Chosen among Women

Mary and Fatima

in Medieval Christianity

and Shi`ite Islam

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Introduction

Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. . . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. (Luke 1.28–30)

Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above women of all peoples. (Qur’an 3.42)

According to both Christianity and Islam, the angel Gabriel delivered the above pronouncements to Mary, informing her that she would give birth to a son even though she was a virgin. Mary obeyed God’s will and bore the Christians’ God-Man and the Muslims’ great prophet, ‘Isa/Jesus. Shi’ite tradition relates that Gabriel repeated the same Qur’anic pronouncement to another favored woman, Fatima, the prophet Muhammad’s daughter, also known as Maryam al-kubra, or Mary the Greater.¹ For Shi’ites God chose both women for a sublime purpose, mothers of an exalted progeny; yet Fatima, as Maryam al-kubra, surpasses Mary in both purity and divine favor.

Mary and Fatima afford scholars of medieval Christianity, Islam, and gender studies an opportunity to examine feminine imagery in sacred traditions. Christian authors elevated Mary as Christ’s mother, and Shi’ite authors recognized Fatima’s offspring as their community’s infallible
leaders (called Imams). Both religions asserted the holy women’s wondrous bodies and deeds without compromising their more conservative feminine ideals. As Mary and Fatima performed miracles, rewarded the pious, and punished the heretical, they also remained submissive, chaste, and immaculate.

Mary and Fatima provided more than just models for feminine compliance, however; these female exemplars also betray complex political, social, and religious agendas. Late antique and early medieval Christian authors (c. 200–750 CE) identified Mary with the church and labeled those outside as heretics. Early medieval Shi`ite authors (c. 700–1000 CE) explained that Fatima led her supporters to paradise and consigned her enemies to the hellfire. Hagiographers and theologians alike imbued Mary and Fatima with symbolic markers of political, theological, and communal identity as they redefined their societies.

In late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, church fathers and hagiographers transformed Mary into a symbol of sectarian identity. The fifth-century theologians Augustine and Ambrose assimilated Mary to the Christian church: both remained pure and spotless, yet fecund with converts. Mary symbolized an emerging orthodoxy (or, right theology); those labeled heterodox remained outside her maternal care.

The early Merovingian Kingdom (c. 400–750 CE) also employed Mary as a symbol of unity and orthodoxy. The Merovingians revolutionized the late Roman Empire in Gaul. They were a Frankish tribe that both supplanted and assimilated Roman rule, Gallo-Roman cultural patterns, and Rome’s state religion. When the Franks converted to orthodox Christianity, they infiltrated the church’s ruling structures as bishops and further stabilized their sovereignty. As an orthodox Christian kingdom, they separated themselves from their barbarian competitors, the Arian Huns and the Goths. Fourth-century church fathers and theologians had pronounced Arianism a heresy that denied Christ’s full divinity; the Merovingians thus became orthodox Christians among a sea of Arian enemies.

Frankish authors proclaimed their unique Christian identity by adopting several Gallo-Roman saints (e.g., Saint Martin of Tours, a fourth-century holy man from Gaul) as well as more ecumenical holy figures (e.g., the Virgin Mary). In their sacred histories and hagiographies Frankish authors also assimilated their holy women to Marian prototypes. Just as the
Virgin Mary nurtured and sustained Christians, Merovingian queens and abbesses mothered their emerging communities and congregations. Some Merovingian bishops and priests even advertised their authority with Marian relics. Marian imagery in the early Middle Ages, prolific yet often subtle, reflected the Franks’ Christianization and orthodoxy in the midst of both God and the Merovingians’ heretical enemies. By affiliating themselves with Mary, Frankish authors managed to sharpen their communal boundaries without seriously threatening traditional gender expectations.

The proliferation of Fatima imagery also signaled religious and political shifts in the Islamic community by the eighth and ninth centuries. Shi`ite scholars began to outline their basic theological assumptions and tenets, which firmly identified their orthodoxy against other Shi`i groups as well as their Sunni competitors. The Shi`ites acknowledged `Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, as the Prophet’s chosen successor; they also recognized `Ali’s offspring as the true religious authority regardless of any other political ruler. The Shi’a soon disagreed, however, as to who the Imams actually were: some designated five, some seven, and others twelve different figures. They all accepted the Imam as infallible and pure; there was disagreement as to several of the Imams’ identities.

As the Shi`ite community honed its sectarian theology regarding the Imamate, it emphasized Fatima’s miraculous motherhood. Theologians outlined her attributes to explain the Imams’ status: they existed before created time; they were infallible; they possessed divine wisdom. Fatima, the only female among Muhammad’s miraculous holy family (the ahl al-bayt), supplied the Prophet’s sublime progeny and then welcomed others into the group as extended kin. Yet, as in Christianity, male authors simultaneously praised Fatima’s virtues while extolling the holy family’s masculine dominance. Fatima’s presence among the ahl al-bayt ultimately depended on her role as Muhammad’s daughter, `Ali’s wife, and the Imams’ mother.

The majority Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, elected the Prophet’s friend and companion, Abu Bakr, as the rightful legatee after Muhammad’s death. These supporters of Muhammad’s companions, instead of his family, eventually founded the Umayyad caliphate (661–750 CE). In the largely Sunni Muslim empire, most Shi`ites openly heeded caliphal rule while they credited the Imams (`Ali and Fatima’s descendants) as their true spiritual guides.
Locating Mary and Fatima within these early Christian and Muslim milieus is a difficult task for many reasons. First, a successful comparison brings together sources from two disparate cultures at times of critical shifts in communal and religious identity. There is no historical or geographic symmetry. In the Christian context, Marian imagery appears in the earliest theological treatises and continues into Merovingian circles in western Europe (c. 200–750 CE). In the Muslim context, Fatima imagery becomes particularly prevalent during the `Abbasid caliphate (750–1258 CE) and proliferates throughout Shi‘ite dynasties in Egypt, Persia, and Yemen. While dissimilar in space and time, both Christian and Muslim audiences struggled to define themselves in a rapidly changing world.

