

# Melania the Elder: Creating the Archetypal Ascetic Woman

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## INTRODUCTION

In the latter half of the fourth century, 364 or 365, a Roman woman of high social position, named Melania, made a revolutionary decision. Melania was from a noble family, wife of a consul and mother to three children. Upon the death of her husband and two children, she gave up her elite position in Roman society and devoted her enormous wealth and spirit to performing the Lord's work as an ascetic. Stories about Melania's life and ascetic work circulated widely during her lifetime, nearly all celebrating her exceptional virtue and dedication. She would soon come to be known as "Melania the Elder," when later her granddaughter would choose a similarly noteworthy career. No copies of her writings or letters survive, though we have copies of those written *to* her.

Given her prominence in the writings of church fathers such as Jerome and Palladius, Melania the Elder has been the subject of intense academic study. In the process, certain details of her life and family have been determined to be "true." Yet so much lies in between those milestones. To what degree is it possible to separate the woman from the legend? Given the fact that almost 1700 years separate Melania the Elder's lifetime from my own, and that the only record we have of her is in the writings of her male peers, I have taken as my project an exploration of the depictions of Melania by her contemporaries. I will use Joseph Mali's conception of mythistory and his insights on the value of stories we cannot "verify," in conjunction with Miriam Peskowitz's project of uncovering sites of gender construction to explore why Melania was a formative figure for her community, how her persona functioned

during and immediately after her lifetime, and what was accomplished by the various portraits drawn of her life and person.

#### MELANIA AS REAL WOMAN AND FICTIONAL CHARACTER

In his biographical sketch of Melania the Elder, Francis X. Murphy outlines several milestones of which he is rather certain. He writes that Melania was born in Spain in 341, married around 356 and widowed in 364. She returned to Rome from the province that her late husband had governed in 365, where she joined an ascetic group and had “a guardian nominated for her son.”<sup>1</sup> She either spent some years in Rome or left immediately for Jerusalem, by way of Alexandria, arriving by the year 374.<sup>2</sup> Melania remained in Jerusalem for about twenty-five years, where she helped found a pair monasteries at the Mount of Olives in partnership with Rufinus of Aquila. Returning to Rome in 400, she reunited with her son Publicola and his wife, and daughter Melania the Younger, before she passed away between 405 and 410.<sup>3</sup> In the late 390s, Melania became entangled in the Origenist controversy through her close association with Rufinus and Evagrius of Pontus. The political and theological rancor stemming from the controversy caused her reputation in certain quarters to plummet.

Melania’s life was appropriated by several early Christian thinkers and deployed to achieve a variety of goals. The bare biographical details outlined above can be investigated for their truth, but the “real Melania” cannot be recovered from the biased sources that remain. An application of Joseph Mali’s “mythistory” to the surviving depictions of Melania’s life and character can reveal interesting details about her social impact as well as the circumstances in

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<sup>1</sup> Murphy, “Melania the Elder: A Biographical Note,” p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> See Murphy and Wilkinson, “The Elder Melania’s Missing Decade,” for a discussion of the debates surrounding these dates. Since exact dating is not a priority for the current project, I follow Murphy for simplicity’s sake.

<sup>3</sup> Murphy, “Melania the Elder.”

which she lived and worked. “Mythistory,” as championed by Mali, is a historiographical methodology that looks for multiple meanings in historical texts, especially narratives, beyond what can be verified as fact. The texts by Jerome, Paulinus of Nola, Palladius, Rufinus, Evagrius, and Gerontius that I’ll examine here, mold Melania into many different roles. These texts certainly become more interesting when one moves beyond the “facts” of the stories they tell. Mali argues for this way of doing history, moving beyond quests for the facts, because even artifacts such as tax documents have multiple meanings and interpretations and important knowledge can easily be overlooked. Instead, he advocates a consideration of the stories and “myths” that groups tell about themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond simply offering a more interesting glimpse of life in the Roman Empire during the late 300s, critically examining these texts also opens up an understanding of how early Christian writers constructed the values of their societies as they wrote about everyday life. Mali writes, “through [historical myths’] commemoration in the religious and national traditions of the historical community, these stories set up its moral norms and social forms of life.”<sup>5</sup> Each community has a set of stories that it tells about itself in the process of meaning making and identity formation. For a nascent ascetic community, much of daily life was contended space. Thus the story of Melania’s virtuous life is used to instruct members of her community, to encourage others to follow a pattern of behavior that Jerome and other church fathers hoped to *make* the norm.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> He begins with an examination of modern historiography, which is tasked with balancing the “scientific historiography” of the nineteenth-century with recent scholarship on the value of “historical myths” or “foundational narratives” that provide essential context to the “facts” of scientific history. See Mali, *Mythistory*, p. 3f.

