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The Birth and Rebirth of Fabiola, Patron Saint of Nursing: Hagiography, Female Piety and Salvation Through Care of the Sick in the Fourth and Nineteenth Centuries

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Abstract

This paper explores Belgian artist Francis Alÿs' accidental discovery that Fabiola, the first patron saint of nursing, was a popular subject for amateur painters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This discovery led to Alÿs' contemporary artwork entitled *The Fabiola Project*, which consists of more than 500 found amateur reproductions of the 1885 portrait of the saint by French artist Jean-Jacques Henner. Fabiola's nineteenth-century popularity arose as a result of a wildly popular novel by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, *Fabiola; or, The Church of the Catacombs*, which was published in 1854 in the midst of the Crimean War (1853–56). Wiseman's exciting story and Henner's serene image combined to make the long-forgotten figure of Fabiola material, establishing her as a familiar and popular nineteenth-century trope. Taking a material culture perspective on the nineteenth-century resurrection of Fabiola through both fiction and portraiture, it is argued that the Fabiola story reveals both the longevity and political utility of pious female archetypes. The paper discusses the life of Fabiola, as told by Jerome, focusing on the radical nature of her devotion to the physical care of the sick as an advanced form of asceticism and feminized religious practice. Picking up this thread on religious self-shaping through the work of care of the sick, it then turns to the resurgence of interest in Fabiola in the context of nineteenth-century debates by churchmen on both sides of the confessional divide concerning the appropriate expression of female piety. It argues that *The Fabiola Project* reveals an archive of devotion to the rehabilitated saint, whose popularity in fiction and visual culture provides a rare insight into the energizing of a Catholic ideal for nineteenth-century women as active workers and nurses to the sick poor.

1 Introduction

This paper explores Belgian artist Francis Alÿs' accidental discovery that Fabiola, the first patron saint of nursing, was a popular subject for amateur painters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This discovery led to Alÿs' contemporary artwork entitled *The Fabiola Project*, which consists of more than 500 found amateur reproductions of the 1885 portrait of the saint by French artist Jean-Jacques Henner. Fabiola's nineteenth-century popularity arose as a result of a wildly popular novel by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, *Fabiola; or, The Church of the Catacombs*, which was published in 1854 in the midst of the Crimean War (1853–56). Wiseman's exciting story and Henner's serene image combined to make the long-forgotten figure of Fabiola material, establishing her as a familiar and popular nineteenth-century trope.

I take a material culture perspective on the nineteenth-century resurrection of Fabiola through both fiction and portraiture, and argue that the Fabiola story reveals both the longevity and political utility of pious female archetypes. The paper begins with the life of Fabiola, as told by Jerome,[1] which focuses on the radical nature of her devotion to the physical care of the sick as an advanced form of asceticism and feminized religious practice. Picking up this thread on religious self-shaping through the work of care of the sick, the focus then turns to

[1] Jerome 1933, pp. 309–337.

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the resurgence of interest in Fabiola in the context of nineteenth-century debates by churchmen on both sides of the confessional divide concerning the appropriate expression of female piety. I conclude that *The Fabiola Project* reveals an archive of devotion to the rehabilitated saint, whose popularity in fiction and visual culture provides rare insight into the energizing of a Catholic ideal for nineteenth-century women as active workers and nurses to the sick poor.

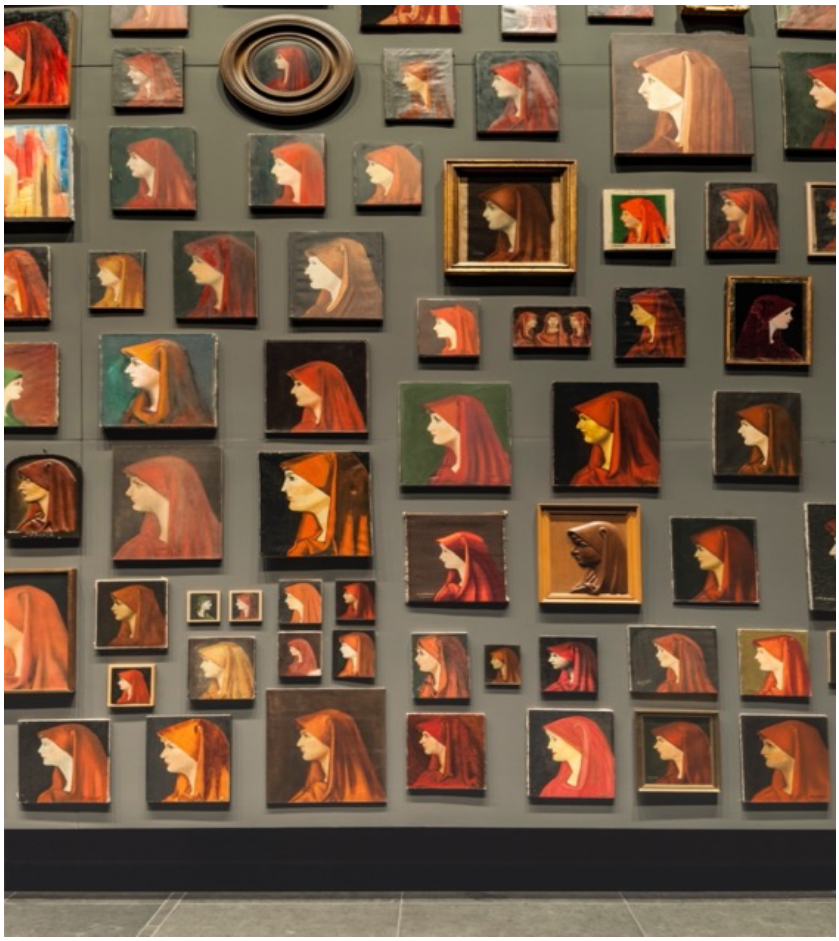

Figure 1: Installation view of *Francis Alÿs: The Fabiola Project,* 2018, Menil Collection, Houston (with permission of the Menil Collection)

2 *The Fabiola Project*: Hagiography and Nursing

The woman in the portrait is thoughtful and sombre. Her face open, her expression pensive. The red folds of her veil and gown signal modesty and seriousness, while revealing the soft glimpse of her hair. She is not a simple innocent but a devout woman of quiet strength and devotion. The composition in profile positions the viewer as an intruder on a moment of reflection. The portrait is bare of detail: no room, no vista to share with the viewer or to indicate the subject of Fabiola's gaze. All that can be seen is her gentle feminine face, her simple gown, and her thoughtfulness. But stepping back from the single to the whole, the effect is startling. The soaring wall of hundreds of Fabiolas, all painted by hand by unknown amateur artists, has a visceral and perplexing impact on the viewer.