Second, comparing Mary and Fatima depends on vastly different types of sources. Late antiquity and the early medieval period yield a number of ecclesiastical treatises and hagiographies referring to the Virgin. From these texts scholars can glimpse the elite, theological descriptions of Mary alongside the more approachable miracle texts and ritual descriptions. Theologians clearly rely on Mary’s miraculous body as they define their Christology; hagiographers subtly elevate Mary as a model for holy women to imitate. Merovingian authors even present many of their queens and abbesses as sublime virgins, styled in Mary’s image.

Shi‘ite sources that extol Fatima are more difficult to categorize. An ideal cross-cultural comparison would correlate Fatima images in theology and hagiography with their Christian counterparts; unfortunately, no easy parallel exists. Shi‘ite theologians and hagiographers alike relied on the transmission of hadith (sayings about the Prophet and his family) to define the Imams’ miraculous nature. Hadith collections, often anonymous, reveal the emerging beliefs and teachings esteemed by the early Shi‘a. They provide a theology as well as hagiographic accounts of the Imams’ miraculous deeds.

Like their Merovingian counterparts, Shi‘ite hagiographers assimilated powerful queens to their idealized Holy Woman. Unlike the Merovingians, who ruled in Gaul, however, Shi‘ites lived and ruled throughout the Middle East. Scholars have yet to examine systematically the gendered rhetoric employed by specific Shi‘ite communities, particularly how they imagined Fatima. The Isma’ili queen ‘Arwa (d. 1138) ruled Yemen, for example, and she assumed many of Fatima’s characteristics.
The Safavid dynasty, founded in sixteenth-century Iran, also styled many of its queens as new Fatimas, with epithets similar to their namesake’s. These appellations included al-zabra (the radiant), tabira (pure), and ma’suma (infallible). This study explores the more general Shi’ite beliefs regarding Fatima transmitted through common collections of hadith. It provides a foundation for future, more discrete works that might analyze how and to what purpose specific dynastic leaders chose to transform pious women into their own “Fatima of the age.”

The third difficulty of comparing Mary and Fatima within their respective traditions is that male authors often described them with conflicting and paradoxical images. Mary and Fatima were both idealized yet inimitable, chaste yet fecund, intercessors yet submissive handmaids. Such bewildering imagery leaves the historian questioning how Christian and Islamic communities actually viewed women and gender roles.

According to theologians, for example, God elevated Mary and Fatima as venerable mothers and exceptional women. Yet they were aberrations among their sex: part of their charismatic authority stemmed from the fact that God transformed them into pure vessels (a miracle in itself). For Christians Mary held God-made-flesh within her chaste womb and, according to early church fathers, eschewed public activities by confining herself within domestic boundaries. Scholars promoted Mary as the perfect model for all young virgins to imitate: be chaste and stay at home. At the same time, Christian scholars labeled women in late antique and early medieval Christianity as the spiritually depraved daughters of Eve. Women symbolized the sinful flesh finally conquered by Christ’s redemptive act. No greater miracle could occur in late antiquity than the transformation of a female into a holy figure. Such a salvific event only emphasized the abundance of God’s mercy as such a lowly female sinner received grace.

Islamic theology placed women in an equally precarious role. Classical texts included women among Shayatin (devilish) forces sent to delude and confuse male Muslims. Islamic rhetoric also equated the female with the base soul (nafs) that tempted humanity to sin. Yet Shi’ite scholars also praised Fatima, the prophet Muhammad’s daughter, as the mother of the Shi’ite Imams. As matriarch Fatima shared the Imams’ privileged status and miraculous gifts; she, uniquely among women, remained ritually pure and divinely inspired.
Both Christian and Muslim theological systems condemned the female body in its impurity and taint while extolling Mary and Fatima as holy vessels for sublime offspring. Hagiographers transformed the two holy women into pristine containers of God’s presence, presenting multivalent images of the womb. Early church fathers encouraged believers, both male and female, to become pregnant with God’s seed (faith) and produce children (good works) just as Mary conceived Christ in her womb. According to Shi‘ite cosmology, Fatima’s womb held the nur (light) of the Imamate; her purity protected this radiant “semen,” and she gave birth to Hasan and Husayn, God’s chosen Imams.

Political and sectarian discourse reveals equally contradictory versions of Mary and Fatima in theological texts. Male authors manipulated their holy women’s lives and miracles to reflect shifting social and political identities. Nascent Christian and Shi‘ite communities associated themselves with these feminine figures and celebrated their miraculous powers. In doing so, these communities formulated and advertised new political boundaries and sectarian divisions.

Mary and Fatima as mothers, quickly synonymous with orthodox (right) doctrine, effectively weaned their communities from hellfire. One medieval exegete associated Fatima’s name with the root meaning, ف-ط-م (f-t-m), which can mean “to wean.” Fatima has the authority to intercede for her family (i.e., the Shi‘a) on judgment day and condemn her enemies to eternal hellfire. Hagiographers express that authority through her domestic station as the holy family’s sublime matriarch: she cares for her family’s earthly needs, cleans the home, feeds her family and neighbors (often through miraculous intervention), and provides wise counsel to her children and husband. Christian Marian imagery also describes a powerful heavenly matriarch, seated at her Son’s right hand, ready to intercede for the church and dismiss the heterodox. She gained that position, however, by submitting to God’s will as his holy handmaiden. Male authors encourage Christian women, including abbesses and secular queens, to imitate that submissive quality. In both cases, the male householder never yields his ultimate authority: the father and sons rule within the ahl al-bayt, and the male priest presides over the church.

