3. Texts, authority and identities
Shaping authority and identity:
Saint Antony and his followers in early monastic texts

"It happened that temptation fell upon a brother in the monastery of abbot Elias, and they sent him away: and he came to the mountain, to abbot Antony. After he had been with him for some time, Antony sent him back to the community whence he had come out. But when they saw him, again they sent him away: and again he made his way to the abbot Antony, saying, ‘they would not receive me, Father’. Then the old man sent to them, saying, ‘A ship was wrecked at sea, and lost all the cargo that it carried, and with hard toil was the empty ship brought at last to land. Is it your wish to sink on land the ship that had come safe from sea?’ And they recognised that it was the abbot Antony who had sent him back and straightaway they took him in."

This little story is illustrative of the status Antony achieved in late Antiquity: his opinions or answers were binding. His sayings were remembered by his fellow hermits and used when instructing their own pupils (hoc enim dicebat beatus Antonius). Together with Paul of Thebes, Hilarion, Benedict and Martin of Tours he is the most appealing saint of late antiquity. Throughout the middle ages Antony remained one of the most authoritative and exemplary desert fathers. His sayings were incorporated in a lot of monastic and theological works and his life was regarded as exemplary. To quote Athanasius of Alexandria in the preface to his famous Vita Antonii: “to know who Antony was offers us the perfect path to virtue”. But who was Antony? Why did he become so important and how describe contemporary authors his authority? To what extent was his name used to increase the credibility and underline the identity of his pupils and contemporaries? Are there also negative views on Antony and if so, how were they received?

The answers to these questions can be found in several late antique texts. Athanasius’ Vita Antonii may be the oldest and longest written account, it is not the only source about Antony. Other texts, all belonging to the so called Vitae Patrum-collections, inform us even better about the way Antony was looked at. The exact contents of these collections differ from time to time and from region to region, but until the seventh century they almost exclusively contained the vitae and sayings of Pelagius and John, Adhortationes sanctorum patrum ad profectum perfectionis monachorum 9, 1, in: Vitae patrum, De vita et verbis seniorum libri X, historian eremiticam complectens VII (ed. Heribert Rosweyde, Anvers 1628), repr. in PL 73, 851–1024, at 909; (transl. Helen Waddell, The Desert Fathers, London 1977) 81–185, at 135. For example: Paschasius of Dumio, Liber Geronticon de octo principalibus vitis (A versão latina por Pascásio de Dume dos Apophthegmata patrum) XXXII, 7 (ed. José Geraldes Freire, 2 vols., Coímbra 1971) 216.


nings of the early Christian desert fathers. Most of the texts of the early Vitas patrum-tradition were originally written in Greek and afterwards translated into Latin. This article focuses on this Latin tradition. The historical credibility of the texts or the relationship between these texts and their Greek originals (if applicable) will not be discussed, as these two aspects do not play a role in their reception history of Antony’s philosophy and the way in which he is portrayed. Before trying to answer the questions asked above, the sources used in this article will be briefly introduced.

**SOURCES – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

All texts concerning Antony were written down after his death in 356. A lot of them include oral traditions that already existed during Antony’s life or came into circulation shortly after the desert father passed away. Therefore it is possible to compare the views on Antony in these texts with each other, although some of them were written down several decades after Antony’s death. The Vitas patrum-texts can be divided into three groups:

- **Vitae:** The Vita Antonii, written in Greek by Athanasius of Alexandria shortly after Antony’s death in 356, is the most famous and exhaustive source for Antony’s life. In writing the Vita Antonii Athanasius did not have the intention to be completely objective. He used this hagiographical form and the saint to ventilate much of his own -especially anti-Arian- theology. The text was translated into Latin twice. A first -anonymous- translation was made shortly after Athanasius finished his Greek original. Only one complete copy of this translation survived. The second translation was made by Evagrius of Antioch in 373. His translation became very popular in the medieval west: the text has been handed down in hundreds of manuscripts. Evagrius did not intend to make a literal translation. On many occasions Evagrius interfered with the contents of the Greek original. He included quotes from great classical authors and often altered Antony’s ideas about the tricks of the devil and the way in which the devil can be defeated.

