

Introduction: Saints, Princes, Teachers, and Students

Milo, the ninth-century poet and monk of Saint-Amand-les-Eaux, shuffles sideways into the frame of a miniature to present an unbound booklet to a larger (and therefore more powerful) seated figure, his teacher Haimin, a monk of Saint-Vaast (Figure 1).¹ Haimin reaches for the work with his left hand and raises his right in benediction. The front of the booklet bears the first words of Milo's *Vita Amandi*, composed around 845–855.² Written in almost 2,000 lines of epic dactylic hexameter, the poem recasts the seventh-century prose life of the monastery's founding saint into a much longer, more elaborate work.³ This full-page miniature, from the codex Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 502 (produced at Saint-Amand between 1066 and 1107) is the visual counterpart to the letter in which Milo dedicates the *Vita Amandi* to Haimin.⁴ Milo, in a stereotypical profession of humility, asks Haimin to correct his epic poem.

¹ Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 502, fol. 77r. See Molinier, *Catalogue*, pp. 403–405; and Abou-El-Haj, *Medieval Cult*, pp. 156–159 and 378–443. I follow the French convention of referring to monastic foundations (e.g., Saint-Gall, Saint-Amand) to distinguish them from their saints (Saint Gall, Saint Amand). In cases in which the house is usually referred to by its place name, rather than that of its church, such as Fulda, Reichenau, Marchiennes, and Hamage, I have followed common practice.

² The *incipit* of the *prohemium* is “festa propinquabant nostri.” Milo, who was born after 809, was a student at the abbey of Saint-Vaast and then a monk and teacher at Saint-Amand. See Traube's introduction to Milo, *Vita Amandi*, pp. 557–558; Platelle, *Temporel*, p. 66.

³ Milo's VA, comprising 1,818 lines of dactylic hexameter and a fifty-line preface, was based on the *Vita* by Amand's disciple Baudemund (BHL 332), ed. Bruno Krusch in MGH SRM 5, pp. 428–449.

⁴ Fols. 74v–75v.



FIGURE 1. Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 502, fol. 77r. Milo presents his epic *Vita Amandi* to his teacher Haimin.

The full-page miniature on the folio's verso shows Milo receiving his work back (Figure 2). In contrast to his obsequious demeanor in the previous image, Milo breezes into the room. Haimin looks up from the parchment on which he is writing (presumably his reply to Milo) to hand back the *Vita Amandi*. Each monk has a hand on the pamphlet, which is