These theologies and ideologies regarding Mary and Fatima appear not only in sacred narratives but also in material culture. Mary’s and Fatima’s textual bodies literally assumed built form while appealing...
more widely to believers’ imaginations. Early Christian catacombs and churches displayed images of Mary, glorified as virgin, mother, and bride. Mosque lamps and prayer niches could easily be interpreted as symbolizing Fatima’s radiant presence along with the Imams’. Shi`ite amulets shaped as the human hand effectively evoked the *ahl al-bayt*’s intercessory authority. Medieval artists and architects transformed their theological, social, and political symbols into visual form.

This work concentrates on feminine imagery in political, cultural, and theological rhetoric as well as material culture during periods of transformation and conversion. This approach reflects current trends among gender historians to correlate structures of power and authority with the literary and rhetorical nature of feminine imagery. As poststructuralist theory dictates, cultural systems often modify gender categories to accentuate changes in political and social conventions. For scholars of Christianity and Islam, for example, the early medieval shift of Mary and Fatima imagery signals dramatic social, political, and even religious transitions. Male authors employed Mary and Fatima as rhetorical tools in a complex discourse of identity and orthodoxy; they were more than models for women to emulate.

This approach is in sharp contrast to earlier feminist theory and modes of historical inquiry. During the 1970s, feminist historians of early Christianity read late antique and early medieval authors as patriarchal proof texts. Feminist theologians rejected early church writings as misogynistic and oppressive. In the 1980s, more moderate revisionist historians sought to reclaim the church’s secret history by revealing the actual lives of pious women. Although women were largely absent from the texts, feminists sought to re-create women’s considerable contributions to the early Christian movement.

A feminist hermeneutic concerning women in Islam is more difficult to trace. Works available to Western audiences confine women to apologetic argument, descriptive historiography, or modern political rhetoric. Modern feminists reimagine early Islamic women in an attempt to discourage veiling, segregation, and patriarchal leadership in Muslim societies. Scholars generally ignore the abundant gender imagery and the rhetorical nature of miracle accounts to focus on their own political agendas.

More recent historical methodology attuned to literary criticism and poststructuralist examinations of gender and culture allows for a review
of feminine imagery in general and Mary and Fatima in particular. Most Marian scholars, for example, largely neglect the fourth through eighth centuries and focus on the Marian cult’s rapid proliferation during the high and late Middle Ages. Scholars of Islam include brief surveys that recount Fatima’s exalted position within Shi`ite Islam, yet none move beyond detailed narratives to offer feminist interpretation. Scholars still argue over Fatima’s historicity and generally ignore the social and gender implications of Fatima texts.23

This study, in contrast, focuses on late antique and early medieval Christianity, particularly in Gaul, as well as medieval Shi`ism. The presence of Marian imagery in Merovingian Gaul is certainly not an exception among the barbarian kingdoms. It is clear, for example, that Mary’s cult flourished in Anglo-Saxon England well before the Norman invasion.24 Bede explains that the earliest missionaires such as Augustine and Mellitus sent by Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth and early seventh century brought Marian relics such as her hair along with them.25 Early lives of the Irish Saint Brigid also mention the Virgin Mary: hagiographers recommend that female saints participate in Christ’s divine motherhood along with Mary herself.26 Historians would benefit from future explorations of Marian imagery in these western empires with an eye toward political and sectarian motivation, in the same way that this work concentrates on Gaul.

Although this study limits its investigation of Christian Marian imagery to late antiquity and early medieval Gaul, it approaches Shi`ite accounts of Fatima more universally because of the nature of the sources. Tracing and confining Shi`ite traditions to their specific geographic roots is almost impossible (and would constitute another book in itself). This study examines Shi`ite theologians and hagiographers who generally lauded the Imams’ lives and miracles while exploring the community’s connection as a whole to a pristine past. As already noted, future studies might well reveal the many ways that specific Shi`ite dynasties assimilated their royal women to a Fatima prototype.

By exploring the various conventions of Christian and Shi`ite sanctity, I offer a comparison of cross-cultural hagiography, a complex symbolic literature that assumes divergent forms in each cultural milieu. Hagiographies are contentious texts for scholars of both religions, yet male authors employed this literary genre to promote Mary and Fatima effectively as
feminine exempla. Read skillfully, hagiographies provide historians and feminists alike with not only sacred models meant to transcend time and space but also reflections of contemporary political and social debates. Such texts reveal distinct cultural contexts wherein male authors construct feminine images for a variety of audiences and purposes.
Chapter One

Holy Women in Context

Hagiographers certainly embellished Mary and Fatima’s roles in Christianity and Shi’ite Islam for rhetorical purpose. Throughout sacred texts these women perform various miracles such as healing the (pious) sick and punishing the (heretical) evildoers with righteous anger. Historians, on the other hand, have struggled to locate Mary and Fatima chronologically, in their sociopolitical contexts. Although their historical personae might be forever shrouded in sacred memory, scholars can identify some of the pivotal moments in theological debates and dynastic lineages when Mary’s and Fatima’s veneration proliferated most fervently.

