

How Popular Was Early Medieval Devotion?

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At the end of a seminal paper Arnaldo Momigliano remarked that "Lectures on popular religious beliefs and the late Roman historians should be severely discouraged."¹ To offer a lecture on popular devotion in the Early Middle Ages might be seen, therefore, either as a stubborn refusal to listen to one of the great authorities on late antiquity, or as an assertion that religion in the early Middle Ages was in some crucial way different from what had come before. The second of these points may be true, although recent work has tended to emphasise the continuities between the two periods, and, as will be apparent by the end of this lecture, I would certainly not want to draw any sharp division between the fifth and sixth centuries, which have traditionally been seen as marking the watershed between the Ancient and Medieval worlds: what changes the seventh century had to bring is another and as yet undermapped topic, although I will look ahead, briefly, into the Carolingian period.

It would certainly be foolish to ignore Momigliano's emphasis on "the christian abolition of the internal frontiers between the learned and the vulgar", even if one rejects the implied value judgement contained in his statement that "For cultured persons it meant the reception and acceptance of many uncritical, unsophisticated beliefs in miracles, relics and apparitions."² This is the comment of a man writing before a wealth of recent studies which have tried to understand early medieval religion,³ and as we shall see "uncritical" may well be a totally inappropriate word. Nevertheless it is possible to argue that, whereas superstition had been something a classical writer could associate with the lower classes,⁴ no such snobbery remained in the last years of the Western Empire. The failure to appreciate this caused generations of historians to argue that pope Gregory the Great could not have written the *Dialogues*, his collection of miracle stories, because the work was inappropriate for so great a theologian.

One might of course argue that miracle stories were written by sophisticated churchmen to educate their congregations: this, however, neither implies that those congregations were composed of anything other than committed christians, nor that they consisted of individuals of backward intelligence who were to be addressed only in the equivalent of baby talk. Most of the territories of the Roman Empire were essentially christian by the time of the barbarian migrations, and it was only in a few areas that the settlers caused the establishment of new paganisms. The audience of stories of *miracula* was, therefore, Christian: moreover that audience was not necessarily far removed from the authors of miracle collections themselves. Gregory of Tours, the most energetic recorder of miracles in the West in the pre-Carolingian period is a participant in a good number of the tales he records, and he even uses his anecdotes to criticise his own piety. When he thinks of going to doctors before going to the shrine of St. Martin he suffers accordingly,⁵ and when he ascribes his miraculous protection from a storm to his own virtue rather than to the relics he is carrying he is dumped unceremoniously on the ground by his horse.⁶ Gregory of Tours and his audience belonged to the same community of belief, and his works do not allow us to make any distinction between the religion of the élite and that of the lower orders. Similarly anyone trying to distinguish between the audience of Gregory the Great's biblical commentaries and that of the *Dialogues* would do well to remember that the latter work, with its abundance of miracles, was written for the pope's own clerical entourage.⁷

The identification of an episcopal author with the miracles he recorded can be seen just as clearly in a later miracle collection, the *Miracula Willehad* composed by Anskar, bishop of Hamburg-Bremen: this collection of miracles which took place at the shrine of Anskar's predecessor, St. Willehad of Bremen, relates to a specific year, 860, when Anskar's missions in Scandinavia had been affected by all sorts of set-backs. The author recorded the outbreak of cures at the saint's shrine as a mark of divine support: far from this being a document which was only appropriate to encourage the masses in their piety, it was consolation for the beleaguered bishop as well as his congregation. Bishops may have used

miracle stories to put across certain ideas with didactic intent, indeed we shall see that they did: there may even have been some miracles that they did not personally believe in. Yet in general we should see the upper clergy as sharing the basic religious beliefs of the majority of their congregation. In short, this is not a paper about distinctions between ,lite and popular religion.

At the same time it would be wrong to say that the leading clergy of the early Middle Ages had no concept of improper superstition. That they did is clear enough from Gregory of Tours' attitude to would-be messiahs who tramped the fields of Frankish Gaul in the sixth century. Above all, however, there is a fascinating little eighth-century text called the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* from the circle of Boniface. It is a handlist of religious practices which are to be condemned. These practices are not all pagan: indeed two of them are concerned with rather folksy saint cults and one with some unspecified sacrilege in church.⁸ For Boniface's circle, however, *superstitio* was quite clearly something that was not part of true Christianity. Whether or not it was pagan, it involved practices which were uncanonical. Exactly who performed these practices is not clear, but the practices themselves certainly belonged to a world of 'alternative' beliefs. Official ritual on the one hand and the *superstitiones* condemned by Boniface on the other may not quite fit into the anthropologist's dichotomy of private superstition as opposed to public religion, but they are not far from doing so.⁹

