as much as possible in his own home and secular habit.”<sup>27</sup> While Umiliana chose the confines of her family home, others chose to leave the city, although they rarely went far. Pursuing the eremitic ideal of complete renunciation of a life ruled by the values and morals of urban society, they lived in cells on the periphery of growing cities or near churches close to the cemetery walls.<sup>28</sup>

For those unable to withdraw completely from the city and their responsibilities therein, there were images. Klaus Krüger has argued that *Bildkontemplation* became a

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substitute for living *in eremo* in the fourteenth century. At the turn of the century, he notes, the holy man was less frequently depicted as withdrawing to go *in monte contemplationis*.<sup>29</sup> He was shown more often in fervent prayer in church or even in a domestic location. Such images, Krüger argues, reframed the experience of the desert for the medieval viewer. Scenes of the desert ascetic having a mystical experience in church suggested to viewers that they too could achieve the penitential experience of the desert in their homes or churches. By contemplating a painting of the Virgin and Child, the viewer could reap the main benefit of a life in the desert: a deep and profound connection to the divine. Images also aided the laity in engaging in contemplative practices, such as meditation. Looking at large mural paintings of *Lignum vitae* in Italian urban centers, Preisinger has argued that such works, which encouraged the meditative practice linked to Saint Bonaventure's treatise, promoted and guided meditation on the humanity of Christ among both lay and ecclesiastical audiences.<sup>30</sup>

Alongside images guiding the faithful through meditation were paintings that drew from the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*. The Thebaid, so called because they evoke the late antique desert of Paul and Anthony near Thebes, focus on every aspect of the Desert Fathers' lives, from the miraculous to the mundane.<sup>31</sup> The *vita contemplativa* that the hermit saints embraced is exemplified in the images of the Desert Fathers praying, reading, fishing, and braiding baskets. Through this quiet, reflective lifestyle, they grew closer to God and earned his favor. At the pinnacle of the hierarchical landscape of the frescoed *Thebaid* at the Camposanto funerary complex in Pisa, Christ appears before Anthony and blesses him (fig. 1). This intimate connection to Christ was the ultimate goal of the eremitical life. It was an achievement that even the

humble viewer could attain if he or she took up the practices of quieting the mind, praying, reading, and engaging in focused labor. As Ellen Callman argued in one of the earliest studies of the corpus, the Thebaid "tell every Christian that the road to eternal salvation is the life of contemplation and self-denial practiced by the Desert Fathers."<sup>32</sup> Nowhere is this concept expressed more clearly than at the Camposanto complex, where, in the fourteenth century, the visitor would have entered the funerary complex through the Porta Regia and, following the path of the funerary rite, encountered first the painting of the *Thebaid* (fig. 2), then the fresco cycle of the Last Judgment with hell, and finally the Triumph of Death.<sup>33</sup> The sequence of images suggested to its viewers that if they embraced the life of ascetic renunciation, contemplation, and prayer espoused by the Desert Fathers, they too might receive the reward of eternal salvation. The tomb of the Pisan hermit Beato Giovanni Cini, positioned just below the *Thebaid*, reinforced this message, reminding the viewer through a "modern-day" exemplar that the life of a hermit not only was attainable but also held the promise of God's favor and salvation.<sup>34</sup>

In the Thebaid, the edifying stories presented in sermons found visual expression. The expansive paintings are littered with visual exempla taken from Domenico Cavalca's *Vite dei santi padri*, which, as noted earlier, was the Dominican friar's vernacular translation of the *Vitae patrum*.<sup>35</sup> Like verbal exempla, the images are concise yet expressive.<sup>36</sup> The story of a Desert Father does not require a sequence of such images—it can be summarized, or even symbolized, in a single image. Connecting the images with the resurgence in interest in the *ars memorativa* within monastic circles, Alessandra Malquori has likened the vignettes in the Thebaid to *imagines agentes*, images that summarize a coherent set of concepts,



a thesis, or a theory in a small number of keywords or details.<sup>37</sup> Intended to jog the memory, *imagines agentes* prompt the viewer to recall a story or important facts through memorable details. By the twelfth century, friars of the Dominican Order were already studying the ancient techniques of the art of memory described in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. However, Malquori argues that it was the Dominican fathers of Pisa who contributed, both in practice and in writing, to this revival of the art of memory. At the Camposanto, the vignettes prompted the viewer to recall the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers as heard previously in a sermon or as told during the evening *collatio*. For example, in the Thebaid cycle, the entirety of the life of Marina is encapsulated in the emblematic figure of a woman dressed in a monk's habit and holding a baby (fig. 3).<sup>38</sup> The essential and memorable details—in this instance, Marina's monastic habit and the child who sits on her lap—serve as mnemonic triggers. Almost cryptically succinct, the image requires familiarity with the stories in order to be understood.

