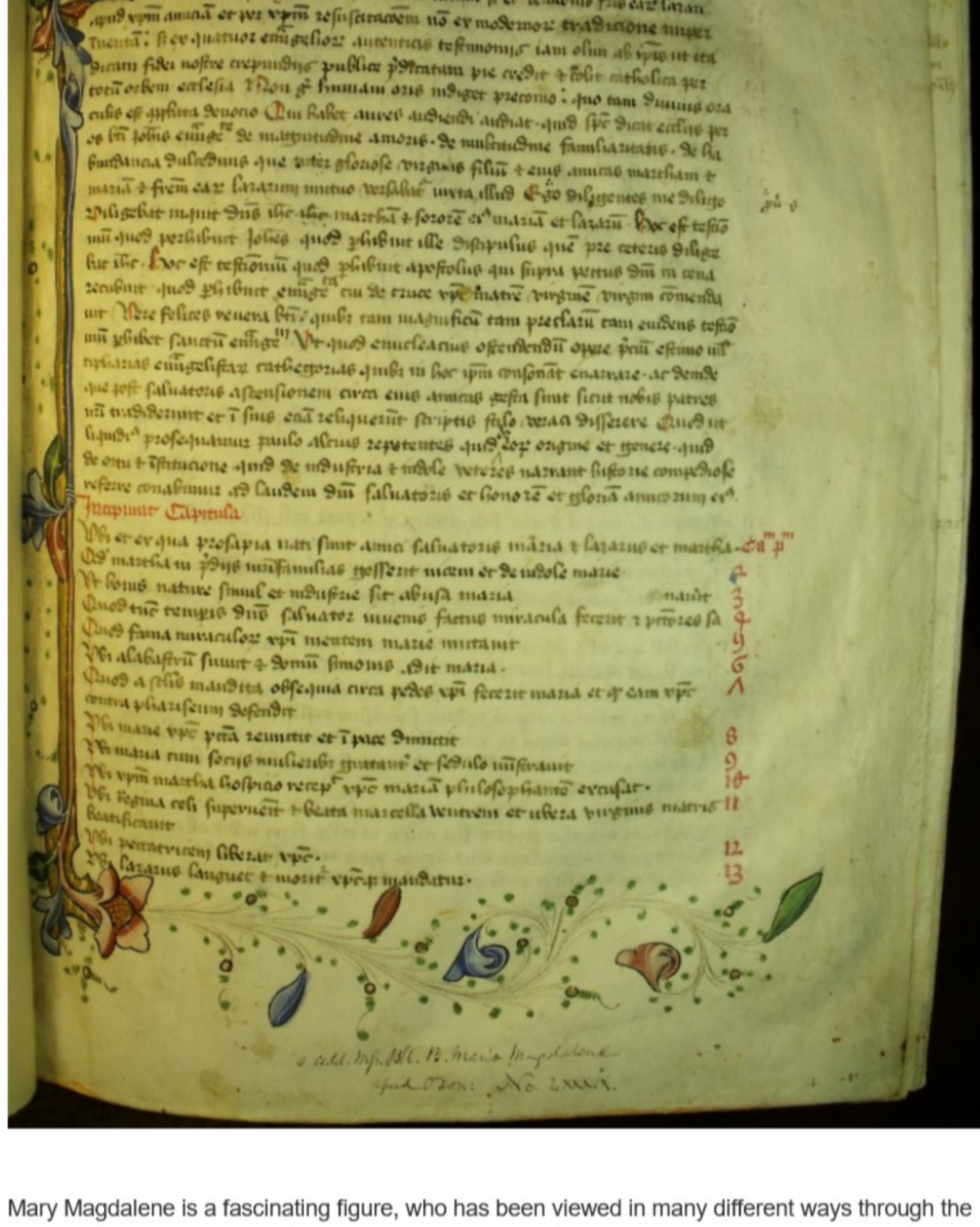




Pseudo-Rabanus Maurus' Life of Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha

22ND JULY 2014

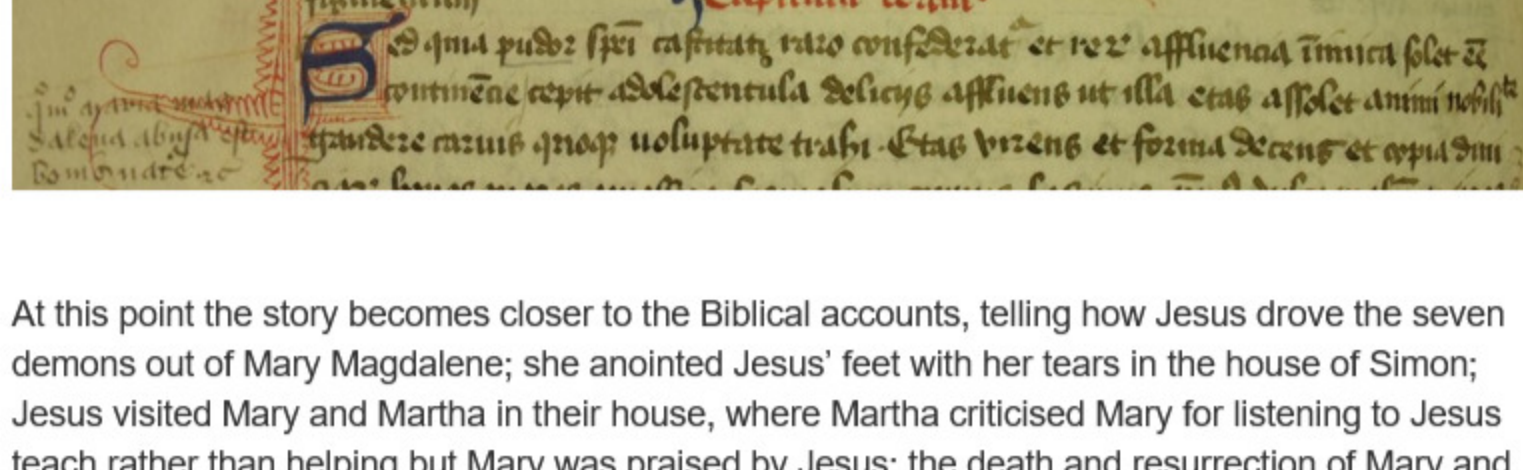
As our namesake Mary Magdalene's feast day is the 22nd July, it seems appropriate to feature as Treasure of the Month one of our most important works about her: MS. Lat. 89(1), a 15th-century manuscript containing a medieval life of Mary Magdalene attributed to Rabanus Maurus. This possibly gives us some idea of what William Waynflete believed about Mary Magdalene, when he named the college in her honour.



Mary Magdalene is a fascinating figure, who has been viewed in many different ways through the years. In the New Testament Mary Magdalene was a woman who had seven demons driven out of her by Jesus, was then present at the crucifixion, and was the first person to visit Jesus' tomb and discover that it was empty. In medieval times Mary Magdalene was hugely popular, presented as a fallen woman seeking forgiveness, a repentant sinner who inspired other sinners to see that salvation was still possible. She was normally assumed to be the same person as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, the follower of Jesus' who anointed his feet or head (It varies between the Gospels) with luxurious scented perfume and was praised by Jesus. According to the medieval tales about Mary Magdalene, she travelled to France after Jesus' ascension, and lived there in religious contemplation.