The *superstitiones* of the *Indiculus* are those noted by Boniface and his followers in the eighth century. A century and a half earlier Gregory of Tours had a concept of *rusticitas*, which Peter Brown has defined as the natural antithesis of *reverentia*, "'boorishness', 'slipshodness' the failure, or the positive refusal, to give life structure in terms of specific supernatural landmarks."¹⁰ This definition is a little too narrow, and Ray Van Dam has traced a wider range of meanings in the word: alongside the lack of reverence displayed towards the holy, the word could simply have rustic connotations, or it could mean lacking high, classical culture which was something that most members of the Frankish kingdom lacked by the end of the sixth century.¹¹ Gregory quite regularly accuses himself of rusticity, referring sometimes to his poor mastery of classical Latin. Certainly Gregory's concept of *rusticitas* cannot lead us to create any distinction between a high- and a low-brow christianity in the sixth century, but it does help us understand some of the limits of piety.

One aspect of *rusticitas* is, as Brown noted, a failure to show due reverence. Sometimes this is accidental, but on other occasions it is deliberate. When a boorish and improvident woman (*rustica mulier et incauta*) and her son were caught in a dust-storm, the ignorant mother did not know to protect the boy with the sign of the cross (*LVSM* 3, 16). The woman's inability to perform the right ritual is an illustration of her *rusticitas*. Curiously enough, according to Jonas of Bobbio the monk Agrestius attacked the performance of such rituals by the followers of Columbanus in the second and third decades of the seventh century as being newfangled:¹² in the light of Gregory's reference to crossing oneself, Jonas's story makes no historical sense: not saining oneself was already a mark of boorishness in the eyes of Gregory of Tours a generation earlier.

A more common failure in Gregory of Tours' *miracula* was an ignorance of how to react properly to relics: when a possessed child collapsed in front of some relics of St.Julian his parents thought it was a case of black magic:¹³ there was the disgruntled peasant who refused to hand over his property to the Church, after relics had rested in it over night (*LGM*, 47); and there was the other peasant who did not want to cut down his pear tree, which grew on the spot where saints Nazarius and Celsus were buried (*LGM*, 46). The irreverence of these rustics is certainly less than that of the men of the lower Tyne in the late seventh century who jeered when monks of the monastery of Tynemouth drifted out to sea on a raft,¹⁴ yet it merited critical treatment from Gregory. There is also irreverence of a quite different kind in Gregory's narrative: for instance Victorious, who should have known better, refused to pray at the shrine of St.Amabilis.¹⁵ This question of irreverence brings me closer to the heart of my investigation. How many people actually believed in the religion offered to them by their bishops? To what extent is the religious fervour shown at the shrines of the saints the norm for early medieval man, and to what extent is it a rather shallow facade masking what was otherwise a somewhat lacklustre religiosity? What, in short, were the limits of piety?

To pursue this question I shall not try to winkle out the odd atheist, nor to argue that there was a general state of "unbelief":¹⁶ it is unlikely that the situation was anything like as simple as that. What we appear to be looking at are a number of beliefs, belief systems or ideologies, which were being negotiated, for a variety of reasons, more and less religious, by populations, both sophisticated and unsophisticated, powerful and weak. Gregory classified among

unbelievers not only people who may or may not have been pagans or atheists, but also Jews and heretics. A Jew scoffed at the priest Lupus, who was hurrying to be cured at the shrine of St. Martin, with the words "Martin will be of no use to you, because the dirt pressing down has made him into dirt": but when the unbeliever himself fell ill he could not connect his own sickness or the cure of the priest with the power of the saint (*LVSM* 3, 45). Equally there are a score of sceptical heretics in Gregory's miracle stories, notably the arian Visigothic king Theudegisel, who thought that the miraculous filling of the springs at Osset was a trick performed by the Catholics, and had his men dig the area to find the water-pipes (*LGM*, 24). Such people are not the object of my investigation. I am concerned with the limits of belief among the orthodox although, as we shall see, this may not take us so far from Theudegisel.

I will start at the top. As Brown has remarked, "Whatever the modern historian may have done, if confronted with a relic, sixth-century men can be trusted to have looked their gift horse firmly in the mouth."¹⁷ Gregory's miracle stories are not overflowing with clerical scepticism about relics, but scepticism is there all the same, and in some quantity. The bishop of Tours himself thinks of a rational cause for the glow of miraculous lights before realising his error (*LGM*, 5, 8); in much the same way as Theudegisel doubted the miracle of the springs of Osset. Relics were not accepted as authentic simply on hearsay. Again Gregory doubted that a piece of cloth really had been used to wrap the True Cross (*LGM*, 5). The bishop of Troyes doubted that Patroclus was a saint of any significance, even after his *Vita* had been found: indeed he condemned the *Vita* as a forgery (*LGM*, 63). Gregory's ancestor and namesake, the bishop of Langres, himself to be regarded as a saint, refused to acknowledge that the shrine of Benignus was that of a martyr, thinking of it, probably correctly, as the tomb of a pagan. He attempted to stamp out any cult there, and it was only after a miracle and a vision that the bishop believed (*LGM*, 50). And all this doubt was despite the fact that the sarcophagus lay in the cemetery of a town which was closely associated with Gregory, and that in time the bishop's family would benefit enormously from the martyr's cult.