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Figure 2: Installation view of *Francis Alÿs: The Fabiola Project*, 2018, Menil Collection, Houston, (with permission of the Menil Collection).

In the 1990s, Francis Alÿs set out to collect amateur versions of the grand masters (such as Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa). What he found in the flea markets, first in Belgium and then further afield, was that versions of the grand masters' works were few, while versions of Jean-Jacques Henner's Fabiola abounded. Henner's lost 1885 portrait of Fabiola, the wealthy fourth-century Roman matron, patron saint of nurses, founder of hospitals and hospices, is conventionally but movingly executed. Extraordinarily popular throughout Europe at the time, it was the Louvre's best-selling postcard for years and appeared on sundry other objects such as matchboxes and rice packets.[2]

Alÿs became fascinated by the choice of subject of these 'Sunday painters', as he termed them, and continued to collect versions of Fabiola over the decades. *The Fabiola Project* was exhibited at the Byzantine Fresco Chapel at the Menil Collection in Houston in 2018, when the entire collection was displayed for the first time.[3] Subsets of the collection had previously been shown at various sites, such as the National Gallery in London in 2009[4] and the Hispanic Society of America Dia Art exhibition in New York City in 2008.[5] The large Houston installation folds together the countless repetitions of the image, but also the distinctiveness of each rendering. As David Morgan says, 'they are not copies but "copia", transcripts in abundance, a

2 Alÿs 2008.

3 Alÿs 2018. See 'The Menil Collection's newest exhibit "Francis Alÿs: The Fabiola Project" is a collector's dream,' Houstonia, https://www.houstoniamag.com/arts-and-culture/2016/06/the-menil-collections-newest-exhibit-francis-alys-the-fabiola-project-is-a-collectors-dream, accessed 4 January, 2022.

4 Cumming 2009.

5 Smith 2008.

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multitude of images that each transmitted the honor and the blessing of the sacred.'[6] According to Morgan, 'The multitude of Fabiola's portraits suggest their referent is actually the idea in the mind of the devout, which is nourished and reaffirmed each time they see Fabiola's image'.[7]

The Fabiola Project is at once a singular and a multiple work for viewer and the artist. Of the 584 renderings of the iconographic image some are well executed, others less so. These images with their imperfections and inconsistent renderings of the original fill the contemporary observer with curiosity. Hannan and Longair assert that 'Things [...] both embody meaning and convey meaning'.[8] As Cooke muses in her essay on the installation: What meaning is conveyed to the artist and to the viewer? Why this choice of image?[9] The project garnered scholarly attention and a collection of essays by art historians, critics, curators, and professors of history and religion, including an essay by Alÿs, offers a range of theoretical and critical perspectives on the subject of Fabiola and the installation. These authors explore the genesis of the nineteenth-century passion for Fabiola from Henner's 1885 painting to Wiseman's 1856 novel and Jerome's eulogy on her death in 400. Historian Susan Laningham notes the timeliness of Fabiola's rediscovery during the Crimean War as the profile of nurses was rising, situating the saint as the 'forerunner of their craft'.[10]

Investigations of material culture 'almost always lead in unexpected directions'[11] because what Laurel Thatcher Ulrich calls 'things' exist as portals which open up to 'constellations of powerful human sentiment'.[12] Fabiola comes to us as a letter in the form of a eulogy by Jerome.[13] As medievalist Catherine M. Mooney argues, 'Male manipulation of female texts and saintly portrayals endured long after the saints and their original interpreters had completed their texts and died'.[14] As Caroline Bynam Walker remarks, 'there is no saint without an audience',[15] and Fabiola's saintliness was a vehicle for Jerome's lessons on female piety and charity, as well as a demonstration of his spiritual power.

3 Material Culture: What Images Tell Us

In their work *Tangible Things*, an analysis of objects in the Harvard collections, Thatcher Ulrich and colleagues write that a painting 'tells a small story that, when interpreted in the context of its time, tells a much larger story [...]'.[16] And while 'objects may initially appear to be an island, [...] in unexpected or even scarcely expected ways they are all of a piece of a continent,

6 Morgan 2008, p. 19.
7 Morgan 2008, p. 21.
8 Hannan/Longair 2016, p. 31.
9 Cooke 2008, p. 69.
10 Laningham 2008, p. 28.
11 Ulrich/Gaskell/Schechner/Carter 2015, p. 3.
12 Ulrich/Gaskell/Schechner/Carter 2015, p. 164.
13 As a result of her first marriage, which ended in divorce, Fabiola is also known for her protection of women who are victims of abuse, see Morgan 2008, p. 13. A Catholic site dedicated to the stewardship of saints also emphasizes her patronage of difficult marriages and there is no mention of her nursing. See https://catholicstewardship.com/5419-2/
14 Moore 1999, p. 9.
15 Walker 1999, p. ix.
16 Ulrich/Gaskell/Schechner/Carter 2015, p. 6.

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a part of the main'.[17] In what follows, I explore this continent of connections and the context for Fabiola's popular revival fifteen centuries after her death. I begin with Jerome's crafting of the saint, his well-known thoughts on women and female piety, and his views on care of the sick. I then move to an examination of Fabiola's nineteenth-century incarnation and the political uses Wiseman found for an ideal of Catholic womanhood devoted to care of the sick. Finally, the focus turns to the runaway success of the visual depiction of the saint in the Catholic world over the later decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which resulted in Alÿs' found Fabiolas.

