
***Sicut Apis Operosa*: Honey, Bees, and Chastity in the Early Medieval World**

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ABSTRACT

Honey and bees have been a long-standing didactic metaphor of chastity in Western civilization, employed by various writers across the centuries. This article delineates the changing interpretations of honey and bees in the early medieval period with a focus on how they were attached to chastity. It argues that the metaphor was gradually redeveloped and reinterpreted from the early church to the early medieval period; it also pinpoints an evolution toward a more specific usage of the metaphor within the contexts of monasticism, demonstrating how honey and bees depart from being a misconceived metaphor of passive sexual abstinence to denote active pursuit of divine wisdom in a continuous line of Christian works by Church Fathers and early medieval monastics. The article first explores how honey and bees were connected to chastity in the writings of various church fathers, then surveys how the connection continued in the works of several monastic writers.

KEYWORDS honey, bees, chastity, virginity, early medieval monasticism, metaphor

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Introduction

Among different kinds of insects in our world, not many species are as positively revered by humans as bees; and honey, the precious and sweet yield from the bees' labor, has been regarded as something divine since the very early history of humanity. The metaphorical meanings attached to honey were profuse in Greco-Roman culture. The taste of honey was considered so perfect that it was thought to have fallen from the skies. Honey was regarded as the drink of the gods, according to Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyrius, who claimed that Zeus got Cronos drunk on honey in the days before wine came about.¹ Plato also described how Porus became drunk on honey in the garden of Zeus before wine was known. In the minds of ancient Greeks, bees often signified the sacred and fertility, and were associated with the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Bees played an important role in Greco-Roman mythology as creatures capable of crossing heavenly and earthly realms and blurring lines between humanity and divinity.² They were also believed to be able to judge a person's sexual morality, and despise those who are unfaithful.³ Moreover, honey and bees are frequently employed as favorable emblems and analogies in the Christian tradition. Honey is a defining element of God's promised land to the Israelites, "a land flowing with milk and honey" illustrating its fecundity.⁴

With heritage from both Greco-Roman and biblical culture, it is, thus, not surprising that honey and bees enjoyed continued favor in late antiquity and early medieval Europe. Alongside the gradual development of different forms of monasticism across countries, bees, as wonderfully divine insects, and honey, their refined production, also emerged as perfect analogical representations of the archetypal monk or nun. In fact, bees and honey were common in medieval

¹ *De Abstinencia ab Esu Animalium*, 2.20; Plato, *Symposium*, 203b; Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 7; cited from Wilson 142-45.

² For bee and apian imagery in classical literature, see Cook 1-24.

³ This explains how bees became associated with both Artemis and Aphrodite, in that the punishment for infidelity could be metaphorically the pain of a bee sting. See Pearson and Sandbach 220-21. Bees feature in an established cult of Artemis, an association of agriculture, purity, and chastity. For more on this, see Cook 5; Ransome 96-97; Kasyan 251-57.

⁴ See Gen. 43.11; Ezek. 27.17. Honey is often used as a metaphor in the Seven Books of Wisdom. It appears often in the Proverbs (16.24; 24.13; 25.16, 27) as the metaphorical message of wisdom and its internalization. However, the Proverbs also offers honey as a negative metaphor for temptation: "dripping honey from the lips of a woman" is related to the seductive manners of the adulterous woman in four didactic passages in the book (2.16; 5.3; 6.25; 7.5, 21). While in the Song of Songs, honey is used to describe the Bride, this usage may convey that biblical authors see honey and bees as a proxy of valuable or attractive women, a trope that can be applied positively or negatively. For more on this, see Neufeld 219-48; Tova 327-41.

daily life, and many abbeys and monasteries were centers of beekeeping. Beeswax was valued for producing sacramental candles, and fermented honey was also used to make mead in some areas in Gaul. Mead is mentioned in poems from the fifth century and in the epic of *Beowulf* in the eighth century. Charlemagne (747-814) ordered that all manors keep bees and that two-thirds of the honey produced be given to the Crown. In England, laws written during the reign of King Alfred, mainly from 885 to 899, subjected the “stealers of bees” to the highest fines. Honey and wax were major trade commodities at the start of the Middle Ages. Furs and fish from Norway were exchanged for wool, malt, wheat, and honey (Ransome 32-33, 46, 63). The imagery of honey and bees, all in all, was very accessible, given their role in daily life along with their long-standing history as revered items.