<sup>5</sup> Mali, *Mythistory*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Palladius, *The Lausiatic History* ch. XXXVIII, XLVI, LIV, Paulinus *Letter 22* and assorted letters of Jerome, cited herein.

## MELANIA, ASCETIC ROLE MODEL

One passage from Jerome is especially illustrative of the move to appropriate Melania's life for the purpose of creating a norm for ascetic women. Melania's turn from all the pleasures of this world in reaction to her losses is presented in a letter to Paula, in the wake of her own daughter Blasilla's death.<sup>7</sup> The year is 389 and Melania is still living at the Mount of Olives, while Jerome was in Rome. He writes:

The holy Melaniam, eminent among Christians for her true nobility (may the Lord grant that you and I may have part with her in His day!), while the dead body of her husband was still unburied, still warm, had the misfortune to lose at one stroke two of her sons...would you not suppose in her frenzy she would have unbound her hair, and rent her clothes, and torn her breast? Yet not a tear fell from her eyes. Motionless she stood there; then casting herself at the feet of Christ, she smiled, as though she held Him with her hands.<sup>8</sup>

Jerome uses Melania's decision to renounce the world as a teaching moment for his patroness, rewriting intimate moments of Melania's life for which he certainly was not present. Jerome did not ever meet Melania for himself: she could not have related such events to him even if this was an accurate description of her rejection of the senselessness of grief in the face of her loved ones' resurrection. Jerome uses Melania as the cultural rule against which Paula should measure her natural reaction to the death of her daughter.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Blasilla's death was widely attributed to the strict ascetic regimen Jerome had instructed her to follow in the midst of an illness (see Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, p. 110). Kate Cooper points out Jerome's attempt to save his own reputation while chastising Paula, comparing her to Thecla's mother Theocleia: "it would serve to accuse his aristocratic critics of insufficient conversion to Christianity, by implying that in their social conservatism they were hard to distinguish from their pagan counterparts," in *The Virgin and the Bride*, p. 82. Palladius would write later that Jerome "hindered her [Paula] by his jealousy, having induced her to serve his own plan," ch. XLI.

<sup>8</sup> Jerome, *Letter 39*. Jerome also writes in Letter 45 to Asella, "Of all the ladies in Rome, the only ones who caused scandal were Paula and Melaniam, who, despising their wealth and deserting their children, uplifted the cross of the Lord as a standard of religion." See Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6 for all of Jerome's letters.

<sup>9</sup> See Mali's use of Clifford Geertz: "myths serve as 'symbolic models of emotion'; that is to say they lay out for us basic precedents, rules, and prescriptions for 'cultural' reaction against our own 'natural' reaction," *Mythistory*, p. 5.

Why could Melania not have first “unbound her hair, rent her clothes” and *then* decide to change her life? That would certainly be more relatable, and thus less effective as a rhetorical tool. Following the chronology outlined above, there could be a year’s time between her husband’s death and her return to Rome. It would have taken time to complete the mundane tasks of putting her estate in order and making arrangements for her son’s care. But Jerome of course is not interested here in the reality of Melania’s experience. It doesn’t matter to him because the barest outline of events from Melania’s life provides an excellent basis for Jerome’s bit of inspirational storytelling. Mali urges historians “to be more aware of the mythical patterns of thought and action that reside in all historical events and narratives.”<sup>10</sup> This account of the trials that Melania overcame before renouncing the world needs to be examined for just such a mythical pattern. Melania did struggle through intense personal tragedy only to begin a new life, but the image of “casting herself at the feet of Christ” is simply a mythic description suited to Jerome’s purpose in chastising Paula’s weakness in indulging her grief.<sup>11</sup> Jerome needed a symbol of steadfast trust in God and resiliency in the face of earthly setbacks, and he eagerly appropriated a few tidbits of Melania’s life to craft just the sort of inspirational homily he felt Paula needed. A mythistorical reading of this passage reveals Jerome’s motives in promoting the celebratory image of Melania, and invites consideration of what the experience might have meant to Melania herself.

Jerome also invokes the invented figure of Melania as the archetypal ascetic to reinforce his good standing with Asella, a noblewoman he has been mentoring in her move away from the world, as well as Roman nobility in general. Jerome’s reputation seems to have suffered at the

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<sup>10</sup> Mali, *Mythistory*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> In the same letter, *Letter 39*, paraphrasing Lev. 21:12, Jerome commands Paula: “Rend not your clothes, he says, neither mourn as pagans, lest you die” and says, “I have spoken plainly, lest you might ignorantly supposed that Scripture sanctions your grief.”

time, as Roman gossip insinuated that his relations with certain women may not have been chaste. He writes as if to convince his critics in Rome that Melania and Paula, “who, despising their wealth and deserting their children, uplifted the cross of the Lord as a standard of religion” are much the better for having followed his example and guidance—thus recovering his own reputation in the process.<sup>12</sup> Jerome continues, “Had they...taken advantage of their wealth and position as widows to enjoy life and to be independent, they would have been saluted as ladies of high rank and saintliness.”<sup>13</sup> He is pointedly crafting images of both Melania and Paula that emphasize their goodness while taking credit for leading them to such admirable lifestyles.