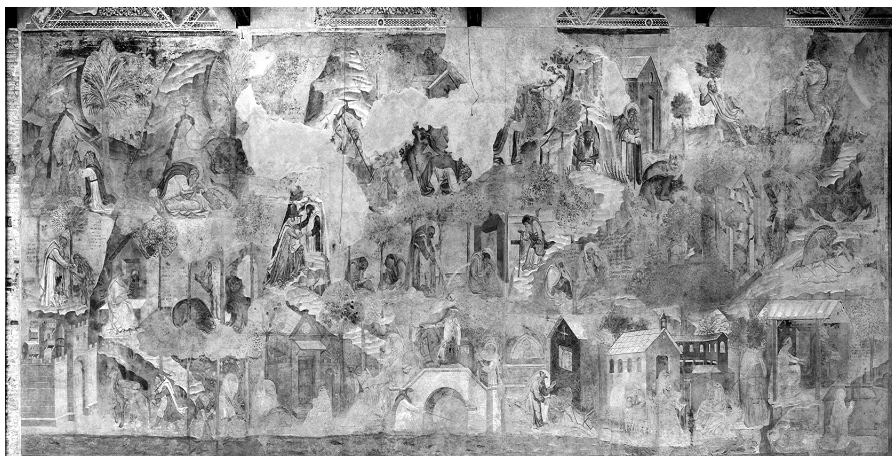


Figure 1. Buonamico Buffalmacco, Christ appears before Anthony and blesses him, detail of the fresco *Thebaid*. Camposanto (restored), Pisa, Italy. Image used with the permission of A.F.O.P. Archivio Fotografico Opera del Duomo di Pisa.

Figure 2. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Thebaid*. Fresco. Camposanto, Pisa, Italy. Image used with the permission of A.F.O.P. Archivio Fotografico Opera del Duomo di Pisa.



Figure 3. Buonamico Buffalmacco, Marina with child, detail of the fresco *Thebaid*. Camposanto, Pisa, Italy. Image used with the permission of A.F.O.P. Archivio Fotografico Opera del Duomo di Pisa.

In contrast to the *Thebaid*s, Morgan MS M.626 presents the viewer with rich, expansive narrative illustrations. Rather than capturing the essence of the narrative in a single image, the illuminations in the Morgan manuscript chart out the desert saints' paths to spiritual perfection, depicting not only their successes but their missteps as well. In doing so, the illuminations edify their viewer. Suggesting arguments and emphasizing themes, they offer a reading of the text that is not unlike a

gloss. Indeed, the layout of the pages—the illuminations follow the text at the bottom of each page—suggests that the text would have been read first, to provide context, and the images read afterward. If the vignettes, or *imagines agentes*, were meant to jog the viewers' memory in the *Thebaid*s by reminding them of past sermons, then the illuminations in the Morgan manuscript were intended to teach and edify directly through the subtle, cinematic force of their narratives. As glosses of the text, the Morgan illuminations reveal a great deal about how fourteenth-century audiences were meant to interpret these fourth-century stories.

### Morgan MS M.626

Morgan MS M.626 is the most extensively illuminated manuscript of the *Vitae patrum* to emerge during the trecento (fig. 4). At 356 by 252 millimeters, with forty-six lines of text organized into two ruled columns on each folio, M.626 is an impressive example of manuscript production in the late medieval kingdom of Naples. It shows the work of an atelier that pulled from different media for inspiration and took on ambitious projects of great scope. With 272 narrative illustrations featured at the bottom of its folios and 120 illuminated initials, the Morgan manuscript was a labor-intensive undertaking. It required at least two illuminators for its narrative illustrations and possibly a third for the illustrated initials.<sup>39</sup> It has no direct iconographic models, nor does it share much in the way of iconography with either illuminated manuscripts or painted cycles narrating the *Lives* in Tuscany, the region from which most extant objects depicting the desert saints derive. It is thus a singular and exceptional witness to the resurgence of the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* and the rise of the eremitic ideal, one that offers insight

