

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

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A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

Volume 2

LATE ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY

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PERSONAL DEVOTIONS AND PRIVATE CHAPELS

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CHAPTER EIGHT

On a hot August night sometime in the 390s, while Rome's Christians flocked to the tomb of Saint Lawrence for the feast vigil, one young woman did not join the throng. Melania, heiress to the great Valerian fortune and as devout a Christian as her grandmother of the same name, remained in her house on the Caelian Hill and wrestled with her conscience. She was pregnant with her second child, but what should have been a joyous occasion was, for the ascetically minded girl, the greatest of disasters. How could she follow in her grandmother's footsteps and travel to the holy places, casting aside the mantle of worldliness and wealth, if she were to be burdened with children? She had not even wanted marriage and, once married, had tried unsuccessfully to convince her husband to reject the marriage bed and live with her in chastity. Melania longed for divine intervention and aid for her problems, longed, on this most special of nights, to approach the saint's tomb and pray for guidance. But at night, Rome's crowded martyr shrines were no place for a woman mindful of her virtue and reputation, and in any case her pregnancy would have kept her sequestered at home. Unable and unwilling to approach the holy places without, she turned to a holy place within her house, a chapel that she herself had probably constructed after her marriage and move to the mansion on the Caelian Hill.¹ In this chapel, away from the public eye, she spent the whole night at prayer and in the morning went into labor, giving birth to a boy who immediately died (Gerontius, *Life of Melania*, 4–6).

The story of Melania's miscarriage has served as the poster child for modern studies of Christian women, the chilling single-mindedness of its heroine a stark example of the new Christian asceticism that rejected the traditional roles of wife and mother in favor of physical renunciation and spiritual devotion. But scholars' understandable preoccupation with Mel-

ania's desire to be rid of her child has obscured the finer points of how the event actually took place. The site of this most pivotal moment in her ascetic career and the site of God's miraculous intervention in her life was explicitly *not* the public martyr shrines or the new public basilicas. The event took place in the home, in a private chapel.

The phenomena of private chapels and private ritual during the late antique period remain as cloaked in shadow as Melania's private midnight vigil. Indeed, the Christianity of the fourth through sixth centuries is typically characterized as rejecting the private for the public, as the church emerged from the homes that had sheltered it during the persecutions to assume the mantle of state-sponsored religion of empire. And yet, by defining the "triumph of the church" as the triumphal procession away from privately based cult to public religion, we have almost wholly overlooked one of late antique Christianity's most important substrands, the continuation and flourishing of private cult and the significant challenge it posed to a nascent institutional church.

This chapter offers a basic sketch of this largely unexplored landscape of private worship. It will describe the pre-Nicene origins of private Christian ritual, particularly the practice of the reserved eucharist and its centrality in pre-Nicene Christian lives. It will then go on to explore the continuation and expansion of private cult after the cessation of persecution, and the reflexive relationship that developed between public ecclesiastical rituals, such as the liturgy of the mass and martyr cult, and private, home-based cult. From the large estate churches that provided Christian services to huge swaths of the western provinces to the tiny basilicas-in-miniature inside urban mansions, from peasants-turned-priests in the service of rural landlords to bizarre private healing rituals using the eucharistic bread, even this briefest trawl through the evidence for private piety reveals the rich Christian world that existed outside the public churches.

Indeed, the very richness of this world and its impact on so many areas of late antique Christian life presented an adolescent church with a series of difficult questions: What defined the Christian community? How had that definition changed with the shift from imperial persecution to imperial patronage of the church? Given these radical changes in community identity, what now constituted "the public" and "the private"? This chapter suggests that many of the great doctrinal controversies of the later fourth through sixth centuries, controversies that were the hallmark of late antique Christian growing pains, had at their heart these problems of privacy and community. In particular, the church's frequent pairing of private worship with heresy documents an institution's attempts to redraw the lines of public and private to align with those of the official church community.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND DEFINITIONS

Any attempt to illuminate the dark corner of late antique private piety must begin in the well-lit corridors of traditional Christian histories. From the nineteenth century until the late twentieth century, these histories have viewed the ascension of Constantine and the "Peace of the Church" in 313 as a wall, on either side of which existed two radically different Christianities. On one side were the pre-Nicene churches of the second century, small but active communities of highly regional nature, whose small stage was the neighborhood, the home, the family. Their architecture was similarly shaped by the preexisting spaces of the private sphere—the house, the warehouse, the bath—while artistic production was suited to these spaces and to the memorialization of the dead on the walls of catacombs and tombs. On the other side of the divide was the triumphant public church, defined by powerful bishops assuming civic duties, a rising tide of aristocratic converts, and a now-public battle with paganism over the physical and temporal geography of the ancient city. The years after the Peace of the Church were the years of the great basilicas, the martyr shrines, and the urban public liturgy, all representative of the church's quick and apparently seamless absorption of imperial power and classical culture.

The need to see the Peace of the Church as a watershed that separated two radically different worlds was shared by Protestant and Catholic scholars alike. Although they vehemently disagreed as to the nature of pre-Nicene Christianity and the significance of Constantine's conversion, they nonetheless agreed that 313 ushered in a radically new world. They had little sense of any continuity across this imagined divide and thus shared the belief that the private Christian world had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist. For Protestant scholars, the history of pre-Nicene Christianity was that of a headlong rush away from a pure church of small communities speaking directly to their God toward an increasingly cumbersome and bumptious hierarchy. The private relationship of an individual with God was the defining casualty of this transformation; thus, the possibility that a private Christianity survived the Peace of the Church was never considered. For Catholic scholars, intent on documenting the rise of institutional structures, expanding concepts of universality and the symbiotic relationships between secular and religious authorities, private piety was a necessary camouflage in times of persecution. With the conversion of Constantine, it was eagerly shed in favor of Christianity's inevitable universal, imperial garb. For both scholarly traditions, the private was the defining feature of pre-Nicene faith, one that had to vanish for the church's triumph, whether positively or negatively defined, to be complete.

Yet the a priori assumptions of scholarly methodology are not the only reasons late antique private piety has been ignored: the problem of evidence is even more daunting. The realm of the home, the family, the private, is thinly documented in the ancient world. Our knowledge of ancient domestic life is paltry compared to the tomes dedicated to the study of political structures, rhetoric, literature, and public cult. This disparity reflects the simple fact that the ancients poured their writing and building talents into the creation and maintenance of status, and status was principally defined through the public sphere. The problem is particularly troublesome for the study of private piety: we should not expect the numerous daily rituals of Christian life to have excited literary description any more than we can expect to excavate the physical detritus of prayers from the ancient house. Those aspects of private life that made it into the textual and material record were those that impinged most closely on public image: a husband's relationship with his wife was described in order to comment on his moral political character; a picture of one's country house was an abstract rendering designed to convey seigniorial power. Thus, what little evidence we do have requires careful sifting and massaging before it can be used to understand a now largely vanished world.