Once he has established Melania and Paula as exceptionally holy, Jerome contrasts their revered figures with the lowly Roman society that does not recognize his own virtue. Melania and Paula *could* have chosen to live as the elite Romans he attacks, but gave up every luxury for the truly desirable life devoted to the Lord. Jerome ridicules the pagan Romans who “find pleasure in troops of laughing girls,” clearly following misguided perceptions of how to live, “We on our side look with disfavor on such a life as yours.”<sup>14</sup> Jerome is attempting to turn the tables on his detractors by arguing that they do not understand how to live a virtuous life, and thus cannot be in a position to judge Jerome’s own virtue. He takes advantage of the social capital Melania has accumulated over a lifetime of good works and church patronage to lend himself credibility and add to his defense. Melania’s role as benefactress coupled with her pre-ascetic social clout has functioned to keep her in a position of high regard among the Roman elite, despite her own indifference to such social opinions. At the time of Jerome’s writing, he

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<sup>12</sup> Jerome, Letter 45, para. 5. Rousseau writes that his perceived “‘disloyalty’ had certainly driven an unforgettable wedge into the aristocratic society of Christian Rome; a wedge between the advantages of birth—the opportunity for leisured devotion and a bookish curiosity—and the corresponding obligations of heredity,” in *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

expects his pagan audience to know about her, to recognize her social influence, and to change their opinion of himself after learning of his close connection to her.

One can easily term Jerome's version of Melania as 'hyperbolic' as he erases her human grief at the deaths of her family and exaggerates her spiritual devotion and perfection, positioning Melania in a space beyond the reach of ordinary Romans. Once this story about Melania began to circulate, other church fathers invoked an association with Melania to benefit their own careers and reputations. In a letter to Sulpicious Severus, written circa 400, Paulinus of Nola relates a detailed account of Melania's life, including a highly stylized version of her sorrow and decision to renounce the world. He writes:

Soon she became a mother, but that transitory happiness she enjoyed only briefly so that she might not love earthly things too long...her griefs so accumulated that she lost two sons and her husband in a year...through the loss of her human love she conceived a love of God. She was made wretched to become blessed; she was afflicted to be healed.<sup>15</sup>

Here Paulinus affords Melania somewhat more humanity than Jerome—she is first “wretched” and “afflicted”—but it is again in Paulinus's interest to portray Melania as exceptionally holy and admirable. His letter to Severus is accompanying a gift of a hair shirt offered in gratitude, perhaps, for their recent reconciliation.<sup>16</sup> Paulinus received this shirt from Melania when she passed through Nola a short time before. He wrote that the gift was a “blessing of the holy Melania, famous amongst the holy women of God.”<sup>17</sup> Paulinus must have been unsure whether Severus was familiar *enough* with the “famous” holy woman, because he describes her at great length despite claiming a fear of being “tedious” by adding to the “volumes written about her.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Paulinus, *Letter 29*.

<sup>16</sup> See Walsh's notes to *Letter 23* in Paulinus.

<sup>17</sup> Paulinus, *Letter 29*. His flattery continues: “So the tunic seemed more worthily yours, for your faith has greater affinity with her than my blood.” See Walsh's note on the possible relation between Melania and Paulinus.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

In looking beyond the stated goals of Jerome and Paulinus in these letters, Melania's power as a coveted social endorsement becomes clear.

#### MELANIA, NOBLE PATRONESS

Integral to the construction of Melania's stature as an exceptional servant of the Lord is her noble background and extreme wealth. Her noble family was at first a great obstacle to her new way of life. Paulinus writes of her "many struggles" because "the spiteful enemy did not allow her to depart without difficulty and peace."<sup>19</sup> Instead, "the devil attempted, through the upmost pressure of her noble relatives, whom he equipped to detain her, to block her design and prevent her from going. But she was lent strength superior to the power of the tempters."<sup>20</sup> This description of Melania's battle to renounce the world stands in stark contrast to Jerome's depiction of her easy retreat, as she stood "motionless" in the face of the deaths of her loved ones, before "casting herself at the feet of Christ." Here, Paulinus emphasizes the authority of her family. The fact that Melania overcame the concerted efforts of a high-ranking Roman family to control her behavior establishes her as a powerful figure for the church, one who will not back down from interference by the Roman government.