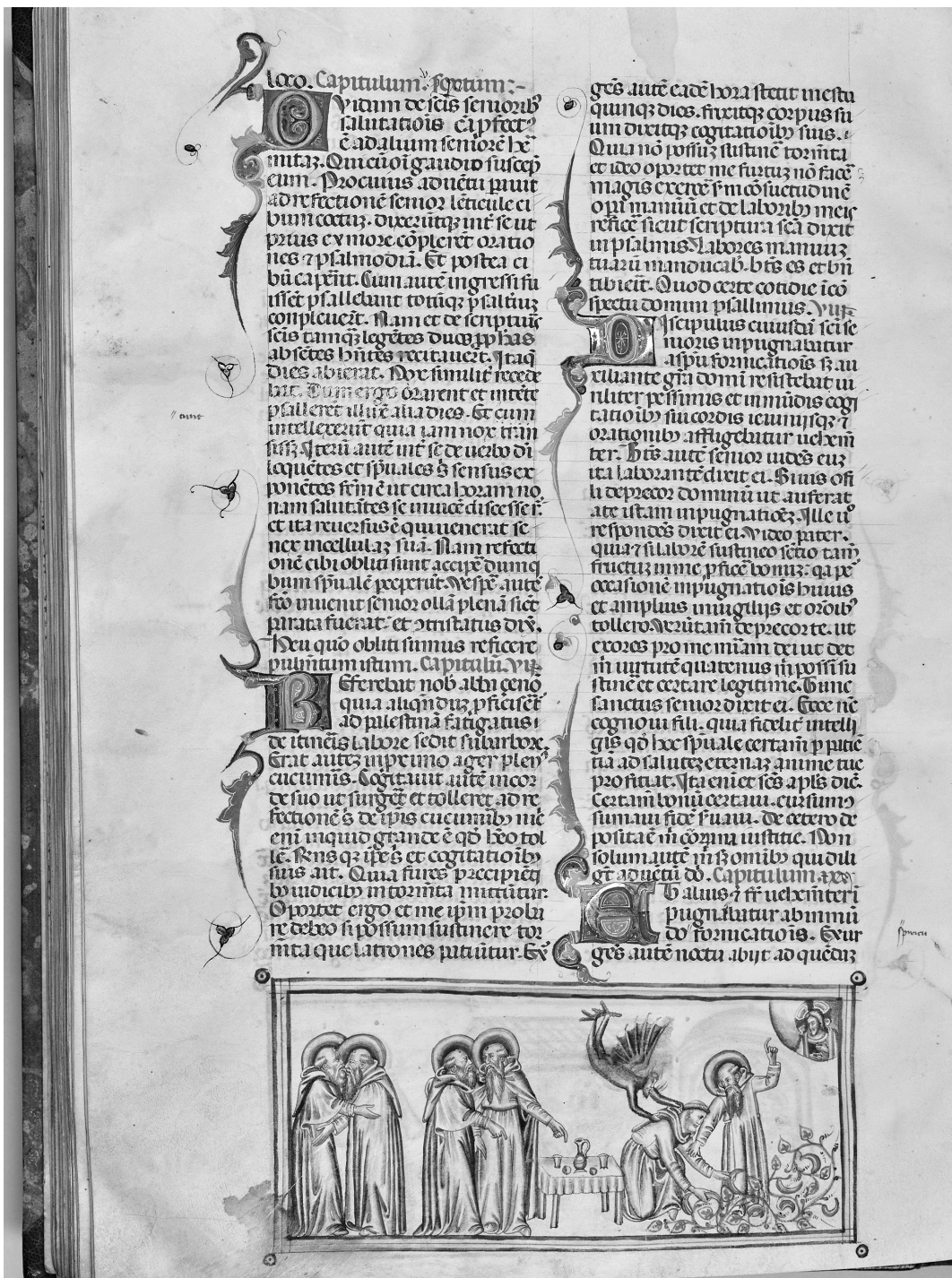


Figure 4. Folio with monks in fellowship; monk tempted by demon. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.626, fol. 58v. Photo: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.



into how the lives of the esteemed fathers were made accessible to their viewers. Fulsomely illustrated, the manuscript offers an unusually rich example of visual exegesis in action.