In the early medieval period, bees and their honey were esteemed for multiple reasons, chastity chief among them. This association was based on an inherited belief from antiquity according to which worker bees work attentively throughout their lives without engaging in intraspecies reproduction. As scientific and agricultural evidence shows, ancient Greeks and Romans did not fully comprehend how bees reproduced, erroneously believing that bees remain chaste because they reproduce asexually. Such a belief was embraced by various authors.⁵ Aristotle, for example, mentioned in *History of Animals* that “some maintain that bees neither copulate nor bring forth young: they fetch them in . . . from the flower of the *kallyntron*, others say from the flower of the reed, others from that of the olive” (II.5.553a18-20). Aristotle influenced Pliny, who claimed that “sexual intercourse among them has never been observed. A majority of authorities have held the view that the offspring are formed in the [bee’s] mouth, by blending together blossoms of the reed and the olive” (III.11.46.3-6). This appropriation of the bee’s asexuality is due to the elusive nature of virginity as a concept so necessarily contingent upon varying norms across times, societies, and cultures that it can only be grasped by what it is not.⁶ By assuming the bees’ asexuality as the absence of reproductive activities, medieval authors turned bees into an analogical representation of virginity and assigned cultural and social meanings to apian behaviors according to their own definition of virginity.

⁵ For more on bees in Greco-Roman thought, see Carlson.

⁶ It is generally accepted that a cross-cultural and universal definition of virginity does not exist. Historian Hanne Blank states that the concept of virginity varies so widely across cultures that a universal definition seems reachable only through its negation and loss. See Blank 96. For more about virginity as a social construction, see Kelly 1-16; Marecek, Crawford, and Popp 192-200.

Although there is plenty of scholarship on the history of honey and bees in different countries and cultures, many studies are factual accounts devoted to enlisting their metaphorical meanings at the expense of how they evolved. When it comes to exploring honey and bees as motifs across time, most studies fail to investigate changes in the usage of the analogies. The early medieval period (AD 400-1000), moreover, is significantly bypassed by most researchers.⁷ This article seeks to trace the topological development and changes of honey and bees during the early medieval period, following a continuum of Christian authors. It focuses on how the metaphor developed a dynamic connection with virginity, and evaluates the monastic ideologies behind this change. It argues that the apian metaphor gradually modified its emphasis, from passive sexual abstinence to active intellectual pursuits. This article consists of two parts. The first part analyzes how honey and bees are associated with chastity in the writings of various church fathers; the second part continues the survey of how the connection endured in late antiquity and early medieval monastic communities.

Consolidating a Virginal Metaphor: Honey, Bees, and Chastity in the Writings of Church Fathers

Sexual renunciation was one of the essential assets for attaining spiritual goals in the Christian tradition. It was first practiced as a result of expectations of a fast-coming apocalypse and endorsed by some Christian thinkers in the late first and early second centuries.⁸ Christians chose to refrain from sexual intercourse throughout their lives, believing that sexual abstinence trained a person to fight against temptations and combat sins. As Peter Brown explains in *Body and Society*, sexual renunciation was a topic of high concern in the early church and was discussed by most influential church fathers.⁹ This “higher” virtue, which was not required

⁷ Eva Crane was one of the most important researchers of apicultural history. She amassed a major library and a collection of artifacts and photographs that documented beekeeping throughout the world. Her book *The Archaeology of Beekeeping* was global in its coverage. Crane’s 1999 encyclopaedic work on the world’s history of beekeeping, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*, stands as the most important monograph on the subject. However, while it is a very informative book, it does not mention whether there were changes in the human perception or interpretation of bees and honey throughout history. Recently, Bee Wilson’s *The Hive* has provided a detailed and well-researched cultural history of bees, honey, and hives aimed at a non-academic readership. Unfortunately, discussion of the early medieval period is nowhere to be seen in this monograph.