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5 Eva Schulz-Flügel, Zur Entstehung der Corpora Vitae patrum, in: Studia Patristica 0 (Leuven 989) 89–300. This article gives an overview of the history of Vitas patrum from the fifth until the ninth century. From the seventh century – and especially from the ninth century – onwards the contents of Vitas patrum have been extended several times. A preliminary overview of the history of Vitas patrum from the fourth until the sixteenth century is part of my dissertation.

6 See for more information: Athanase d’Alexandrie, Vie d’Antoine (ed. Gerard Bartelink, SC 00, Paris 994). This edition gives an detailed introduction to the subject and includes an exhaustive list of literature.


8 The anonymous Latin translation has been edited three times. The last edition appeared in 97: Athanasius Alexandrinus, Vita di Antonio (ed. Gerard Bartelink, Vite dei Santi 1, Roma 97). See this edition for the earlier editions and literature on this translation.

9 Hardly any work has been done yet on this translation. In 005 I have finished a dissertation on the reception history and the manuscript tradition of this translation, including a new edition. The complete text is available at: http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/dissertations/2006-0221-200251/index.htm. A commercial edition is in preparation.

10 Athanasius, Vita Antonii, prologus Evagrii, ed. Bertrand 60: *Ex alia in aliam linguam ad verbum expressa translatio, sensus operit et veluti laeto gramine sata strangulat. Dum enim casibus et figuris seruit oratio, quod breui poterat indicare sermone, longo ambitu circumacta uix explicat. Hoc igitur ego uitans ita beatum Antonium te petente transposui, ut nihil desit ex sensu, cum aliquid desit ex uerbis. Alii syllabas aucupent et litteras, tu quaere sententiam.* (The life of Antony, transl. White 7: "A litteral translation made from one language to another conceals the meaning, like rampant grasses which suffocate the crops. As long as the text keeps to the cases and turns of phrase, it is forced to move in an indirect way by means of lengthy circumlocutions, and it finds it hard to give a clear account of something which could be succinctly expressed. I have tried to avoid this in translating, as you requested, the life of the blessed Antony, and I have translated in such a way that nothing should be lacking from the sense although something may be missing from the words. Some people try to capture the syllables and letters, but you must seek the meaning").

Next to the Vita Antonii the saint plays an important role in two vitae written by Jerome: the Vita Pauli (written in 373) and the Vita Hilarionis (written in 391). These two vitae will be discussed at the end of this article.

- Historiae: The historiae present short descriptions of the lives and sayings of the desert fathers in the form of an eyewitness report. Very often these reports contain stories about other saints (including Antony) told by these fathers. For many hermits these historiae are the only sources about their lives. Only two texts belong to this group: the Historia monachorum in Aegypto and the Historia Lausiaca. The Historia monachorum in Aegypto was written in Greek in the second half of the fourth century by an anonymous author. In circa 395 Tyrannius Rufinus of Aquileia made a translation into Latin. The Historia monachorum describes a journey made by seven monks from Palestine through Egypt to visit the desert fathers living there. The text describes 28 fathers and three monastic settlements.

The Historia Lausiaca was written in circa 420 in Greek by Palladius of Heleneopolis. Palladius (circa 363–431) was an Egyptian monk. He wrote his account of desert monasticism for Lausus, a chamberlain at the court of the eastern Roman emperor Theodosius II. In his work he describes about sixty ascetics. His information is based on his own experience, on conversations he had with other monks and on writings of others, including the Vita Antonii. Palladius’ text has been handed down in a long and a shortened version. The shortened version is known as Heraclidis Paradisus and is wrongly attributed to Heraclides Alexandrinus. Both versions were translated into Latin by anonymous translators: the long version in the fifth century, the shortened some decades later. For the larger part the historiae contain information about Antony and his pupils that cannot be found in the vita.

- Collections of Sayings: Next to these vitae and historiae several collections of sayings exist. Most of the time these sayings are very short and contain only a sentence of a father or an answer to a question. Sometimes the sayings developed into little stories. An example of this last kind of Saying can be found at the beginning of this article. Almost all Sayings contain lessons in humility, persistence, obedience, nutrition, prayer, demons, forgiveness etc. The Greek originals mostly depend on oral traditions and were probably written down in the fifth century. In the second half of the sixth century several Greek collections were translated into Latin. These collections of sayings contain important information about the way Antony was looked at and the way in which others used his name. There are four important Latin collections of Sayings:

The Adhortationes sanctorum patrum ad profectum perfectionis monachorum, translated by pope Pelagius I and pope John III, between 540 and 555. This collection contains over 750 sayings.


