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EARLY CHURCH WRITERS ON HAGIOGRAPHY

An Introduction to *The Spiritual Meadow*:
Written by St. John Moschus to St. Sophronius:

In my opinion, the meadows in spring present a particularly delightful prospect. They display to the beholder a rich diversity of flowers which arrests him with its charm... Think of this present work in the same way, for in it you will discover the virtues of holy men who have distinguished themselves in our own times. They were all equally beloved of God (by the grace of Christ) – yet there was a diversity in the virtues from which the beauty and the charm of each derived. From among these I have plucked the finest flowers of the unmown meadow and worked them into a crown which I now offer to you, most faithful child; and through you, to the world at large.

I have called this work *meadow* on account of the delight, the fragrance and the benefit which it will afford those who come across it. For the virtuous life and habitual piety do not merely consist of studying divinity; not only of thinking on an elevated plain about things as they are here and now. It must also include the description in writing of the way of life of others. So I have striven to complete this composition to inform your love, oh child; and as I have put together a copious and accurate collection, so I have emulated the most wise bee, gathering up the spiritually beneficial deeds of the fathers.¹

¹ John Moschus, “Introduction”, *The Spiritual Meadow*, (Trans.) John Wortley, Cistercian Press, 1992, pg. 3-4.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus' Prologue to *A History of the Monks of Syria*

How fine it is to behold the contests of excellent men, the athletes of virtue, and to draw benefit with the eyes; the objects of our praise appear enviable and become desirable, and impel the beholder to attain them. No middling profit, however, derives from the mere narration of such achievements, communicated by those who know of them to the hearing of those who do not... Since time injures bodies by inflicting old age and death, and injures achievements by causing oblivion and blunting memory, surely no one could reasonably be indignant with us for trying to write down the way of life of the men who have loved God, just as those who have been entrusted with treating bodies prepare medicines, so the welcome labor of such composition becomes like some preventive medicine, a device against oblivion and an aid to memory....²

Theodoret of Cyrrhus on *The Life of St. Simeon the Stylite*

Not only all the subjects of the Roman government know the famous Simeon, the great marvel of the world, but even the Persians, the Medes and the Ethiopians. His fame has reached the Scythian nomads and taught his love of labor and his love of wisdom. Now although I have the whole world, so to speak, as witnesses to his indescribable struggles, I feared his story might seem to those who come after like a tale wholly devoid of truth. For what took place surpasses human nature, and people are accustomed to measure that which is said by the yardstick of what is natural. If something were to be said which lies outside the limits of what is natural, the narrative is considered a lie by those uninitiated into divine things. However, since the earth and sea are full of devout people who, educated in divine things and taught the gift of the all-holy Spirit, will not disbelieve what I am about to write but will surely believe, I shall write my story eagerly and confidently.³ ✦

² Theodoret of Cyrrhus, "Prologue", *A History of the Monks of Syria*, (Trans.) R.M. Price, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, 1985, pg. 3-4.

³ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *The Life of St. Simeon Stylites*, (Trans.) Robert Doran, Cistercian Publication, Kalamazoo, MI, 1992 .