Christopher Pinney argues we should consider 'the manner in which material forms produce, and become integrated in a particular perspective on the world'.[18] Details of Fabiola's life are scant and no image or description has survived. It is entirely through the letters of Jerome that we gain a picture of the quotidian lives of pious women in late fourth-century Rome and of Fabiola's distinctive path. Jerome had little time for women who followed the traditional path of marriage and motherhood. In fact, Jerome's denigration of the married state was so extreme that it caused controversy in Rome and generated a response from Augustine.[19] His only spiritual solution for women was virginity or widowhood, declaring that a woman who forgoes marriage and children and serves Christ in the world shall 'cease to be a woman, and will be called a man'.[20]

4 Fourth Century Piety and the Place of Care of the Sick

In the late fourth century the monastic movement that had begun in the Eastern Empire under Basil had not yet reached Rome. This meant that there were no religious communities for women in the West. Jerome filled this transitional moment when he was in Rome between 382 and 384 by becoming the spiritual director of an informal community of pious Romans who congregated around the household of the wealthy and influential Paula. These women lived not in a community but in their separate households. Their wealth supported the charitable efforts of the church, as well as providing financial support for figures such as Jerome. After departing Rome, Jerome journeyed to the Holy Land, where he and Paula established four religious communities for men and women.[21] He remained closely connected with the members of the Roman community that had formed around Paula, acting as their spiritual director, and his correspondence over the decades provided explicit instructions on the appropriate daily life of virgins and widows consecrated to God while living in the world.

This private domestic spiritual life was dominated by heroic feats of asceticism and prayer. As Peter Brown's work has elaborated, early Christians created a complex relationship between body and soul, extolled virginity, and engaged in spiritual practices focused on the eradication of the flesh as a means to free the soul.[22] Jerome's correspondence emphasized the need for extreme measures and his injunctions on food and virginity were plentiful. He demanded that

17 Ulrich/Gaskell/Schechner/Carter 2015, p. 7.
18 Pinney 1992, p. 5.
19 Elliot 2013, p. 7.
20 Dyan Elliot describes Jerome's work, *Against Jovian*, as the 'most notoriously misogynistic treatise of all time', see Elliot 2013, p. 5.
21 Cooke 2008, pp. 59–79. See also Cooper/Hillner 2009 for a discussion of the relationship between leading Roman families and the church in the early Christian period.
22 Brown 2008.

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fasting be a 'daily occurrence'.[23] He bade women to abstain from meat and wine, and to let their 'companions be those who are pale of face and thin with fasting'.[24] On virginity he argued they should 'understand that virginity is natural and that marriage came after the fall'.[25] His only praise for wedlock was that it 'produce(s) virgins.'[26]

Jerome's direction was also specific with respect to the dress and outward demeanour of the women. He declared 'let your dress be neither elegant nor slovenly [...] nor be noticeable by any strangeness that may attract the attention of passers-by'.[27] Jerome also believed that attention should not be drawn to the shape of the body. He specifically mentioned that the 'girdle is intended to keep the dress close rather than cut the figure into two halves'[28] and commented that virgins should avoid 'walking abroad'[29] and 'let God alone' see them when giving alms.[30] At the same time he warned against flamboyant displays of ascetism and piety, telling his followers not to 'lower your voice on purpose as though you are worn by fasting'. He also advocated never doing anything that could cause people to 'point their fingers at you'. Jerome was of the view that virgins of both sexes should avoid any social contact with the other sex, stating that, in particular, 'females should only mix with their own sex'.[31] Jerome was clear on the primacy of the vow of consecration to God over all other duties and responsibilities, even the requirement to obey one's father – a fundamental tenet of Roman society. In what was likely the most radical aspect of his advice to his Roman followers, Jerome insisted that the call of God meant it may be necessary to 'trample your father underfoot and go your own way, fly'.[32]

In addition to Jerome's community of wealthy virgins, widows were also an important source of converts and devotees for the early Church.[33] Among Paula's circle of Roman widows were those who commanded significant resources. This may explain another theme in Jerome's letters: his extolling of widows to remain unmarried and devote themselves to Christ. After all, he argued, the dark robe of the widow 'is scarcely soiled by lying on the ground' (a form of penance).[34] He demanded widows resist their family's wishes and reflect on the horrors of childbirth and children, and especially the 'curse of stepchildren'.[35]

The most famous widow connected with this aristocratic group of Jerome's followers was Fabiola. By Jerome's account Fabiola was known to and loved by all of Rome. Upon her death around the year 400, Jerome's eulogy dwells with characteristic harshness on Fabiola's sins and failings. Despite Jerome's injunctions to his women followers, which emphasized modest asceticism, renunciation, and invisibility, Jerome praised Fabiola's extreme and high-profile

23 Jerome, Letter XXII, To Eustocium, The Virgin's Profession, p. 87.
24 Jerome, Letter XXII, pp. 87–89.
25 Jerome, Letter XXII, p. 93.
26 Jerome, Letter XXII, p. 93.
27 Jerome, Letter XXII, p. 115.
28 Jerome, Letter XXXVIII, To Marcella, A Good Woman, p. 165.
29 Jerome, Letter XXII, p. 87.
30 Jerome, Letter XXII, p. 87.
31 Jerome, Letter CXXVII, To Principia, Marcella and the Sack of Rome, pp. 465–475.
32 Jerome, Letter XIV, To Heliodorus, The Ascetic Life, p. 31.
33 Wilkinson 2012.
34 Jerome 1933, Letter XXXVIII, p. 165.
35 Jerome 1933, Letter LIV, To Furia on the Duty of Remaining a Widow, pp. 258–259.