Even more daunting is the very nature of the subject itself. What is the private? Who defines it, and how? Are there not as many definitions of what constitutes the private sphere as there are people who occupy it? Indeed, in the case of private Christian ritual, how can a group whose liturgical activities are defined as a collective sacrifice have any truly private worship? One way around these difficulties is to adopt the institutional church's own perception of what constituted private worship, namely, individuals or groups engaged in ritual outside the direct supervision of the official church or its clergy. This definition embraces an individual's undertaking a solitary healing ritual in his or her bedroom using a privately owned relic, an estate church built and controlled by a landowner and attended by his peasantry, and a family who, in addition to regular Sunday services, attended periodic meetings in their house chapel.

It would seem, however, that even in this definition the hand of the institutional church might be so pervasive as to trump any secondary privateness. The matter of private clergy is the most obvious case, for late antique sources make it clear that private chapels and churches were staffed by ordained clergy, nominated for their posts by the patron in question, but approved and indeed ordained by the episcopate. Thus, such private churches could be seen as simply outposts of the church writ large, supervised by its clergy. However, while they might be episcopal creatures in name, these clerics were undoubtedly the patrons' men in practice, for it

was the patrons who held the power of appointment, sustenance, and (frequently) legal power over their clergy, just as they would over a dependent. Far from proving the inherent public nature of the private church, these clergy instead demonstrate how fully intertwined the institutional and private might be and what little hope we should entertain of being able to separate one from the other neatly.

It is this very phenomenon of intertwining, of the overlap between the public church and private practitioners, that raises the all-important question of community. One means of defining Christian community is that propounded by the institutional church—namely, a community of believers in the Christ as Lord, grouped under a recognized hierarchy and sharing in the same liturgical practices and doctrinal beliefs. Yet all Christians, elite and nonelite, clerical and lay, also belong to other communities simultaneously: their family, their class, their gender. While in theory the institutional church might fold all such communities into its own communal umbrella, in actuality these communities existed in a shifting, dynamic state of overlap with the community of the faithful. This fact is so obvious to us today as almost to escape notice: families operate on their own rules, somewhat independent of their Christian identity, just as wealthy Christians sometimes obey the dictates of business at the expense of their Christian beliefs. Depending on time and circumstance, different, non-Christian communal affiliations may influence identity and action more than the rules and expectations of church membership. Thus, a husband's activities may conform to Christian communal expectations in some instances but be more influenced by his membership in a marriage relationship in others.

The triumph of Christianity is traditionally measured by the church's ability to alter the definitions of other communities and communal relationships so that they meshed neatly with the community of the faithful: the senator exchanged his consular toga for bishop's miter; the civic bureaucracy was charged with building churches and hostels instead of amphitheatres and baths; the poor became the emblem of a community's humility and the altar on which it might sacrifice the sin of extra wealth. Even the family was enfolded into the bosom of the church, as the ritual of marriage was made a symbol of Christ's marriage to his church and, by the sixth century, the birth of children was entwined with the baptism of new church members.

This process by which preexistent communities were enmeshed into institutional church communities is, however, rarely contemplated, and, when it is considered at all, it is typically imagined to have been wholly successful and all-embracing: the only group believed to have escaped its affects were pagans who remained entirely outside the Christian faith. Yet

the holes in the umbrella of Christian community were more numerous and more subtle than is indicated by a simple gesture toward a dwindling number of recalcitrant pagans. The tenacity of other forms of communal identity and organization meant that, even within the circle of the faithful, other identities might fail to mesh smoothly with the new community of the institutional church. The Roman aristocracy did not immediately or even successfully enter the church hierarchy, families did not necessarily conform their Christian domestic rituals with Sunday mass prayers, landowners did not abandon their century-old religious prerogatives simply because they and their estate populations had converted to Christianity, and even bishops themselves frequently responded to the dictates of friendship and patronage rather than the obligations of episcopal office.

These were the communal interstices untouched (or only lightly touched) by the Christianizing process, the disconnects in which membership in the community of faithful Christians did not necessarily mean membership in the institutional church—that is, where the overlap between the church as an institutional community and other forms of community was imperfect or incomplete. The study of private piety is the study of these disconnects, of the places where worship, particularly liturgy, took place in groups defined first and foremost by nonchurch affiliation: by family ties, by economic ties, by friendship ties. Private piety thus embraced all types of people, clergy and lay, aristocracy and poor, for, unlike these simple categories that describe but one facet of a person's identity, the "private" of private piety was temporal and contextual: depending on time and place, anyone might find their Christian rituals to be private. Bishops worshipping in their palace chapels, clergy performing unauthorized rituals at the request of wealthy patrons, families performing domestic rituals on weekdays—all were engaged in private worship, and all found themselves, for those moments, outside the fold of the institutionally defined Christian community. It is these people, and the problems raised by this realm of practice, that will be the focus of this chapter.

THE LITURGY OF PRIVATE PIETY

Prayer was the simplest form of private ritual in the early church. Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen all wrote on the subject, offering advice as to the timing, content, and appropriate locations for private prayer. All recommended a daily prayer regimen punctuating certain hours of the day and night with devotions, to take place in an undisturbed part of the house. The content of the recommended prayer varied, from a simple recitation

of the Lord's Prayer to scriptural readings. Indeed, these ritual rhythms of the pious pre-Nicene household would indirectly form the basis of the medieval monastic office.

While private prayer was probably the most common private ritual, another, more physical rite was likewise central to early Christian private devotions: the consumption of the reserved sacrament, a portion of the eucharist, typically the bread only, consecrated at the Sunday service and distributed among the faithful to eat during the week.² Tertullian, Hippolytus, Novatian, and others attest to this practice, which seems to have been customary in the North African, Roman, and Egyptian churches, if not universally (Tertullian, *On Prayer* 19.2–4; Hippolytus, *Ap. Trad.* 36; Novatian, *On Spectacles* 5.4–5; Jerome, *Ep.* 48.15). Many liturgists have assumed, based on its later manifestations, that the reserved sacrament was given only to the sick, as described by Justin Martyr (*Apol.* 1.67), or reserved for the last rites, or *viaticum*. However, the numerous descriptions of daily communion, from Tertullian's description of a Christian wife consuming the sacrament before each meal to Hippolytus's inclusion of the reserved eucharist as part of the daily round of prayers, indicate that the role of the reserved sacrament was much broader. Consuming the reserved sacrament as part of the evening meal or during prayer rituals, the average pre-Nicene Christian probably took many more communions from his or her own hand, in the confines of the home, than he or she did from the few eucharistic masses offered during the week.

