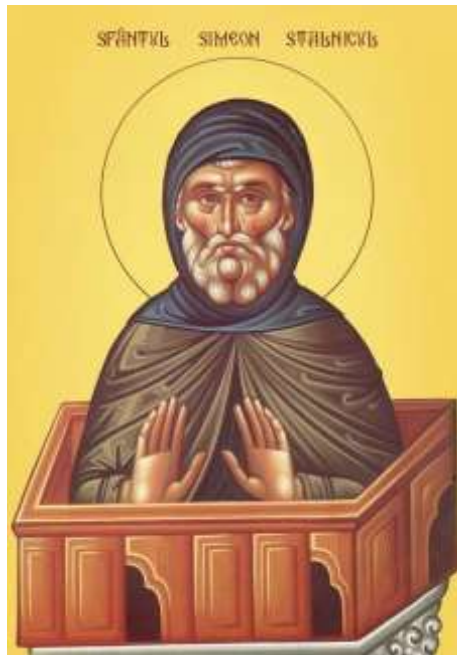


St. Simeon



St. Simeon was the first and probably the most famous of the long succession of stylitoe, or "pillar-hermits", who during more than six centuries acquired by their strange form of asceticism a great reputation for holiness throughout eastern Christendom. If it were not that our information, in the case of the first St. Simeon and some of his imitators, is based upon very reliable first-hand evidence, we should be disposed to relegate much of what history records to the domain of fable; but no modern critic now ventures to dispute the reality of the feats of endurance attributed to these ascetics.

Simeon the Elder, was born about 388 at Sisan, near the northern border of Syria. After beginning life as a shepherd boy, he entered a monastery before the age of sixteen, and from the first gave himself up to the practice of an austerity so extreme and to all appearance so extravagant, that his brethren judged him, perhaps not unwisely, to be unsuited to any form of community life. Being forced to quit them he shut himself up for three years in a hut at Tell-Neschin, where for the first time he passed the whole of Lent without eating or drinking. This afterwards became his regular practice, and he combined it with the mortification of standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him.

In his later days he was able to stand thus on his column without support for the whole period of the fast. After three years in his hut, Simeon sought a rocky eminence in the desert and compelled himself to remain a prisoner within a narrow space less than twenty yards in diameter. But crowds of pilgrims invaded the desert to seek him out, asking his counsel or his prayers, and leaving him insufficient time for his own devotions. This at last determined him to adopt a new way of life. Simeon had a pillar erected with a small platform at the top, and upon this he determined to take up his abode until death released him. At first the pillar was little more than nine feet high, but it was subsequently replaced by others, the last in the series being apparently over fifty feet from the ground. However extravagant this way of life may seem, it undoubtedly produced a deep impression on contemporaries, and the fame of the ascetic spread through Europe, Rome in particular being remarkable for the large number of pictures of the saint which were there to be seen, a fact which a modern writer, Holl, represents as a factor of great importance in the development of image worship (see the Philotesia in honour of P. Kleinert, p. 42-48).

Even on the highest of his columns Simeon was not withdrawn from intercourse with his fellow men. By means of a ladder which could always be erected against the side, visitors were able to ascend; and we know that he wrote letters, the text of some of which we still possess, that he instructed disciples, and that he also delivered addresses to those assembled beneath. Around the tiny platform which surmounted the capital of the pillar there was probably something in the nature of a balustrade, but the whole was exposed to the open air, and Simeon seems never to have permitted himself any sort of cabin or shelter. During his earlier years upon the column there was on the summit a stake to which he bound himself in order to maintain the upright position throughout Lent, but this was an alleviation with which he afterwards dispensed. Great personages, such as the Emperor Theodosius and the Empress Eudocia manifested the utmost reverence for the saint and listened to his counsels, while the Emperor Leo paid respectful attention to a letter Simeon wrote to him in favour of the Council of Chalcedon. Once when he was ill Theodosius sent three bishops to beg him to descend and allow himself to be attended by physicians, but the sick man preferred to leave his cure in the hands of God, and before long he recovered. After spending thirty-six years on his pillar, Simeon died on Friday, 2 Sept., 459 (Lietzmann, p. 235).

A contest arose between Antioch and Constantinople for the possession of his remains. The preference was given to Antioch, and the greater part of his relics were left there as a protection to the unwalled city. The ruins of the vast edifice erected in his honour and known as Qal 'at Sim 'ân (the mansion of Simeon) remain to the present day. It consists of four basilicas built out from an octagonal court towards the four points of the compass. In the centre of the court stands the base of St. Simeon's column. This edifice, says H.C. Butler, "unquestionably influenced contemporary and later church building to a marked degree" (*Architecture and other Arts*, p. 184). It seems to have been a supreme effort of a provincial school of architecture which had borrowed little from Constantinople.