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penance. Fabiola was not a virgin consecrated to Christ but a sinner and penitent as she 'took a second husband and abandoned her first'.[36] Her penance was severe and public: 'baring her head and closing her mouth' she 'took up the millstone', with 'unshod feet', 'sat upon the coals of fire' and 'beat the face […] by which she won her second husband's love'. Her squalor was 'studied' with 'plebeian dress' and 'slave's garb'.[37] Moreover, her acts of mercy went far beyond the alms-giving familiar to wealthy pious Romans who 'show mercy with the purse, not with the hand.'[38]

Fabiola was distinguished by the fact that, despite her high station in life, she personally cared for the sick poor, unlike those whose 'weak stomachs' required them to 'carry out these acts of mercy by the agency of others'.[39] And while her wealth allowed her to found what was likely Rome's first nosocomium or infirmary, Fabiola also personally 'gathered into it sufferers from the street, giving their poor bodies worn with sickness and hunger all a nurse's care'. In her hospital, Fabiola would 'wash away purulent matter from wounds', and as well as feed the sick poor with her own hand, while for those who were little more than 'breathing corpses' she would 'moisten their lips with drops of water'.[40] Fabiola also built, together with Pammachius, Paula's son-in-law, a hostel or xenodochia at the Port of Rome, which crowds 'flocked to […] for hospitality' and which 'the whole world heard was a […] home to strangers'.[41]

Jerome acknowledged that his letters have 'praised virgins, widows and married women who have kept their vestments always white' and that Fabiola is indeed different, albeit that she 'fell among thieves and was carried home upon Christ's shoulders'.[42] Fabiola apparently considered the possibility of joining Paula's religious community in Jerusalem but decided against it, returning to Rome to spend her fortune on the poor and the Christian community. And although religious communities came to be established in Rome in her lifetime, Fabiola continued to remain apart, focusing instead on her charitable endeavours and her public acts of atonement through care of the sick.

For the early Christians care of the sick was merely one form of self-abasing penitent practice, such as fasting, going barefoot, renunciation of family and friends, and painful physical practices. Care of the sick received no particular attention from Jerome in his letters to his followers, with the exception of Fabiola's eulogy. Jerome does mention visiting the sick as one of the duties of the priest,[43] but again it is discussed as merely one of many duties and does not include a requirement to nurse the poor's ailments. It is, however, her asceticism and 'strong stomach' that brings Jerome's highest praise for Fabiola:

> Need I describe here the diverse troubles from which human beings suffer, the maimed noses, the lost eyes, the scorched feet, the leprous arms, the swollen

[36] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 315.
[37] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 311.
[38] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 323.
[39] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 315.
[40] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 322.
[41] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 334.
[42] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 337.
[43] Jerome 1933, Letter LII, To Neopotium, A Clergyman's Duties, p. 225.

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> bellies, the shrunken thighs, the dropsical legs, and the diseased flesh alive with hungry worms?[44]

In Fabiola we not only find the first hospital foundation for the sick poor in the West; perhaps even more importantly we find further delineation of pious practices into distinct strands. The first was giving alms to the poor, a practice that was already well established in this period and was expected of all members of the Christian community, along with the expectation that the wealthy direct their fortunes towards supplying the poor with their needs. The second strand of charitable practices was the founding of institutions to provide care to those in need, such as hospitals, orphanages, or other charities. These two practices were to some extent expected of wealthy Romans, pagan or Christian – a variation on the bread and circuses tradition of Rome.[45] The third strand, whereby ascetism is expressed through the direct care of the sick, was a distinctly Christian evolution in its penitent practices of self-mortification and renunciation. In nursing the sick, the nurse endured the risk of contagion and death from exposure to disease. This, combined with the ability to discipline the body to overcome repugnance at the state of the wounds or deformities of the sick poor, constituted care of the sick as an embodied spiritual practice and an essential element of the self-culture of the nurse. In the case of Fabiola all three of these practices come together: benefactor, institution-builder, and penitent.

Fabiola's private foundations demonstrated the largesse of the Christian community and its wealthy patrons, echoing the ancient Roman tradition of euergetism or largesse towards the people of the city. In Jerome's words, Fabiola's charity paid 'over to the poor before the eyes of Rome all that she had sold with Rome to witness'.[46] In this period, as the church was becoming firmly established as the official Church of Rome, Fabiola's deeds showed the leadership of the Roman elite in this transition. On the day of her funeral 'Rome saw all her people gathered together. Everyone flattered himself he had a share in the glory of her penitence.'[47] Such a share in the glory was only possible because Fabiola was not an outsider but a Roman aristocrat, a woman of immense wealth whose father was a senator. Her conversion, her penance, and her saintly life provided a spectacle and a parable of the Christian path to salvation open to sinners and the pious alike. In fact, Fabiola was a particular boon to the message of Christianity as a penitent rather than a spotless virgin, and as a woman whose mission was a public spectacle for the pagan and the Christian with her charity and her self-abasement through nursing the sick. With Rome to witness her path of salvation through dedication to the sick poor, Fabiola advanced the cause of the faith and the power of the Church by providing an example for the powerful and wealthy to follow, undermining the pagan authorities by bolstering the public standing of the Christian church through charity and the creation of communities loyal to the Christian leadership.

5 The Nineteenth-Century Re-creation of a Nursing Saint

Despite the picture of a grieving Rome on the death of Fabiola painted by Jerome in his eulogy, and her subsequent canonization a century later, devotion to Fabiola does not appear to have

[44] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 315.
[45] Hawes 1913.
[46] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 315.
[47] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 337.