The practice of the reserved eucharist did not cease with the Peace of the Church but seems to have continued unabated, particularly in the East, where evidence for its use is plentiful. While detailed descriptions of the circumstances and rituals surrounding its consumption are almost nonexistent, we may assume that it continued to be taken as part of meal or prayer rituals. Some sources describe the bread being kept in a special casket or *arca*, and it has been suggested that some of the many preserved fourth-through sixth-century ivory *pyxides*, or round caskets, may have also served as reserved eucharist containers (color gallery, plate I).³ Many of these caskets are carved with biblical scenes alluding to the eucharistic rite, such as the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, or the Sacrifice of Isaac, believed to be a prefiguration of the eucharistic sacrifice.

The most notable aspect of this later history of the reserved sacrament, particularly during the fifth and sixth centuries, is the increasing divorce between sacrament and the public liturgy. With the rise to fame of great bishops and holy men, a thriving "mail-order" business in the reserved sacrament developed in which laymen and women procured sacramental elements blessed by famous clerics, even if those clerics were in faraway

lands. The bishop Severus of Antioch was plagued by such requests and chastised the applicants for assuming his sacrament to be any different from that available locally (*Ep.* 3.1, 3.3, 3.4). Indeed, the Council of Laodicea in the mid-to-late fourth century had prohibited the sacrament from being distributed across diocesan lines, and Severus's and others' capitulation to their fans' requests would probably have been viewed as somewhat irregular, if not outright wrong (*Can.* 14). The practice was likewise worrisome because such special sacraments seemed to have had significant market value, and some parishioners made a tidy profit selling or trading them.⁴ The bread did not simply represent a convenient form of private communion but was also believed to channel divine power in extraordinary ways. Gregory Nazianzen claims that his sister, Gorgonia, once rubbed her entire body with the eucharistic bread soaked in wine, thereby miraculously curing a fever (*Oration* 8.17). In John Moschus's later sixth-century *Spiritual Garden*, the reserved sacrament is described as "defending itself" from corruption or destruction by transforming into sheaves of wheat or disappearing with a clap of thunder (30, 79). What is most striking about these stories is the degree to which the eucharist had become, particularly by the later sixth century, a holy thing, utterly divorced from both its liturgical origins and the community whose sacrifice it was to represent. Thus objectified, it was utterly possessable by the individual—bought, sold, traded, and shipped to and fro.

While practice of the reserved eucharist seems to have been a significant part of private ritual on both sides of the Nicene divide, other private rites are largely post-Nicene developments, inspired by new public liturgies or simply by the expansion of Christian ritual activity generally. The cult of relics is one such practice, the origins of which lay in that "fine and private place," the grave, a space where private memory and public commemoration had always collided.⁵ The earliest evidence for the private ownership of relics comes from the turn of the fourth century, when one Lucilla, a wealthy Spaniard living in Carthage, was reprimanded by her bishop for carrying around a martyr's bone of dubious origins and kissing it before taking communion (Optatus, *Don.* 1.16; Augustine, *Ep. Cath.* 25.73). However, the real floodgates of private relic owning were probably opened by Constantine himself; he, his mother, Helena, or the two of them together transported the relics of the true cross to the Sessorian Palace in Rome (now the Church of Santa Croce), and perhaps also to the Great Palace in Constantinople.⁶ Their Holy Land activities gave a monumental boost to an already burgeoning cult of the martyrs. In addition, by immediately appropriating a portion of the newly discovered cross for a palace-based cult, they made plain the possibility and desirability of cornering a piece of



Fig. 8.1. Most pilgrim ampullae, or oil flasks, were made of humble clay, crudely impressed with abbreviated images of the saint or shrine. This example from Antioch depicts Saint John the Evangelist, whose shrine at Ephesus was an important stop on the pilgrim tour. Most ampullae have neck ridges and/or holes to hold a chain, indicating that they were frequently worn around the neck where the relic's protective power might be clasped tightly to the body. Photo credit: clay pilgrim ampulla found at Antioch, © Research Photographs, Department of Art & Archaeology, Princeton University.

the holy for personal use. By the later fourth century, privately held relics abounded. Melania the Elder, for example, procured a piece of the true cross for Paulinus of Nola, who in turn gave it to his friend Sulpicius Severus. Paulinus suggested that Sulpicius might not wish to place it beneath the altar of his new estate chapel as planned, but rather reserve it for "daily protection and healing" (Paulinus, *Ep.* 31). Sulpicius had already amassed quite a collection of relics, including the body of Clarus, confidant of Martin of Tours, and various Holy Land relics obtained through his extensive network of aristocratic connections. The holy woman Macrina wore a piece of the true cross around her neck (*Life of Mac.* 30), while the Georgian prince-turned-holy-man Peter the Iberian possessed not only a piece of the true cross but also relics of Persian martyrs (John Rufus, *Life of Peter the Iberian* 41 [39]). Archaeological evidence for the private ownership and worship of relics confirms this picture: the house chapel in the so-called Palace of the Dux (described below) possessed a large reliquary, and a new interpretation of the so-called *confessio* beneath the church of Ss. Giovanni e Paolo in Rome, previously believed to be a communal *martyrium*, has likewise identified this small, closet-like space, decorated with images of martyrdom, as a private reliquary shrine in a large wealthy home.⁷

While not relics in the strictest definition, *eulogia*, earth or oil blessed through contact with a holy person or site, served many of the same functions as relics and were probably among the most common holy ritual objects.⁸ *The Life of Simeon Stylites the Younger* is filled with miraculous tales of such *eulogia*, typically earth taken from the base of the saint's column and used by clerics, travelers, and families. The monk Dorotheus used his, crumbled and thrown into the water, to calm the seas and prevent shipwreck; a praetorian prefect drank his, along with some of the saint's hair, as a cure for diarrhea; an Iberian priest received pieces of the saint's hair as a *eulogia*, which he encased in a cross and placed in a chapel (235, 232, 130, respectively). The many pilgrim flasks preserved in modern museums (fig. 8.1) would have served a similar function by holding oil taken from lamps burning at holy sites, such as Simeon the Younger's column outside Antioch, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, or the hugely popular shrine to Saint Menas in Egypt.