Gregory of Langres did at least respond to Benignus the first time the martyr appeared to him in a vision. Often enough, however, humans, even members of the clergy, do not respond immediately to heavenly visitations in the *miracula* of Gregory of Tours. It took three appearances of Christ to persuade the priest Basileus to clothe the icon of the Saviour hanging on the cross (*LGM*, 22). St. Ursinus had to appear to three men, one of them an abbot and two of them bishops, before they would go to look for his tomb (*LGC*, 79). A monk of Marmoutier took three warnings before he burned some contaminated straw on which he had been sleeping (*LVSM*, 3, 42). Gregory of Tours himself took three warnings before he went to vigil in the cathedral on Christmas Eve (*LGM*, 86). Yet, being unresponsive could bring its own rewards: the spirit of St. Lusor had to offer gold before he could persuade a man to clean a room for him (*LGM*, 90). On the other hand it could also be dangerous: appearances of the martyr were not enough to make a man take his relics of St. Lawrence to Aredius of Limoges: the whole family had to fall ill as well (*LGM*, 41). The spirits of two unnamed virgins had to make two visits to a local near Tours, and threaten him with death, before he cleared their tombs (*LGC*, 18).

If Merovingian clergy failed to respond to visions it is not terribly surprising to find numerous examples of scepticism about the holy among the laity, or to find Gregory on occasion complaining that people do not believe his accounts of miracles. "I have heard a man as he proclaimed that the oil that increased because of Martin's blessing could not have happened; he also doubted that the flask that slipped loose and fell to the marble floor remained intact." (*LVSM*, 2, 32; see also *LGC*, 6). Not surprisingly a slave-owner refused to recognise that one of his slaves had been miraculously cured, when it meant that he had to free him from his usual duties (*LVSM*, 1, 22).

The scepticism even of bishops may affect our reading of a limited number of anecdotes in Gregory of Tours' writings which prefigure the now well-known high medieval practice of the humiliation of saints.¹⁸ A cleric might deliberately desecrate a shrine, in order to force a saint to act against an oppressor. Thus, after a legal judgement had been given against him by king Childeric I, bishop Franco covered the shrine of St. Mitrias with thorns and said, "Most glorious saint, no more lights will be lit here, no more melodies of psalms will be sung, until you first avenge your servants from their enemies and restore to the holy church the properties that have been violently taken from you" (*LGC*, 70).¹⁹ Again the bishop of Agde turned to the shrine of St. Andrew to reclaim its land from *comes* Gomacharius: he broke the lamps in the shrine and said, "No light will be lit here until God takes vengeance on his enemies and restores this field that belongs to his house" (*LGM*, 78). Because we know the answers to these stories we ignore the high risk in the strategies adopted by the clergy. But Gregory knew quite well that the saint might not help: when the Spaniard Florentius had been sick as a child, his grandfather had left him at the foot of an altar dedicated to Martin, saying,

"Most blessed confessor, it was our great hope to transport here your relics that have expelled illnesses, extinguished fevers, scattered darkness, and cleansed other infirmities, because we have read about your many deeds, what you did while alive, and what you have done after your death Your power will be evident here if in accordance with our faith you also now revive this little boy. If you do not do this, we will no longer bow our necks here, nor will we burn lights or show the gratitude of other honours" (*LVSM*, 3, 8). In other words a saint was on probation and could be abandoned if he showed himself powerless.

The great collections of miracle stories of the early Middle Ages have probably deluded us into thinking that men and women of the period were consistently aware and sure of the power of the saint. It is an assumption that is bred of reading too many miracle stories too quickly: 'x' falls sick, goes to saint 'y' and is cured on feast 'z'. It is also an assumption that can be encouraged by the literary form of the *miracula*, especially when the underlying source was a register kept at a saint's tomb, as appears often to have been the case. Such registers were only concerned to list the saint's power, not the sufferer's tribulation and, equally important, his or her doubt. Yet even the barest of registers can tell a different tale. Take some of the more remarkable heroines of the Early Middle Ages, poor peasant women of ninth-century Saxony who appear in Anskar's *Miracula Willehadi*: Tida, blind for seven years, who was forbidden to go to church by her mistress, and so slipped off to the shrine of St. Willehad before her mistress was up, or Ikkia, also blind for seven years, who thought that St. Willehad could do her no good, but was bullied into making the journey from Wilsted to Bremen by one of her equally poor female neighbours, who accompanied her.²⁰ These were women who took a very dangerous gamble, which happened to work. If there had been no gamble it would be impossible to understand the long delays before men and women entrusted themselves to the power of a saint, or the fact that they would turn to a doctor in the first instance.