Late antique Christian theologians, for example, invoked the Virgin Mary as an image of orthodoxy; Mary’s body displayed the church’s purity and incorruptibility. Battling theologians, arguing most ardently over Christ’s nature, articulated their ideas by describing Mary’s nature. Early medieval dynasties depended on the same didactic technique. Families such as the Merovingians aligned themselves with the Blessed Virgin and orthodox Christianity against their barbarian counterparts (who adhered mostly to Arian Christianity; i.e., those Christians who denied that Jesus was cosubstantial with the Father).

In a similar fashion, the evolving Shi’ at `Ali (party of `Ali) came to define themselves through their connection with Fatima. While all Muslims
esteemed Fatima as the Prophet’s daughter, she uniquely symbolized the reverence for and status of the Prophet’s family among the early Shīʿa. Shiʿite theologians developed a distinctive notion of authority that they believed passed from the Prophet to ʿAli and his descendants (the Imams) through Fatima. Fatima’s maternity became increasingly important as Shiʿi scholars defined her miraculous, pure, and intercessory capacities to strengthen a definition of power imbued with spiritual significance and unique to ʿAli’s patriline and Fatima’s matriline. As Fatima’s descendants became more privileged, various Shiʿite groupings emerged, sometimes arguing over the Imams’ true identity and then forging separate dynastic claims.

The historical personae of both Mary and Fatima thus may be hidden within layers of hagiographic formulas and sacred memory, but the sociopolitical contexts from which they emerge can be reconstructed to some degree. Hagiographers and theologians, Christians and Shiʿites, retold and reformulated the women’s lives to reflect and refine emerging notions of sanctity, community, and dynastic authority. Mary and Fatima, shaped and reshaped through time, demonstrate the importance of women in constructing a sense of historical anamnesis and identity.¹

Mary, the Church, and the Merovingians

Mary’s greatest contribution to Christian theology is perhaps that she literally conferred flesh upon Jesus, the Christ. Yet early Christian sects considered this seemingly basic point the most controversial; many groups argued over the exact nature of Jesus well into the fourth and fifth centuries. Gnostic groups questioned whether Divinity could be encapsulated in flesh; Arian Christians suggested Jesus was created in time and thus was unlike God the Father. Only by the fifth century did an emerging Christian orthodoxy firmly claim that Christ, fully divine and equal to the Father, bore a human body composed of flesh and blood that suffered and died at Calvary. Theologians made such assertions by designating Mary Theotokos, or God-bearer, to prove Christ’s unique composition.² Nestorian Christians quickly countered this claim and forced the church to finally, and very distinctly, define the God-Man’s nature and birth.
The church confirmed Mary as Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE (although the title had appeared throughout theological discourse since the time of Origen, d. 254 CE). The council acted after a heated dispute developed between two important church leaders. Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, considered the title Theotokos an infringement on the God-Man’s divinity. The appellation, he feared, implied that the deity required a natural birth, a mundane gestation; to suggest that Mary contained God within her womb bordered on paganism. Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, insisted that Mary as Theotokos verified the unity of Christ. The Marian appellation showed clearly, he believed, that Christ was God and Man simultaneously. At the hastily convened council, church leaders sanctioned Cyril’s position, condemned Nestorius, and presented Mary’s new title to a boisterous crowd.

The Council of Ephesus generated Marian devotion almost as a byproduct of Christological explanation. Popular piety had already revealed a vibrant Marian devotion evidenced in prolific tales of her infancy and childhood, yet theologians also harnessed the image and popularity of Mary in their emerging orthodoxy regarding both Christ and his church. Mary functioned as a proof text for Christ’s unique nature as well as a metaphor for the church itself. Both Mary and the ecclesia evoke the image of a spotless, pure virgin and a fecund mother producing Christian offspring.

Church officials’ use of Mary to craft a Christian orthodoxy corresponded with the Roman Empire’s political transformation. During the fifth and sixth centuries, Germanic kingdoms replaced the (once) more ecumenical Roman administration with local kings, bishops, and priests who wielded substantial local power. Holy men, in particular, served as theologians as well as political figures because the church easily appropriated local vestiges of Roman authority. Theological resolutions and even political might came to reside more in the church than traditional political offices. These church officials appeared particularly powerful as they defended their communities not against external, foreign enemies but against the internal abominations of heresy.

By the late fifth and early sixth century, for example, the Gallo-Roman population no longer feared barbarian onslaughts, ethnic contamination, or usurpation by Germanic overlords; in fact, Gregory of Tours considered most freemen of Gaul as Franks, even if they...
descended from the indigenous Gallo-Roman population. If they felt secure in some ways, however, they were not free from perceived threats of spiritual contamination. Church leaders viewed Arianism and Judaism as threats to Christian theology and life itself. The general Frankish population of Gaul identified their barbaric enemies not only in terms of ethnic or linguistic otherness but also as threats to Catholic orthodoxy.

It is important to remember, too, that theological orthodoxy was not considered part of an elite culture accessible only to a literate scholarly class. Theologians and laypersons alike debated many issues. While it would be difficult to find a sixth-century theologian of Augustine’s or Ambrose’s caliber, Christian orthodoxy was nonetheless felt and lived in every social stratum partly by way of the cult of saints, devotions promoted by the clergy and taken up avidly by the laity. Ideas about orthodoxy were not located primarily in theological treatises or formulaic accounts of Trinitarian disputes. They were found in complex diatribes against heresy, which, in turn, were embedded in a variety of popular devotions, many of which centered on the figure of Mary.

Orthodox Christianity, unlike its heretical counterparts, necessitated the union of humanity and divinity in the God-Man, Jesus. Judaism denied Jesus as the Messiah, and Arianism questioned the full divinity of Christ, thinking him a creature and therefore not on the order of the Creator. Both refused the Christian claim that in Jesus the human and divine were united in one person and thus denied that the vast chasm between God and humanity could be bridged.