⁸ This is officially developed in the teachings of St. Paul (1 Cor. 7.27-28, 32-33), who recommends celibacy as a better option than marriage, although he recognized the legitimacy of marriage for those who could not follow this higher ideal. For the emergence and development of the notion of sexual renunciation from St. Paul to St. Antony, see Brown 3-190.

⁹ For the relation between asceticism and sexual renunciation in the early church, see Clark 177-203, 259-329.

for every Christian, turned into a standard practice in the ascetic movement. According to *Vita S. Antonii* by Athanasius (c. 296-373), St. Anthony of Egypt (c. 251-356) disposed of all his worldly property and left for the desert at the age of twenty-one. While living in an abandoned cemetery, he began having visions of demons that accosted him by earthly enticement (21-23).¹⁰ *Vita S. Antonii*, an account of the saint's life, offers one of the very first monastic examples where the metaphorical connection between honey, bees, and chastity can be seen.

The *Vita* portrays how Anthony started his ascetic vocation like a wise bee, eagerly looking from village to village for anyone engaging in disciplined life, as if they were honey: "until he had set eyes on the one he longed for and then when he had, so to speak, obtained the gift of honey" (10). The *Vita*, however, does not single out the sexual temptations that Anthony faced; it merely describes Anthony's battle with the "demon of fornication" (11-12) as a whole. The only explicit description of sexual temptation in the *Vita* was that the devil took upon the shape of a woman and imitated all her acts to beguile Anthony. Although the *Vita* connects Anthony's passion for ascetic practice with the imagery of bees and honey, it does not link the metaphor to chastity. Honey here represents all good virtues in Anthony's ascetic pursuance, of which bodily chastity is certainly one.

Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397), a famous bishop and devotee of virginity, had a *vita* connected to bees and honey according to legend.¹¹ The *Vita S. Ambrosii*, written in 422 reports, states how, one day, when Ambrose was merely a child, he was placed in a cradle in his father's courtyard and was asleep with his mouth open. "A swarm of bees suddenly approached and covered his face, so that they were continually flying in and out of his mouth." Although terrified, Ambrose's father thought the swarm of bees was an affirming sign of Ambrose's future. Paulinus, the biographer, comments that the miracle foretold Ambrose's eloquent writing and preaching (34-35). The authenticity of this event is difficult to determine, but Paulinus obviously chooses to introduce Ambrose's life via an intimate if somewhat chilling connection with honey and bees, an imagery that Ambrose used frequently in his writings. Ambrose compared the Church to a beehive. He believed that bees share everything in common with the Church, from their dwelling-place, food, activity, rewards, will, virginal chastity, to the limitations of their flight (VIII.12.67). Since not every member of the Church is a virgin, Ambrose's comparison does not have to be limited to virginity; it does point out the purity of bees, but it serves as a general illustration of how the Church works

¹⁰ There is a strong case against direct authorship by Athanasius of the *Life of St. Anthony*. See Barnes 353-68.

¹¹ Before being appointed bishop, Ambrose pursued a secular career and remained single. It appears that Ambrose, if not a virgin, certainly leaned toward celibacy. See Moorhead 21-23.

as a community to which everyone contributes.

In his other writings, however, a more idiosyncratic application of the metaphor is found. Between 377 and 385, Ambrose composed four texts on virginity, the first and longest being *De virginibus ad Marcellinam*, where a full connection between bees, honey, and chastity emerged.¹² In Book One, he elaborates on honeycombs in the Song of Songs and compares virgins to bees. He claims that the work of virgins is like a honeycomb, “for virginity is fit to be compared to bees, so laborious is it, so modest, so continent.” Also, “the bee feeds on dew, it knows no marriage couch, it makes honey” (35). Inner qualities of virginity such as diligence, modesty, and continence are addressed. According to Ambrose, these qualities are essential to building honeycombs and making honey. His entire analogy revolves around how virgins should imitate bees in their works and deeds. While dew or flowers symbolize divine words and Christ the Word, the product of their labor is honey, the fruit of the lips without bitterness, which abounds in sweetness—a reference to the preaching of the Word of God.¹³ Like working bees, virgins are encouraged to labor not for themselves but for others. Ambrose pays special attention to the lips and mouths of the bees in the metaphor, reminding virgins that they should use their mouths carefully.