Even Gregory did this. Having successfully resorted twice to the shrine of St. Martin to cure a headache, the bishop of Tours decided that he needed a bloodletting, and instantly the headache returned (*LVSM* 2, 60). He had made a plausible scientific analysis of his health, which happened to be psychologically and spiritually wrong. On another occasion, shortly after he was consecrated bishop, he suffered from dysentery, but it was not until he was at death's door that he resorted to dust from the shrine of St. Martin (*LVSM*, 2, 1). Much later he turned to hot baths to cure diarrhoea, and it was only when he remembered his previous experience that he returned to relics of the saint (*LVSM*, 4, 1). On two occasions when Gregory's father fell ill the family did not know what to do until an apparition gave the young Gregory instructions: on the first occasion he had to place a sliver of wood with the name Joshua under his father's pillow, on the second he had to grill the liver and heart of a fish in front of his father (*LGC*, 39). Gregory's mother, a woman of undoubted piety, endured a pain in her shin for thirty-four years before resorting to the shrine of St. Martin (*LVSM*, 3, 10). The bishop's brother-in-law was on his death-bed before his wife resorted to the neighbouring tomb of Ferreolus and Ferrucio (*LGM*, 70). Gregory had to complain regularly to his deacon, before the man would resort to oil from St. Martin's shrine to cure his quartan fever (*LVSM*, 2, 32). Servants of Gregory's own household resorted to soothsayers when one of them fell ill: he died. But when a second servant fell ill it took an intervention from Gregory to get dust from the shrine of St. Julian to effect a cure (*LVSJ*, 46a). On another occasion the wife of one of his servants was cured by oil from St. Martin's in the nick of time, having already been treated by soothsayers (*LVSM*, 4, 36). If the family and household of the most assiduous collector of miracle stories of the century only turned to the power of the saints in the last resort, one needs to be very careful about interpreting the evidence as showing "the reception and acceptance of many uncritical, unsophisticated beliefs in miracles, relics and apparitions."²¹

If a bishop's household did not instantly turn to a saint for help, it is no surprise that others were equally cautious. The wife of Georgius was ill for a long time before an apparition told her to go to the tomb of an unknown saint (*LGC*, 34). When he was nearly dead Gallus, *comes* of Chalon-sur-Saône turned to the shrine of St. Valerianus (*LGM*, 53). Mummolus was so ill that he had actually written his will before looking for a doctor, and even though he was in Patras at the time he did not even think of trying the shrine of the Apostle Andrew, who was buried there (*LGM*, 30). It took a servant to think of laying a sick boy at the shrine of St. Maximus of Riez (*LGC*, 82). With this evidence for caution in mind we may come closer to understanding those who flouted belief in the power of the saints. Gregory saw them as villains awaiting their come-uppance: a more secular reading might see them as intelligent free-thinkers, but to do so would ignore the extent to which they were figures on one end of a spectrum of belief which was far from certain that saints did act regularly.²²

For a start there are those who simply doubted whether certain figures were saints and whether they deserved any reverence. The martyr Eutropius of Saintes had to appear to the two abbots who translated his body, to reassure them that the scars on his forehead were from the blows which had caused his death (*LGM*, 55). One can sympathise with the man who thought that St.Marianus, found dead at the foot of a fruit-tree, was a silly old glutton who had died while climbing the tree to take the apples. The cynic chose to ignore the saint's festival to brew some beer instead, and as a result burned down his whole property (*LGC*, 80).