15 For more information about the Greek tradition: Jean-Claude Guy, Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata patrum (Subsidia Hagiographica 36, Bruxelles 1962).

16 Pelagius and John, Adhortationes, ed. Rosweyde (see note 1). Rosweyde’s edition is corrupted and incomplete. Columbia Battle, ‘Vetara Nova’. Vorläufige kritische Ausgabe bei Rosweyde fehlernder Väter sprüche, in: Festschrift Bernhard Bischoff zu seinem 65. Geburtstag dargebracht von Freundem, Kollegen und Schulern, ed. Johanne Autenrieth/Franz Brunhödl (Stuttgart 1971) 32–42. has published some missing sayings; see also Battle’s study about this collection of
About 556 Paschasius of Dumio made a new translation of sayings at the request of Martinus of Braga. Paschasius’ collection (the Liber geronticon de octo principalibus vitiiis) contains 358 sayings.

Around the same time as Paschasius, Martinus of Braga himself translated 109 sayings in his Sententiae patrum Aegyptiorum.17

The anonymous Commonitiones sanctorum patrum, translated in the sixth century by an anonymous author, is the last large collection of sayings. The Greek original of this collection is lost.18

SHAPING AUTHORITY

Antony’s extraordinary way of life and his persistence was one of the reasons for the high status he got in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In his Vita Antonii, Athanasius tried very hard to show Antony’s outstanding virtues and perseverance. At the beginning of the text Athanasius describes how Antony became a pupil of several ascetics: ‘He obeyed all those whom he visited in his eagerness to learn and absorbed their various individual gifts – striving to imitate the self-restraint of one, the cheerfulness of another; emulating the gentleness of one, the nocturnal devotions of another; admiring one who fasted, another who slept on the bare ground and praising the endurance of one and the compassion of another. He kept in mind the love they all showed one another and he would return to his own place refreshed by every aspect of their virtues. There he would think all these things over and strive to imitate the good points of each of them. He was never provoked to anger, not even against those of the same age: the only fire that burned in the heart of that exceptional man was that of his determination to appear second to none in the deeds I have mentioned’. Athanasius presents Antony as the most important hermit of all: ‘he surpassed all other in glory’.19

The Vita Antonii contains the main outlines of Antony’s way of life and his teaching: live a life according to Scripture (especially the Gospels), trust your life completely to God’s hands, do not care for earthly wealth or pleasures, be patient, forgiving, obedient and sympathetic, always try to improve yourself, be aware of the never-ending attacks and tricks of the devil and above all: be persistent. Although Athanasius did not write an objective vita and has often inserted his own ideas about asceticism, these ideas can also be found in the sayings attributed to Antony. As mentioned before, the sayings do not depend on Athanasius’ text. However, these ideas are not new: they derive from sayings: Columba Battle, Die Adhortationes sanctorum patrum (Verba seniorum) im lateinischen Mittelalter (Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinerordens 31, Münster 1972).

17 The collections of Paschasius and Martinus have been handed down in a longer and a shortened version. Editions: Paschasius of Dumio, Geronticon, ed. Freire [= long version]; Paschasius Diaconus, Verba seniorum, in: Vitae patrum. De vita et verbi seniorum libri X historiam eremiticam completens VII (ed. Heribert Rosweyde, Anvers 1628), repr. in PL 73, 1025–1066 [= shortened version]; Martinus of Braga, Aegyptiorum patrum sententiae (ed. Claude Barlow, Martini Episcopi Bracarensis Opera Omnia, New Haven 1950) [= long version]; Martinus of Braga, Aegyptiorum patrum sententiae, in: Vitae patrum. De vita et verbi seniorum libri X historiam eremiticam completens. Appendix ad Vitas patrum (ed. Heribert Rosweyde, Anvers 1628), repr. in PL 74, 381–394 [= shortened version]. In this article only the complete versions are used.