The metaphor’s emphasis on the bees’ mouths echoes Ambrose’s other instructions in *De virginibus*. Ambrose believes that virginity requires not only a chaste body but also a proper demonstration of the virtue, modesty, and particularly on taciturnity (39).¹⁴ According to Ambrose, modesty is best demonstrated through bashful and, above all, silent behavior: “let virginity be first marked by the voice, let modesty [*pudor*] close the mouth” (39). At the heart of Ambrosian chastity, “it is not virginity [*virginitas*] which is bought at a price. . . . [T]he first victory of chastity [*castus*] is to conquer the desires of one’s own faculties, for the pursuit of gain is a temptation to modesty [*pudor*]” (82.3). In other words, Ambrose sees chastity as amenable to self-control, especially when speaking. His view shifts the focus of virginity from a passive, ascetic behavior to an active awareness of body and soul, and marks a major difference from other church

¹² *De virginibus* was a letter from Ambrose to his elder sister Marcellina in Rome, who was a consecrated virgin. It consists of three parts. The first part praises virginity, the second provides examples of virginal life, and the third offers practical advice for virgins.

¹³ It is common for biblical texts to compare the Word to something sweet. For example, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119.103). John, the author of the Apocalypse, also described his visionary experience of eating the little scroll: “it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter” (10.9).

¹⁴ Although some modern translators choose to translate *pudor* as “chastity” rather than “modesty,” I translate it as “modesty” because Ambrose often uses another word, “*castus*,” when referring specifically to physical sexual abstinence.

fathers preceding him. Ambrose's understanding of virginity is clearly reflected in his metaphor of honey and bees. To him, virgins and bees are connected not only by their asexuality but more acutely through their inner modesty. Instead of comparing bees to all virtue-seekers, Ambrose emphasizes the laboriousness of bees, affirming their correct use of their mouths to nurture others, making them a perfect example of virginal modesty. When the metaphor is read together with Ambrose's understanding of virginity and his enthusiasm for defining female asceticism, we can conclude that he purposefully shifted the metaphor in a more abstract direction.

Jerome (c. 347-420) is another significant figure among church fathers who advocated sexual renunciation. In his letter to Rusticus, Jerome advised the young monk of Toulouse to continue his spiritual pursuance in a monastic community. He compares the monastery to a beehive, with particular reference to order and obedience, and urges Rusticus to "construct also hives for bees, . . . learn from the tiny creatures how to organize a monastery and to discipline a kingdom" (124). Later in the letter, Jerome explains that bees only follow the order of one emperor; it is thus correspondingly better for Rusticus to settle in a monastery and put himself under the supervision of an abbot. He also claims that a monastic community is functionally similar to a beehive, for both promise companions and guidance on humility, patience, silence, and meekness (126-27).

Literally speaking, Jerome neither mentions bees' sexual status nor asks Rusticus to learn chastity by living in a "beehive." However, by stressing the similar social structures of a beehive and a monastery, in which members undividedly serve one leader, Jerome offers us another kind of chastity marked by spiritual fidelity. As his apian motif demonstrates, chastity equals an absolute loyalty to God, represented through the Ambrosian concept of virginal modesty: humility, silence, and meekness. Never letting go of these qualities, Jerome extends the metaphor to a feudal and communal aspect, suggesting that the pursuance of all kinds of virtue is never an individualistic practice but has to work within a communal setting, under the instruction of a leader. His announced need to be guided, taught, and confirmed by a father can be seen as a kind of behavioral chastity, which relies on communal surveillance for its nurture and enhancement. If we compare Jerome's view with the bee-like saint wanderer in the *Vita S. Antonii* and Ambrose's treatise, Jerome extends the meaning of virginal modesty by adding unconditional obedience as a trait of being chaste, while limiting the practice of this behavioral chastity to the monastic walls.