The *Vitae patrum* is an anthology of the lives of eastern Christian ascetics who inhabited the arid wastelands and deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria during the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that in Latin, the word *desertum* can mean both desert and wilderness. In general, it implies “a wild and uninhabited land in which one is far removed from quotidian concerns.”<sup>41</sup> Morgan MS M.626 transmits a late medieval recension of the *Vitae patrum*, produced in Naples in the fourteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The manuscript is similar in content and structure to another southern Italian fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Vitae patrum*, Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, Cod.VIII.B.10.<sup>43</sup> The Morgan manuscript, like Cod.VIII.B.10, begins with the lives of Paul of Thebes, Anthony the Abbot, Hilarion, and Malchus the Captive, and then proceeds to a recension of the *Historia monachorum*. Both manuscripts continue with a recension of the *Verba seniorum* believed to have been compiled by the theologian and historian Rufinus of Aquileia. After the *Verba seniorum*, the manuscripts include the short vitae of the Desert Fathers presented in the *Historia lausica*; the individual lives of Eastern desert saints such as Sabas of Jerusalem, Pachomius, Fronto of Nitria, and Paphnutius; the visionary accounts of medieval monks of the Latin West; and the lives of the Desert Mothers Marina, Euphrosyna, and Mary of Egypt. Among other factors, the inclusion of a redaction of the *Vita* of Saint Gregory the Miracle Worker (Gregorius Thaumaturgus) written by Peter, subdeacon of Naples, allows us to trace both the Morgan manuscript and Cod.VIII.B.10 to the south of Italy, and specifically to Naples. The manuscripts’

similarities suggest that they represent a compilation popular in southern Italy during the fourteenth century, though it is unclear whether the redactions are representative of a compilation produced by a specific monastic house. MS M.626 stands apart from Cod.VIII.B.10, which contains no illustrations.

The largely didactic and edificatory function of the *Vitae patrum* informed the selection of scenes from the lives to be illustrated in the Morgan manuscript. The lives of the Desert Fathers are defined by key moments that distinguish them as an almost unique subset of the genre of hagiography.<sup>44</sup> At its core, the hermit saint’s quest is a search for spiritual perfection. The Desert Father begins his journey by renouncing what has tethered him to society: family, marriage, wealth. He then enters into a practice of disciplined asceticism and discipleship to purge himself of the longings of the mind and body that have kept him mired in sin and closed off from perfection. As a result of his devotion, the saint is graced with the ability to be God’s vessel, the instrument through which the divine can be seen in the world. The call to perfection, the subsequent act of withdrawal, the practice of asceticism, and the illustration of miracles all find pictorial representation in the Morgan manuscript, although not every life contains representations of each narrative element. In the chapters that follow, I discuss the narrative topoi that both appear prominently in the Morgan manuscript’s illustrations and are consistent with the rise of the eremitic ideal. First, however, let us look briefly at several other iconographic threads that are worthy of note.

The Morgan manuscript depicts a striking range of animals, from dragons to elephants and lions. In these images, the Desert Fathers have a special relationship to the animal world.<sup>45</sup> Animals frequently come unbidden to their aid, often serving as their guides. In the lives of Paul

of Thebes, Mary the Egyptian, and Onuphrius, lions arrive unsummoned to bury the ascetics.<sup>46</sup> Their arrival suggests that these saints, who often live in the farthest reaches of the desert, have fallen into sync with the natural world in a manner that recalls paradise before the Fall, when beast and man lived in sinless harmony. This close relationship between the sainted fathers and the animals reflects the Desert Fathers' ability to both heal and command animals. In this relationship, the fissure between the human and animal worlds caused by Adam's sin has been repaired.<sup>47</sup> Although it seems effortless, the relationship between holy man and animal is not one of equals. In the Morgan manuscript's images, animals acknowledge the power and sanctity of the holy man. Desert Fathers such as Hilarion and Beno are shown banishing serpents and dragons, adopting a posture similar to the one they assume when exorcising or healing a person.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, animals are shown doing the bidding of the Desert Fathers, as illustrated, for instance, in the *Life of Sabas*, where the sainted father's lion companions are shown fending off invading soldiers.<sup>49</sup> Animals can also be signs of the hermit's status of sin or grace; their demise points to the sainted father's corruption.<sup>50</sup> Overall, animals in the Morgan's *Vitae patrum* serve as indicators of God's grace and the Desert Fathers' status as holy men.

The lives of the Desert Fathers feature the journey as a central trope. Accordingly, the illuminations in the Morgan manuscript show the desert saints engaged in many forms of travel. In the *Life of Macarius of Rome*, for instance, the protagonists Theophilus, Sergius, and Hyginus leave their monastery in search of the place "where the sky meets the earth"—in short, paradise.<sup>51</sup> In the illuminations narrating Macarius's life, the three protagonists are shown undertaking what proves to be a

long journey away from their monastery. Across the span of ten folios, they travel into the desolate wilderness and across mountains, where they encounter all manner of beasts and people, from dragons to giants. In the far reaches of the desert, away from the city, they meet Macarius, who has achieved a prelapsarian state of grace as a result of having witnessed God's signs and has been willing to mortify his flesh to divest it of attachments to the material world.<sup>52</sup> In the rest of the Morgan manuscript, the Desert Fathers travel not only across land but also by sea, journeys that are both described in the text and depicted in numerous illustrations.<sup>53</sup> Many illustrations emphasize the great lengths to which the Desert Fathers and Mothers go to divorce themselves from the temptation and sin found in cities. The deserts through which they travel are evoked, in some illustrations, by the barren, craggy landscape and, in others, by dense forest. In the Morgan manuscript, representations of travel are not simply narrative devices used to propel the story forward but also metaphors for the desert saints' spiritual journey from sinner to saint.

