

Final Project: Desert Superheroes

Desert Discipleship

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The more we joked in class about how much the stories of the desert mothers and fathers resembled the stories of modern day superheroes, the more the idea stuck with me. It seems like there is just something in the human psyche or the human imagination that gravitates to these kinds of larger-than-life stories and that seeks to recreate them again and again, updating them each time for a new generation of people. People of earlier centuries were drawn to infallible heroes who battled demons and performed miracles of healing and feeding, while people of this day and age are drawn to infallible heroes who battle supervillains and perform miracles like flying and overthrowing oppressive systems of power. Both, in their own ways, comprise a kind of folk mythology that speaks deeply to people's need to look beyond themselves for something larger, to find heroes worth their admiration.

Figures like Antony the Great, Shenoute the Archimandrite, and Anastasia the Patrician seem like characters very much worth resurrecting and translating for a modern audience. Instead of stories of crash-landed aliens or radioactive spiders or out-of-place Norse gods inexplicably cavorting with humans, these are stories of ordinary people drawn to live extraordinary lives by answering the call of God to live an ascetic life of discipleship in the desert. They draw their strength not from any kind of freak accident involving chemical spills, nor from immense wealth nor inherent godlike powers; their strength and persistence come from the Holy Spirit, and they repeatedly give God the glory for it. And unlike the morally ambiguous

“antihero” character that has become so popular in our day, these desert fathers and mothers are unambiguously good, heroic figures who embody virtues of humility, wisdom, generosity, and unwavering devotion to God. These traits make them heroes who are not just worthy of our admiration; they are worthy of our emulation. And the fact that they are stories of regular people answering God’s call to live a certain way within their own lives makes that experience actually accessible to all of us. If I had more time, I would especially love to illustrate some of the everyday saints from the stories of Daniel of Scetis, or from the stories of Paphnutius in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (there is ample material to bring to visual life in those stories!).

However, I have chosen to give these three particular saints the superhero treatment, in part, because their stories just seemed to lend themselves especially well to illustration. I also felt like they represent a relatively varied cross section of the people we have studied. I wanted to include both male and female figures. And I wanted to cover a range of monastic styles, so they range from Antony the anchorite to Shenoute the cenobite, with Anastasia occupying a sort of middle ground between the two. Their stories span the third through the sixth centuries and the nature of the miraculous accounts of their lives vary according to the needs that hearers might have brought to these stories at their respective times. They represent a movement from the solitary anachoresis of Antony in the desert to the super-holy community of Shenoute in the monastery to the invitation to holiness answered by everyday people like Anastasia.

I have done my best to “translate” them into what I think of as “modern iconography”: the visual language of superheroes. I have drawn them in dynamic, active poses to show that they are dynamic, active people, defenders of faith and passionate doers of God’s will (who knew that drawing guides for surfers, rockstars, and “anime heroes” would come in so handy?). Each one is armed with weapons of faith, befitting the stories of each, extending the power that God has

given them. Their costumes imitate the skin tight uniforms of modern superheroes – symbols of their office, their responsibility to be protectors and lovers of justice. For me, they also evoke the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6: the close-fitting spandex breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth around their chiseled abs, their gospel boots and helmets of salvation, their swords or weapons of the Spirit (a literal sword in Shenoute's case). And as was noted in class, these are some super ripped monastic heroes, with rock hard abs and bulging muscles; I drew them that way in keeping with the super strong superhero aesthetic, and also so that their physical appearance would reflect their spiritual strength.

In addition to portraying these three desert saints with characteristics of modern superheroes, I also of course wanted to draw them with elements unique to them and their stories. I consulted several icons of each figure for ideas of what their appearance should be, what sort of colors to perhaps use in their costumes, as well as symbols that would make each one recognizable. I think the results of this blend of modern pop culture and traditional iconography make for a delightfully bizarre, provoking set of images. I will share a little bit about some of the artistic choices I made for each saint.

Antony: Easily among the most memorable details of the stories of St. Antony, especially as recorded by St. Athanasius, are his famous battles with the Devil and his demons, which run throughout *The Life of Antony*. I knew right away that I wanted to draw superhero Antony in the midst of a skirmish with the demons. True to Antony's understanding and experience of the demons, they have tangible physical forms (*Life of Antony* 8:1-10:11, 31:2, 40:5); if you look closely, you can see that Antony's porcine sidekick has actually bitten off the tail of one of them! I thought it would be fun to draw Antony with a sidekick – a sort of Robin to his Batman – and the pig seemed like a good candidate, since it often appears in Western

depictions of Antony as a sign of his status as a patron saint of domesticated animals, due to later tradition of his work as a swineherd and his ability to communicate with and command animals (*Life of Antony* 52:2-3). Antony wields his staff, a symbol of his ascetic discipline, which also appears almost invariably in his traditional icons. I also chose to base the colors of Antony's superhero costume on many of the traditional icons I found of him. The one thing I couldn't figure out how to incorporate into the drawing was the scroll Antony is always portrayed with, representing the call he experienced while listening to a reading from Matthew 19 about Jesus commanding the rich man to sell his possessions and follow him (*Life of Antony* 2:2-5). However, I did draw him in the middle of the desert with nothing but a staff and a pig, so I suppose perhaps it's implied?

Shenoute: I had been looking forward to drawing Shenoute since I first seriously considered doing this project. There are so many fantastical elements in the accounts of his life and deeds that it was difficult to decide what to include! Unlike Antony, I did not base the colors of Shenoute's superhero costume on any of the icons I saw of him; most portrayed him in kind of boring off whites and yellows, and I felt that those colors were nowhere near exciting enough to do Super-Shenoute justice. I tried to draw his eyes as dark and sunken as possible (*The Life of Shenoute* 12) and gave him an intense facial expression. I couldn't resist drawing him astride his favorite form of magical transportation: the "shining cloud" (*Life of Shenoute* 18, 19, 58, 63, 108), on which he appears to be surfing. In one hand, he wields the flaming sword from the story of his encounter with the duke and his battle with the "barbarians" (*Life of Shenoute* 102-108), and in the other hand he wields the "little palm branch" that features in several of his miracles, like the millstone that wouldn't stop producing flour and the collapsing well (*Life of Shenoute* 20, 24, 86).

Anastasia: Last, but certainly not least, Anastasia's superhero portrayal is a little bit more subdued than Antony or Shenoute, but no less powerful. Obviously, I had a lot less written material to work with in drawing her to life, but I tried to be as faithful to her story as possible. I drew Anastasia wearing a long, heavy black cloak and a superhero costume with a prominent cross across her chest; the cloak is to show the fact that she is hiding from Justinian and from the world of her former life, and the cross is meant to symbolize the reason why she is hiding. I deliberately chose to have the cross emblazoned across her chest as a symbol that her gender is covered up or superseded by her faith. She is standing near a doorway that leads out into the desert, showing her transition from cenobitic to anchoritic life as she leaves the monastery she herself founded for the wilderness of Scetis (Vivian, "Daniel of Scetis," p46). The torn up sheet of paper at her feet is meant to represent a love letter from the emperor Justinian, who loved Anastasia – who herself came from a position of wealth and influence – specifically for her great intelligence. And the scroll in her hand is meant to represent her intelligence – her great strength and weapon – as well as to be a throwback to Antony who, like her, left everything to live a life of discipleship in the desert.

I really enjoyed having this opportunity to reimagine these three desert saints in the visual language of modern day super heroes. I offer it as my humble contribution to a long legacy: the centuries of tellings and retellings of the stories of these faithful servants of God, and of God's awesome actions through those who dare to live the life of desert discipleship.