The figure of Melania as a noble advocate for the persecuted appears in both Paulinus's Letter to Severus and Palladius's *Lausiaca History*. Palladius relates that when Valens expelled the "Tall Four" monks, she followed them out of Alexandria and secretly "ministered to them from her own money."<sup>21</sup> In this narrative, Melania was ultimately found out and taken before the consular of Palestine, who threw her into jail. According to Palladius, she defended herself to the

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<sup>19</sup> Paulinus, Letter 29.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Palladius, *Lausiaca History*, Chapter XLVI.

consular saying, “one must in dealing with insensate folk be as audacious as a hawk.”<sup>22</sup> Paulinus relates the same course of events, though he does not tell of a prison stay. Instead, he writes that she “flew along before her would-be escort to the judge’s tribunal. His respect for the woman before him troubled him, and his surprise at her bold faith caused him to drop his heretical rage.”<sup>23</sup> Here Melania is not only an example of a charitable patron of the church, but also a steadfast champion of the disadvantaged. Again, Melania’s behaviors are presented as the standard to which other women should strive.

Though Melania likely saw her financial support of the church as merely another way to devote her life to God—she needn’t have renounced Roman society for life as a desert ascetic in order to serve as patroness—those writing about her financial donations cannot seem to separate Melania the ascetic from Melania the patroness. She is treated with reverence and deference by those who relied on her for support, despite the fact that the respect of earthly society meant little to her. In renouncing her place in Roman society, Melania’s goal was something far beyond this life. Nevertheless, Melania’s high social standing and influential family had practical, material benefits for the Christian community she joined. Paulinus writes, “I think I should begin to proclaim her praiseworthiness by praising her ancestry, for this, too, has a bearing on the grace with God has heaped on her.”<sup>24</sup> He continues, “not only her righteous life but also her privileged family made her suitable to receive God’s gifts,” since she is able to be a more influential proponent of Christianity. Though also in possession of a noble character, it is her extraordinary

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<sup>22</sup> Palladius, *Lausiac History*, Chapter XLVI.

<sup>23</sup> Paulinus, *Letter 29*, para. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Paulinus, *Letter 29*. She famously devoted all her wealth to the Church, building monasteries and churches, feeding and clothing the poor.

wealth that allows her to leave her family in the first place, and to provide for all those who were a part of her religious community, for decades after her death.<sup>25</sup>

Melania's nobility is evoked nearly as often as her rigorous devotion to an ascetic life, providing an interesting insight into the true priorities of some of these Christian writers. Despite (for example) Jerome and Rufinus's own avowed devotion to a life of austere existence in service of God's people, they cannot ignore the immense assistance that Melania's wealth provides. Melania as patroness of the exiled monks is also figured in distinctly gendered terms. The judge in Paulinus's story "respects" the woman before him and is surprised by her "bold faith," showing the ways that Melania's behavior is figured as outside the norms of Roman gender roles. In fact, by renouncing her duties as mother, daughter, and noblewoman, Melania may have thought she would shed the burdens of gendered life.<sup>26</sup> However, she remains tied to her gendered position as a noble, holy woman capable of acting on behalf of the church and its prominent thinkers. Her benefactors seem to be unable to conceive of Melania outside of her position of noblewoman even though she explicitly decided to leave that role behind her.

#### MELANIA, HOLY LADY

As seen in the passages discussed above, Jerome and Paulinus are not simply establishing a narrative of Melania as an exceptionally holy and saintly woman. They are also advocating a certain kind of female behavior and establishing those behaviors as the norm to which other women should conform. Melania, and women like Jerome's patroness Paula and her daughters, were certainly not behaving in accordance with the naturalized gender roles of Roman or lay

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<sup>25</sup> See Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, part 2 for a discussion of Melania's funding of the Mount of Olives monasteries after her death.

<sup>26</sup> See Shaw, *The Burdens of the Flesh*. Shaw notes on p. 6 the "primacy of the spiritual over the physical." See also Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, and Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* for discussions of the use of male pronouns to refer to successful female ascetics, as well as the goal of ascetic transcendence of gender.

Christian society, but there were no established church roles that could accommodate them either. Church fathers worked rather quickly to establish boundaries of acceptable behavior for this new type of religious woman.

The ideals represented in the mythic presentation of Melania proliferate, and they start to be taken for granted. Time and time again, Melania is called “holy Lady,” evoking her status as an exemplary female devoted to God. As Miriam Peskowitz writes of gender construction in Roman Palestine, “social meanings of gender were naturalized, made to seem familiar, commonplace, natural, expected, and very, very ordinary.”<sup>27</sup> Of course, in order for a crafted ideal to seem natural, it must be repeated, as the stories about Melania were. A “holy lady” does not unbind her hair, rend her clothes, and tear her breast when she is faced with difficult circumstances. Instead, she calmly devotes her life to serving God and his church. She sells her possessions and funds the publication of theological texts and translations, the building of churches, and the feeding and clothing of the poor. She withdraws from the world and the pleasures of “laughing girls.” As seen in the depictions of Palladius, she is confident in her role as spiritual mentor and protector of the disadvantaged. The story of the “holy Lady Melania” is used to reinforce these and other ideals of female ascetic behavior depicted by her male contemporaries. Given her lasting influence in Roman society, Melania was a compelling example indeed.