18 Commonitiones sanctorum patrum. Uma nova colecção de apotegmas (ed. José Geraldes Freire, Coimbra 1974). In the tenth century a new large collection of sayings came into circulation, attributed to Rufinus. This collection does not contain new material, but is completely based on the Commonitiones sanctorum patrum, the Geronticon of Paschasius of Dumio and a letter of Jerome. The collection of Pseudo-Rufinus has been edited by Heribert Rosweyde: Vitae patrum. De vita et verbi seniorum libri X historiam eremiticam completens III (ed. Heribert Rosweyde, Anvers 1628), repr. in PL 73, 739–814; see for a short description of this collection: José Geraldes Freire, Traductions latines des Apophthegmata patrum, in: Mélanges Christine Mohrmann. Nouveau Recueil offert par ses anciens élèves, ed. Joseph Yseaerb et al. (Utrecht 1973) 164–171, at 166–167. In this article Freire also discusses some other smaller collections of sayings. In these collections Antony is not mentioned, apart from the so called ‘Appendix’, a small collection of sayings that Rosweyde wrongly inserted as part of his Palladii Lausiaca = Vitae patrum. De vita et verbi seniorum libri X historiam eremiticam completens. Appendix 2, 20, in: Vitae patrum. De vita et verbi seniorum libri X historiam eremiticam completens. Appendix II ad Vitas patrum (ed. Heribert Rosweyde, Anvers 1628), repr. in PL 74, 377–382. The ‘Appendix’ contains one saying of Antony, PL 74, 380.

asceticism, stoicism and the via apostolica and they had already existed long before Antony was even born.\textsuperscript{20} These philosophies were not reserved to Antony, but they were practised by all the desert fathers; the Vitas patrum contain numerous stories and sayings from different desert monks in which these ways of life have been incorporated. Apparently Antony’s philosophy and sayings were important not only because of their contents, but because of the fact that they were his. This authority is not only based on the fame Antony got by Athanasius’ vita.

From the early tradition of the Vitas patrum it is clear that already in the fourth and fifth century Antony was regarded to be the most important desert father of all. A first indication of Antony’s special status can be derived from the honorary titles he received. The Historia Lausiaca refers to him as ille magnus Antonius.\textsuperscript{21} Although the title ‘magnus’ is also used to denote other important desert fathers, Antony is the most important of them being the ‘father of monasticism’ (Sanctus ac beatissimus Antonius, verus in Christo pater monachorum). The reason for this title is described in the Vita Antonii: although Antony was not the first Christian ascetic, he was the first one to found Christian communities in the desert.\textsuperscript{22} In the reception history of Antony this aspect plays an important role: Paul of Thebes is venerated as the first christian hermit that lived in the desert. Antony is regarded the first one to build monasteries and instruct pupils there.\textsuperscript{23}