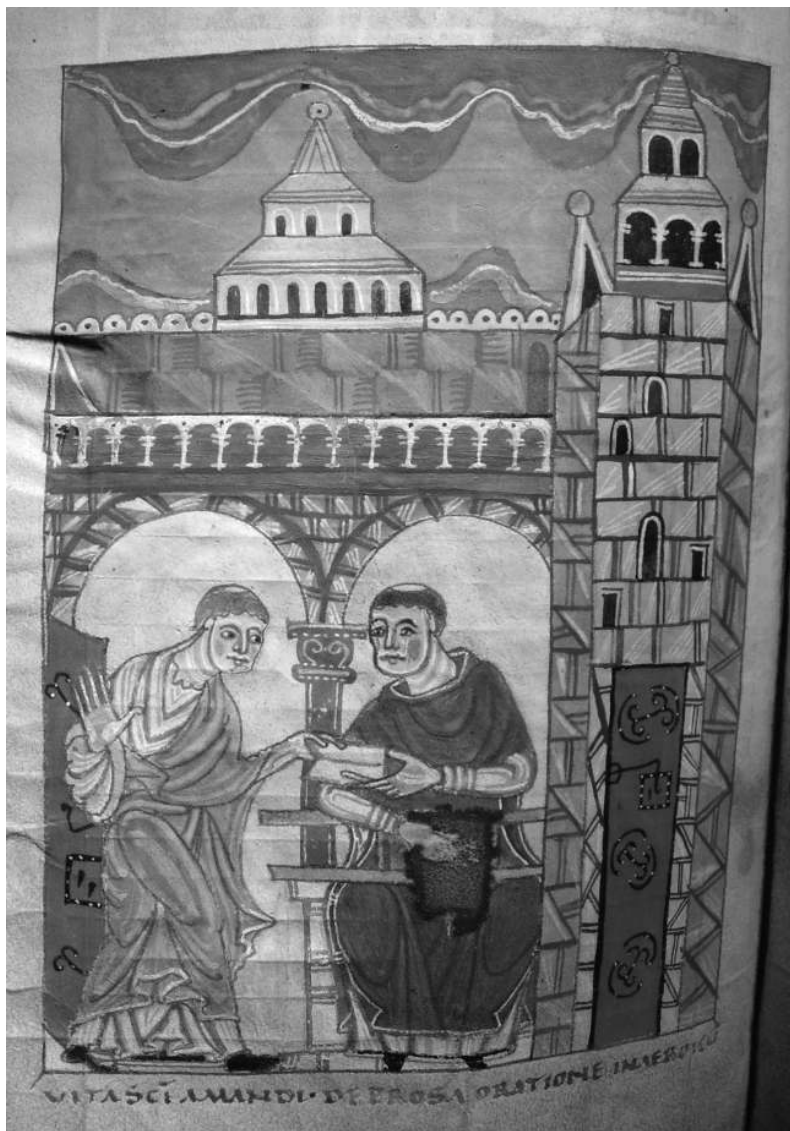


FIGURE 2. Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 502, fol. 77v. Milo receives his epic *Vita Amandi* back from Haimin.

open toward the viewer, inviting him or her to read the *Vita Amandi* that follows.⁵ Rubricated capitals that begin beneath the miniature read “the Life of Saint Amand transformed from prose speech into heroic song,” that is, epic meter.⁶ This miniature corresponds to Haimin’s response to Milo, in which he says that after he had judged the *vita* to be doctrinally sound, metrically correct, and eloquent:

I showed the brothers who are with me how this whole stream should be navigated. . . . I urge our brothers who do not shrink from such studies to freely take up this work and I beseech them so that they might be goaded to a similar pursuit rather than inflamed by the torches of jealousy.⁷

This exchange reflects the pedagogical context of epic saints’ *vitae*. Milo cast his epic as one of the *praeexercitamina*, the composition exercises undertaken by a student advanced in language arts. Haimin responded that he read the *vita* with others and encouraged them to emulate it.⁸ Epic *vitae* were read in the monastic classroom and composed as a result of this education. The earliest manuscript of Milo’s *Vita Amandi*, very different from this luxury codex, is a ninth-century schoolbook.⁹

⁵ Fols. 78r–117r.

⁶ “Vita Sancti Amandi de prosa oratione in aëroicū carmen transfusa.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Haimin, *Rescriptum* in MGH Poetae 3, pp. 566–567 (on fols. 75v–76v of this MS): “totum id flumen fratribus, qui mecum sunt, quomodo sit navigandum ostendi. . . . hortor fratres nostros, qui in talibus studiis non abhorrent, munus hoc libenter suscipere et obsecro, ut satius velint ad simile studium provocari quam invidiae facibus concremari.”

⁸ The term comes from Priscian’s *Praeexercitamina*, exercises for rhetorical training adapted from Hermogenes widely used in the Middle Ages for teaching composition and textual interpretation. Priscian, *Opuscula*, ed. Marina Passalacqua, vol. 1, *De figuris numerorum; De metris Terentii; Praeexercitamina* (Rome, 1987), pp. xxix–xxx. Haimin wrote a *Miracula* (BHL 8510) and a *Sermo* (BHL 8511) on his abbey’s patron, Vedast. On Saint-Vaast, see Denis Escudier, “Le scriptorium de Saint-Vaast d’Arras des origines au XIIe siècle,” *Positions de thèses de l’École nationale des chartes* (1970): 75–82.

⁹ Valenciennes, BM, MS 414, copied at Saint-Amand (late ix). This unornamented and utilitarian book (106 folios, 245 mm × 155 mm) includes Bede’s treatise on verse composition and other classroom texts: Bede’s *De arte metrica*; a brief passage (in an untrained hand) on the death of Nero; Milo’s letter to Haimin and Haimin’s response; Milo’s VA; the *Versiculi Vulfai*; Milo’s verse *De sobrietate*, with verse dedication to Charles the Bald; the poem *Conflictum veris et hiemus*, and an *abecdarium*. For this manuscript, see Lièvre, *Catalogue général des manuscrits*, p. 452. The *conflictum* is printed under Alcuin’s name in MGH Poetae 1, p. 270. *De sobrietate* is printed in MGH Poetae 3, pp. 611–675. Brussels KBR MS 8721–8728 (3214) (ix), a collection on Amand, contains Hucbald’s poems of dedication, the letters by Milo and Haimin, Milo’s VA, and Vulfaius’s *Versiculi*. The composite codex Copenhagen, KB, MS Thott. 520, includes ninth-century fragments of the VA. See J. Van den Gheyn, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique*, vol. 5 (Brussels, 1905), p. 188.