Jerome's contemporary and Ambrose's mentee, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who had enormous influence on the medieval perception of the body, did not use

the metaphor of honey and bees in a similar manner to his peers. The Aristotelian idea of bees' asexuality was, however, in Augustine's mind. In *De civitate dei* (*The City of God*), when he discusses the creatures inside Noah's ark, Augustine classifies the animals in terms of sexual reproduction:

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Some animals—such as flies—that are generated from various substances without mating but afterwards copulate to reproduce. And there are others—such as bees—in which there is no differentiation between the male and the female.¹⁵

According to Augustine's explanation, when the Scripture says, "they shall be male and female" in the ark (Gen. 6.19), God meant only species worthy of being restored. Therefore, species born out of corruption were not included in the ark. In *De bono conjugali* (*On the Good of Marriage*), Augustine makes a similar comment on the nature of bees and claims that God "was able to give offspring to the bees without any sexual union." In *De bono conjugali*, Augustine equates this to God's ability to form Christ's flesh in the womb of a virgin (33). By comparing apian procreation to the mystical Immaculate Conception, Augustine further advances the idea that bees are sinless because they lack sexual activity and desire; they are exempted from sin by keeping themselves away from the marriage bed. Compared with other Latin church fathers, Augustine's use of bees as a metaphor of virginity places more emphasis on sexuality. He does not mention any virtue of the bees that contributes to their stainlessness, nor does he believe there is any. This way of using the metaphor is in accord with his allegorical reading of other animals and insects. He simply perceives bees as a thing (*res*) which itself is an allegory of the mystery of virginity, and he understands them as an allegorical illustration rather than an example to imitate.¹⁶

Overall, since the fourth century the honey and bees motif continually evolved in relation to virginity. The Latin fathers' views on honey and bees were inherited from the Greco-Roman tradition, and the metaphor was therefore used positively. From Athanasius to Augustine, the metaphor acquired a more concrete explanatory power. It first referred to all ascetic training and then specifically to chastity and virginity. As seen in this section, the links between honey, bees, and chastity formed and developed in this period extended from a mere praise of bees' asexuality to allegorical interpretations of their labor, lives, and attitudes. The motif was

¹⁵ This is an obvious reference to Aristotle, *History of Animals* V.1 and Pliny, *Natural History*, XI.16.46, who records an opinion held by some that all bees are female except for the king of the hive.

¹⁶ On Augustine and his allegorical reading, see Teske 109-22; Stock 167-69.

used in association with the Church and monastic contexts in Christendom, and it was often edited and transformed to suit different authors' theological and contextual purposes. As we shall see, this association and contextual moderation will persist in the following era.

Honey and Bees as Metaphors of Chastity in Early Medieval Monasticism

Honey, Bees, and Chastity

By the year 400, virginity and celibacy had become dominant virtues in Christian society, while honey and bees continued to be used in popular references to chastity. Such metaphorical valences were further developed by various early medieval authors, particularly those with monastic backgrounds, and fully interacted with various cultural dynamics. Maximus of Turin (who died c. 408-423), a bishop and author of numerous speeches, compares bishops to bees in one of his homilies. "Like the bee," he said, bishops "produce delightful honey from the blossoms of the divine Scriptures, and whatever pertains to the medicine of souls they make by the skill of their mouth. They 'display bodily chastity, offer the bread of heavenly life, and exercise the sting of the law. For they are pure in order to sanctify, sweet in order to refresh, and severe in order to punish'" (364). By describing the bees' asexuality, Maximus suggests bodily continence as one of the basic traits for bishops to carry out their duties acutely. In Maximus's time, clerical celibacy was highly recommended, but not mandatory.¹⁷ With the beginning of the fifth century, a new form of the *vita religiosa*—the cloistered life of clerics—began to take shape. There were clerics who were not expected to live in a monastery but who deliberately retreated in the cloister and lived an ascetic life; however, they remained active in the secular world through pastoral care, mostly in the form of teaching and preaching.¹⁸ Maximus's description of bishops as comparable to bees is possibly an early image of ascetic clerics: the clerics who lived and roamed between the cloistered and secular worlds, nurturing souls through pastoral duties in which bodily chastity was seen as a prerequisite of successful teaching.