Antony’s way of life was a measuring rod for his fellow hermits and pupils. According to the Vita he surpassed his fellow hermits in the austere way in which lived his life: “He decided therefore to impose upon himself the constraints of a more rigorous rule of life and even though everyone was amazed at this young man’s untiring dedication, he patiently endured the holy endeavour, because the long-term exertion of voluntary servitude to God would transform habit into nature.”\textsuperscript{5} Although it is possible that Athanasius exaggerated Antony’s virtues for the benefit of his beloved subject, it is clear that Antony’s way of living, his degree of perfection and his successful struggle with the demons were very important elements of his authority and veneration. Examples of this can also be found outside the Vita Antonii, for example in the Geronticon of Paschusius of Dumio and the anonymous Commonitiones sanctorum patrum.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} A large part of Antony’s sayings contain elements of these philosophies. See for example Pelagius and John, Adhortationes 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8; Saulo, De institutione divinarum litterarum \textsuperscript{21} Paul Mynors, Oxford 1993, repr. with corrections of the edition Oxford 1937) ; Pseudo-Augustin, Ad fratres in eremo com
\item \textsuperscript{21} For example: Isidor of Sevilla, Chronicon (ed. Theodor Mommssen, MGH AA 9, Berlin 1894) 240–488, at 463: Decius regnat anno I. Haue temporibus sanctus Antonius monachus in Aegyo docetur eortus, a quo primum monasteria condita sunt; Harbanus Maurus, Martyrologium (ed. John McCulloh, CC CM 44, Turnhout 1979) 1–161, at 8; Natale Pauli priim
\item \textsuperscript{22} Cf. Conrad Leyser, Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great (Oxford 2000) 8f.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Cf. Conrad Leyser, Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great (Oxford 2000) 8f.
\item \textsuperscript{24} For example: Isidor of Sevilla, Chronicon (ed. Theodor Mommssen, MGH AA 9, Berlin 1894) 240–488, at 463: Decius regnat anno I. Haue temporibus sanctus Antonius monachus in Aegyo docetur eortus, a quo primum monasteria condita sunt; Harbanus Maurus, Martyrologium (ed. John McCulloh, CC CM 44, Turnhout 1979) 1–161, at 8; Natale Pauli primi
\item \textsuperscript{25} Athanasius, Vita Antonii 7, ed. Bertrand 162f.; The life of Antony 7, transl. White 13.
\item \textsuperscript{26} For example: Paschusius, Geronticon 31, 4, ed. Freire 212; Pelagius and John, Adhortationes 7, 34, PL 73, 591; Paschasius, Geronticon 32, 2, ed. Freire 214; See also Pelagius and John, Adhortationes XVII, 3, PL 73, 973; Commonitiones V, 8, ed. Freire 389.
\end{itemize}
There are only two desert fathers that equal Antony: Paul the Simple and Hilariion. Both desert fathers were pupils of Antony. It seems that the presentation of Hilariion by Jerome is coloured by political motives. The Vita Hilariionis will be discussed at the end of this article. Paul the Simple is described as being mentally retarded, but completely humble, obedient, forgiving and patient. After he caught his wife in adultery, he left her and wanted to be a monk. So he went to Antony. After a while Paul even obtained the power to drive out demons, which was put to the test by Antony. The following story, taken from the Historia Lausiaca, illustrates Paul’s extraordinary status in relation to Antony. One day a demoniac was brought to Antony: “So Antony, having examined him, said to those who brought him: ‘this is not my work, for I have not yet been counted worthy of power over this order of high rank, but this is Paul’s business’. So Antony went off and led them to Paul, and said to him: ‘Father Paul, cast out this demon from the man that he may go away cured to his home’. Paul said to him: ‘What are you doing?’ Antony said to him: ‘I have no leisure. I have something else to do.’ And Antony left him and went again to his own cell. So the old man got up, and having prayed an effective prayer, addressed the demoniac: ‘Father Antony has said: ‘Go out from the man’’. But the demon cried out, saying with blasphemies: ‘I am not going out, bad old man’. So Paul took his sheepskin coat and struck the man on the back with it saying: ‘Father Antony has said, ‘Go out’. Again the demon cursed with some violence both Antony and him. Finally he said to him: ‘You are going out; or else I’ll go and tell Christ. By Jesus, if you don’t go out I am going this very minute to tell Christ, and He will do you harm …’”. The demon still refused to go. Only after Paul had sworn to Jesus that he would not leave, drink or eat until He helped him, the demon fled, crying: “O Violence! I am being driven away. The simplicity of Paul drives me away, and where am I to go?”

In this case -and only this case- a pupil excelled his teacher: the demon was not driven away by Antony or by his name, but by Paul’s simplicity.

SHAPING IDENTITY

The authors of the Historia monachorum and the Historia Lausiaca often declare that they have met pupils or contemporaries of Antony. These references can be interpreted as geographic indications or as indicating a time frame (the fathers lived in the same area and in approximately the same time as Antony did). Especially Palladios, the author of the Historia Lausiaca, was very keen to mention that some hermits he talked to were pupils of Antony, or at least known to him. Palladios tells a story about Jacob who was also known under the name Claudus. The author states that this fact is true, as Antony knew both names: Fuit autem is quoque notus beato Antonio. According to Palladios, Isidore told a story that he once heard of Antony: “Blessed Isidore the xenodochus told me that he had met the blessed Antony and heard from him a story worthy of being put into writing”.

The same goes for a story told by Cronius (Hoc quoque narravit Cronius illa nocte magnum eis narasse Antonium).30

Mentioning Antony’s name not only increases the status of his pupils and contemporaries and the credibility of the story told, there is a more important reason to mention his name: it links his pupils, contemporaries and successors together. Antony’s name is an important addition as it emphasizes their identity: it indicates that originally they all belong (or want to belong) to the same spiritual community founded by Antony. This link to Antony’s spirituality and his community is especially