It is clear that in secluded ascetic communities, gendered expectations of proper behavior persisted. In Susanna Elm’s examination of Evagrius of Pontus’s “*Sententiae ad Virgem*” in contrast to his “*Sententiae ad Monachos*,” several differences between male and female ascetics emerge. For example, the document addressed to the virgins exhorts them to “honor your mother,” assuming the audience is not in fact those “mothers” running convents. Conversely,

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<sup>27</sup> Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, p. 24.

monks are ordered to “teach your sons,” as Evagrius addresses the men in charge of their communities.<sup>28</sup> Though his text addressed to the virgins alludes to a female leadership, he avoids validating this leadership by women when he addresses subordinates rather than the leading women themselves.

Peskowitz argues that when studying antiquity, one must keep invisible gendered structures like these in mind. She writes that if one unconsciously uses the “eyes and values” of the elite men whose writings are often the only source materials, the narratives and stories of antiquity are somewhat “seamless.” One might not immediately notice that in the example above, Evagrius is reinforcing an idea of monks as leaders and virgins as those who are led. “If we forget where we have positioned ourselves,” Peskowitz writes, “then theirs become the invisible but powerful eyes we use to look at other people’s bodies, even when we consider women’s lives, and even if we are women.”<sup>29</sup> Critically examining what it means to approach antiquity through a gendered perspective can open up new avenues of inquiry. It makes visible the construction of gender and the ways the writers of antiquity built their world as they wrote about it.

For this study, that means homing in on the ways these church fathers construct gender through the establishment of the archetypal ascetic woman, a project for which Melania proved useful. Palladius tells yet another tale of Melania’s holiness and devoutness, in which he figures her as a “wise mother of a true son.”<sup>30</sup> Palladius and Melania were members of a party travelling from Jerusalem to Egypt that included Jovinus, bishop of Ascalon. Palladius describes Jovinus as “a devout and learned man,” however when he stops to wash his feet, he receives a thorough chastising from Melania. “She came to him like a wise mother of a true son and began to scoff at his softness, saying ‘how dare you, at your age, when your blood is still vigorous, thus coddle

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<sup>28</sup> Elm, “Evagrius Ponticus’ ‘Sententiae ad Virginem,’” especially p. 102 and 110.

<sup>29</sup> Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, p. 157.

<sup>30</sup> Palladius, *Lausiac History*, Chapter LV.

your flesh?”<sup>31</sup> Despite being older than Jovinus, “I am in the sixtieth year” and suffering from medical disorders, “I am a victim to various ailments,” she does not allow herself to “coddle” her flesh, and neither should he.<sup>32</sup> In this rare depiction of Melania’s speech, she behaves as a “wise mother” with every right to scold her “true son,” despite the fact that in church hierarchies the roles would be reversed.<sup>33</sup>

In the passage examined above, Palladius’s focus is Melania, despite titling the chapter, “Silvania.” Silvania is briefly identified as a member of the party: “the blessed Silvania the virgin, sister-in-law of Rufinus the ex-prefect.”<sup>34</sup> Her sole role in the narrative is to provide an explanation for Melania’s presence in a travelling party and an excuse for Palladius to continue writing about Melania. For once Palladius has found himself on the topic of Holy Melania’s virtues, he cannot seem to stop himself. The section ends with a celebration of Melania’s dedication to the study of scripture and the writings of church fathers. “Blessed” Silvania’s life seems to be insufficiently captivating to warrant discussion in a text explicitly written primarily to inspire men “to rivalry and imitation” of the holy fathers and women to “wear the crown of continence and chastity” in imitation of “aged and illustrious God-inspired matrons.”<sup>35</sup> Silvania is tossed aside to make room for Melania, who is more useful for Palladius’s purposes. By the year 419, when Palladius began writing, Melania’s reputation was so powerful that Palladius gives her she two entire chapters of her own, and includes her at length in three others.

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<sup>31</sup> Palladius, *Lausiatic History*, Chapter LV.

<sup>32</sup> Palladius does not record Jovinus’s response, leading one to imagine that he followed her example without rebuttal.

<sup>33</sup> In his discussion of desert ascetic communities, Philip Rousseau writes that “even among equals, outspokenness was to be avoided,” *Ascetics, Authority and the Church*, p. 51. For Palladius, Melania’s outspokenness is rather celebrated than cited as a behavior to be avoided.

<sup>34</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, ch. XLV.

<sup>35</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, Preface.