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been sustained over the centuries. There are no surviving shrines or other evidence of special devotion that indicate a popular following in Christian countries.[48] All this was to change in the mid-nineteenth century when Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman penned his historic novel, *Fabiola; or The Church of the Catacombs*. In an uncanny parallel to the time of Jerome and Fabiola, Wiseman's novel was a salvo in the on-going battle over the legitimacy of the Catholic Church and its expansion in Great Britain following Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Despite this legal reform, which improved the position of Catholics in Britain, the Catholic Church was met with violence and resistance from Protestants as it tried to build its base throughout the British Empire and on mainland Britain. Early to mid-nineteenth century Britain was characterized by Anti-Catholic agitation, Irish-Catholic immigration, and alarm at the growing number of Catholic conversions.[49] At the same time it witnessed the rise of Catholic-like developments within the Anglican Church, such as the Oxford Movement, which saw the reintroduction of sisterhoods, a number of whom were devoted to nursing.[50] And while the overall numbers of Catholic and Protestant religious nurses in England, Scotland, and Wales remained small, particularly within the context of expanding hospitals and nursing services across Britain, the sisters garnered both public and theological attention as divisive emblems of the confessional wars of the nineteenth century.[51]

These great theological and social debates between Catholics and Protestants in nineteenth-century England were in part played out by proxy through historical fiction.[52] For the three decades following the liberalization of prohibitions against Catholicism and Catholics, high profile authors released exciting pot-boilers based loosely upon the history of early Christianity in the time of persecutions. Fabiola formed the centrepiece of one trilogy-long debate. It began with Charles Kingsley's anti-Catholic *Hypatia: Or New Foes with an Old Face* (1852–53)[53] – where a mob of villainous monks brings about the lurid death of Hypatia. This was followed by Nicholas Wiseman's response to Kingsley, *Fabiola; or The Church of the Catacombs* (1854),[54] in which the unfaltering faith of the Christian martyrs is given sublime and triumphant treatment, accompanied by descriptions of the garment-ripping lasciviousness of their tormentors, inspiring the ultimate conversion of Fabiola. The final instalment was John Henry Newman's *Callista* (1856)[55], which also tackled the theme of the corrupt beast of Rome versus exciting tales of conversion and persecution.[56]

Stories of early Christianity offered the nineteenth-century Catholic writer the powerful analogy of the persecution and martyrdom suffered by believers and the shunning of converts by

48 Cooke 2008.
49 See Adams 2010 for an in-depth discussion of conversions to Catholicism in nineteenth-century Britain.
50 See Moore 1988 on the Anglican sisterhoods and St Johns House. More recently, Helmstadter/Godden 2016 have provided a detailed exploration of the St Johns House sisters and other nursing reforms that emerged in the London teaching hospitals as well as their impact on the reform of hospital care and the subsequent professionalization of nursing. See also Nelson 2001 for a discussion of the introduction of the Protestant sisterhoods in England and their relationship to nursing and hospital reform in the nineteenth century.
51 Mangion 2010, p. 76, argues that although around 10,000 women underwent partial preparation to become Anglican sisters in the nineteenth century, only a few thousands were professed.
52 Leger-Thomas 2009.
53 Kingsley 1896.
54 Wiseman 1854.
55 Newman 1904.
56 Wheeler 2018.

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their family and friends in Rome before the conversion of Constantine in 313. As Wiseman put it, 'The year 1829 (Catholic Emancipation) was to us what the egress of the Catacombs was to the early Christians'.[57] Fabiola was the runaway hit in this war of parables, enthusiastically consumed by a mass audience of readers from impressionable young women to church leaders. The Archbishop of Milan reported that the College of Cardinals called it a good book with the success of a bad one.[58] It was translated into multiple languages and versions of it performed as plays.[59] It continued to be adapted into the twentieth century with Italian movies in 1919, 1949, and 1960.[60]

The fourth-century hagiography around Fabiola and her nineteenth-century revival set out ideal paths for female piety that centred on renunciation, humility, obedience and devotion to the sick poor. Amy Hollywood points out that 'Hagiography tends to represent the internal dispositions of the soul through external narrative devices. This mode of representation becomes most pronounced in texts describing women's lives'.[61] The narrative device in the case of Fabiola brings to the fore care of the sick as a useful and much needed act of mercy that offered double duty as a penance or mortification. Moreover, like Fabiola with Rome as her witness, it was a penitent practice that brought glory and political power to the Catholic Church through the work of pious women and the sacrifice of their bodies in this dangerous work. The voices of women whose bodies are offered as balms to God's poor are notably absent from this narrative. Fabiola is the silent exemplar; her deeds are her penance. By invoking Fabiola, Wiseman was calling upon Catholic women to follow her path and at the same time boasting of Catholicism's singular capacity to respond to the zeitgeist of the mid-nineteenth century with its need for women's devotional labour to further the church's cause.

Wiseman's novel offered a broad canvas for these messages and formed part of the public narrative created by this war of metaphors that harkened to early Christianity's debates and schisms over marriage, the body, and priesthood.[62] Novels, sermons, and theological texts debated the primacy of virginity and celibacy as the most prestigious paths of religious devotion and the role of ascetic practices in the care of the sick. These themes resonated powerfully across the 1500 years between Jerome and Wiseman. Like Jerome, the English Catholic Church lauded the courage of its converts and emboldened its followers to stand strong against the enemies of the Catholic Church, and follow the true call, whatever family or friends might say. Like Fabiola and the early Christians, the English Catholic Church held that the true

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57 Wiseman 1863.

58 Ward 1897, p. 107. The Archbishop of Milan reported that it was big hit with the College of Cardinals.

59 See for instance, The Youthful Martyrs of Rome. A Christian drama, [in five acts and in verse], adapted from [Cardinal Wiseman's] Fabiola; or, the Church of the Catacombs, by F. O. Frederick OAKELEY, London, 1856. Fabiola, drame en 3 actes, pour demoiselles, tiré de l'ouvrage du même titre du cardinal Wiseman par M. l'abbé M. Soullier. Martial SOULLIER, Paris, Lyon, 1867.

60 See *Fabiola*, 1919 silent film directed by Enrico Guazzomi; https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171301/, accessed June 25, 2020; Fabiola, 1949, directed by Alessandro Blassetti; https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041342/, accessed June 25, 2020; The Revolt of the Slaves, 1960, director by Nuncio Malasomma. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055377/, accessed June 25, 2020.