As Paulinus's and Dorotheus's stories attest, privately owned relics and *eulogia* seem to have been particularly valued for their protective and healing qualities: Theodoret describes how he himself kept a vial of oil "of the martyrs" tacked to his bed for protection and, as a child, wore a belt of the holy man Peter to expel disease, while Augustine tells of one Hesperius of Hippo, who hung a piece of earth from the Holy Sepulcher in his bedroom as protection, which, when transferred to a local shrine, began to effect

healing miracles (Theodoret, *Rel. Hist.* 21.15–16, 9.15; Augustine, *City of God* 22.8). *Eulogia* were thus frequently used to effect healing when travel to the holy man or site was not possible. Some combination of prayer, incense, and physical contact with the holy body, earth, or oil brought saint and suppliant together, bridging the gaps of time and space and permitting the saint's healing powers to flow into the object's owner. Private holy items thus offered immediate access to holy power, no matter the time or place, plugging up the keenly felt gaps between holy places, such as churches and martyr shrines, and the exigencies of everyday life.

Pictures of the holy also had this immediate, transportable power to bridge worlds.⁹ Images, either in the form of panel paintings of saints or impressed or painted on holy objects, such as *eulogia* or pilgrimage containers, were common accoutrements in private ritual. Constantine's daughter may have asked a disapproving Eusebius to obtain for her an "icon" of Christ for her private devotional use (*Ep. Const.* 1545). According to the *Life of St. Simeon Stylites the Younger*, a Cilician woman placed an image of the saint in her home, where it proceeded to work miracles (118). Also from the life of Simeon is the tale of a priest who brought his son to the saint to cure. The saint gave to him a *eulogia* impressed with his image, saying, "The power of God . . . is efficacious everywhere. Therefore, take this *eulogia* made of my dust, depart and when you look at the imprint of our image, it is us that you will see" (231). The use of images as a means of ushering in divine presence was a commonplace of the ancient world, in both the public and private spheres. The pagan *lararium*, or shrine holding small statues or paintings of the household gods, was a functional antecedent to the Byzantine *iconostási*, the shelf that carried the household's icons. And yet the expectations of intimacy with the divine mediated through the Christian icon seem to have been far greater than those surrounding the pagan *lararium*: not only would the icon permit the viewer to call upon divine power, but, like a visual radio, it would permit an actual conversation between human and divine.

From the transformation of the reserved eucharist into healing salve to the use of *eulogia* to prevent shipwreck, private ritual's greatest power was its ability to mold around temporal and experiential demand. Reflective of this need to respond to circumstance are the several rituals associated with nighttime, a time associated with danger as well as with holy presence, yet one in which clerical guidance or access to holy spaces might be particularly hard to find. The *lucernarium*, the lighting of the lamps at sundown, is probably the oldest of these rituals, one that may have originated in Jewish or even pagan households and was adopted by pre-Nicene Christian homes before being picked up in the public liturgies of the fourth century



Fig. 8.2. This fifth-sixth century bronze lamp from the area of Herculaneum, Italy, includes both traditional apotropaic iconography, such as the griffin's head, as well as Christian symbols, here a dove seated on the Chi-Rho initials of Christ. Such lamps may have formed part of the *lucernarium*, or lamp-lighting ritual that was carried out in the home as well as in the public church, or simply used for everyday lighting needs. Photo credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

(see fig. 8.2).¹⁰ It may have been supervised by women, as mothers supervised the ritual in Jewish homes, and a Spanish church council circa 400 seems to associate the *lucernarium* with "learned women" and "widows" (Toledo, Can. 9). Incubation or sleep in a holy space in order to initiate divine contact through dreams is similarly associated with private contexts. Theodore of Sykeon, when still a boy, forged his close relationship with the martyr George through nights spent in the saint's oratory, during which the saint would regularly appear to him to encourage and edify (*Theod. Syk.* 7–14). Peter the Iberian likewise began his life of prayer and holy works by "sleeping with the martyrs," spending nights on the floor of a chapel in which he had placed his relics of Persian martyrs.

It is important to note that none of the above-described private rituals were exclusive to the private sphere. Specially designed private masses, crafted particularly for domestic use, were centuries away in the West and may never have developed fully in the East. Rather, private rituals in late antiquity seemed to have developed out of or in conjunction with their public cousins, one sphere reflexively informing the other. The use of relics and *eulogia* in the home grew alongside the increasingly popularity of martyr shrines and pilgrimage, while the changing nature of the reserved eucharist may relate to shifting notions of the communion liturgy in the East brought on by the Chalcedonian controversy. What distinguishes these rituals in their private context is the particular nature of community they created there. Each of these rituals—the reserved eucharist, the use of private relics for healing and protection, the practice of incubation—had the result of ritually crafting a smaller Christian subcommunity, sometimes as narrow as simply the petitioner and God himself. These rituals not only forged particularized links between small groups or individuals and the divine, but they also further strengthened the ties within those groups: the father who brought home the Simeon *eulogia* to cure his son reformed the father-son relationship under

Simeon's guidance; Sulpicius's possession of the Holy Land relics increased the status of his own estate-cum-monastery community while also strengthening its bonds to Paulinus, the relic procurer, who was himself portrayed along with the saints on the walls of the estate church. Private rituals were not simply a private version of public ritual: they created and maintained separate subcommunities within the Christian faithful.

THE SPACE OF PRIVATE PIETY: CHAPELS AND CHURCHES

If privacy exists only as a relative category, conditioned by time and place, then what constituted a private space must also be wholly relative to circumstance and context: a city street, a dining room, or a closet might all be construed as private, given the particularities of occasion, function, or even psychology of the individual in question. Thus, the spaces that accommodated the many private rites described above were as varied as the rich landscape of the ancient world: one couple's private eucharistic miracle, inspired by fractures within their marriage, took place in the street outside their home; for another pious layman, the garden seems to have been the site of his eucharistic devotions; a ship, a picnic spot, and a bedroom were all used as sites of private rituals (John Moschus, *Spiritual Garden* 30; John Rufus, *Plerophoria* 77). Indeed, the knowledge that any space could serve as a site of holy ritual caused church officials no small degree of discomfort. One fear was that space itself might accumulate the moral detritus of the activities it witnessed. Origen admonishes that the space selected for prayer must be one unstained by sin, particularly sexual sin: "For it must be considered whether it is a holy and pure thing to intercede with God in the place of intercourse" (*On Prayer* 31.4). Bedrooms, so frequently mentioned as preferred spaces of private ritual, were thus particularly suspect. This fear was heightened when the eucharistic bread was involved, for not only space but holy objects might be rendered impure by surrounding activity of dubious morality. Novatian bewails the fate of the reserved sacrament that was carried through a red-light district by a feckless parishioner: "That faithless man has carried into the midst of the foul bodies of prostitutes the sacred Body of the Lord" (*On Spectacles* 5.4–5). The unclean bodies of such women rendered the very streets thick with sin, sin that was absorbed sponge-like into the holy bread.