The Morgan illustrations are populated with a host of other characters—bishops, clergymen, courtiers, and large monastic gatherings. On the one hand, these characters gesture to the lived experience and environment of the fourteenth century, an example of what Anne D. Hedeman calls visual translation, or "the process by which images helped stories in the past or a different culture come alive and be current to a medieval reader."<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, these secular and monastic characters seem to stand in contradiction to the eremitic life of solitude fervently desired by the desert saints. In his *Conferences*, Cassian notably describes the anchorites, the class of monks the Desert Fathers represent, as "deservedly called—anchorites—that is, those who go apart—

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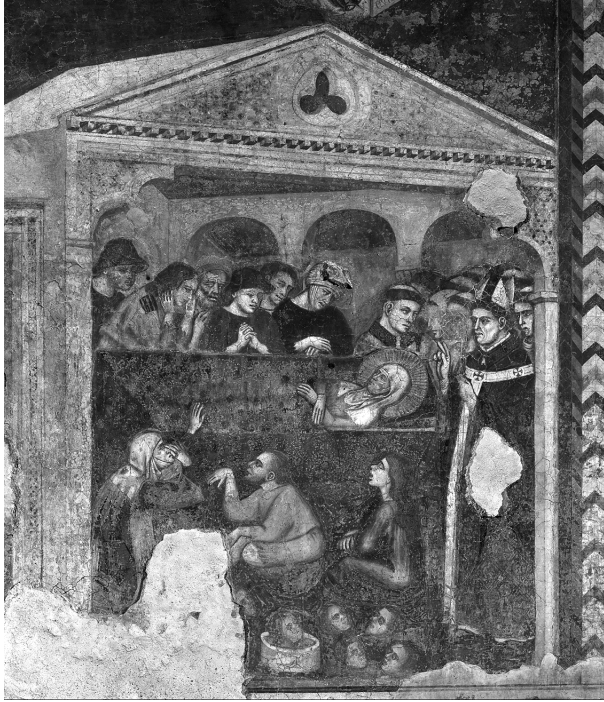
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because they are not at all content with the victory of treading underfoot the hidden snares of the devil in the midst of men. They desire to engage the demons in an open struggle and in out-and-out combat, they are not afraid to penetrate the vast recesses of the desert.”<sup>55</sup> Cassian’s description of the anchorites highlights a defining feature of the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: the desert saints, not content to undertake the battle against the devil within the safety of community, withdraw into solitude. This dangerous break with community creates a division not only between the desert saints and their monastic brethren but also between them and the faithful readers of their stories. In the Morgan manuscript, the images of bishops, courtiers, clergymen, and monastics foreground the difference between the hermit saints and the “others”—laypeople and the monastics who remain in community. In going beyond secular institutions such as the court and fraternal community, the desert saint overcomes earthly ambition, and God ultimately rewards him for his faith.

As a whole, the Morgan manuscript participates in the larger iconographic tradition of illuminating saints’ lives, using iconography that had been established in the eleventh and twelfth centuries for illustrating hagiographic narratives. During the High Middle Ages, illuminators drew on a variety of sources to develop what would become standard iconography for hagiographical cycles. Their sources of inspiration included illustrations of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and even Prudentius cycles.<sup>56</sup> The illuminators of the Morgan manuscript use this standard iconography to illustrate recurring motifs in the lives of the Desert Fathers, such as the teaching of disciples and the faithful, the exorcism of demons, the performance of miracles, and even the moment of death. Such common scenes are illustrated