Orthodox (or “right”) Christianity, in contrast, maintained that Christ could and did breach the abyss separating heaven and earth. Christ was not only a divine person capable of uniting humanity and divinity within himself; he afforded a model for others to follow. Accordingly, saints, by imitating Christ, could themselves transcend the human condition after death by taking on immortality in an eternal paradise. The power of the Jesus story and those of the saints animated the landscape of medieval Gaul. In the experiences of ordinary people, the divine touched their lives every day, every moment, through miraculous healings, exorcisms, and intercession. Catholic orthodoxy and its prolific hagiography confirmed miraculous displays of divine power and effectively denounced Arianism and Judaism.
Such imagery was not unexpected as Merovingian (and later Carolingian) historians assimilated their past to a biblical framework and renamed themselves the “new Israel.” Gregory of Tours recognized the Frankish struggle to establish its kingdom and spread Christianity as one ordained by God. The Franks’ eventual triumph was simply a matter of divine providence as they banished heresy (i.e., Arianism instead of the Israelites’ Canaanite enemies) and preached orthodox Catholicism. In his Ten Books of Histories, Gregory recasts Merovingian kings in the guise of Old Testament heroes. As Frankish warriors struggled against Goths and unruly offspring, they became new Davids braving the Philistine threat.

Within the Merovingians’ early alignment with Israel, Mary takes on the role of Eve’s righteous counterpart. Extant Merovingian missals (books describing the liturgy of the mass), for example, emphasize perfected Christianity as compared to imperfect Judaism. The Bobbio Missal and the Missale Gothicum rely on temple ritual language to demonstrate the superiority of Christ, the sacrificial lamb, who completes the Old Covenant and initiates the New. In this system of salvation, the missals juxtapose the sinful Eve to the redemptive Mary while also affirming Mary’s perpetual virginity. Mary’s obedience to God’s will and miraculous parturition provide the mode of Christ’s birth, proof of his unique nature, and the foundation of Merovingian orthodoxy.

Merovingian devotion to Mary is manifest in a number of other ways. First, Frankish Christians celebrated at least two masses dedicated to Mary, one being the Feast of the Assumption, during the liturgical calendar. This feast recognized Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven without physical death, a theological point that became official doctrine only in 1950. Second, Merovingian holy men gained prestige through the procurement and possession of Mary’s relics. As the Franks accepted Mary’s bodily ascension, these relics probably related to her clothing or physical remains such as hair or breast milk.

The cult of relics in general signified the church’s power on earth; miracles, exorcisms, and divine displays ratified God’s presence and provided a framework for Frankish communities to make sense of their world. Merovingian royalty and aristocrats certainly understood the importance of relics as symbols of both authority and heavenly mandate. By the sixth century, aristocratic families also sought prominent bishoprics.
throughout Gaul. Local authority, now centralized in the church offices instead of senatorial clout or ancestral prestige, provided a substantial source of sociopolitical ascendancy. The ownership or even the discovery of saintly relics only added to aristocratic fame in the competition for episcopal title.

Saint cults and relics also enhanced royal authority in Gaul. The two Merovingian queens Brunhild and Balthild consolidated their position at court not only by supervising the appointment of bishops but also by managing local saint cults. Brunhild sponsored Saint Martin’s local clique, and Balthild procured several different saints’ relics for her monasteries. Merovingian kings and queens rendered themselves conduits of heavenly power by (ideally) appointing bishops sympathetic to their royal agendas and proving themselves appointees of the saints. These early medieval saint cults, in comparison with those of the later period, remained mostly localized and regional while at the same time the belief and rituals surrounding the living dead provided a kind of unity. Gregory of Tours could discuss northern Gaul’s practices and saint figures with a sense of familiarity because of his experiences in central and southern Gaul. Some cults transcended local boundaries and proliferated through all the Gallic provinces. Relics of Saint Martin of Tours, for example, spread throughout Gaul and attracted cultic practices from many towns (this, of course, required some clever stories about his travels and adventures to account for how his relics ended up in so many different areas).

Gregory of Tours also suggests that most Franks adored other common saintly figures identified in the Scriptures, such as Peter, John the Baptist, and Paul. He even boasts of Marian relics, although he is vague in identifying exactly what type of relics he owned. Gregory is usually noted as the first Western hagiographer to describe Mary’s corporal assumption into heaven just before her death, so it is doubtful that he would refer to her dead body parts as he might refer to John the Baptist’s head or Saint Denis’s arm. He does describe, however, the miracles performed by her relics both in Jerusalem and in Gaul.

When Gregory begins his discussion of various Marian miracles, he includes Saint Mary’s church in Jerusalem as a place-relic. He explains that the emperor Constantine had commissioned the edifice, but the building required supernatural facilitation. According to Gregory, the architects and workmen proved unable to move the massive columns.
intended for the church’s support. Mary, as a sublime engineer, appeared to the architect in a dream and explained how he should construct appropriate pulleys and scaffolding to aid in the job. The next day the architect followed Mary’s instructions. He summoned three boys from a nearby school (instead of the grown men previously employed), and they raised the columns without incident.23 Gregory establishes Jerusalem as one of the first focal points of Marian piety.