It is no wonder, then, that when resources permitted, Christians might build special spaces within the domestic sphere for private worship. A growing number of such chapels or churches have been unearthed in archaeological excavations, although these necessarily represent only those spaces

with permanent, Christian features such as a monumental altar or reliquary. Spaces whose Christian equipment consisted simply of a portable altar or reliquary, wooden furnishings, or other ephemera do not appear in the archaeological record but are attested in numerous textual descriptions. From this increasingly large collection of evidence, two fundamentally different categories of such churches may be distinguished on the basis of context and function: private churches in urban homes and private churches on rural estates. The preserved examples of each type also demonstrate a significant geographical bias: urban chapels are known largely from the Eastern empire, while most villa-churches are clustered in the great estates of the West. While this bias undoubtedly reflects certain late antique realities, namely, a more vibrant urbanism in the East and a largely Western rural estate culture, textual sources indicate that both kinds of private churches existed throughout the empire.

Two examples, both from wealthy houses in cities and both dated tentatively to the sixth century, provide provocative glimpses of the urban chapel phenomenon. In the North African city of Apollonia (modern Susa), a large residence known as the Palace of the Dux included an ornate chapel, complete with a large stone reliquary box (fig. 8.3). The chapel was set on the far side of the house along the peristyle, and measured about nine meters by seven meters. Built as a basilica in miniature, the chapel had three aisles, a relatively large narthex, and an eastern apse flanked by two side chambers. The large reliquary was probably set in front of the apse and protected by a series of flanking screens, and its prominence, as well as the absence of an altar, suggests that the chapel was principally used for martyrial cult.

Another example, this from the city of Ephesus, was added to a large house overlooking the city's theater. Set in a remote corner of the rambling residence, the Ephesus chapel was smaller than its Apollonia cousin and had only a single nave. Nonetheless, its sanctuary was carefully separated from the nave by chancel screens and pierced by two deep cupboards, presumably to store ritual implements. The apse itself contained an elaborate stepped clergy bench (*synthronon*) and was preceded by a small stone altar. The altar and cupboards both indicate that the chapel may have been built with eucharistic functions in mind, although, as we shall see, these accoutrements may have had other uses. In the cases of both Apollonia and Ephesus, the chapels' location deep within the house and their relatively small size suggest a worshipping community formed principally of the family.¹¹

Despite their relatively protected location and likely familial function, both examples betray a complex relationship between public and private holy space. The three-aisled plan with apse and flanking side rooms in the

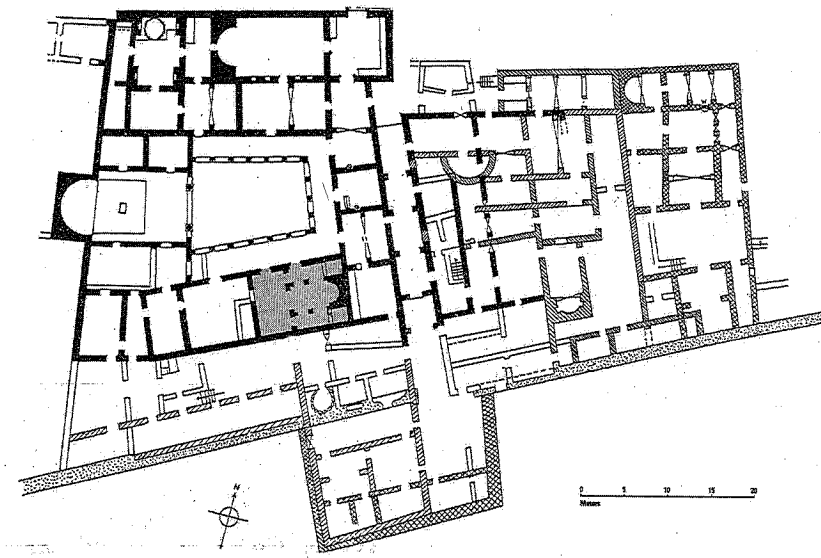
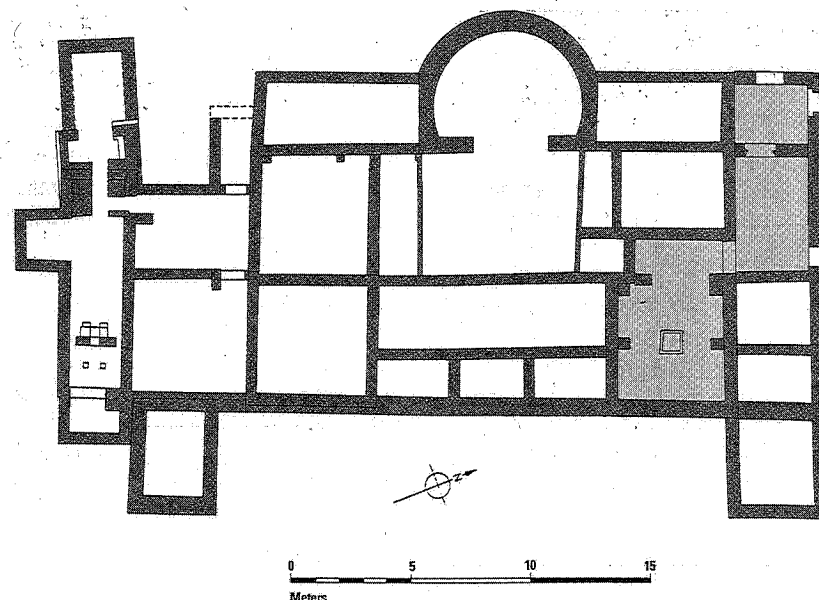


Fig. 8.3. Apollonia (modern Susa), Libya, offers an excellent example of a private chapel in an urban house that may have belonged to the provincial governor or "dux." The small chapel, located along the south wall of the house, was comprised of a nave, two aisles, apse and flanking chambers. A large reliquary box was found in the excavations and probably sat in the chapel's center.