using the same gestures and conventions found in earlier pictorial hagiographic cycles in wall paintings and manuscripts. In addition to following these conventions, the illuminators of the Morgan manuscript drew inspiration from local pictorial sources, such as the frescoes at Santa Maria Donna Regina (ca. 1316–21).<sup>57</sup> These illuminators not only borrowed the compositional and topographical arrangements of the fresco cycles but also reprised certain scenes. The scene of the lame and sick awaiting miracles at the deathbed of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (fig. 5), for example, finds representation on folio 39v in the Morgan manuscript, with the same characters urgently petitioning the Desert Father Beno (fig. 6). Architectural devices that motivate and ground the narrative in the Elizabeth cycle are also used in the Morgan’s *Vitae patrum* with similar precision and at times for a similar purpose. The circular prison that provides the focal point for the second half of the narrative of Catherine’s life in Santa Maria Donna Regina (fig. 7) is used similarly in a scene in the Thebaid in which Apollo is visited in prison (fig. 8). The structure is not only crucial to both plots but also instrumental in creating dynamism in the pictorial narrative. The prison motivates the movement of the figures, propelling the pictorial narrative forward and focusing the eye.

Scholarship on the Morgan’s *Vitae patrum* has concerned itself primarily with the style of its illustrations and its dating, with the broader aim of placing the manuscript within the history of manuscript production in Naples during the trecento.<sup>58</sup> Bernard Berenson first suggested that the manuscript was of southern Italian origin.<sup>59</sup> Three years later, in 1933, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl mentioned the Morgan manuscript, putting it into conversation with another Neapolitan manuscript (London, British Library, Royal MS 20 D I), a copy of the



second redaction of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*.<sup>60</sup> In her notes on the *Vitae patrum*, Meta Harrsen suggested that the manuscript was made by the same atelier as Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat.lat.3550, also known as the Matteo di Planisio Bible and the Hamilton Bible (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett, MS 78.E.3).<sup>61</sup> At the time of her writing, both manuscripts had been dated to the second half of the fourteenth century, and thus she and George K. Boyce proposed a similar date for the Morgan manuscript in the 1953 catalogue of Italian manuscripts at the Morgan Library.<sup>62</sup> In their *Corpus der italienischen Zeichnungen, 1300–1450*, Bernhard Degenhart and Annegrit Schmitt also firmly situated the manuscript within the second half of the fourteenth century based on the strong affinity between it and both the Matteo di Planisio and Hamilton Bibles. Because of its affinity with the Matteo di Planisio Bible, Degenhart and Schmitt also called MS M.626 one of the many important manuscripts to have been



Figure 5. Saint Elizabeth healing the sick, detail from the fresco cycle *Life of Saint Elizabeth*. Santa Maria Donna Regina, Naples. Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici ed il Paesaggio e per il Patrimonio Storico Artistico e Demotnoantropologico di Napoli e Provincia. Photo: Luciano Pedicini.

Figure 6. Abbot Beno healing the lame. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.626, fol. 39v. Photo: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

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## Introduction

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Figure 7. Catherine led to prison, detail from the fresco cycle *Life of Saint Catherine*. Santa Maria Donna Regina, Naples. Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici ed il Paesaggio e per il Patrimonio Storico Artistico e Demotnoantropologico di Napoli e Provincia. Photo: Luciano Pedicini.



Figure 8. Apollo of Thebaid in prison. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.626, fol. 40r. Photo: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

illuminated by the atelier of Cristoforo Orimina, the Neapolitan illuminator and artist to the royal court of Naples in the second half of the trecento.<sup>63</sup>

In contrast to earlier scholars, who saw Morgan MS M.626 as representative of manuscript illumination produced by a later atelier connected to Orimina, later scholars have proposed earlier dates for the manuscript, basing their conclusions on comparisons between the

Morgan manuscript and other manuscripts executed with a similar technique.<sup>64</sup> In the Morgan manuscript, the illuminators first drew the illustrations in graphite and then lightly colored them with a tempera wash. This is a technique used in two other notable Neapolitan manuscripts also believed to have been illustrated by Orimina, a manuscript of the second redaction of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* (London, British Library, Royal MS

20 D I), dated to ca. 1330–40, and a copy of the *Divina Commedia* (London, British Library, Additional MS 19587), dated to ca. 1370.<sup>65</sup> In terms of style, Morgan MS M.626 most closely resembles Royal MS 20 D I, which suggests that the manuscript was illuminated within the same years as the Royal MS 20 D I, around 1336.<sup>66</sup>