61 Speaking of gender in the medieval context, Hollywood describes hagiography as a process of male control over female sanctity, see Hollywood 2002, p. 55.

62 See Brown 2008 for a detailed discussion of these debates.

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English believer should shun all opposition and be willing to pay any price to answer to God's call.

For England's beleaguered but ambitious Catholic community, the heroism of the early Christians was a befitting analogy and one that also gave courage to those seeking to convert against the wishes of their family. And there were umpteen examples of just such conversions: John Henry Newman's own shift from Anglicanism was the most famous, but many others were also called to the rebellious path of Catholicism, and even to the religious orders.[63] As with the Christian women of the fourth century, dedication to celibacy found expression in nineteenth-century England in both the Catholic and, to even greater controversy, the Anglican community. These communities of dedicated virgins on both sides of the confessional divide established foundations to teach, care for the sick, and to pray, outraging evangelical men, and spawning a vast literature on popery's machinations against the weaker sex.[64]

Much of the English Protestant horror of Catholicism focused on the 'unnatural' nature of celibacy for both sexes, and Anglo-Catholics and the Catholic Church were constantly attacked on the basis that their lives were an offense against nature and thereby constituted the breeding ground for acts of abomination. At the same time, public fascination with this subject was reinforced by a stream of exposés from 'escaped' nuns and 'reformed' priests and monks.[65] A further issue that deeply troubled Protestant men was the assumed intimacy between a woman and her priest – a relationship that could have primacy over the woman's obedience to her father or husband.[66]

Nineteenth-century questions over the suitable modes for and governance of female piety indeed echoed the early church, albeit without the lions. For the Roman women who chose to follow Christianity (after the time of the persecutions) the question of what separated them from their pagan neighbours was of enormous importance. The model of Fabiola's modest, pious, yet indeed 'epic' life centres not simply on her virtue as a renunciate, but on her work and the visibility of her work to all of Rome. Service to the sick poor and nursing of the sick by such a high-born woman were a scandalous demonstration to the Roman public of the radical way in which Christianity challenged their traditions and expected behaviours and glorified sacrifice.

Fifteen hundred years later the first Catholic convent since the time of Henry VIII was established on mainland Britain, in Bermondsey, East London in 1838. The Sisters of Mercy were an Irish community, barely seven years old. It was a pragmatic and hard-working order devoted to the sick poor. Its members swiftly acquired experience in epidemic nursing and

63 Adams 2010.

64 There exists an extensive secondary literature on Anglican sisterhoods. See for instance Mumm 2001. Also Mangion's 2018 examination of hospitals and secularism in nineteenth century London in which she argues that religion and religious practices remained embedded in secular hospitals in the nineteenth century.

65 Monk 1836.

66 There are many examples of pamphlets and sermons on this favourite theme. Suffice to say the fundamental problem was the assumed intimacy between a woman and her priest – a relationship that could have primacy over the woman's obedience to her father or husband. There was genuine concern that the priest might ask the woman details of her sexual life with her husband. There were also many fevered imaginings of confessionals and convents as dens of sex and demonry. See Stowell 1847, as a good example of the genre.

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home visiting and went on to become great founders of schools and hospitals and other charitable institutions throughout the world. In London, the sisters launched into this work with gusto and three sisters died nursing typhus patients within two years of their founding, prompting Bishop Thomas Griffith to write, congratulating the community on achieving its first martyrdoms.[67] The sisters were ably led from the beginning by the intelligent and competent Mary Clare Moore, who, along with four of her sisters, accompanied Florence Nightingale to Crimea some twenty-five years later in 1854. Moore and Nightingale became close, exchanging letters, and Moore loaned Nightingale spiritual texts over the years following the war.[68]

Wiseman's Fabiola was released in 1854, in the midst of the Crimean War. This was a moment when the popular imagination was captivated by the high death rate of sick British soldiers and their lack of care, which resulted in the officially sanctioned intervention of a group of ladies led by Florence Nightingale. The British public was suddenly made conscious that, unlike the French, they had no Sisters of Charity, and the British soldier was suffering the consequences. There was debate over the contribution of respectable, competent nurses (including women who were members of religious communities), such as those under the leadership of Florence Nightingale, could make to the war effort. In addition, a second and more controversial group of Sisters of Mercy from Dublin (led by Mother Mary Bridgeman) came without Nightingale's approval, leading to sectarian battles that were to dog Nightingale throughout the course of the war.[69]

These questions of female expertise and the role of women in hitherto exclusive male domains (such as the arena of war) were the backdrop to both the Nightingale story in Crimea,[70] and to the Catholic Church's battle to establish itself as a legitimate and full member of British society. In an assertion of male control over female bodies, the Catholic leadership could not resist the opportunity to boast of the women at their disposal – brave and obedient to the church's call. Wiseman described the situation to his European colleagues in his address to the Catholic Congress at Malines, Belgium in 1864:

> The Crimean War broke out and it was wisely considered that every comfort should be provided for the poor soldier, sick or wounded. The demand was now Mulierem fortem quis inveniet? Who will find us the courageous women – the woman who is ready to brave the sea and its storms – perhaps fever and pestilence, [....] And the Catholic Church replied: I will – not seek or find one such, but give, for I already possess many. The calm, unimpassioned, and retired religious ladies, so much misunderstood are ready to start work at once [...].[71]

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67 Carroll 1883, p. 183.

68 See Sullivan 1999 for the edited collection of 47 letters illustrating the close friendship and spiritual bond between Moore and Nightingale.

69 See Goldie 1997. See also MacDonald 2010 for a comprehensive collection of Nightingale's writings and battles on Crimea.

70 Who could be counted as a nurse in Crimea was contested on many levels. See also the story of Mary Seacole, a Jamaican entrepreneur and adventurer who was highly experienced as a nurse, but was unsuccessful in her attempts to join the official party and her account of her time in Crimea. See Seacole 2005.