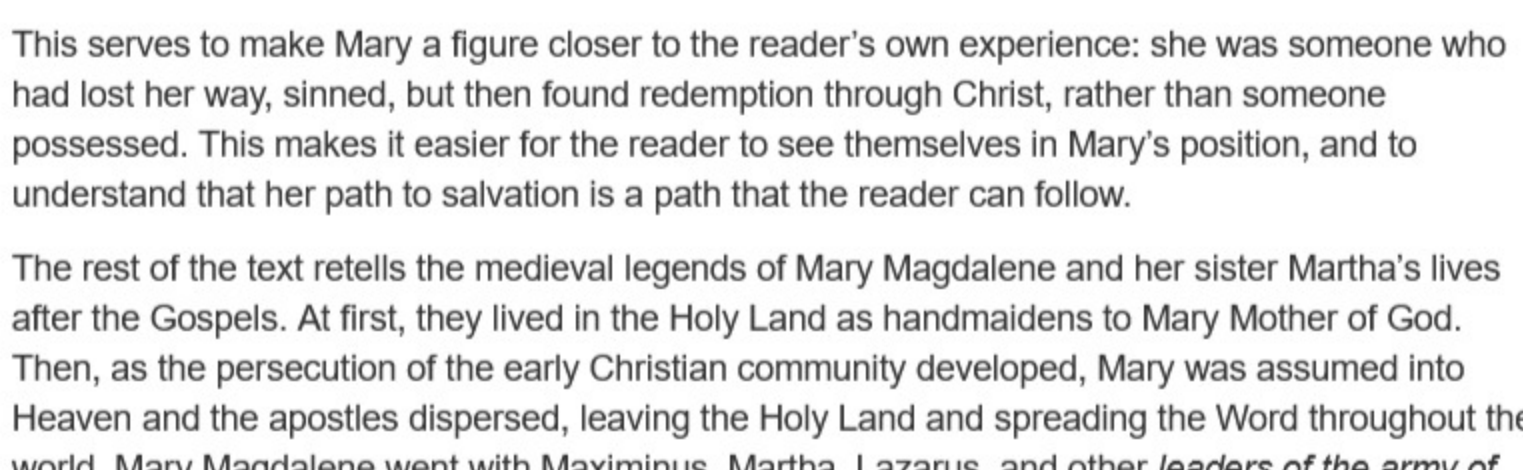
MS. Lat. 89(1) is a collection of such stories, a medieval life of Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha, mixing tales from the Gospels and later legends. Precisely who wrote this text is unclear. In our 15th-century manuscript it is attributed to the great 9th-century German teacher and scholar Rabanus Maurus, however the other six surviving copies of the text (which date from the late 12th to the 15th centuries) all lack this attribution, making it seem unlikely. Two of the earliest copies are from St. Bernard's Cistercian abbey at Clairvaux, and two of the other copies are bound with works by St. Bernard, suggesting that whoever the author was, they may well have been working in a Cistercian context.

MS. Lat. 89(1) begins by discussing the birth and estates of Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, in Magdala and two different villages called Bethany, extrapolating from scraps of information in the Gospels. It then leads on to her fall from grace, saying *but because outward beauty is rarely allied to chastity, and an affluence of possessions may often be an enemy to continence, when she became a young woman, abounding in delights and rejoicing in a noble heart, she, as is usual at that age, followed after the pleasures of the flesh.* It laments her sins at great length, before concluding that *the soul of youth is a pilgrim: she dwelt in earthly love only for a time before hurrying to return to grace.*