Work on saint's days and on Sundays prompts a number of miracles in Gregory of Tours' writings. A woman baked on St.John's Day and burned herself (*LGM*, 15), while the right hand of another who wished to bake bread on a Saturday evening withered (*LVSM*, 3, 31). A woman who hoed on St.John's Day was covered with burns (*LVSM*, 2, 57) A man who hoed on St.Avitus' Day, against the advice of his neighbours, twisted his neck (*LGC*, 97) Another tried to plough on Sunday, and the plough-handle stuck to his hand (*LVSJ*, 11), while one who yoked his oxen went blind (*LVSM*, 4, 45). A servant who tried to mend a hole in the fence on the first day of Easter lost his sight (*LVSM*, 2, 13); another who did the same one Sunday stuck to his mallet (*LVSM*, 3, 29); and a third saw his hands wither (*LVSM*, 3, 45). A man who tried to mill on Easter Day stuck to a lever in his mill (*LVSM*, 3, 3). The hands of a man who made a key on Sunday bent inwards, as did those of a woman who did some unspecified task ((*LVSM*, 3,7 and 3, 55). Having a drink on Sunday instead of hurrying to church was enough to blind a deacon of Chflons-sur-Marne (*LVSM*, 3, 38). Even more extreme, saint Vitalina was temporarily excluded from heaven for washing her face on Good Friday (*LGC*, 5).

These stories are unquestionably moral tales intended to make a point, and they can be associated with the canonical legislation against Sunday work issued at the Council of Mfcon between 581 and 583.²³ That the Church was exploiting incidents to make its point is clear from Gregory's identification of a deformed child as having been conceived on a Sunday, for it was surely not until after the child had been born deformed that anyone thought it had been conceived on the first day of the week (*LVSM*, 2, 24). Even clearer is the case of poor old Sisulf, who lost the use of his hands, although he was totally innocent, just so that he could be instructed to preach against perjury, usury and Sunday work, before being cured at St.Martin's (*LVSM*, 2, 40).

In Gregory's accounts the majority of the population are opposed to work on Sundays or feast days: the man who hoed on St.Avitus' Day was told not to, as was the man who brewed beer during the feast of St.Marianus. Yet one may wonder quite how committed the population really was to Sunday observance. A number of the stories told by Gregory, particularly those relating to the need to mend fences--which was required by common sense, not least because of legislation relating to damage to property caused by animals ²⁴--point to a straightforward conflict between the demands of ecclesiastical and agricultural time. And the deforming of Sisulf, for no fault of his own, but merely to force him to preach against Sunday work, might be taken to suggest the Church was fighting a losing battle.

Sisulf was also told to preach against usury and perjury. Usury does not occur often in Gregory's writings: perjury on the other hand does, in a variety of contexts. Gregory names a number of shrines as being particularly hard on perjurers: St.Pancras in Rome (*LGM*, 38), St.Polyeuktos in Constantinople (*LGM*, 102), St.Genesius in Tarbes (*LGM*, 73), St.Julian at Jou,-lſs-Tours (*LVSJ*, 40), and St.Maximinus in Trier (*LGC*, 92). At this last shrine a local archdeacon was unable to clear himself of an accusation of adultery by oath, because he collapsed with a fever (*LGC*, 91). A man in Tours tried to perjure himself, but fell over backwards and collapsed (*LGM*, 19). In Bourges a man called Felix was miraculously up-ended as he tried to swear a false oath (*LGM*, 33). A girl who swore that she had not stolen an ornament from a merchant was petrified, almost literally, before the shrine of St.Eugenius in Albi (*LGM*, 57). In Brioude a man tried to perjure himself over the return of a gold coin, but dried up (*LVSJ*, 19). A custodian of the shrine at Tours tried to swear that he had not received a gold coin (*LVSM*, 1, 31). A man showed his rusticity in the cathedral in Limoges by swearing a false oath and was struck mute as a result (*LGC*, 28), while a man who broke his oath to Aventinus died (*LGC*, 67).

Perjury was not just an ecclesiastical problem. At some point before 516 the Burgundian king Gundobad had legislated in favour of trial by battle, specifically because his people were only too happy to perjure themselves precisely because they seemed to be able to do so without any disastrous consequences.²⁵ In other words, in the Burgundian kingdom, at least, barbarians tended to take oath-taking less seriously than did Gallo-Romans.²⁶ There may be some hint that this was a problem which affected barbarian groups other than the Burgundians. Talking of the shrine at Jou,-lſs-Tours Gregory remarked that it was a place where even barbarians did not dare to perjure themselves (*LVSJ*, 40). Yet not too

much should be made of the propensity to perjury of the Germanic peoples: Felix who perjured himself in Bourges may well have been of Roman stock. More interesting is the fact that a custodian of the shrine at Tours and an archdeacon of Trier were both prepared to commit perjury.

Perjury implies that there were people who did not recognise, or who were prepared to risk, the power of the holy in avenging wrong doing. It therefore implies a limit on the piety of a number of people. Of course it is possible to make too much of this: it would be wrong to argue that an archdeacon had no religious belief, because he was prepared to perjure himself, to clear himself from a charge of adultery. Indeed, the fact that he and all the others broke down while perjuring themselves is a mark of the psychological pressure exerted by oath-taking. It is also possible to make too much of Gundobad's legislation against the use of oaths: for in dispensing with oaths the king introduced ordeal by battle, which depended on divine intervention every bit as much as trial by oath. Nevertheless, as Gundobad remarked, perjury is an indication that not everyone took oath-taking--and by extension divine judgement--seriously.