Besides representing the clergy, the honey and bees metaphor was also used to describe individuals and monastic rules. Venantius Fortunatus's (c. 530-609) poem *De virginitate* was addressed to Abbess Agnes (who died in 586) on the occasion of her ceremonial installation as abbess. The poem promotes the influ-

¹⁷ For discussion of celibacy in the early church, see especially Heid 170-98.

¹⁸ This shift unfolded long before the establishment of the Augustine order in the eleventh century. However, the influence of living according to a *vita canonical* started in the fifth century and endured over time. See Melville 10-11.

ence of the *Rule of Caesarius*, which provided a structural basis for female cenobitical monasticism. Given that the *Rule* drew upon established ascetical traditions in the East and West, Fortunatus describes its authors Caesarius of Arles (470-542) and his sister Caesaria as a “wise bee” (*docta apis*). The imagery in the verses 8.3 suggests that they sublimated the flowers of the existing ascetical traditions (37-42), in a comprehensive and discriminating manner, like an educated bee (47-52), and then passed the “honey” to Agnes’s foundation at Poitiers (81-84). Fortunatus’s depiction is also reminiscent of *Vita S. Antonii*; his usage of honey and bees, however, specifies the formation and passing down of the monastic inheritance.

In the seventh century, Aldhelm of Malmesbury (c. 639-710), first the abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne, took up this popular metaphor of honey and bees in his *Prosa de virginitate*, and became the most prolific writer who employed the apian metaphor in the early Middle Ages. *Prosa de virginitate* was a sixty-chapter treatise written for Abbess Hildelith (who died c. 725) and other nuns at Barking, Essex, in response to their request for a commentary on virginity.¹⁹ Similar to Jerome, Aldhelm highly appreciates the voluntary obedience of bees. He considers bees’ adherence to their assigned roaming boundary a “voluntary servitude” to their king and concludes that they “obey the command of their begetter and strive to fulfil the order of its king with great desire . . . because [it is] a symbol of unstained virginity” (61-63). The chastity of bees, according to Aldhelm, is reflected in their prominent submission and their eagerness to fulfil their duty of “roaming widely through the flowering fields of scripture” (61). While Ambrose mentions the laborious character of bees, he does not fully elaborate on the metaphorical meaning of bees’ work. Here, Aldhelm connects their labor with the Church’s duty to study and teach the Scripture. He describes how the bees roam with thirsty curiosity about the prophecy of the Savior, then scrutinize the histories of the two Testaments and examine the Scripture by means of its grammatical rules (62). In a surprisingly sexual description, Aldhelm asserts:

the bee, I say, by virtue of the special attribute of its peculiar chastity, . . . signif[ies] a type of virginity and the likeness of the Church: robbing the flowering fields of pastureland of an ineffable booty she produces her sweet family and children, innocent of the lascivious coupling of marriage, by means

¹⁹ Aldhelm’s *Prosa de virginitate* is an *opus geminatum* (a twinned pair of texts, one in verse, one in prose, treating the same subject) that covers the same subject in separate works of prose and verse. It is generally accepted that Aldhelm composed the prose before the verse *Carmen de virginitate*, as he twice mentions his prospective intention to provide a verse variation. My article will only focus on the prose version because there is no bee and honey imagery in the verse.

of a certain generative condensation of a very sweet juice [i.e., honey]; and in truth, the Church, striking vitally into the hearts of men with the double-keen sword-edge of the [two] Testaments, fertilizes through the chaste seed of the Word the offspring who are lawful heirs of eternity. (62)

Aldhelm compares the bees to the Church, for they are able to give birth to their offspring while remaining chaste, and both of them nourish their heirs by their collections—honey and the Word of God. Paradoxically, the virginity of the Church, as described by Aldhelm, is linked with the reproductivity of the Church, achieved through the penetration and fertilization of the Word. As Carol B. Pasternack notices, through the bee simile, Aldhelm represented a different understanding of reproduction, which is chaste and virginal but at the same time entails all the sensuality of heterosexual reproductivity (101-03). Aldhelm's elaboration of the honey and bees metaphor makes the Church the reproductive body, and faithful scriptural teaching and learning her yield. Chastity is hence highly related to the studious labor of scriptural learning, teaching, and preaching in Aldhelm's depiction.²⁰