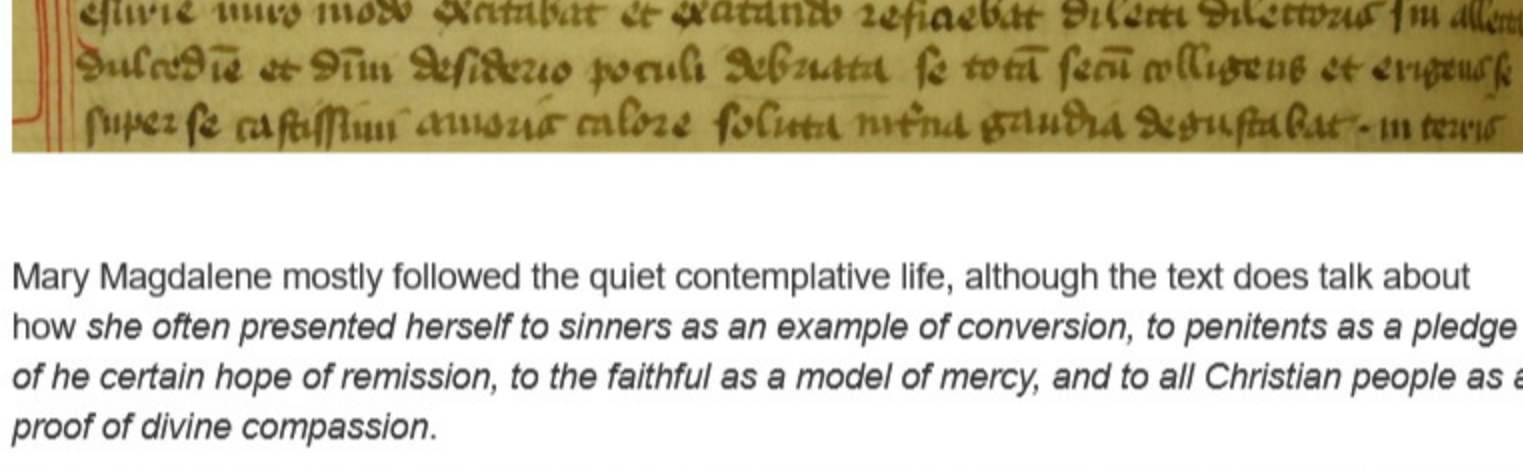
At this point the story becomes closer to the Biblical accounts, telling how Jesus drove the seven demons out of Mary Magdalene; she anointed Jesus' feet with her tears in the house of Simon; Jesus visited Mary and Martha in their house, where Martha criticised Mary for listening to Jesus teach rather than helping but Mary was praised by Jesus; the death and resurrection of Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus; how Mary anointed Jesus' head with perfumed oils and the resulting argument with Judas about the cost of the perfume; the Last Supper; the crucifixion; Mary Magdalene's journey to anoint Jesus' body and discovery of the empty tomb; and finally his ascension.

Throughout, our text attempts to make a composite Gospel, a single narrative, which does result in some oddities such as the two villages called Bethany, the duplicated anointment of Jesus, and the long section untangling the repeated meetings with angels at the empty tomb. This text is also interesting because it plays down some key miracles. Rather than saying that Mary Magdalene was actually possessed by demons (as in the Gospels), instead it presents a more nuanced account that *with her attractiveness, flourishing youth, and abundance of things, she had waged war on all sides against goodness, until, because of her innumerable sins, she was said to be possessed of seven demons.*