Gregory then explains how many Marian relics found their way into Gaul. In one narrative, Johannes, a pious pilgrim, traveled to Jerusalem to be healed of his leprosy. While in the Holy Land he received the Virgin’s relics and then proceeded home via Rome. On his journey highwaymen ambushed him and stole his money and reliquary. After they beat Johannes, they discovered that the reliquary contained nothing of value (such as gold) and tossed it into a fire. Johannes later retrieved the relics, miraculously preserved in their linen cloth, and advanced safely to Gaul where the relics continue to work miracles.24

Gregory himself boasted of owning Marian relics and carrying them in a gold cross (around his neck) along with relics of Saint Martin and the holy apostles. These relics, in fact, once saved a poor man’s house from burning. Gregory explained, “Lifting the cross from my chest I held it up against the fire; soon, in the presence of the holy relics the entire fire stopped so [suddenly], as if there had been no blaze.”25 While the poor man’s family had been unable to quench the flames that would consume his home, the simple presence of the bishop’s relics brought relief.

Gregory’s attestation to the presence and power of Marian relics not only boosts his own authority, but also the authority of Gaul as a locus of religious piety. He introduces Marian miracles at Jerusalem and then follows the transmission of her relics to his own land. In this way, Gregory is transforming Gaul into a biblical Jerusalem, comparing Mary’s miracles and cures in the Holy Land to her current residence in Gaul.26 Instead of traveling to Jerusalem on a holy pilgrimage, the pious could simply tour Mary’s relics at Clermont. Gregory proclaims Gaul as a spiritual center equal to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, operating freely from the constraints of Rome.27

Gregory, like his late antique and Merovingian counterparts, transformed the Virgin Mary—a woman barely mentioned in the Christian canon—into a champion of orthodoxy and even prestige. Patristic
authors constructed their evolving Mariology to bolster the church’s evolving Christology. Merovingian theologians, bishops, and kings relied on the saints, including Mary, to warrant their expanding spiritual (and political) authority.

*Fatima, the Holy Family, and Shi‘ite Dynasties*

Just as Christianity transformed the Virgin Mary, Shi‘ite hagiographers and theologians transformed Fatima into a symbol of orthodoxy and dynastic mandate. Fatima’s authorization of the Imamate enables the designation of those within the *shi‘at ‘Ali* and the other. As with the Virgin Mary also, exposing the exact historical persona of the Prophet’s daughter proves elusive. Shi‘a date their emergence to the moment of Muhammad’s death (632) when some of the community allied themselves with Abu Bakr instead of the Prophet’s chosen successor and son-in-law, ‘Ali, Fatima’s husband.

Historically, ‘Ali’s party certainly emerged at a specific moment, usually identified as 656, when ‘Ali became the fourth caliph. This precipitated the first civil war in the Islamic community as ‘Ali defended himself against his predecessor ‘Uthman’s kin and those who generally rejected his election. Yet those who endorsed ‘Ali as the community’s leader, and subsequently distinguished Fatima as the mother of the Shi‘ite Imams, hardly composed a monolithic group.

The earliest *shi‘at ‘Ali* were certainly political; that is, they supported ‘Ali as the community’s leader. After the death of ‘Ali and his son Husayn, however, the party began to assume religious implications. A member of the Kharijites, an early ‘Alid (pro-‘Ali) sect, assassinated ‘Ali in 661 because the group disagreed with his arbitration with those who opposed him. After ‘Ali’s death, Mu‘awiyah (‘Uthman’s kinsman) declared himself caliph and ushered in the Umayyad caliphate. ‘Alids turned first to his son Hasan for leadership; Hasan refused to rebel against Mu‘awiyah’s forces and instead retired from public life. After Hasan’s death in 669, ‘Ali’s supporters (and the Umayyad’s opponents) turned to ‘Ali’s second son, Husayn, for guidance. Husayn finally decided to make a public bid for power against Mu‘awiyah’s successor-son, Yazid, after hearing rumors of tyranny and receiving pledges of support.
In 680 pious Muslims in Kufa (present-day Iraq) appealed to Husayn to lead their community against the caliph Yazid. Husayn agreed after thousands of Kufans professed their loyalty; he set out from Mecca to meet them. Before he arrived the caliph tamed any threat of revolt through terror tactics and bribery. When Husayn and his party (numbering seventy-two armed men plus women and children, including his own family) reached the plain of Karbala outside Kufa, they met a detachment assembled by `Ubaydullah ibn Ziyad, the commander sent by the caliph.

On the tenth day of Muharram, 680 CE, after several days of siege in desert terrain, Husayn and his companions fell to the Umayyad forces. Husayn was decapitated and his head returned to Kufa where `Ubaydullah publicly struck the lips of the Prophet’s own grandson. Husayn’s martyrdom became a central point in Shi`ite theology representing suffering, penance, and redemption: Shi`ites continue to re-create the martyrdom at annual ta`ziya ceremonies, demonstrate repentance for deserting Husayn, and finally gain redemption through symbolic participation in Husayn’s sufferings.

After Husayn’s death, leadership of the shi`at `Ali became much more complex. ‘Alids disagreed over who inherited the Prophet’s son-in-law’s position of authority and exactly what type of authority was involved. The Shi`a then began to craft their own kind of orthodoxy wherein Fatima’s maternity proved particularly important. In the midst of a blatant patrilineal system of descent, Shi`ite theologians uniquely transformed Fatima’s motherhood into the cornerstone of the Imamate, the system of Shi`ite authority. The Shi`ites argued, over time, that Fatima transcends the importance of her mother, Khadija (the Prophet’s first wife); Maryam, the mother of Jesus (or `Isa); and ‘A’isha, the Prophet’s beloved wife. They effectively placed Fatima in a singular position as the mother of the Imams.

Unfortunately it is almost impossible to discover the exact historical evolution of such traditions and theologies. Some historians date Fatima traditions and the importance of her bloodline to the earliest community, apparent during the Prophet’s own lifetime (d. 632). A second group situates Fatima’s popularity and evolving Shi`ite identity in the period surrounding the `Abbasid revolution (750) and subsequent consolidation of `Abbasid authority that usurped the Umayyad caliphate. A third group
The proliferation of Fatima traditions as slowly evolving throughout the first several centuries of Islam as a rejoinder to extremist (ghuluww) doctrine.