The dating of the Morgan manuscript places its production during the reign of King Robert of Anjou (r. 1309–43), sovereign of Naples. On folios 60v (fig. 9) and 61r (fig. 10), the manuscript displays two crypto-portraits—representations of King Robert that, in the absence of clear heraldic identifiers, are identified based on the portrait subject’s physiognomic similarity to known representations of the sovereign. These crypto-portraits have been identified on the basis of their similarities to representations of the king found in manuscripts of the *Carmina regia*, the Anjou Bible, and Simone Martini’s panel painting of Saint Louis of Toulouse.<sup>67</sup> Citing these crypto-portraits as evidence, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese has proposed that the manuscript was probably commissioned by the sovereign.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the royal *cancellaria* (the royal treasury records), now preserved in the form of transcriptions after the devastating bombings of World War II, reveals that Robert not only purchased books but also commissioned their production.<sup>69</sup> Morgan MS M.626 is not listed in the *cancellaria*; however, scholars have argued that Robert was the patron of other illuminated manuscripts not listed in the records, such as the British Library, Royal MS 20 D I, the earliest surviving copy of the second redaction of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu’à César*, and the so-called Anjou Bible.<sup>70</sup> Like M.626, the Anjou Bible features representations of the king.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, on the last register of the genealogical table on folio 4r of the Bible (fig. 11), a figure believed to be Andrew of Hungary prostrates himself at Robert’s feet, taking the sovereign’s feet into his hands and kissing them.

The act of recognition and fealty unmistakably recalls the Desert Father’s gesture in the Morgan illumination (fig. 9).

The act of prostration may also reflect a carefully constructed identity that Robert adopted and his family pursued in a bid to fashion the Angevin sovereign after Byzantine rulers. Diana Norman has argued that the royal members of the Angevin court in Naples took inspiration from the visual culture of the Sicilian court.<sup>72</sup> Norman shows, for instance, that the main panel of the Saint Louis of Toulouse altarpiece was indebted to a number of late twelfth- and thirteenth-century images made in Palermo, the former capital of the Angevin kingdom. Indeed, Byzantine customs and iconography heavily influenced twelfth- and thirteenth-century Sicilian court life in general. As Norman points out, Sicilian rulers presented themselves in a way that evoked the Byzantine basileus. Roger II and his successors modeled their coronations on those of the Byzantine imperial court, adopting similar ceremonial dress. Citing the presence of Byzantine ivories in the last will and testament of Robert’s mother, Mary of Hungary, Norman suggests that members of the Angevin royal family might well have been familiar with Byzantine iconography via Sicily. *Proskynesis*, the act of prostrating oneself before the sovereign, was an important part of Byzantine court ceremony.<sup>73</sup> Robert or members of his family may have been familiar with the gesture of *proskynesis* through a similar exposure to Byzantine imagery, as Norman proposes. Such a citation would certainly align with the imperial image that Robert and others sought to promote.<sup>74</sup>

While the act of homage in the Anjou Bible makes explicit the bond between sovereign and heir apparent, in the Morgan manuscript the act probably serves a different purpose: to create an image of the king as a wise and pious ruler, deserving of adoration. The adoration of the sovereign that is explicitly rendered in both manuscripts



Figure 9. King Robert of Anjou as Emperor Theodosius visits anonymous Desert Father. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.626, fol. 6ov. Photo: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.



Figure 10. Poemen's sister's son visits a judge. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.626, fol. 61r. Photo: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