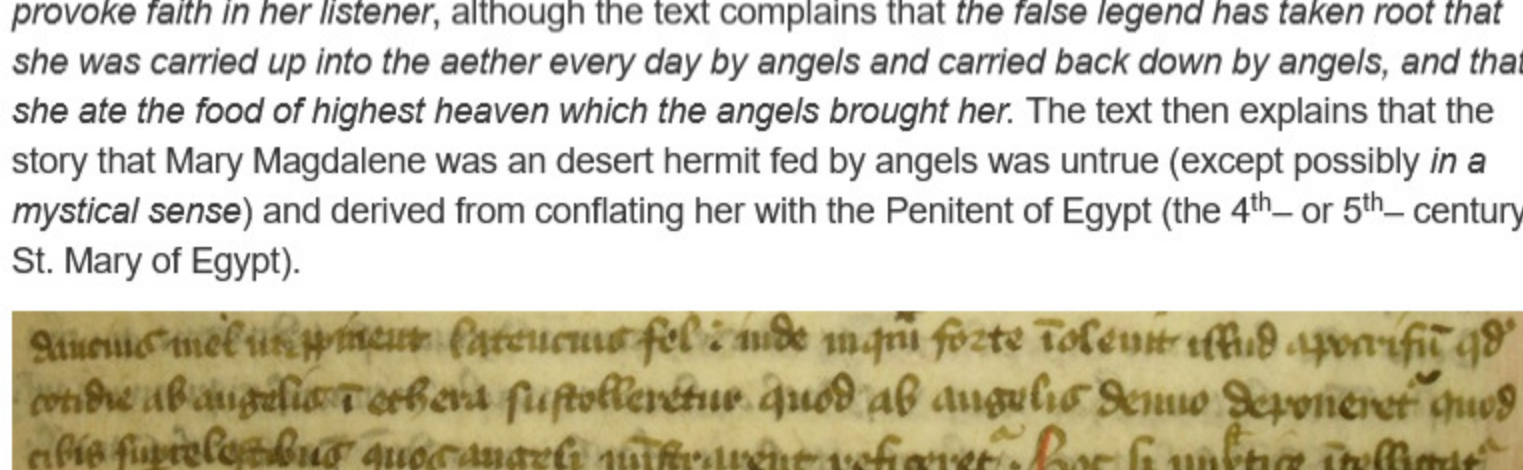


This serves to make Mary a figure closer to the reader's own experience: she was someone who had lost her way, sinned, but then found redemption through Christ, rather than someone possessed. This makes it easier for the reader to see themselves in Mary's position, and to understand that her path to salvation is a path that the reader can follow.

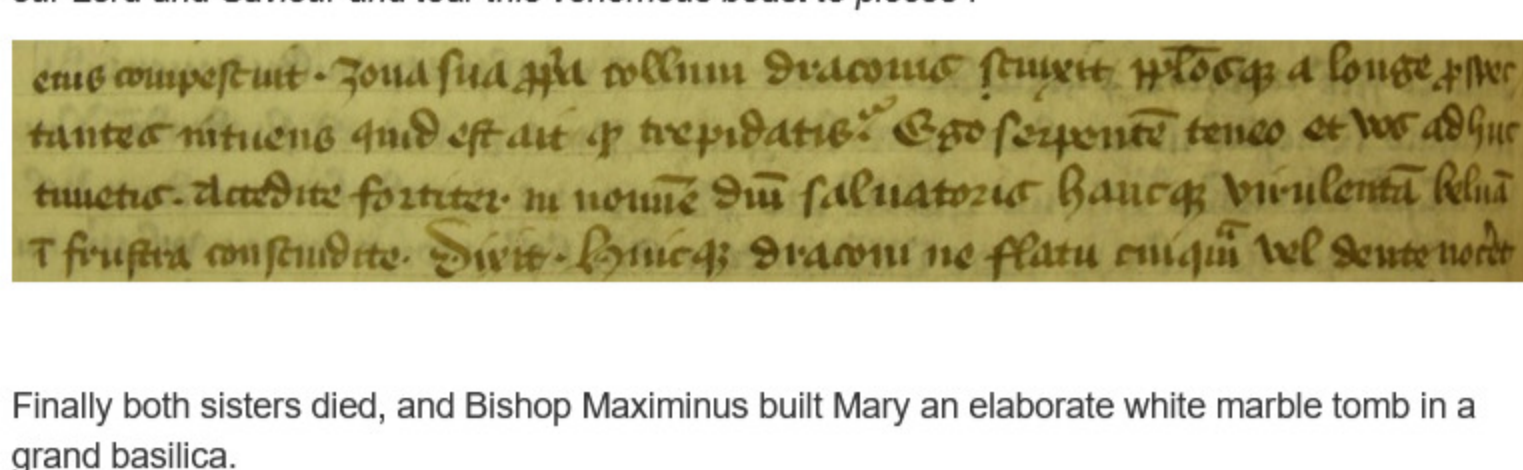
The rest of the text retells the medieval legends of Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha's lives after the Gospels. At first, they lived in the Holy Land as handmaidens to Mary Mother of God. Then, as the persecution of the early Christian community developed, Mary was assumed into Heaven and the apostles dispersed, leaving the Holy Land and spreading the Word throughout the world. Mary Magdalene went with Maximinus, Martha, Lazarus, and other *leaders of the army of Christ*, sailing to Marseilles, and then dividing themselves among the provinces of France, Spain, Belgium, and Germany. There is a long list of who goes where, which begins by saying that to *Saint Maximinus the archbishop fell by lot Aix, metropolis of the second province of Narbonne, in which the blessed Mary Magdalene finished the course of her pilgrimage.*