Apollonia example is essentially a miniaturized version of Apollonia's grand central church. At Ephesus, a clergy bench, designed to seat the various clerical orders of a major urban church, has been shrunk and crowded into the tiny chapel apse. Indeed, it is the very miniaturization of these furnishings that provides a glimpse into their meaning. Chancel screens designed to keep crowds at a distance from the sacred, aisled arrangements built for proper liturgical circulation, clergy benches to seat a bevy of clerics—none of these would have been strictly necessary in a private chapel, and indeed, many of these furnishings, such as the *synthronon*, have been miniaturized past actual functionality. Clearly, it was not important that such furnishings be functional, but only that they be present. By the sixth century, when these chapels were likely built, the great martyr shrines and urban basilicas had developed an architectural language of holiness. No longer only functional, the plans and furnishings of urban churches might themselves stand for the liturgies they housed and the holiness they embodied and contained. As with the reserved eucharist, so, too, the church's physical components might be detached from their liturgical origins, miniaturized and transplanted into the home, where simply their presence was sufficient to recall their ritual implications. That is, these elaborate private chapel furnishings were shorthand for the complex liturgies and communities they had short-circuited in their migration into the private sphere.

An equally complex relationship between public and private Christian spaces is evident in the second category of private churches, the rural estate church. Some of these churches, like the urban chapels examined

Fig. 8.4. Lullingstone, England, provides an example of a private chapel in a rural villa. The small chapel (indicated by the shaded areas) was set on the villa's north side and entered from the outside via a series of vestibules.



above, were constructed within the villa's residential nucleus. In the villa of Lullingstone in Kent, for instance, the Christian church was set into a far corner of the villa, over a cellar that had previously held a small pagan shrine (fig. 8.4). The main worship space consisted simply of a small (seven meters by four meters) rectangular room equipped with an eastern niche. Its simplicity is belied, however, by a series of annexes, including a large antechamber and side chambers, and its remarkable and complex fresco decoration. Highly fragmentary, these frescoes included a series of unidentified scenes along the long walls, plus three large paintings of the symbol of Christ, the Chi-Rho (fig. 8.5). The placement of these three Chi-Rhos seems to mark a path from the vestibule to the church's eastern focus wall, echoing the procession of the faithful from the entrance into the church. Furthermore, the frescoes depicting six praying figures were arrayed on the church's western wall, mimicking the position and actions of the faithful as they faced the eastern niche (color gallery, plate H). A similarly sized chapel in the villa of Fortunatus, in Huesca, Spain, was more elaborate in design. Dating to the later fourth or early fifth century, it was placed in an earlier, three-aisled dining room, whose basilican plan probably inspired its choice for chapel use. It boasted a sanctuary, two side rooms, and a pseudo-crypt, accessed by three narrow stairs and protected, like the reliquary box at Apollonia, by a series of rough stone screens. Too small to have held an actual burial, the crypt, like Ephesus's too-small *synthronon*, was a miniaturized reference to crypt architecture, which probably simply held a portable reliquary.¹²

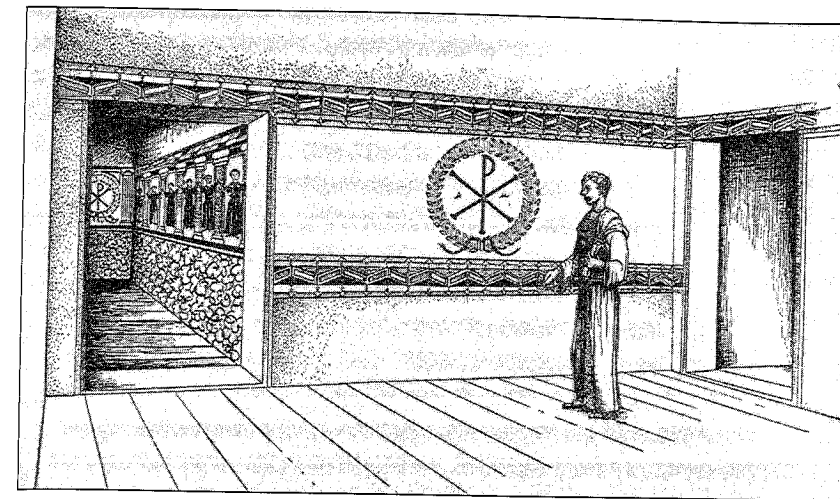


Fig. 8.5. At Lullingstone, the path to the chapel was marked by large fresco images of the Chi-Rho, as shown in this reconstruction. Illustration by Mr. Pal Rook, taken from *THE LULLINGSTONE ROMAN VILLA* by Lt. Col. G. W. Meates, FSA, published by William Heinemann. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.

These small integrated villa-churches probably served, like their urban church counterparts, as family chapels. Also constructed primarily for family use were the imposing funerary chapels set near Roman villas. The octagonal mausoleum set next to the villa at Pueblanueva in central Spain was encircled by an ambulatory and may have had a separate, eastern chamber for ritual function. The below-ground crypt held three sarcophagi, one of which was finely carved with images of the Twelve Apostles. Also in Spain, the villa of La Cocosa included a separate tetraconch funerary chapel, oriented east-west and covered with a mosaic-encrusted dome.¹³ A single marble sarcophagus, also oriented east-west, was placed in the apse beneath the floor. Textual sources suggest that such funerary chapels might also include relics, such as that built by the aristocrat Rufinus in Chalcedon, intended to hold both his own body and relics of the apostles of Peter and Paul imported specially from Rome (Callinicus, *Life of Hypatius* 66.19). The deaconess Eusebia was similarly buried with her collection of the relics of the Forty Martyrs in her suburban villa outside Constantinople (Sozomon, *Eccl. Hist.* 9.2).

A final category of villa-churches seemed to have embraced a much larger worshipping community. Such churches may have become increasingly common as time went on, and most date to the fifth and sixth centuries. These churches were set apart from the villa as freestanding buildings, and thus careful archaeology is required to ascertain if the churches functioned contemporaneously with the residential use of the villa or were built long after the villa had been abandoned or transformed. The former are true villa-churches, while the latter represent a different, although equally interesting, phenomenon. One example in which church and villa seem to be contemporary is the church of the villa of Loupian, in Languedoc. The

villa itself was rebuilt in the late fourth or early fifth century, with new reception rooms and fine mosaic floors. At approximately the same time, a large church was built some eight hundred meters from the villa. A thirty-five meter by ten meter single-aisled building, it included a baptistery on its north flank, while its inscribed, eastern apse was almost an exact replica of the inscribed apses in the new villa. The villa-church at Torre de Palma in central Portugal, while later in date, was similarly large and well furnished. The villa itself was unusually expansive, and by the early sixth century, when the church had been built, its residential sector may have shifted to a large, newly constructed house. The church was built some twenty-five meters away from this house and assumed its same northeast by southwest orientation. A large (thirty meters by ten meters) basilica, the building was fitted with a liturgical walkway (*solea*), eastern and western apses, and an attached baptistery. Clearly, neither of these churches were just small family chapels; rather, they were mostly likely built to serve rural communities, almost certainly the workers and landlords of the estate itself.¹⁴