Divine judgement was further challenged in the breaking of sanctuary. This occurs more often in Gregory's *Histories* than in his *miracula*.²⁷ Indeed only two stories of sanctuary-breaking at Tours are to be found in the hagiography: Wiliachar was seized from the saint's shrine in the days of Chlothar, but chains would not stay on him, while Ruccolen fell ill before he could attack Tours on account of those seeking sanctuary at St.Martin's (*LVSJ*, 1, 23 and 2, 27). Sanctuary at St.Julian's was breached when a man tried to drag his opponent out during a brawl, but the assailant was iraculously blinded (*LVSJ*, 10). St.Nicetius proved less capable of protecting a boy who had sought sanctuary at his shrine, for he could do no more than appear to the child, and tell him to appeal to king Guntram (*LGC*, 60).

The breaking of sanctuary shows a disregard not only of the power of saints, but also of secular legislation.²⁸ Further, those who breached sanctuary were not usually minor brawlers, though such was the case at St.Julian's. The great cases of sanctuary breaking were political and were sanctioned either by the king or by one of his leading agents. Chlothar at least tried to make amends for the damage caused during Wiliachar's time in sanctuary by paying for the reroofing of the church (*LH*, 4, 20). Nevertheless the recurrent infringement of sanctuary for political reasons suggests a limit to a recognition of sacred taboos even among the powers that be.

Kings did not usually go as far as stealing from church buildings, but they and their agents took church estates, and there were plenty of thieves who did take treasure from the inside of churches. Some thirty-five chapters of Gregory's *miracula* concern the thefts either of church property or of property on church land. A man even tried to take objects from inside the sarcophagus of SS Agricola and Vitalis in Bologna (*LGM*, 43). Marginally less sacrilegious were attempts to steal the silk which covered the tomb of St.Denis and to rob the tomb of the martyr Felix at Gerona (*LGM*, 71 and 91). A man seized jewels from the tomb of St.Julian (*LVSJ*, 20). while Lombards tried to take treasure from the shrine of St.Genesius at Arles (*LGM*, 68). Actual relics were stolen from Orbigny, while a man travelling to Rome was robbed of a reliquary (*LGM*, 89 and 18). Liturgical vessels and vestments were taken from Yssac-la-Tourette (*LGM*, 65); a gold cross was stolen from the altar of a church dedicated to St.Julian by Aredius of Limoges (*LVSJ*, 44); and a man took the window glass of the church of Yzeures (*LGM*, 58). Britto tried to seize a belt offered on the altar of Saint-Nazaire, while in Rome a subdeacon attempted to steal silver left in the shrine of St.Chrysanthus (*LGM*, 60 and 37). In Galicia king Miro's jester tried to take grapes from vines dedicated to St.Martin (*LVSM*, 4, 7).

The seizure of land is less surprising, being the subject of numerous legal disputes as well as miracles stories. Nevertheless Gregory tells how king Charibert tried to take land from St.Martin's at Tours (*LVSM*, 1, 29); how *comes* Gomachar attempted to take estates of the church at Agde (*LGM*, 78); how Childeric tried to seize land of that at Aix (*LGC*, 70); and how Sigivald and the tax-collector Pastor took land from St.Julian's at Brioude (*LVSJ*, 14 and 15). Land was also taken from the church of St.Remigius at Rheims (*LGC*, 78). Bolder still, Plato tried to seize the monastery of St-Sernin itself (*LGM*, 47).

Moveable property from the estates of churches ought to have been much easier to steal: a man tried to take honey from the recluse Eusicius (*LGC*, 81), and another hives from the nuns of Amiens (*LVSM*, 1, 17); a deacon stole sheep belonging to St.Julian's, and others tried taking animals offered to the saint (*LVSJ*, 17 and 31). A priest's horse was stolen at St. Quentin (*LGM*, 72) and a pilgrim's horse at the feast of St.Julian (*LVSJ*, 18). Away from Gaul a man had his knife stolen while waiting for holy water at the springs of Osset (*LGM*, 25), and a thief stole a chicken from the shrine of St.Sergius at Rustafa, where a woman had left it for safe keeping (*LGM*, 96). On a grander scale there was

plundering by armies (*LGC*, 12). Burgundians tried to plunder St.Julian's at Brioude, and Theuderic's men subsequently did the same (*LVSJ*, 7-8 and 13). Guntram's army ransacked the church of St.Vincent at Agen, where locals had taken their goods for safe-keeping (*LGM*, 104). And then there is just plain fraud: for instance a goldsmith substituted replicas for a solid gold gospel cover and patten (*LGC*, 62), while a priest used vinegar instead of good Gaza wine which had been offered by a widow to remember her husband in the celebration in the mass (*LGC*, 64).