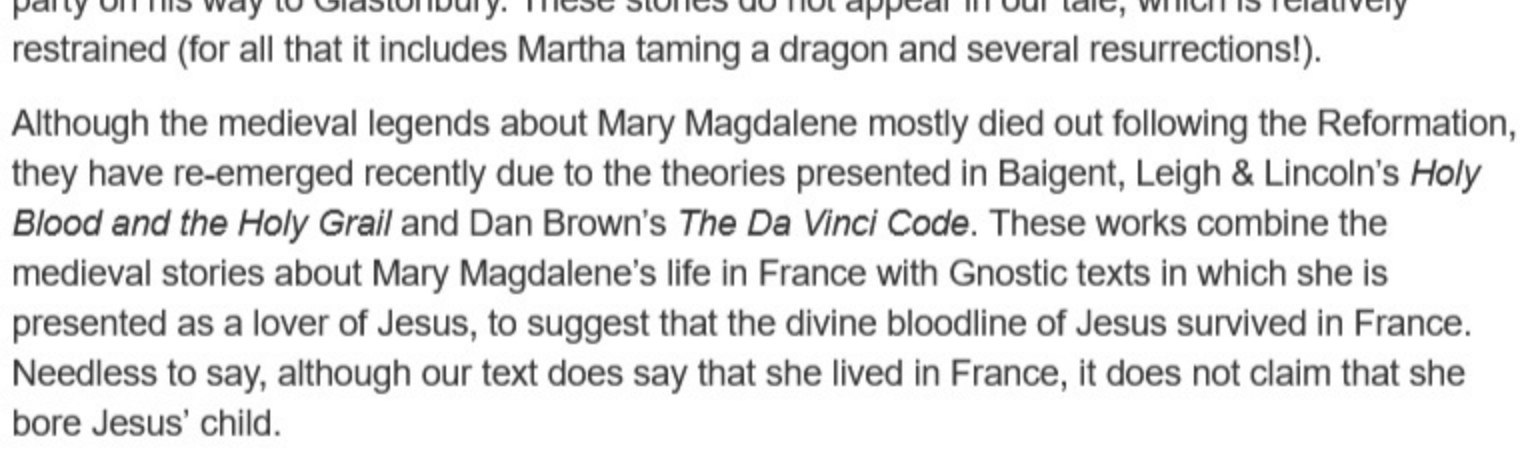
The final section of the text tells stories about Mary Magdalene and Martha's lives in southern France. Mary Magdalene's earlier Earthly lusts were replaced as *Mary hungered in spirit for the Word of God, which, in a wonderful manner, excited her desire again and again. Drawn by the sweetness of her beloved, she became drunk of the cup of heavenly desire.*



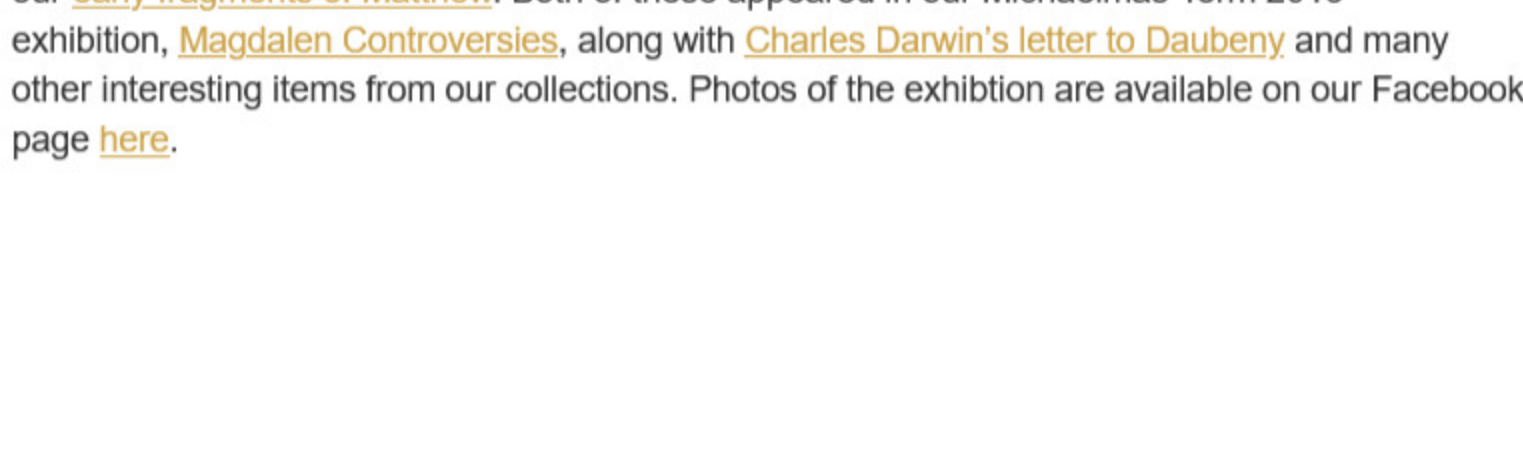
Mary Magdalene mostly followed the quiet contemplative life, although the text does talk about how *she often presented herself to sinners as an example of conversion, to penitents as a pledge of the certain hope of remission, to the faithful as a model of mercy, and to all Christian people as a proof of divine compassion.*