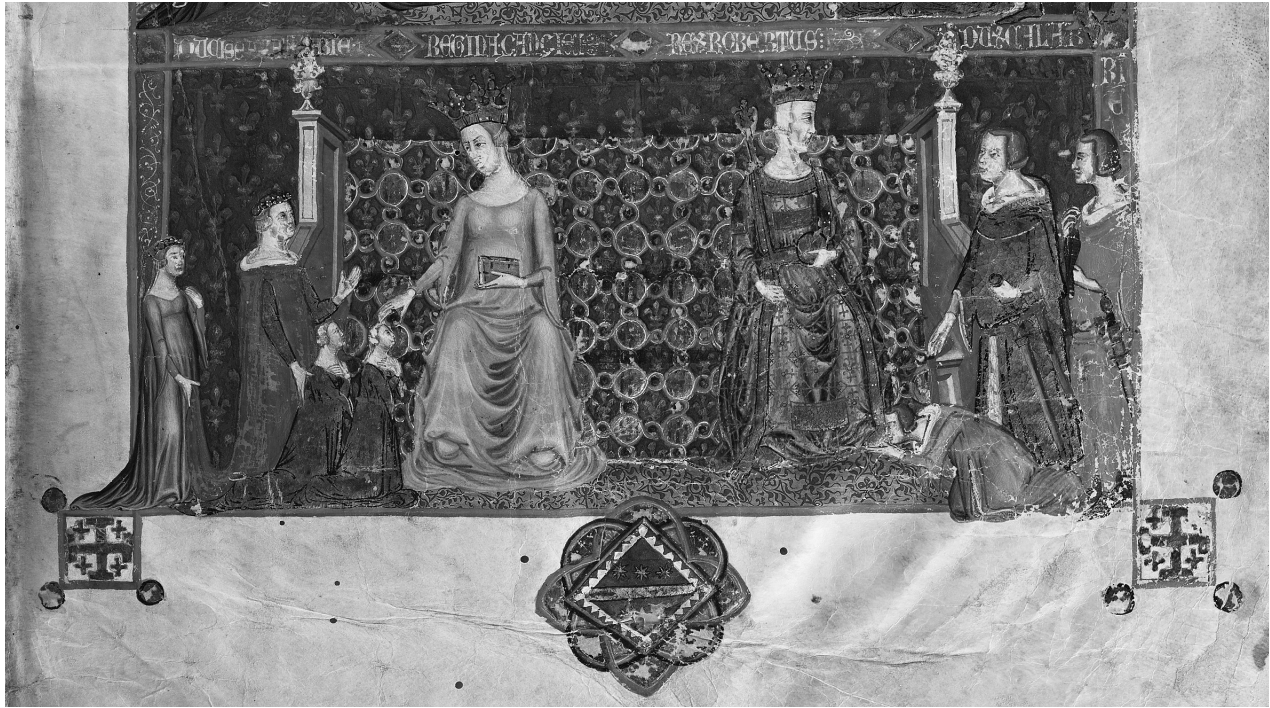


Figure 11. Queen Sancia and King Robert, detail from the Anjou Bible. Leuven, Katholieke Universiteit, Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerheid, Maurits Sabbe Library, Collection of the Archdiocese of Mechelen, Cod. 1, fol. 4r.

might point toward their participation in a larger propagandistic campaign carefully carried out by Robert and his advisors, familiars, and clients. As Samantha Kelly and others have shown, Robert and the members of the court sought to cultivate an image of the sovereign as a learned, wise, and virtuous king.<sup>75</sup> The Morgan manuscript, with its illustrations of desert saints overcoming their demons and performing penance, may well have been instrumental in creating an image of the ruler as a pious sovereign, interested in understanding the eremitic ideal and incorporating aspects of the eremitic life into

his own. Renowned for his preaching, Robert may even have commissioned Morgan MS M.626, most probably a presentation copy, and Cod.VIII.B.10 at the same time—the latter to serve as a resource for his sermons (the *Vitae patrum* was frequently used as a source for exempla in sermons) and the former as an elaborate demonstration of his erudition and religious devotion, a sign of his position as a sacral ruler.<sup>76</sup>

Although the crypto-portraits of Robert suggest that MS M.626 is a royal manuscript, this classification does not mean that it was used exclusively by the king.<sup>77</sup> A royal



manuscript might, for instance, have been commissioned by a king and then given as a gift, as scholars believe was the case with the Anjou Bible.<sup>78</sup> With an illumination for every page of text, the Morgan manuscript was intended to edify its readers, whether the king, members of his household, or others in the royal circle. While the text provides readers with edifying tales, the illustrations teach viewers to value and practice the skill of spiritual focus, reassure them of the efficacy of penance, and exhort them to total reliance on God.

The Morgan manuscript stands apart from other illustrated manuscripts of the *Vitae patrum*. Before the fourteenth century, manuscripts of the *Vitae patrum* were rarely illuminated, and when they were, they primarily featured historiated initials (fig. 12). Directing the viewer's focus and instructing him in the proper comportment, the illustrations in these manuscripts supported the reading of the written narrative. By contrast, the robust narrative illustrations in the Morgan manuscript present their own interpretations of the text and emphasize their own themes. Showing the Desert Fathers and Mothers engaged in prayer, reading, contemplation, and discernment—activities that the corresponding written *Lives* often do not mention—the illuminators of the Morgan manuscript place the saints firmly within a period-specific conception of the contemplative life. So positioned, the desert saints are offered up to the viewer as exemplars worthy of imitation. At a time when friars like Giordano da Pisa were urging their congregations to withdraw to the desert and to read the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, the illustrations in the Morgan manuscript provided a mirror for model behavior, showing how the faithful might incorporate such a seemingly unobtainable ideal into their lives.



Figure 12. Desert Father, inhabited initial. Brindisi, Biblioteca Pubblica Arcivescovile A. De Leo, MS\_A/2, fol. 87v. Image courtesy of Biblioteca Pubblica Arcivescovile “Annibale De Leo.”