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28 Palladios, Historia Lausiaca XII, PL 74, 289.
30 Palladios, Historia Lausiaca IX, PL 74, 283. There is a similar example in Pelagius and John, Adhortationes I, 11, PL 73, 856: sed lamen audivi quia interrogavit eos Parum abbatem Nisterom in magnum, qui erat amicus abbatis Antonii.
31 Rufinus, Historia monachorum VIII, 2; XXV, 5, 2; XXVI, 6, 1; XXVIII, 1, 1–2; XXXI, ed. Schulz-Flügel 333, 362, 363, 365, 378–382; Palladios, Historia Lausiaca II and X, PL 74, 259–260 and 284–287; Commonitiones V, 2, ed. Freire
important for his successors. In his Historia Lausiaca, Palladios explicitly connects two desert fathers to Antony. According to him Antony was first succeeded by Ammon, who – in his turn – was succeeded by Pitryion (tertius qui illum locum exceptit). A similar example can be found in connection to the mountain on which Antony spent a large part of his life. It would always carry his name, as a geographical specification. 

For one father in particular this mountain had a special meaning: Sisoius. When Sisoius heard that Antony had passed away, he came to live on Antony’s mountain. The mountain almost became his middle name: “Sisoius, living on Antony’s mountain”, “A certain father came to Sisoius when he was living on Antony’s mountain” and so on. 

Sisoius is presented as a heir of Antony’s authority; he is identified with him. Just as visitors came to Antony ‘on his mountain’, they now came to Sisoius ‘living on Antony’s mountain’. According to the Vita Antonii, Antony saw the spirit of Amon when this great desert father had passed away. 

In the Vita Pauli (see below), Antony saw how a choir of angels, prophets and apostles, accompanies the spirit of Paul of Thebes to heaven. When Sisoius was going to die he saw the spirit of Antony, the prophets and a choir of angels who were going to accompany him. Sisoius was almost presented as a second Antony. Almost: according to Sisoius himself he was not nearly as perfect as his predecessor: “A brother came to Abba Sisois in Abba Antony’s mountain and in the course of conversation he asked: ‘Do you think you have now arrived where Abba Antony got to, father?’ And he replied: ‘If even one of my thoughts were like those of Abba Antony I would by now have become like fire all through.’” Although his pupils and successors are closely connected to him, Antony stayed the most perfect and most important desert father of all.

RESTORING AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY:
JEROME AND HIS VITA HILARIONIS

This inviolable status Antony achieved also played an important role in the reception history of the Vita Pauli. Jerome wrote this vita between 373 and 378. The text describes a visit Antony paid to Paul of Thebes who – according to Jerome – was the first Christian hermit. Jerome claims that he heard the story from Amathas and Macarius who assisted Antony in his old age. As Antony’s life had already been written down in Greek and Latin, Jerome decided to write the Life of Paul. The Vita Pauli gives a very negative view on Antony. According to this text Antony thought he was the only hermit in the desert. In the manuscript tradition of the Vita Pauli this part of the text has sometimes been changed: Antony does not think he is the only hermit, but he believes to be the best hermit there is. There has been scholarly debate about the original text by Jerome. The punishment by God, showing Antony there is another hermit who in fact is better than he is, allows both variants. Nevertheless, they both put Antony in the wrong. In writing this vita Jerome tried to surpass the success of Athanasius’ work.
The Vita Pauli tells us that when Paul was one hundred and thirteen years old, the ninety-year-old Antony was living in another part of the desert. It occurred to Antony that there was no other (or better) monk in the desert. But during the night God revealed to him that there was another monk in the desert who was better than himself: Paul of Thebes. God wanted Antony to pay Paul a visit. After a long and dangerous journey, Antony reached Paul’s cell. Paul however was not prepared to let him in straightaway: “Then Antony fell down in front of this door and continued to beg to be allowed in until it was the sixth hour of the day or even later, saying, ‘You know who I am, where I come from and why I have come. I know that I do not deserve to see you but I will not go away unless I do. Why do you, who welcome animals, drive a person away? I have sought you and I have found you: I knock that it may be opened to me. If I do not get what I want, I shall die here in front of your door – and I trust you will bury my body when I am dead’.” Finally Paul let him in and they had supper. When Paul feeled that he was going to die he sent Antony back to his cell to catch a cloak Antony got from Athanasius in order to bury Paul’s body in it. When his pupils asked him where he had been all that time, Antony answered: “Alas for me, sinner that I am. It is dishonest of me to call myself a monk. I have seen Elijah, I have seen John in the desert and now I have seen Paul in Paradise”. After Paul’s death Antony “returned to the monastery and gave the disciples a detailed account of all that happened, and on the feast days of Easter and Pentecost he always wore Paul’s tunic”.