Gregory's *miracula* are usually taken as an index of the miraculous: as an illustration of the power of the saints of Merovingian Gaul. They might equally well be taken as a set of crime figures, and as such they might show interesting regional variations. Sixteen of the 106 chapters of the *Liber in Gloria Martyrum* deal with theft, as do six of the 110 chapters of the *Liber in Gloria Confessorum*. Covering the whole of the christian world these figures tell us little. But compare the three chapters on theft out of the 207 chapters of the four books of the *Liber de Virtutibus sancti Martini* with the ten chapters on theft out of the 50 chapters of the *Liber de Virtutibus sancti Juliani*. This suggests that theft may have been more of a problem in the semi-rural world of Brioude than in the relatively more populous urban world of Tours: it may also tell us something of the policing of the respective shrines. It would thus be possible to look at the sins in Gregory's hagiography in much the same way as Alexander Murray has looked at those in the hagiography of the eleventh century.²⁹ The holy is not just pitted against disease and the demonic: it is also pitted against impious man.

It is time to return to face the question of "how popular was early medieval devotion?" more directly. Gregory clearly would like us to think that the power of the saints was manifested regularly throughout Gaul, and that many witnessed this power, particularly at the great feasts of the Church, although there were those who lacked appropriate reverence. It is possible that his picture is largely a piece of propaganda, and that he gives far too rosy a picture of belief. Even if he does not, the picture that he gives may be less optimistic and more nuanced than is often thought, and can be sketched as follows. The feasts of the church and of the saints drew considerable crowds, but this did not mean simple credulity; apparent sources of power had to prove their worth before they were officially recognised by the Church. Nor did Church recognition necessarily go hand in hand with secular enthusiasm, which could be greater or less than the clergy might have wanted. Moreover, there was more than a smattering of dissidents, who were prepared to face up to the hostility of their neighbours when they worked on holy days, and who were not convinced by the threats of divine punishment which Gregory himself regularly stressed. Some, among them clerics, were happy to risk perjury and to steal from supposedly sacred space.

As for the more committed believers, even they seem to have had limited resources of piety. In an interesting anecdote Gregory tells how a monk of Limoges arrived at the feast of St.Julian, but was unable even to enter the church. Disappointed he went back to his lodgings, and lay down to sleep, only to be visited immediately by an apparition, which told him that the shrine was now empty, as indeed it was, to the extent that the monk had access to the tomb of the martyr itself (*LVSJ*, 28). The service over, the faithful had gone off straight away. The scene is not so far from the festival of St.Justus described by Sidonius Apollinaris over a century earlier: after the early morning processions everyone went away to do whatever they wanted.³⁰ In the same generation as Sidonius, when bishop Mamertus planned his Rogation liturgy, which involved processions round the city of Vienne, he specifically thought up routes which would be attractive to the citizens.³¹ A generation later Caesarius of Arles would lock the church doors to make sure that people stayed for his sermons.³²

Looked at closely the evidence of Gregory of Tours brings us no nearer to an age of blind faith than does that of the great churchmen of the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Moreover, like St.Anskar faced with crises in 860, Gregory needed the miraculous to reassure himself: Ray Van Dam has noted how closely the miracles that affect Gregory personally are associated with periods of crisis in his own life: his decision to become a cleric; his election to the episcopate; the accusation that he had slandered queen Fredegund.³³ Gregory and Anskar needed psychological support on occasion, as no doubt did everyone. That they did so is not enough to make them credulous in the face of "miracles, relics and apparitions." Rather, we should recognise that individuals, even pious ones, negotiated between a host of ideologies--of which official Christianity was only one--to suit their own needs. While in recent years we have come to appreciate the power of the holy, we should also be aware that this was only one source of religious and psychological support in the early Middle Ages: there were plenty of alternatives, and the holy was not necessarily a source which was held in high esteem. With this in mind we can see that the *miracula* of Gregory of Tours provide an index of the limits of popular devotion even while describing the workings of the saints.

Notes

The following abbreviations are used throughout this essay:

LVSJ: *Liber de Virtutibus sancti Julianii*;

LVSM: *Liber de Virtutibus sancti Martini*;

LGC: *Liber in Gloria Confessorum*;

LGM: *Liber in Gloria Martyrum*.

MGH, SRM: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*

1. A. Momigliano, "Popular religious beliefs and the late Roman historians", in G.J. Cuming and D. Baker, ed., *Popular Belief and Practice: Studies in Church History* 8 (Cambridge, 1972), p. 18.

