

of Eusebius of Vercelli, and also perhaps of the great Ambrose, archbishop of Milan. Like them, he was later canonized for his staunch defense of orthodoxy in the bitter theological disputes of his age, and for his exemplary life as a bishop, tending his flock in troubled times. The information we possess concerning his life and governance is fragmentary, and even the dates of his tenure as bishop are uncertain. It seems that he was already the bishop of Turin in 398, when an important synod was held there to decide a number of knotty doctrinal and organizational issues. We know that he was highly reputed as a biblical scholar, and so might well have played a leading part in these debates. He died at some point in the early or mid-fifth century. He was a representative figure of militant Christianity in its struggle against the forces of paganism, which reached its climax in his lifetime. He seems to have been an early propagator of the cult of the Theban martyrs, which was already a central feature of Christian devotion at Turin. Bishop Maximus was devoted to the monastic life, with its constant penances and self-mortifications. Ascetic and misogynistic, he feared and condemned the world as an endless array of temptations: his ideal was the life of a desert hermit, barren of earthly delights and above all of the company of women, whom he denounced as “the root of all evil”.

Almost everything we know about Bishop Maximus comes from the large corpus of homilies and sermons he composed for the edification of his flock. These writings leave one with the impression of a powerful, even imperious personality. He constantly rebukes his flock for their shortcomings, in often irascible tones, upbraiding them for their failure to live up to his own example of austere Christian virtue and self-abnegation. His rebukes – if we are to believe them – tell us much about the ambiguous religious outlook of his time, still far from perfectly Christian. He constantly berates his flock for what he saw as its self-indulgence and backsliding. His followers did not observe the feasts of the Church in a fittingly reverential manner, he thundered, but desecrated them with gluttonous banquets. They were constantly flirting with pagan practices, and were a prey to every kind of ancient superstitions. The attachment to heathenism and idolatry was particularly marked in the countryside, where the peasants clung stubbornly to the old ways. Maximus chided the peasants’ aristocratic masters for their unwillingness to convert their serfs; out of idleness or diffidence they preferred to leave them alone, putting their worldly interests before their Christian duty.

Maximus’ sermons give us a colorful – or perhaps lurid – picture of Turinese society in this transitional age, when Christianity was gradually vanquishing the old religions and developing its own doctrinal and