Some twenty years after he finished the Vita Pauli, Jerome wrote his Vita Hilarionis. In the prologue to this Vita Jerome says: “That is why, in taking up the work begun by Epiphanius I do him a service rather than any harm and I disregard what the critics say of it, for those who earlier found fault with my life of Paul will now perhaps also find fault with my life of Hilarion. If they criticize Paul for his solitude, they will criticize Hilarion for his sociability, believing that because Paul always remained out of sight he did not exist and because Hilarion was seen by many he should be regarded as of no importance”. However, the lack of historical reliability in the Vita Pauli does not seem to be the real reason for the criticism Jerome encountered. Most medieval chronicles and martyrologies refer to Paul of Thebes, without question. Monastic texts mostly mention both Paul as well as Antony as being the great examples for Christian life.

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39 Hieronymus, Vita Pauli 13, ed. Hunink 21; transl. White 82.
42 For example: Hrbabanus Maurus, Martyrologium (see note 24); Prosper Tiro, Epitoma Chronicon (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 9, Berlin 1892) 341–446, at 455; Antonius monachus centesimo anno in heremo moritur, solitus multis ad se venientibus de Paulo qodam Thebeo mirae beatitudinis viro referre complura; Florus, Martyrologium (ed. Jacques Dubois/Genevieve Renaud, Paris 1976) 11: Natale Pauli primi eremitarum: qui a sexto decimo anno usque ad centesimum tertium decimum solus in creno permanit: cuius animam inter apostolorum et prophetarum choros ad caelum ferri ab angelis Antonius vidit.
never been an issue, although besides Jerome’s Vita Pauli no references to Paul can be found in late antique texts.

In view of the structure and contents of the Vita Hilarionis it is quite obvious that Jerome used the Vita Antonii as an example. Just like Antony, Hilarion gave all his property to the poor after his parents died, he was attacked by demons, he performed miracles, he had to sustain numerous temptations by demons who appear to him in the shape of women, children and animals, he chased away serpents and other poisonous animals and so on. And when God revealed to Hilarion that the Arians will overturn the Church, it is almost an echo of the words used by Athanasius in his Vita Antonii. It is very unlikely Jerome copied the structure of the Vita Antonii only because of pure admiration. As Jerome stated himself in the prologue to the Vita Pauli, he already knew the Vita Antonii: the Vita Antonii is the reason why he wrote his Vita Pauli. So if he had wanted to imitate the Life of Antony, he would have structured the vitae he wrote earlier – the Vita Pauli and the Vita Malchi – in the same way. There must be another reason for this change of style.

In comparing the contents of the Vita Hilarionis with the Vita Pauli it is striking to notice the positive way in which Antony has been portrayed: Antony was Hilarion’s great example, and Hilarion was his disciple for a while: “When he came to hear of the famous name of Antony which was talked about by all people of Egypt, he was fired with a desire to see him and so he set off for the desert. As soon as he saw him, he changed the garment he had been wearing and remained with Antony for about two months, studying the routine of his life and the austerity of his behaviour. Hilarion was amazed by how frequently he prayed, how humble he was in welcoming the brothers, how severe he was in rebuke, how keen to encourage! No weakness ever caused him to break his rule of continence of give up his coarse diet.” Just like Antony he sells all his property after his parents have died and decides to commit his life to God. Dressed in the clothes he got from Antony he goes to live in the desert. In time Hilarion equals Antony, as the following example shows. One day a mother came to Hilarion. Together with her family she paid a visit to Antony, but on their way back her children had fallen ill. She asked Hilarion to save her children saying: “May those whom Antony kept safe in Egypt be saved by you in Syria”. After Hilarion cured the children the text concludes “When this incident became known the news of it spread far and wide, people came flocking to him eagerly from Syria and Egypt, and as a result many came to believe in Christ and adopted the monastic way of life. For at that time there were as yet no monasteries in Palestine nor had anyone in Syria previously known a monk before St. Hilarion. He was the founder and teacher of this way of life and this discipline in that province. The Lord Jesus had the elderly Antony in Egypt and in Palestine he had the youthful Hilarion”. After Hilarion spent several years in the desert performing all kinds of miracles Jerome writes: “I would run out of time if I were to relate all the miracles Hilarion performed. For the Lord raised him to such great glory, that even blesses Antony, hearing of his way of life, wrote to him and received his letters gladly. And if ever exhausted visitors came to Antony from the regions of Syria, he would say to them, ‘Why did you want to put yourselves to the trouble of such a long journey when you have my son Hilarion near you?” When Antony died, Hilarion was informed about this in a vision, and, in tears, informed a woman who wished to pay Antony a visit
of his death: “But today it is two days since the whole world was bereaved of such a father”.