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The other images framing Milo's *Vita Amandi* in Valenciennes, BM, MS 502 indicate other contexts and functions of epic *vitae*. Another full-page miniature shows a monk presenting a bound codex to a large, crowned, and seated individual (Figure 3). This man is the work's second dedicatee, Charles the Bald, and the monk is Milo's student Hucbald, who, after his teacher's death in 872, sent the *Vita Amandi* to the emperor.¹⁰ Charles inclines his head toward Hucbald and reaches out his left hand for the *Vita Amandi*. His right hand is raised, holding a small scepter. The artist connects the dedications to Haimin and Charles by using almost identical composition for both scenes. The image corresponds to the acrostic poems with which Hucbald addresses the *Vita Amandi* to Charles, redeploying it to impress the abbey's most important patron.¹¹ The twin dedications, to a teacher and to the emperor, point to two contexts of the epic lives, pedagogy and patronage, which were closely related in this case, because Milo had taught two of Charles's sons at Saint-Amand.¹² Similarly, Heiric of Saint-Germain in Auxerre had written his epic *Vita Germani* at the request of his student, Charles's son Lothar, before sending it to the emperor.¹³

A half-page miniature of the monk Vulfauius follows the text of Milo's *Vita Amandi* (Figure 4). The nimbed figure sits at a writing desk in an elaborate architectural setting reminiscent of Carolingian evangelist portraits.¹⁴ Like the depiction of Charles the Bald, the image invokes Saint-Amand's ninth-century golden age. In his right hand, Vulfauius holds a quill; in his left, a scraper. He writes on parchment, composing his *versiculi* (little verses) in response to Milo's *vita*. His eyes rest on an open codex representing Milo's work. His *versiculi* are copied in the miniature (Figure 4).

The portrait of Vulfauius, the only figure represented alone with a copy of Milo's *Vita Amandi*, points to another function of epic lives, as the objects of solitary devotional reading. By showing this reader's poetic response, the artist emphasizes the dynamic aspect of the *vita*; as Haimin says, an epic life

¹⁰ On Charles as a patron, see Rosamond McKitterick, "Charles the Bald (823–877) and his Library: The Patronage of Learning," *EHR* 95 (1980): 29–47, and "Manuscripts and Scriptoria in the Reign of Charles the Bald, 840–877," in *Giovanni Scoto nel suo Tempo: L'organizzazione del sapere in età carolingia*, ed. Claudio Leonardi and Enrico Menestò (Spoleto, 1989), pp. 201–234.

¹¹ Fols. 73v–74r, ed. in MGH *Poetae* 3, pp. 462–465.

¹² On Charles's policy of cloistering extra heirs, see Janet Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London, 1992), p. 226.

¹³ Heiric, *VG*.

¹⁴ Fol. 117v, Abou-El-Haj, *Medieval Cult*, p. 89.



FIGURE 3. Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 502, fol. 73r. Hucbald presents Milo's epic *Vita Amandi* to Charles the Bald.

could spur readers to compose their own works.¹⁵ Read intensively in the classroom, guided reading, or private meditation, they could inspire new compositions, such as Vulfaus's verses or other epic *vitae*.

The four miniatures that frame Milo's epic *vita* depict the work's exchange and reception. The artist represents a book containing the epic

¹⁵ Haimin, *Rescriptum*, ed. in MGH Poetae 3, pp. 566–567.



FIGURE 4. Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 502, fol. 117v. Vulfauius composes his *Versiculi* in response to Milo's *Vita Amandi*.

vita four times (twice open and twice closed), its author twice, and its readers (Haimin, Charles, and Vulfauius) a total of four times. By contrast, all but one of the thirty-two miniatures accompanying the prose *Vita Amandi* in the same codex show the saint's deeds. The single depiction of a book of the prose *Vita Amandi* is static; in Baudemund's author portrait, the *vita* is nearly closed and he holds his pen aloft (Figure 5).¹⁶ In each of the images accompanying the epic *vita*, the work is central to the action: in three instances, it is being exchanged between men of unequal status (a student and a teacher or a monk and an emperor), and in the fourth, it is being read and inspiring new verse. Like the written materials transmitted with this copy of Milo's *Vita Amandi* (Hucbald's acrostics, the correspondence of Milo and Haimin, Vulfauius's *versiculi*), the epic's pictorial program emphasizes the poem not the saint.¹⁷ As Rosamond McKitterick has shown, "representations of books in Carolingian book illuminations . . . stress the power of the written word and by implication those who controlled and produced books."¹⁸ By choosing to represent the epic *vita*, the artist signaled its importance. McKitterick has argued that elites defined themselves by their use of the written word. In this case, the epic poem – learned and difficult, requiring considerable education to read or write – was a particularly apposite way for the hypereducated elite to constitute their identity and relations.