## MELANIA AS WILLFUL ASCETIC GUIDE

Melania was not only used by others to develop an appropriate standard for women entering the ascetic life, she also took up leadership roles on several occasions. Believing that her granddaughter Melania and her husband Pinianus are in danger of being led to a spiritual life by the wrong factions, she returns to Rome to intervene. Paulinus writes that “those silk-clad children of hers, though accustomed to the splendor of a toga or a dress according to their sex, took joy in touching that thick tunic of hers, with its hard threads like broom, and her cheap cloak.”<sup>36</sup> After Melania’s visit to her family, Palladius writes that Melania the Younger’s “conscience was always being pricked by the tales she heard about her grandmother, and (at last) she was so goaded that she felt unable to perform her marriage duty.”<sup>37</sup> That the role of Melania the Elder in her granddaughter’s decision to turn to the ascetic life is entirely absent from Gerontius’s *The Life of Melania the Younger* will be discussed later.

Perhaps most compellingly, it is Melania who is credited with convincing Evagrius of Pontus to devote himself to the ascetic existence when he floundered after fleeing Rome in disgrace. Palladius writes that “blessed Melania” swooped in when Evagrius was ill, in exile as a result of a disastrous affair with a married woman, and instructed him: “Give me your word before the Lord that you will keep to the mark of the monastic life; and sinner though I am, I will pray that you may be granted a furlough of life.”<sup>38</sup> Evagrius followed Melania’s instructions, and when he recovered days later, he devoted himself properly to a life of worship and contemplation. Casiday adds, “One imagines that Melania had a hand in Evagrius’s choice of Egypt for his next destination and undoubtedly her contacts there were very useful to him.”<sup>39</sup> Melania performs the

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<sup>36</sup> Paulinus, *Letter 29*.

<sup>37</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, ch. LX.

<sup>38</sup> Palladius, ch. XXXVIII. See also the introduction to *Evagrius*, esp. pg 9.

<sup>39</sup> Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, p. 9.

unlikely role of spiritual mentor to Evagrius, who at this point was an archdeacon. Melania not only inspired his spiritual rededication but also provided material assistance through her network of connections, and likely provided financial assistance as well. In relating these tales, Palladius reinforces the idea that a respectable ascetic woman is confident in her belief and in her responsibility to steer those around her towards a righteous life.

Interestingly, the roles of mentor and protégé have reversed after just a few years, according to Evagrius's writings. In his response to Melania regarding the proposed journey of her deaconess Severa, Evagrius admonishes her to "teach your community and your sons that they should not travel on a long drawn-out journey and that they should not go rashly into deserted places, for this is foreign to every soul that has withdrawn from the world."<sup>40</sup> Severa's journey can hardly be called "rash" when she not only sought the advice of Melania, but of Rufinus and Evagrius as well. In addition, Evagrius seems to be forgetting that Melania herself has traveled "into deserted places" on multiple occasions, and has yet to be caught up in the sinful world outside the monastery. He closes with the observation that "I would be surprised if a woman who goes round and meets ten thousand people found it possible to perfect this discipline!"<sup>41</sup> Again, he forgets that he is addressing just such "a woman," who has by this point achieved a solid reputation as having perfected the ascetic discipline.

In this letter, and those to Rufinus and Severa on the same topic, Evagrius makes Melania's authority to govern her community secondary to his own authority to influence the behavior of Melania and the women at the Mount of Olives. Melania's demotion from mentor to protégé is unremarked. Once Evagrius was well-established and regained his reputation, he was

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<sup>40</sup> Evagrius, Letter 8 in Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, p. 61.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

able to rewrite the terms of their relationship.<sup>42</sup> No longer in need of Melania's guidance and believing himself transformed enough to regain his superior position as an ascetic male, Evagrius works to convince others of his renewed authority. Each time he writes with an assumption of superiority, he is actually creating and reinforcing that position of power for himself. It is important to look at how this reconfigured relationship benefits Evagrius: by assuming the role of advisor to the holy Melania, Evagrius improved his spiritual authority considerably.

#### MELANIA AND THE ORIGENIST CONTROVERSY

For the purposes of this study, I'll briefly outline some details of the complex controversy over Origen that erupted late in the fourth century.<sup>43</sup> Origen was a second-century theologian and ascetic, some of whose teachings were later deemed heretical by many church fathers. Nevertheless, almost all who were active in the church in the following centuries—including Jerome, Rufinus, and Evagrius—read and translated Origen's works with some frequency. As debates over forms of ascetic practice circulated, there was a renewed interest in Origen's theology. Specifically, his theories regarding the nature of the assumption into heaven with or without physical bodies and the universal potential for redemption are among the most controversial tenets. It is not until Rufinus published a new translation of Origen's *On First Principles* and attempted to make the case that another hand had introduced the heretical elements that it became damaging to have read or supported Origen's texts.