71 Wiseman 1863, p. 57.

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Correspondence between Bishop Grant and Moore shows how the work of these religious nurses and support for the Crimean engagement by both English and Irish religious women served to advance the position of the Church in the public imagination. Congratulating the sisters on their success in winning the hearts of Britain through their devoted and patriotic efforts Grant writes: 'Bless the sisters for me, and tell them that during the last session of Parliament no one dared say a single word against convents or religious [...] This silence is attributed to the divine blessing through the sisters'[72]. As Wiseman put it: 'the ladies have proved themselves as patriotic as they are virtuous'.[73]

For Cardinal Wiseman the power of Fabiola lies in her romantic appeal to young women to follow the call of Christ and to bravely renounce any faith but the true Catholic faith, for which no price is too high to pay. The ability of the church to attract such Fabiolas, whose demonstration of piety was so public and whose impact so visible, rested not with ascetic interiority but with good works and service to the sick poor. It asserted a pragmatic spirituality in line with the Vincentian nursing tradition and newly minted Irish sisterhoods of post-Catholic-Emancipation Ireland.[74]

6 Iconography and the Image of the Saintly Nurse

Fabiola's chequered life was a forgiving path for those who, unlike Florence Nightingale, had not been set apart by religious fervour since their early life. As a divorced, wealthy woman, Fabiola's story, like the homily of the prodigal son, made everyone welcome on the path to redemption that devotion to the sick poor offered. Nineteenth-century devotion to Fabiola came not from a sustained following of devotees over the centuries, but from her rediscovery and reworked hagiography. Wiseman's novel provides scant detail of the saint herself. It was historically inaccurate, erroneously having Fabiola's life coincide with the major persecutions. Nonetheless the effect of his book is hagiographic and the lack of detail provides a helpfully blank canvass upon which others can draw their idealizations of female piety some fifteen hundred years after the saint's death. As Hannan and Longair argue, reception is a key element in deciphering the meaning and importance of objects.[75] The popularity of both the literary and visual representation of Fabiola is impressive, its timeline extending for perhaps a century, from Newman's 1854 book to the twentieth-century amateur renderings of the Henner image displayed in *The Fabiola Project*.

And yet Fabiola's precise appeal remains a mystery. Was it her fall from grace and subsequent salvation? Or that her depiction of an idealized form of female piety harmonized with the rise of Marian devotions such as Lourdes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Or perhaps the fact that her salvation came through active asceticism found resonance with the sensibility of a time that witnessed a surge of religious foundations by women. These new communities of religious women, Catholic and Protestant, in France, Germany, Ireland, and, across the New World, harnessed female energy for good works among the poor and the

[72] Carroll 1883, p. 135.
[73] Wiseman 1863, p. 57.
[74] The Sisters of Mercy epitomized this hardworking spirituality with Mother McCauley deriding romantic notions of ascetism, dismissing those who would prefer a hair shirt to 'dressing a cancer'. See Carroll 1883, p. 48. Clear 1987, detailed the impact of the sisterhoods and the possibilities they offered Irish women in the nineteenth century.
[75] Hannan/Longair 2017, p. 27.

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suffering.[76] As with Fabiola, care of the sick was a central object of devotion in the lives of so many of these women.

This upsurge in Catholic fervour and dramatic increase in women religious was the context for the Catholic world's enthusiastic reception of Jean-Jacques Henner's 1885 portrait of Fabiola.

Figure 3. Reproduction of Jean-Jacques Henner's lost painting of Fabiola, 1885. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fabiola_-_Jean_Jacques_Henner.png

Thirty years after the release of Wiseman's novel, Henner's portrait of Fabiola gave face to an idea that had already captured the imagination of millions. And through innovations in printing technology that introduced cheap image reproduction methods, a burgeoning international trade in reproduced images 'achieved unprecedented volume and diffusion' of images.[77] Like Wiseman's book, which preceded it, Henner's image of Fabiola proliferated in the printed media. In addition to the printed copies of the painting and postcards, Fabiola's image appeared on sundry items, such as the Clasicos de Lujo series from Mexico, which featured classic works of art on matchbook covers.[78] The simplicity of Henner's portrait provided the key, newly invented iconographic elements of her image: the red cloak and thoughtful profile. The painting solidified the idea of Fabiola into a beautiful, simple, and recognizable form. And with that image firmly established, Fabiola continued to replicate and disseminate through

[76] See Nelson 2001 and Wall 2005 for a discussion of religious nursing communities in the United States. See also Kreutzer/Nolte 2016 for a discussion of deaconesses and their varied manifestations as a model of life for women as in pious working women. For a discussion of Catholic nursing sisterhoods in Protestant Denmark see Malchau Dietz 2009, pp. 137–150.

[77] Bann 2008, p. 39.

[78] Cooke 2008, p. 62.

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print and handmade copies, despite the loss of the original (possibly in 1908 during the San Francisco earthquake).[79]

7 Conclusion: Nursing and an Epic Life for Women

Wiseman's rebuttal of Kingsley's attack on Catholicism foregrounds Fabiola, resurrecting her tale of renunciation and salvation through good works. Whether the novel resonated as a vocational call to Catholic women and potential converts or was simply a wildly successful gothic novel that rehabilitated Fabiola to the pantheon of saints in Catholic countries, it is impossible to say. Meanwhile women, religious and secular, Catholic and Protestant, were finding their voices and establishing professional paths where none had existed. This female urge for a life of substance, both spiritual and temporal, resonated equally powerfully across the secular domain at the same time as it enshrined its pious underpinnings[80]. In the prologue to *Middlemarch*, George Elliot's magisterial work on the changing world of the early nineteenth century, Elliot begins her tale with a prologue on the popular story of Saint Teresa of Avila:

> Theresa's passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life: what were many volume romances of chivalry and social conquests of a brilliant girl to her? Her flame quickly burned up that light fuel; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self.
>
> [...]
>
> Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed.[81]

In writing these words about the impossibility of great lives for women, Elliot could have been thinking of Nightingale, whose life was one great struggle to forge a path worthy of her brilliance. She too shunned the 'light fuel' of social conquests. She read with passion the lives of the mystics, including Saint Theresa, and struggled to understand God's plan for her. *Middlemarch* was published in 1871, the same year Nightingale published *Una and the Lion* within which Nightingale engages in her own version of hagiography. *Una and the Lion* was written on the death of the devoted, pious nurse, Agnes Jones. Nightingale considered Jones' demise while working in the Liverpool Workhouse Infirmary to be a martyrdom to nursing. And like all hagiography, *Una and the Lion* was not only a call to arms to honour the fallen, but a chastisement to those reluctant to follow in their wake. It was Nightingale's clarion call, not just for the Agnes Joneses of Britain, but for all women.