The pictorial emphasis on the uses of Milo's text demonstrates the importance of epic *vitae* for monasteries in western Francia during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. By writing, reading, emulating, excerpting, teaching, memorizing, and exchanging these works, monks (and sometimes nuns and canons) created and perpetuated "textual communities" characterized by the use of erudite saints' lives written in epic

¹⁶ Valenciennes, BM, MS 502, fol. 1v. The half-page author portrait on fol. 125v is almost certainly of Gislebert, author of the *Miracula Amandi* (BHL 345) on fols. 126r–136v. A twelfth-century addition depicts Amand dictating his will (fol. 123r). Reproduced in Abou-El-Haj, *Medieval Cult*, pp. 443, 435.

¹⁷ An eleventh-century manuscript from the abbey of Marchiennes (Douai, BM, MS 849), Saint-Amand's neighbor, several kilometers away on the River Scarpe, shows a similar contrast between illustrations of prose and epic *vitae*, with the epic *VE* prefaced by a half-page inhabited initial with an author portrait of a monk, kneeling in prayer, offering up a leaflet, while a hand reaches down from heaven (fol. 43r). The prose works are accompanied by scriptural scenes and saints. See Appendix B.

¹⁸ McKitterick, *History and Memory*, p. 243; Rosamond McKitterick, "Essai sur les représentations de l'écrit dans les manuscrits carolingiens," in *La Symbolique du livre dans l'art occidental du haut moyen âge à Rembrandt*, ed. F. Dupuigrenet Desroussilles (Bordeaux, 1995), pp. 37–64.



FIGURE 5. Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 502, fol. 1v. Baudemund, author of the prose *Vita Amandi*.

Latin verse.¹⁹ By depicting three generations of teachers and students (Haimin, Milo, and Huchbald), the illustrations indicate the importance of epic *vitae* in educating monks and creating a community of scholars. Showing Milo's *Vita Amandi* as a physical object that changes hands, the pictures also point to how the exchange of these works created and cemented bonds of *amicitia* – friendship and patronage – with important figures outside the monastery. The manuscript itself – a lavish collection of works on Saint Amand made for the abbey and probably kept on the altar – points to another function of the epic life; it glorified the saint.²⁰ In return for homage, poets could hope to attain the heavenly patron's intercession in their own salvation.²¹

None of these individual functions was unique to epic *vitae* – various works glorified saints, inveigled patrons, and challenged students – but the precise combination of features and purposes was distinct and significant. Of particular importance was the combination of saintly subject with epic form. During the Central Middle Ages (ca. 800–1100), a church's patron saints, manifest in their relics, were its main source of influence and revenue.²² Texts, rituals, art, and architecture could all convey the saint's power and narrative to patrons, adversaries, and pilgrims. The epic *vita* was a particular way of promoting the saint. Poetry was central to medieval grammar education, and epic was its most prestigious form. Virgil's *Aeneid* – the ultimate model for the *vitae* – was the central school text, making epic saints' lives the quintessential expression of the synthesis of pagan and Christian culture that underlay the Carolingian Renaissance.

By combining the *virtus* of their patron saints with the cachet of epic, poets imbued their works with celestial and worldly authority and combined two potent forms of spiritual and cultural capital. Accordingly, epic *vitae* possessed a set of meanings and social functions distinct from their prose counterparts and from other kinds of poetry. In order to show the significance of the epic *vitae*, I will return to the functions indicated by the images in Valenciennes, BM, MS 502, before suggesting reasons for the

¹⁹ The term is from Stock, *Implications*, p. 88.

²⁰ An illustrated *libellus* on the patron saint, such as Saint-Omer's *codex argenteus* (now lost), could be kept on the altar. See Rosemary Argent Svobada, "The Illustrations of the Life of St. Omer (Saint-Omer, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 698)" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1983), p. 16.

²¹ For example, Milo, *Prohemium*, lines 1–16; VA, 3.201.

²² Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1999), p. 15. Geary uses the term "Central Middle Ages" for 800–1100.