In his commentary on his collected works of Evagrius, Casiday writes that Melania was "herself steeped in the works of Origen and was doubtless a formidable theologian" as one of the

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<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Evagrius seems not to have left any written account of his reliance on Melania during his crisis. Whether this is coincidence of circumstance or a concerted effort to erase that period of vulnerability is unknown.

<sup>43</sup> An excellent account of the controversy and the various social elements is found in Elizabeth Clark's *The Origenist Controversy*.

reasons Evagrius would have found easy camaraderie with her in the aftermath of his flight from Rome.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in a scene mentioned earlier, Palladius describes Melania as “being very learned and loving literature, she turned night into day by perusing every writing of the ancient commentators, including 3,000,000 lines of Origen and 2,500,000 lines of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil, and other standard writers.”<sup>45</sup> In Clarke’s translation of the *Lausiatic History*, he notes here that the mention of Origen is “omitted by leading authorities for the text, as in the other places where he is mentioned by Palladius.”<sup>46</sup> Clearly, the notion of association with Origen became so damaging that some editors found it necessary to cleanse Palladius of his Origenist sympathies in order for his written legacy to be taken seriously. In discussing Evagrius’ impact in the Origenist controversy, Casiday observes that “Guilt by association has a regrettable staying power.”<sup>47</sup> This, I will show next, was certainly the case for Melania the Elder.

When Rufinus published his translation of Origen’s *On First Principles* in 397, he paid what he believed to be a compliment to his friend Jerome. In the preface, he wrote, “that brother and associate of mine...prefixed to the work [one of Jerome’s translations of Origen] a preface so full of beauty and so magnificent that he awoke in every one the desire of reading Origen and eagerly investigating his works.”<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, Jerome’s friends at Rome interpreted this move as a mean-spirited attempt to damage Jerome’s reputation and quickly wrote to Jerome to alert him of the offense.<sup>49</sup> “Dearest” Rufinus, Jerome’s “brother” and close friend for decades,

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<sup>44</sup> Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Palladius, *Lausiatic History*, Chapter LV.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 161. He doesn’t mention who those “authorities” are, but it is interesting to note the degree to which the Origenist controversy reached.

<sup>47</sup> Casiday, p. 17. See 14–22 for a general discussion of the controversy.

<sup>48</sup> Rufinus, “Preface to the Translation of Origen’s Books,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3. In his Preface to the 383 Latin translation of Origen’s “Two Homilies on the Song of Songs” Jerome in fact wrote, “Origen, whilst in other books has surpassed all others, has in the Song of Songs surpassed himself.” See Jerome’s “Preface to the Translation of Origen’s Two Homilies on the Song of Songs,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6.

<sup>49</sup> See Jerome, “To Pammachius Against John,” in Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6.

had deeply offended him and an immediate rift was created between the two.<sup>50</sup> The situation escalated quickly; Jerome accused Rufinus of whitewashing the heretical elements of Origen from the text; Rufinus claims he merely left out what he felt had been inserted by another writer. When the dust settled, Jerome, who may have been more concerned with clearing own name than resolving the conflict, arose on the side of orthodoxy; and Rufinus and Evagrius, along with Melania found themselves cast as heretics.<sup>51</sup>

From this point onward, Melania appears rarely in Jerome's letters, never identified by name. Instead she is recast from "holy Melanium;" "the devout lady, Melanium," to "her whose name bears witness to the blackness of her perfidy."<sup>52</sup> Melania's only offense seems to be her refusal to distance herself from Rufinus and side to with Jerome. Jerome's pettiness did not stop there: he even struck her from his translation and expansion of Eusebius' *Chronicle*. The original entry for the year 374, to which Rufinus refers in his *Apology*, read, "Melania, noblest of Roman women, and daughter of the sometime consul Marcellinus, at that time have left behind her only son, the urban praetor, sailed to Jerusalem, where she was such a miracle of virtue and especially humility, that she received the name of Thecla."<sup>53</sup> Rufinus describes Jerome's alteration of the text as "astonishing."<sup>54</sup> Even though Melania had no direct role in the controversy, she suffered for her association with Rufinus. Given, however, that Jerome had crafted and circulated a particular vision of Melania, the holy woman, it is not surprising that she is banished from his

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<sup>50</sup> See especially Jerome, Letters 1-4 on his early attitude towards Rufinus and Evagrius, and Letters 4, 33, 34, 45 for Melania. Jerome's quick perception of offense may be related to the fact that the two had only recently been reconciled from another dispute. See Schaff's introduction to Rufinus's "Preface," and the introduction to Jerome's letter "To Pammachius." In the latter, Schaff speculates that this earlier dispute (in the late 380s) was perhaps resolved "through the influence of Melania."

<sup>51</sup> See Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, p. 35 for a discussion of Jerome's hypocritical endorsement of Origen to various letter recipients while in 399 vehemently claiming that he never placed value in Origen's works.

<sup>52</sup> Jerome, Letters 3, 5, 133, in Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Jerome, *Chronicle*.