She also *performed miracles with inexpressible ease to establish the truth of her words and to provoke faith in her listeners*, although the text complains that the *false legend has taken root that she was carried up into the aether every day by angels and carried back down by angels, and that she ate the food of highest heaven which the angels brought her.* The text then explains that the story that Mary Magdalene was a desert hermit fed by angels was untrue (except possibly in a mystical sense) and derived from conflating her with the Penitent of Egypt (the 4th- or 5th- century St. Mary of Egypt).



Most of the rest of the text focuses on Martha, who follows the active life and performs many miracles, including times when *she healed lepers, cured paralytics, revived the dead, and even tamed a dragon. With the sign of the cross she subdued the dragon's wildness, and with her own girdle she bound its neck, as the people looked on intently from afar. "What is it", she asked, "that you fear? Here I am holding this serpent and you still keep back. Approach bravely in the name of our Lord and Saviour and tear this venomous beast to pieces".*



Finally both sisters died, and Bishop Maximinus built Mary an elaborate white marble tomb in a grand basilica.

The text omits several key elements that are included in other medieval lives of Mary Magdalene. For example, the *Golden Legend* tales of Mary Magdalene, which were fairly widely seen as definitive in the Middle Ages, contain a long sequence involving the prince of Marseilles and his conversion by Mary Magdalene, including a journey to Rome and the death and resurrection of his wife. The *Golden Legend* also confidently relates how Mary was fed by angels, which this story refutes. Other medieval one in a rudderless boat, the journey with Joseph of Arimathea accompanying the party on his way to Glastonbury. These stories do not appear in our tale, which is relatively restrained (for all that it includes Martha taming a dragon and several resurrections).

Although the medieval legends about Mary Magdalene mostly died out following the Reformation, they have re-emerged recently due to the theories presented in Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln's *Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. These works combine the medieval stories about Mary Magdalene's life in France with Gnostic texts in which she is presented as a lover of Jesus, to suggest that the divine bloodline of Jesus survived in France. Needless to say, although our text does say that she lived in France, it does not claim that she bore Jesus' child.

If you want to find out more about MS. Lat. 89(1), there is an English translation published as *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalen and of her Sister Saint Martha: A medieval biography translated and annotated by David Mycoff* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1989), No. 108 in the Cistercian Studies Series. This contains an excellent introduction and commentary, as well as a translation of the full text. All of the translations in this article have been selected from that work, and it is highly recommended.

If you are interested in our treasures relating to Mary Magdalene, you might also like to read about our [early fragments of Matthew](#). Both of these appeared in our Michaelmas Term 2013 exhibition, [Magdalen Controversies](#), along with [Charles Darwin's letter to Daubeny](#) and many other interesting items from our collections. Photos of the exhibition are available on our Facebook page [here](#).

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