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and Chastity**

Throughout his comprehensive use of honey and bee imagery, Aldhelm focuses his analysis on the bees' inner qualities, further directing us to another internal character of the chaste bee: studiousness. Aldhelm's use of the metaphor must be read together with his immediate context, especially the development of monasticism in the early English world. As Stephanie Hollis, Clare Less, and Gillian Overing have shown, when the supply of competent clergy was scarce in the seventh-century English kingdoms, numerous royal monastic women took up pastoral duties and energized the nascent churches by teaching, preaching, ministering baptism, and educating children.²¹ The connection between virginity and learning in Aldhelm's text echoes the prominent educational role monastic women played in his time. After all, the essence of virginity has also significantly shifted from an inner virtue to the actual labor of producing and instructing scriptural knowledge. Although the studiousness of bees was mentioned in *Vita S. Antonii* and some other literature, Aldhelm's metaphor points out the specific target of study; it clearly conjoins the bees' labor and the study of scriptural scholarship, rather

²⁰ Aldhelm also uses bees as the subject of his Riddle 20, where he comments that bees are "formed in wondrous way and engendered without seed." In the riddle, however, Aldhelm treats this as a general knowledge rather than a particular virtue (chastity) that bees possess. See *Aldhelmi Opera* 106.

²¹ Reading Aldhelm's treatise, one can confirm that Barking itself had a good library, to which Aldhelm referred his audience so they might read further on Ambrose's life. The nuns were probably highly educated too, as Aldhelm expected them to work on various Latin texts on their own. For more on women's role in the early English Church, see Hollis 243-70; Lees and Overing 15-39.

than the general activity of discovering and imitating excellent virtues from different people.²² As we shall see, the desire to collect, learn, and teach the divine Word soon became the defining quality of virginity in metaphors of honey and bees throughout the eighth century.

A continuous linkage between virginity and the learning of the Word is found in the honey and bee metaphor used to describe Boniface (c. 675-751), a leading figure in the English mission to the Frankish kingdom. Between 716 and 718, an English nun, Ecgburg (living c. 717) described her friendship with Boniface in a letter. Ecgburg highlighted the metaphorical sweetness of the Word being read and transmitted with Boniface's chastity, saying that she "tasted the bonds of your [Boniface's] affection," and that her "very inmost soul is filled with a sweetness as of honey" (13.18-19). Similarly, a letter sent by Abbess Eangyth and her daughter Heaburg mentioned Boniface's "blossoms of chastity" and "learning in doctrine" as "sweetness" when they recalled their friendship (14.21). They recount how keenly they wish to be fed by Boniface's words, "how sweet are thy words unto my taste, the sweetness of your words in my mouth exceeds that of honey and the honeycomb!"—quoting Psalm 119.103 (14.24). In both letters, the imagery of honey is used to refer to Boniface's pedagogical contributions to the nuns' monastic community. While virgins were expected to produce scholarship just as bees make honey, Boniface's teaching facilitates their learning duties and nourishes their yield.

Later, in *Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo*, Willibald (c. 700-787) also describes Boniface's contribution during his journey to Thuringia by means of the honey and bee metaphor:

Thus like the busy bee which, borne along by its softly buzzing wings, flits over fields and meadows and picks its way among a thousand different sweet-smelling flowers, testing with its discriminating tongue the secret hoards of honey bearing nectar and completely ignoring all bitter and poisonous juices, and then comes back with nectar to its hive and, to use an illustration from the words of the apostle, "test all things and hold on to what is good." (5.22-23)

Here, against the background of paganism in Thuringia, Willibald compares Boniface's labor to the bee's careful distillation of honey—he collects and delivers

²² Before Aldhelm, Caesarius of Arles likened the Church to a beehive because God's servants, like the bees who labor between flowers, are prudent in preparing divine words in their cells; he also describes their products as "sacred and heavenly honey." However, Caesarius does not connect their labor specifically to virginity. See Caesarius of Arles 831.