<sup>54</sup> Rufinus, *Apology*, Book II, ch. 26 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3. "In these very Chronicles he had narrated...how the name of Thecla was given her on account of her signal merit and virtue. But afterwards...he erased her name from all the copies of his work."

works once Melania, the real woman, behaves in ways that no longer suit his idealized archetype.<sup>55</sup>

Another unfortunate consequence of Melania's close association with Evagrius and Rufinus is that she is entirely absent from *The Life of Melania the Younger*—even from the scene where Melania the Younger visits the monasteries at the Mount of Olives. This is especially surprising given the role Melania is said to have played in her granddaughter's decision to leave her public life and riches behind. In Palladius's account, Melania the Younger tells her husband she desires to “become the heir of my grandmother, whose name I also bear.”<sup>56</sup> Gerontius uses this very scene from Palladius in his *Life* without mentioning Melania the Elder once.<sup>57</sup> Keeping in mind Peskowitz's admonition to remember through whose eyes we approach the material, it becomes clear that Melania the Elder's guilt-by-association was still a perceived threat to the character of Gerontius's revered subject. He chose to distance Melania the Younger from the memory of her then controversial grandmother despite the overwhelmingly positive image of Melania throughout most of her life. Gerontius in fact lists Melania the Younger's “ardor for the orthodox faith” as one of her first attributes deserving of praise—perhaps thinking of her grandmother's departure from the orthodox.<sup>58</sup> Gerontius is crafting a particular model of Melania the Younger, recreating her in his idea of the ideal ascetic women.

## CONCLUSION

Melania the Elder has been remembered through several vivid accounts of her life. She is alternately presented as an ideal of Christian virtue and subjected to erasure as a result of her

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<sup>55</sup> Jerome's writings from this point on grow increasingly “contemptuous” and “arrogant,” as Schaff notes. There is no room in Jerome's myth of the stable, reliable ascetic who looks to Jerome for guidance on all matters for this pair of thinkers who have failed to repent for their mistaken Origenist sympathies.

<sup>56</sup> See Palladius, *Lausiac History*, ch. LXI and Paulinus, *Letter 29*.

<sup>57</sup> Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, p. 148.

<sup>58</sup> Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, Gerontius's Prologue.

particular beliefs and alliances. Paulinus wrote that “fear of being unbearably tedious forbids me to add more to the volumes written about her.”<sup>59</sup> If the wide range of perspectives of Melania that we *do* have access to is any barometer, it will be interesting indeed if more of those “volumes” are uncovered. As the sources about Melania are so heavily biased, it is nearly impossible to determine fact from fiction in the details of Melania’s career as a founding ascetic mother. For this reason, the critical theories of Mali and Peskowitz are helpful in untangling the meanings that these varying representations of Melania had for her contemporaries.

Using Mali’s mythistorical lens to examine the ways the stories these men told about themselves and about Melania make clear that she was an exceedingly prominent figure in her community. Considering the bias embedded in the texts about Melania adds an important layer of meaning to the works. Without any record of Melania’s own letters or thoughts, it is impossible to locate the “real Melania.” Nevertheless, in looking critically at the ways she is depicted by her powerful peers, one can get a sense of this woman’s extensive influence and what she meant to her community. Positioning themselves as the heads of a new ascetic communal tradition, Jerome, Palladius, Paulinus and others felt the need to quickly establish norms for those communities. These men used Melania to inspire devout behavior in others and establish a norm for the ascetic woman, a norm that kept their own positions of power intact. When association with Melania could no longer enhance one’s reputation, she disappears from the texts of Jerome and Gerontius.

By keeping in mind the constructed nature of these narratives it becomes clear that the positive and negative views of Melania are related to the contexts in which the writer was working and how they aimed to portray and reinforce gender norms for this burgeoning

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<sup>59</sup> Paulinus, *Letter 29*, paragraph 6. This was written ca. 400, well after the publication of Rufinus’s translation of Origen.

community. Peskowitz's work points out the need to interrogate naturalized constructions of gender, as those seen throughout the letters that invoke Melania as a role model in one way or another. Peskowitz's analysis, paired with Mali's, is a reminder of the ways culture is constantly constructed through the stories people tell about themselves and their societies. Melania the Elder offered an excellent figure from which an archetype could be constructed: she faced potentially devastating challenges in her personal life, yet turned her back on the luxury and riches of Roman society in favor of an austere life devoted to God. She financed a number of church buildings, supported the writings of Rufinus and others, and acts as a formidable advocate for disadvantaged believers. Despite the fact that Melania tried to remove herself from a life in the spotlight of society, writers like Jerome and Paulinus refused to let her move beyond her noble beginnings. Melania's notability began with her revolutionary decision to give up the luxuries of her life at the highest rank of Roman society, and she was never able to escape the opinions of her peers.

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