The textual record tends to confirm this quasi-public, estate-wide function. For instance, a series of Gallic church councils of fifth- and sixth-century date prohibited villa owners from celebrating eucharistic masses in their estate churches on Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and other major feast days, insisting that they present themselves to their bishop in the urban cathedral church (Agde, Can. 21; Orléans 1, Can. 25; Épaone, Can. 3; Orléans 2, Can. 3; Clermont, Can. 15). The prohibition of feast-day services tacitly assumes (and approves) the celebration of ordinary masses in these villa-churches. Furthermore, one council's allowance that these oratories might serve the weekly needs of a "family," interpreted here to mean the larger estate community of blood relations and dependents, as well as several written permissions for "public masses" in estate churches, eloquently support the archaeological picture of quasi-public villa-churches (see Galasius, *Ep.* 32). Landowning aristocrats such as Sidonius Apollinaris and Paulinus of Nola wrote laudatory descriptions of their friends' villa-baptisteries, describing these as demonstrations not simply of piety but of civic generosity, likewise suggesting that such baptisteries served a broader rural population (Paulinus, *Ep.* 32; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Ep.* 4.15).

Given the expansive community and wide variety of liturgical services provided by some estate churches, a clerical staff was clearly requisite. Certainly by the later fifth century and probably earlier, a landlord claimed the right to nominate his own clergy, for ordination if need be, while the final choice of such clerics remained with the local bishop.¹⁵ Nominees were frequently estate tenants or other working dependents. A variety of sources, from a disgruntled holy man-cum-villa-presbyter who lost his job, to disci-

plinary cases against dissolute estate clerics, make it likely that the clergy staffing these churches were permanent staff, rather than occasional visitors.

We have only just begun to appreciate the impact that these estate churches, particularly those of quasi-public function, would have had not only on the character of the late antique estate but also on the Western countryside more broadly. The repeated discussions of such churches by episcopal authorities, together with their increasing prominence in the archaeological record, describe a deeply complex world in which the rural parish church may not have been the sole or even primary space of Christian worship and community. Christianity not only seeped slowly from the urban episcopal centers into a resilient pagan countryside but also emerged in the distinct islands of the rural estate, where its impresarios were not bishops or other representatives of the institutional church but the same persons who had always ruled the rural world, namely, the landowners themselves. In many areas of the West, particularly in Hispania, where cities were few and bishops even fewer, these landowners and their estates may have been the real engine of Christianization. Thus, the Christian communities of these rural provinces would likewise have been shaped by the age-old institutions of land tenure, and their internal hierarchies built less around lay/clerical distinctions than around the dependent relationships of landowner and tenant.

COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE: PRIVATE PIETY IN THE EYES OF THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

From daily communion at home to estate churches under the thumb of powerful landowners, the above survey of private liturgy and private churches presents a landscape of alternative Christian communities. Christian experience shaped through the mold of the rural economy, the rhythms of daily home life, and the exigencies of travel or sickness was experience shaped outside the liturgy of the public churches, outside the rhythms of the Christian calendar, and thus in ambiguous relationship to institutional structures supervised by Christian bishops. How did the episcopate regard acts of private worship and the existence of these subcommunities within the Christian faithful? How did these subcommunities regard the episcopate, or did they even recognize themselves to be communities outside that of the institutional church? These questions address the more basic issue of how the public and the private, the individual and the collective came to define themselves in the centuries after the Peace of the Church, when the nature of one type of Christian community, the institutional

episcopate, changed radically, while other kinds of community swirled in a state of both flux and continuity around it.

A large chunk of evidence describes a world in conflict, one in which the episcopate regarded private worship with suspicion and sought (with uneven success) to control private communities through clerical oversight and restriction on the kinds of worship permitted in the private sphere. Even the most cursory trawl through the sea of church and imperial law reveals an episcopate profoundly troubled by private worship, particularly private churches. Some of the very first church councils held after the Peace of the Church took up the problem. At the council of Laodicea in Phrygia, held sometime during the late fourth century, the assembled bishops prohibited eucharistic services from being held in private houses, even with an attending bishop or presbyter (58). The prohibition was repeated at the council of Gangra in Galatia, although here, as we shall see, the prohibition is likely related to doctrinal disputes (Can. 6). While these proscriptions were among the harshest and, if later legislation is any indication, probably widely ignored, the same kinds of concerns appear regularly throughout conciliar legislation of the fourth through sixth centuries and beyond. Typically, such legislation focused on clergy serving in private homes as well as private churches, insisting that both be approved by the local bishop. Thus, contrary to the mandates of Laodicea and Gangra, it seems that private masses were eventually tolerated as long as they took place under the watchful eye of the episcopate. Imperial law codes also included regulations on private churches but tended to focus their attention on the founders rather than the clergy. As described above, private church founders were permitted to nominate clergy of their choice to serve in their private churches, but their choices had to be approved by the local bishop.

While private church concerns sounded a periodic refrain throughout the period's regulatory documentation, crescendos of concern punctuated certain times and places. One such time and place was the later fifth and sixth century in the western provinces, where particular concerns about estate churches seem to have troubled the churches of Gaul, Hispania, and Italy.¹⁶ Rural landowners had seemingly carved out a highly self-sufficient Christian experience for themselves and their dependents through their estate churches, which provided all manner of services throughout the liturgical year. A worried episcopate insisted that the landowners and their immediate family make periodic appearances in the urban episcopal church, particularly on important feast days such as Easter and Epiphany. It similarly sought to wrest the sacraments of baptism, ordination, and consecration out of the hands of estate clergy, who had seemingly appropriated them, and to place them back under exclusive episcopal control.

In northwestern Hispania, bishops fought repeatedly against landowners who built estate churches or monasteries for profit, presumably pocketing the proceeds of the collection plate. Similar monetary concerns troubled the Italian episcopate, who finally began to wrest from donors' control any financial rights over donations, including lands meant to support their estate churches. What began as a series of gentle reproofs may have grown somewhat sharper in later sixth-century Italy, as the papacy cracked down on private church owners, requiring them to obtain permission to build any private church directly from the bishop of Rome and seriously restricting their activities by prohibiting public masses, baptisteries, burial, and permanent clergy. Since much of this legislation was again directed against the rural estate church, the increasing hostility may have been born of the institutional church's own growing presence in the countryside through the expansion of the parish system. That is, the growing hostility of the Italian legislation may have been brought about as two kinds of Christian community organization, the rural estate and the parish church, came into increasingly close and thus potentially volatile contact.