After Antony’s death Hilarion is portrayed as Antony’s successor: “The skies had not opened for three years, causing those regions to become parched: people said that even the elements were mourning the death of Antony. The inhabitants of that place also got to hear of Hilarion’s reputation: men and women, pale-faced and with bodies emaciated with hunger, earnestly entreated this servant of Christ, as the blessed Antony’s successor, to bring rain. When he saw them he was terribly upset. Raising his eyes to heaven and lifting both hands on high, he instantly obtained what they desired”.

In view of the structure of the Vita Hilarionis and the extreme positive way in which Jerome describes Antony, it seems that lack of historical reliability in the Vita Pauli was not the real (or at least not the only) cause for criticism, but the negative way in which Jerome had portrayed Antony. Evidence for this assumption can be found in the reception history of the Vita Pauli. In the Latin text tradition Antony’s idea of being the best hermit has often been changed into the idea that he believes he is the only hermit in the desert.

In the tenth century an adaptation of the Vita Pauli was written: the Legend of Patras. This story can be divided into two parts: a new story about Antony followed by an adaption of the Vita Pauli. The first part of the Legend of Patras gives the reason why Antony becomes convinced that he is the best hermit: he founded several monasteries and he was the leader of the largest amount of monks. The second part of the text, the adaptation of the Vita Pauli, follows the text written by Jerome, but here the humiliation Antony has to sustain before Paul’s door is shortened dramatically: the text only mentions that Paul at first was reluctant to open his door, because he was frightened by a noise he has heard. When Paul understood that the noise was made by Antony, he let him in immediately. However, Paul knew about Antony’s pride and he admonished him. Nevertheless the Legend of Patras tries to present Antony as Paul’s superior.

Contrary to the Vita Pauli, Antony performed a miracle: by his prayers Agathon, a monk that was turned into a satyr because he sinned with a deer, was restored. Neither the Vita Pauli nor the Legend of Patras contain miracles performed by Paul. The text concludes with the remark that Antony stayed to live in Paul’s cell dressed in Paul’s tunic and that he was the first one to build a monastery in that land (*ipse vero fecit primum monasterium in terram illam*).

It seems that the Vita Hilarionis was not only written as a biography of Hilarion, but also as a rehabilitation of Antony and a public excuse for Jerome. Apparently the public of the Vita Pauli did not accept a negative story about Antony. In writing his Vita Hilarionis, Jerome not only restored Antony’s reputation, he also joined the general opinion on Antony’s authority and virtues. But this is not all. Jerome used these issues also to Hilarion’s advantage. As he portrayed Hilarion as Antony’s pupil, equal and heir, a negative portray of Antony would also harm Hilarion’s reputation. This is also a reason to give a very positive depiction of Antony. There was however no reason to link these two desert fathers in the way Jerome did or to follow the structure of the Vita Antonii. Jerome’s narrative technique in the Vita Hilarionis, his descriptions of the saints’ reputations and their relationship seem to be inspired by the negative reactions to his Vita Pauli.

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50 *Vita Pauli*, PL 22, 22, note i.
CONCLUSION

From the late antique texts it is clear that Antony attained a very special status. His sayings were authoritative, not only because of their contents, but especially because they were his. He was the most important desert father of all, the pater monachorum. Antony’s way of life became exemplary. It was a measuring rod for his fellow hermits and pupils. Negative stories about Antony were unacceptable: Antony’s authority, piety and faultlessness are presented as being perfect and they were beyond all doubt and criticism. His pupils and contemporaries are often associated with him; it increased their own status and emphasized their identity as members of Antony’s spiritual community. According to Athanasius of Alexandria knowing “who Antony was offers us the perfect path to virtue”. Antony’s life and virtues became the most important lesson his pupils and contemporaries could learn. Do you want to know how to be good? Live your life just like Antony did.