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79 The Menil Collection: Francis Alÿs: The Fabiola Project. Documentary Produced by The Menil Collection and Carrithers Studio in Houston, Texas. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlgMKaYN3j0, accessed June 25, 2020.

80 There is significant foundational scholarship on the work, contribution, and thinking of women in Victorian England, see for instance Vincinus 1985 and Poovey 1988.

81 Elliot 1871, pp. v–vi.

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> O, fellow countrywomen, why do you hang back? Why are there so few of you? We hear so much of 'idle hands and unsatisfied hearts,' and nowhere more than in England. All England is ringing with the cry for 'Woman's Work' and 'Woman's Mission'. Why are there so few to *do* the 'work'? We used to hear of people giving their blood for their country. Since when is it that they only give their ink? We now have in England this most extraordinary state of things—England, who is, or thinks herself the most religious and the most commercial country in the world. New hospitals, new asylums, new nurses' homes, and societies for nursing the sick poor at home, are rising everywhere. People are always willing to give their money for these. [...] But are buildings all that are necessary to take care of the sick? There wants the heart and the hand—the trained and skillful hand. Every work-house and other hospital in the kingdom ought to be nursed by such hands and such hearts. Tell me, does not this seem like a truism?[82]

Nightingale lamented the failure of British women to rise up and lay down their bodies on the altar of the sick poor. The 'idle hands and dissatisfied hearts' she impatiently mocks are not flooding to nursing schools despite the great need. Nightingale's Agnes Jones offers a re-worked version of Fabiola, selfless but also powerful and driven, unceasing in her efforts.

Fabiola reappears in the lexicon of saints in the mid-nineteenth century, at a time when the parallels between the early church and the current context were being repeatedly made. But for opponents of both the Catholic Church and the Oxford Movement, fervent women were also a cause for alarm. As English women defied their families to convert to Catholicism and enter religious communities, or take up nursing training, evangelicals, such as Methodist William Pennyfeather, grappled with the proper course of piety for women, which would not tempt 'them out of the lowly sphere assigned to them by God'.[83] Nonetheless the desires of women to serve God through service to the sick poor, and the clear and growing need for such services, in the end overwhelmed male qualms.[84] By and by, each of the Protestant churches made their own style of concessions to expanding the formal role of women in their communities through the introduction of deaconess and other active roles for women.[85] But even more were needed. As Nightingale noted in *Una and the Lion*, the world had changed in the two decades since the Crimean War and women could now assume their proper place in the care and management of the sick poor. Those opportunities extended far beyond the grasp of the sisterhoods. By the 1870s, the nursing stage was becoming transformed by the trained secular nurses, who were graduating in ever increasing numbers from the newly established nursing schools in Britain and around the world.[86]

The choice of Fabiola as the personification of female piety privileges the sanctity of a woman who has been lost and then found in the fold of her church. It is the tale of renunciation and

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82 Nightingale 1868. Nightingale's essay takes the character Una from Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queen to weave a eulogy for nurse Agnes Jones, graduate of the Nightingale School and Nightingale's protegé who died of fever while trying to reform the Liverpool Workhouse Infirmary. See also MacDonald 2004 for the context of this work.

83 Coleman 1886, pp. 429–430.

84 Carmen Mangion argues that the Anglican women were themselves responsible for shifting attitudes due to their evident 'social utility', Magnion 2010, p. 77.

85 Nelson 2001.

86 See MacDonald 2009, for her collection of Nightingale's writings on extended nursing.

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penance through good works. Fabiola offers the spectacle of penitent piety – ascetic, celibate, and devoted to the sick poor in both philanthropic terms and through the practice of penance, not shunning the 'poor filthy wretches'.[87] Fabiola's nineteenth-century appeal to women lay with her personification of care of the sick as a primary form of female piety, even if it required 'trampling their fathers underfoot'.[88] The fact that Fabiola's path to salvation and sainthood was through her works, rather than the mystical revelations of the medieval women saints, may also have inspired women of the Victorian era to aspirations beyond the humble status of 'retired religious ladies' granted by the boasting Wiseman.[89]

In bringing together *The Fabiola Project*, artist Francis Alÿs excavated a nineteenth-century moment. He had stumbled upon a form of female piety that found expression in the selfless devotion to the sick poor. With over five hundred images of the saint, *The Fabiola Project* records an echo – like the heavens recording events from eons past. These portraits chart a pious fervour and the Church's attempt to harness it. Wiseman's Fabiola story, ahistorical and hyperbolic, along with Henner's portrait, represent the re-invention of an ideal and the massification of the image of a sombre and serene Roman matron, living out the life of a penitent devoted to the care and support of the sick poor. Fabiola represented a path for women to engage with the world, to have a fulsome role in tackling its suffering, and to achieve a worthy and respected life at the same time. Care of the sick, whether they were the Irish poor that flooded the cities and workhouses of mainland Britain, or the suffering soldiers dying for want of good care in Crimea, provided women with something to do. From the sisterhoods to Nightingale and Agnes Jones, care of the sick poor offered women the opportunity for Elliot's 'long recognized deed'.

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[87] Jerome 1933, Letter LXXVII, p. 315.
[88] Jerome 1933, Letter XIV, p. 31.
[89] Mooney 1999; Elliot 2013.

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