proper knowledge of God. Chastity appears in this passage as religious integrity, which is demonstrated by Boniface's "discriminating tongue" in service of God only, as compared to the clergy who were "contaminated and polluted by unchastity" and who had "forsaken the life of continence to which, as ministers of the altar, they were vowed" (5.23). From a slightly different aspect of chastity, the apian metaphor in the *Vita* ties chastity and teaching together through Boniface's labor and studiousness, understood as his arduous differentiating and preaching orthodox teachings. Studiousness, originally one of the inner qualities of chastity, now emerges as the defining trait of virtue in the metaphor. In *Hodoeporicon Sancti Willibaldi*, Willibald is described as a busy bee that flits through the meadows and returns to the hive with honey for his disciples (164). The text refers particularly to Willibald's exploration of other existent monastic rules before deciding to adopt the *Rule of Benedict*.

Since the seventh century, as we can see in Aldhelm's *prose de virginitate* and the lives of Boniface and Willibald, the metaphor of honey and bees was linked more closely with literacy and learning than ever. With a continued attention to inner virtue over physical bodies, studiousness emerged as the most significant trait of chastity in early medieval literature. Instead of learning and imitating virtues from experienced ascetics, early medieval monks and nuns were expected to learn from the Scripture; they were to copy and study texts earnestly, in a studious and supportive way as they spread the Word unto the ends of the earth. Since physical chastity is a passive virtue hard to demonstrate to others, it is perhaps easier to show one's chastity through piles of books, as the visible representation of a community's obedience to and desire of the Word of God.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth elucidating the transformation of the metaphor of honey and bees in the early medieval world. The significance of its semantic shifts and interpretations can be summed up in three directions. First, the apian simile gradually developed from a general reference to religious pursuit into a specific metaphor of chastity between the third and the eighth centuries. For the Latin church fathers, honey and bees were at first a metaphor referring to the passion of searching and imitating all kinds of ascetic behavior. Then, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine connected the metaphor specifically with chastity in their own ways. The imagery experienced a formative process thanks to these authors, who tended to frame it as a more specialized motif in connection to chastity. In the seventh century, Aldhelm compiled the fathers' views and formed a

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comprehensive comparison between the bees, virgins, and the virginal church. The metaphor was continuously well-received in later monastic literature, representing specific traits of virginity. Secondly, the metaphor was mainly employed to indicate the inner qualities of chastity. Through interpreting bees' deeds, early medieval authors explored their own concerns about what constitutes authentic chastity. Even though the simile of honey and bees itself remained similar over time, writers suggested different kinds of inner virtue referencing the chastity of the bees. For Ambrose the chastity of the bees (and thus the virgins) resides in their modest behaviors; for Jerome, it was loyalty; and for Aldhelm, it was obedience shown in studious scriptural learning. After Aldhelm, honey and bees were used particularly in praise of one's intellectual enthusiasm, featured as the most important virtue of chastity in the eighth century. Finally, the gradual development of the metaphor altogether reflects the changing expectations of monastic sanctity and a paradigm shift in learning culture. Although most authors discussed in this article understood the asexuality of bees as a prerequisite to make honey and agreed that virgins should be praised for their sexual abstinence, the notion of sexual abstinence was never a static idea in the early Middle Ages. As the interpretations of the honey and bees motif show, the emphasis on chastity as an individual ascetic practice was replaced by an increasing concern with virginal virtues. In the eighth century, chastity was largely perceived as faithfulness in biblical studies and the transmission of an orthodox monastic tradition, which were both tightly tied with the Church's maternal role toward the laity through endeavors in intellectual learning.

Notwithstanding a traditional "misunderstanding" of bees, honey and bees were one of the most popular metaphors of chastity throughout the course of the early medieval world. Like bees, virgins were chaste, laborious, and community-based; they were exalted for their nurturing the Church via their "honey." Overall, honey and bees are a felicitous metaphor that illustrates the abstract and complex concept of chastity. And, as we have seen, neither the metaphor nor chastity remained static. Authors employed this metaphor in their own ways and, by doing so, reinterpreted chastity in their own time.

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