. Momigliano, "Popular religious beliefs and the late Roman historians", p. 17.

3. One might reasonably single out P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago, 1981). See also P. Brown, "Relics and social status in the Age of Gregory of Tours", in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London, 1982), pp. 239-40.

4. Momigliano, "Popular religious beliefs and the late Roman historians", p. 4.

5. Gregory, *Liber de Virtutibus sancti Martini*, 2, 1; 3, 60 (hereafter *LVSM*), ed., B. Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* 1, 2 (Hannover, 1885; hereafter *MGH, SRM*), trans. R. Van Dam, *Saints and their miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1993).

6. Gregory, *Liber in Gloria Martyrum*, 83, ed., B. Krusch, *MGH, SRM* 1, 2 (Hannover, 1885); trans. R. Van Dam, *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool, 1988), hereafter *LGM*.

7. C. Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 67-74.
8. *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, 5, 9, 19, ed. R. Rau, *Bonifatii Epistulae, Willibaldi Vita Bonifatii* (Darmstadt, 1968).
9. For a consideration of this issue within a pagan context see I.N. Wood, "Pagan religion and superstitions east of the Rhine from the fifth to the ninth century", in G. Ausenda, ed., *After Empire* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 253-268.
10. Brown, "Relics and social status in the Age of Gregory of Tours", p. 230.
11. R. Van Dam, *Gregory of Tours, The Glory of the Confessors* (Liverpool, 1988), pp. 12-3.
12. Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, II 9, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH, SRM* (Hannover, 1905).
13. Gregory, *Liber de Virtutibus sancti Juliani*, 45, ed., B. Krusch, *MGH, SRM*, 1, 2: trans. Van Dam, *Saints and their miracles in Late Antique Gaul*.
14. Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, 3, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940).
15. Gregory, *Liber in Gloria Confessorum* (hereafter *LGC*), 32, ed., B. Krusch, *MGH, SRM* 1, 2: trans. R. Van Dam, *Gregory of Tours, The Glory of the Confessors* (Liverpool, 1988).
16. See on this issue S. Reynolds, "Social mentalities and the case of medieval scepticism", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 1 (1991), pp. 21-41.
17. Brown, "Relics and social status in the Age of Gregory of Tours", p. 239.
18. E.g. P. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 95-124.
19. See I. N. Wood, "The Irish and social subversion in the Early Middle Ages", in *Irland, Gesellschaft und Kultur* VI, ed. D. Siegmund-Schultze (Halle, 1989), p. 267.
20. Anskar, *Miracula Willehadi*, 2, *Acta Sanctorum*, November III, pp. 847-91, and Anskar, *Miracula Willehadi*, 9.
21. Momigliano, "Popular religious beliefs and the late Roman historians," p. 17.
22. Even Gregory was aware that a saint's presence could not be relied on: Gregory, *LSVM*, 2, 25. See also Brown, "Relics and social status in the Age of Gregory of Tours", p. 248.
23. I.N. Wood, "Early medieval devotion in town and country", in D. Baker, ed., *The Church in Town and Countyside: Studies in Church History* 16 (Oxford, 1979), p. 64
24. *Pactus Legis Salicae*, 9, ed., K.A. Eckhardt, *MGH Legum Sectio 1, Leges Nationum Germanicarum* 4, 1 (Hannover, 1962).
25. *Liber Constitutionum*, 45, ed., L.R. de Salis, *Leges Burgundionum, MGH, Legum Sectio 1, Leges Nationum Germanicarum* 2 (Hannover, 1892).
26. See the discussion in I.N. Wood, "Disputes in late fifth- and sixth-century Gaul: some problems", in W. Davies and P. Fouracre, *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 15-18.
27. Gregory, *Libri Historiarum*, 4, 20; 5, 14; 7, 21, 29, 43; 8, 6; 10, 31, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *MGH, SRM* 1, 1 (Hannover, 1951).
28. The legislation is that of the *Codex Theodosianus*, 9, 45, 4, ed. T. Mommsen and M. Meyer (Berlin, 1904-5): the Code was, however, the law applicable in church cases in Merovingian Gaul.
29. A. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978), 135. Gregory, *LVSJ*, 28.
30. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. 5, 17., ed., A. Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire* (Paris, 1960-70).
31. Avitus, *Homilia in Rogationibus*, ed. R. Peiper, *MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi*, 6, 2 (Berlin, 1883).
32. *Vita Caesarii*, I, 27, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH, SRM* 3 (Hannover, 1896): trans. W.E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: Life, Testament, Letters* (Liverpool, 1994).
33. Van Dam, *Saints and their miracles in Late Antique Gaul*, pp. 50-81.