The first theory, favored by most pious Shi‘ite Muslims, accepts traditions that limit the abl al-bayt to Fatima’s children (which, in turn, emphasizes Fatima’s unique status) and that allegedly date to the Prophet’s own lifetime and certainly to the time of Husayn’s martyrdom (i.e., seventh century). One such tradition defined Muhammad, `Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn as the specific “people of the cloak,” or abl al-kisa’.32

According to the “cloak” hadith, Muhammad met a group of Christians at Narjan, a town located on the Yemeni trade route, and attempted to convert them. After some debate, the Christians agreed that Jesus foretold the Paraclete, or Comforter, whose son would succeed him. They agreed that since Muhammad had no son he could not be the fulfillment of such a prophecy. The Christians also consulted a collection of prophetic traditions titled al-Jami‘, which referred to one of Adam’s visions wherein he encountered one bright light surrounded by four smaller lights. God revealed to Adam that these were his five beloved descendants.

Although the Christians rejected Muhammad at Narjan, they were nonetheless intrigued by his message and later sent a delegation of scholars to Medina to question the Prophet further and engage in mubahala (mutual cursing). When Muhammad arrived, he had `Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn with him wrapped in a cloak. The Christians identified the family with the prophetic chapter of al-Jami‘ and quickly withdrew from the contest.

Various Shi‘ite traditions directly relate the people of the cloak to the abl al-bayt and say that Muhammad repeated the Qur’anic verse 33.33 as he wrapped the holy family in his mantle: “Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, members of the family, and to make you pure and spotless.” This asserts the (eventual) Shi‘ite notion of the Imams’ infallibility and ultimate ritual purity.

The traditions attesting to the holy family’s supremacy encountered some resistance. A set of countertraditions, usually transmitted by prominent Umayyads, erupted that placed others under the cloak with Fatima’s family such as the Prophet’s servant, Wathila b. al-Asqa’, and wife, Umm Salama. These traditions denying the exclusivity of the abl
al-bayt allegedly predate the ʿAbbasid revolution and at the least recognize the controversy surrounding the meaning of the ahl al-bayt. This challenges, then, the second theory of Fatima tradition that places her sublime status (as well as her family’s) as only an ʿAlid rejoinder to ʿAbbasid denigrations.

This second theory, favored by most historians, emphasizes the propaganda potential of Fatima imagery when employed by sectarian leaders. The early ʿAbbasid movement, so this argument holds, merged forces with the Hashimiyyah, a Shiʿite sect originating with Mukhtār ibn ʿUbayd al-Thaqafi (d. c. 686) as it prepared to usurp the ruling Umayyad dynasty. Mukhtār had arrived in Kufa around 680, just after Husayn’s tragic martyrdom under Caliph Yazid. Mukhtār, acting as a prophet of sorts, proclaimed Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, Imam ʿAli’s third son by a woman of the Hanifa tribe (and not Fatima) as the Mahdi (anointed one). As Mahdi, Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya would restore peace and order to the Kufan community and relieve Umayyad oppression. After both Mukhtār and Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya died, a group of supporters called the Kaysaniyya continued their adoration by proclaiming that the Mahdi had entered occultation (ghayba), a type of hiding or sublime stasis, instead of truly dying.35

The Kaysaniyya was not a monolithic sect. After Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya entered occultation, the group split into separate branches. One of these branches, the Hashimiyya, taught that Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya did indeed die after relegating his authority and divine knowledge to his son, Abu Hashim. The ʿAbbasids later asserted that Abu Hashim conferred his Imamate on Muhammad ibn ʿAli (the great-grandson of al-ʿAbbas, the Prophet’s uncle) and, thereby, the descendants of al-ʿAbbas (with no bloodline through Fatima). The ʿAbbasids identified themselves with the Hashimiyya and, by association, the “party of ʿAli” because ʿAli was Abu Hashim’s grandfather through the Hanafite woman. The ʿAbbasids advanced their revolution by harnessing the discontent of the early shiʿat ʿAli against the ruling Umayyad dynasty.

After the ʿAbbasids firmly established their own caliphate, however, their propaganda machine disassociated themselves from the Hashimiyya and the ʿAlids (and also persecuted the Shiʿa who refused to recognize their authority). By al-Mansur’s caliphate (c. 754–775), the ʿAbbasids stressed their relation to Muhammad’s uncle al-ʿAbbas instead of their
connection to `Ali and the Banu Hashim. They argued that Allah favored the male relative, in this case the paternal uncle, over inheritance through a female (implying, of course, Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima). Court clerks circulated Mansur’s declarations against the `Alids:

As for your assertion that you are direct descendants of the Prophet, God has already declared in His Book, “Muhammad was not the father of any of your men” (33.30); but even though you be descended from the Prophet’s daughter, which is indeed a close kinship, this still does not give you the right of inheritance.36

`Ali and Fatima’s family, according to the `Abbasids, held no esteemed position among the community.