Irascible bishops struggling to control independent-minded church patrons was one issue, but heresy was quite another. Woven into many descriptions of private churches and ritual, particularly those of the fourth and early fifth centuries, was the insidious taint of heretical accusation. This subject is discussed at length in the next chapter, so only a brief sketch will be presented here. For the heresiologist, rooting out heretics meant rooting out their meeting places, and these meeting places were presumed to consist, at least in part, of private homes. The Theodosian Code repeats in edict after edict the same assumption, namely, that heretical gatherings took place in private houses, just as it repeats the same punishments, namely, confiscation of said properties (see, for example, *CTh.* 16.5.3 [372], 16.5.9.1 [382], 16.5.11 [383], 16.5.40 [407], 16.5.65.3 [435], 16.7.3 [383]). While Manichees are sometimes singled out, heresies are frequently lumped together in grocery lists of heretical "isms," whose "nefarious retreats and wicked seclusion," "secret and hidden assemblies" are repeatedly constituted as part and parcel of their incorrect belief (*CTh.* 16.7.3 praef. [383], 16.5.9.1 [382], among many). The tone of the whole corpus can be summarized in one edict issued in Constantinople in 383:

All persons whatever who are tossed about by the false doctrine of divers heresies, namely the Eunomians, the Arians, the Macedonians, the Pneumatomachi, the Manichaeans, the Encratites, the Apotactites, the Saccophori and the Hydroparastatae shall not show any walls of private houses after the likeness of churches, and shall practice nothing publicly or privately which may be detrimental to the Catholic sanctity. (*CTh.* 16.5.11)¹⁷

Indeed, there is scarcely a heresy that the late fourth-century edicts and councils do not damn with allegations of private worship. The format of the edicts varies little from the example cited in full above, including the name of the heresy or heresies, their condemnation for false belief, the prohibition of domestic assemblies, and a warning to would-be sympathizers of the consequences of using their homes for such purposes.

It is important to note that the above-listed examples, plus the dozens more that might be cited, make up the vast majority of all fourth- and early fifth-century textual evidence on private cult. That is to say, when private worship appears in the textual record, it most often appears in the company of heretical discussions. What are we to make of this phenomenon and how are we to interpret these dozens of descriptions of "secret gatherings" and "houses in the likeness of churches"? As Maier describes in this volume, the domestic sphere was clearly favored by schismatic or persecuted groups as spaces to air new ideas, harangue potential members, and gather for meetings and worship.¹⁸ And yet, in the sameness of the allegations, the doggedly repetitious language of the Theodosian Code, and the constancy of language employed by early Christian bishops, we may perceive indications of even deeper stirrings. Twenty years ago Alain Le Boulluec persuaded us not only that heresies were carefully constructed by knowing heresiologists, but that categories of heresy and orthodoxy were yin and yang, the negative image of "other" created to derive a correspondingly positive image of self. That constructive process required building blocks, relatively simple concepts whose moral implications were readily understood and shared by all. Modern historians of religion have become adept at identifying these heresiological building blocks, such as gender and magic, and disentangling them from the polemical structures in which they were so successfully placed.¹⁹ It may be that the allegations of private cult lies are precisely this type of powerful and flexible trope.

That this evidence should be viewed as polemical, as well as or in addition to reflective of actual circumstance, is suggested from the character of the evidence itself. We have already mentioned the repetitive, list-like quality of so many of the Theodosian Code edicts that included prohibitions of private cult. We have the sense that we are far from the world of observed reality and that we are caught between legalistic thoroughness, manifested through the careful removal of all worship venues and a ponderous enumeration of heresies, and stock formulas of heretical behavior. The same may also be said of the flip side, the oft-repeated insistence that one's home rituals were simply a return to an apostolic purity. The use of the obvious biblical precedent only emphasizes the polemical nature of both accusation and defense, and tells us little about real houses used as sites of doctrinal resistance. Even more persuasive is the very antiquity of

the trope itself. It would seem that as soon as the exodus from the *domus ecclesiae* (house church) to the basilica was initiated after the Peace of the Church, the increasingly deserted concept of "the private" was taken over by heresiologists and refitted as a "den," "a lair," "a nefarious retreat." Already in the 320s Alexander of Alexandria included among his list of Arian sins private cult meetings (*Ep. Alex.* 1.1). The concept can be pushed back further still, for Alexander's "secret meetings" were a later, Christian echo of centuries of pagan accusations. Minucius Felix's record of pagan opinion included jeers about private Christian worship: "a people skulking and shunning the light, silent in public, but garrulous in corners. . . . Why do they never speak openly, never congregate freely, unless for the reason that what they adore and conceal is either worthy of punishment, or something to be ashamed of. . . ." (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8, 10).

Thus, the topos or theme of the private generally and of private worship specifically as the inverse of corporate consent had a long and weighty pedigree. Most importantly, its longtime presence in the debate over correctness of belief and deed had permitted it to evolve from fact into symbol. Like the emblem of the uppity woman or the sorcerer, the topos of domestic worship had a shopworn place among both the heresiologist's and the downtrodden's polemical tools of trade. The tired, repetitive quality of the Theodosian Code edicts now becomes understandable. The abrupt prohibition of private services by the councils of Gangra likewise becomes clear. In addition to their vivid descriptions of the home as an alternative venue of community identity or resistance, these prohibitions describe the struggle to redefine the private and the domestic in a world in which the very definitions of community were being redrawn.

CONCLUSIONS

This use of the private as shorthand for heretical practice reveals the yawning gap between institutional church communities and other kinds of communities that opened up after the Peace of the Church. The rich variety of extra-church rituals, and the growth of private churches to serve family and dependents, presented the institutional church with a fundamental challenge, in which nothing less than the future form of Christian experience was at stake. Around what community model would a burgeoning Christian population live their Christian lives? Would it be a constellation of private homes, each a "holy household" whose members' pious daily lives were the touchstone of Christian identity?²⁰ Or would it be a civic principate, a Christian citizen body, hierarchically organized and led from the top by a bishop? To what degree might these models be made to overlap,

and in what ways did they resist collusion? The family and the aristocratic friendship network, the bedroom and the estate chapel all lay in the tectonic zone where different ways of organizing Christian experience collided. The centrality of such private worship in the construction of heretical identities was symptomatic of growing pains of the new church and its bishops and the concomitant urgency to find the correct place, at least conceptually, for the private in a newly public world.

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IDENTITY AT THE BOUNDARIES

Part 3