The `Abbasids also questioned the very meaning of the *ahl al-bayt* and its association with `Ali and Fatima’s progeny. Caliph Mahdi (d. 785), Mansur’s son, circulated various hadith and poetic verses promulgating a distinctively anti-Shi’a interpretation of the people of the cloak.37 According to these traditions, the people of the cloak instead included Muhammad’s uncle `Abbas and his descendants:

The Prophet came to `Abbas and his sons and said: “Come nearer to me.” They all pushed against each other. He then wrapped them in his robe and said: “O, Allah, this is my uncle and the brother of my father, these are my family; shelter them from the fire in the same manner that I shelter them with my robe.”38

This understanding of the *ahl al-bayt* promoted the house of `Abbas while challenging the notion of the infallible Imamate as well as Fatima’s unique status.39

The `Alids responded to these `Abbasid claims, first, by pointing out that `Abbas was only Muhammad’s half uncle and that Abu Talib, `Ali’s father, was Muhammad’s full uncle. `Ali’s relationship as the Prophet’s cousin therefore outweighed any claims of `Abbas.40 Second, the `Alids punctuated their direct descent through Fatima. A proliferation of traditions proclaiming the predestined status of Fatima and the *ahl al-bayt* ensued.41 Historians then might view Fatima hagiographies as the `Alids’ political rejoinder to `Abbasid claims of ascendancy.
A third group of historians consider Fatima traditions and the *ahl al-bayt*’s glorification as a response to extremist theologies (or ghulat sects) within the Shi`a instead of an overtly political move. Many `Alid scholars advertised mystical traditions that promoted divinely inspired reason (*aql*) instead of logical rationality, the esoteric (*batin*) above the exoteric (*zahir*), and cosmogonic links between the Imams and humanity. Shi`ite theology that evolved during the ninth and tenth centuries represents a process of mitigating, negotiating, and eventually integrating some of these mystical views.

The emerging orthodox traditions, for example, define the Imams as the divine light (*nur*) and Fatima as the Confluence of the Two Lights (*majma` al-nurayn*; i.e., her husband’s and her father’s light). Fatima resides as the nexus between Muhammad (exoteric knowledge) and `Ali (esoteric knowledge), where the sublime meets the human. In a sense Fatima manages to bridge the great chasm between Allah and humanity just as the Christian saints and Mary do; she exists as part of Allah’s light (divine *nur*), yet she is the attending mother, flesh and blood, beckoning her extended (and spiritual) family to her care. Fatima traditions display Shi`ite scholars’ careful incorporation of esoteric cosmology in an evolving, rational theology. These traditions directly deny some of the ghulat’s more extreme assertions that the Imams themselves (such as the sixth Imam, Ja`far al-Sadiq) were incarnations of Divinity.

Whatever the genesis of Fatima traditions, whether in political discourse or in esoteric theology, Fatima remains a signal throughout for the orthodox (right) community. Sometimes that might be interpreted as the `Alid claims against the `Abbasids, as the Banu Hashim against the Umayyads, and perhaps even the Shi`ite theologians against extremist sects. From a more general perspective, Fatima always symbolizes Shi`ism against the other. Beginning in the late ninth century (and the solidification of an Imami orthodoxy, or rightness), Fatima’s image provided a powerful proof for theologians as well as future dynastic leaders.

As Shi`ite theologians eventually came to recognize `Ali and Fatima as the Imamate’s progenitors and bestowed spiritual potencies on the Imams themselves, they disagreed as to the Imam’s designation process. These disagreements continue to distinguish Shi`ite sects today: many Shi`a recognize five initial Imams (Zaydis); some, seven (Isma`ilis); and others, the majority of the Shi`ite world, twelve (*Ithna-`Ashariyya*, or...
Twelvers). The different groups accepted different descendants of ‘Ali and Fatima as Imams. According to Twelver Shi‘ite traditions, the fifth and sixth Imams (Muhammad al-Baqir [d. 731] and Ja‘far al-Sadiq [d. 765]) addressed the problem by carefully articulating the theory of nass, the process by which the current Imam designates his son (the Prophet’s bloodline) and bestows on him ‘ilm (authoritative knowledge). The problem lies, however, in which son the community recognizes as having received nass.

By the mid-tenth century, most of these Shi‘ite groups had control of substantial geographic regions. The Buyid dynasty (Twelvers) controlled much of Iraq and Iran, although they allowed the ‘Abbasid caliph to reign as a figurehead; the Isma‘ilis established the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa and founded Cairo; and the Zaydis controlled areas of northern Iran and Yemen. By the tenth century there is a true flowering of Fatima traditions in Shi‘ite theological texts. As Buyids came into power, they had to articulate what distinguished them from their Isma‘ili competitors. Zaydi Shi‘ites explained their unique view of the Imamate: the Imam must be descended from ‘Ali and Fatima, but he must also make a public claim for power and oppose illegitimate rulers. As Shi‘ite dynasties seized leadership throughout the Middle East, Shi‘ite identity became increasingly distinct from Sunni Islam.

Fatima proved important to theologians of all these Shi‘ite groupings because she gave birth to the Imams; through this Mother, the Imamate’s authority flowed from husband/‘Ali and father/Muhammad. For the majority of Shi‘ite Muslims (Twelvers), that authority ended with the twelfth Imam’s great occultation in 941 CE. Until his return at the end of time, Shi‘ite clerics and theologians speak in his stead, drawing on the traditions of the ahl al-bayt and the Imams for guidance.

Mary and Fatima, as they appear in late antique and early medieval sources, must be placed in the historical contexts from which they emerge. Theological disputes, dynastic authority, and shifting lines of community certainly affected the interpretive tradition that perpetuated their legacies. Whether through the writings of patriarchs or bishops, Twelvers or Isma‘ilis, Mary’s and Fatima’s lives helped to shape historical memory and communal identity. Their stories are told most fully not
only in theological tracts and historical chronicles but also in hagiography. Hagiographers fully defined Mary’s and Fatima’s status in their respective communities by assessing their miraculous and intercessory powers. Comparative hagiography provides a glimpse at the various and contrasting ways these male authors refashioned their holy women to fit their rhetorical strategies.