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Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul (review)

Peter J. Potter

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members may have been some of the more fanatical martyrs during the persecution of Diocletian. An English version of the apocalypse, an extensive bibliography, and indexes round out the book.

Frankfurter is a careful scholar, never claiming more for his evidence than it will bear. His use of literary genres and traditions in Egypt helps us understand the indigenous roots of later Egyptian Christianity and helps account for some of the unique features of that Christianity.

John O. Gooch, Nashville, Tennessee

Raymond Van Dam

Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993

Pp. xii + 349. Cloth, \$49.50; paper, \$16.95

A dozen years have passed since the publication of Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints*. Brown's book, of course, has been enormously influential in reviving scholars' interest in saints' cults and relics in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. And yet Brown called *The Cult of the Saints* an "essay in interpretation" and noted that he "left many books on the cult of the saints in late antiquity yet to be written." With this in mind, it is enlightening to read Raymond Van Dam's *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* with a copy of *The Cult of the Saints* close at hand. As one would expect, Van Dam readily acknowledges the importance of Brown's work. But what is perhaps more interesting is to consider (and marvel at) just how far the study of saints' cults has advanced in the twelve years since the publication of Brown's book.

Van Dam's focus is Gaul in the fifth and sixth centuries. This fact alone invites comparison with Brown's book. One of the central criticisms raised against *The Cult of the Saints* was that it makes sweeping statements about the function of saints' cults without making full allowance for geographical diversity and chronological change. Van Dam therefore limits his gaze to Gaul, pausing for a moment in the fifth century but settling down in the sixth century, where the writings of Gregory of Tours provide him ample room to work. It is indeed a delight to watch Van Dam work because he clearly finds great pleasure in the richness of late Roman and early Merovingian society. He is equally at home discussing culture, society, or politics, all of which he sees as the fertile soil from which saints' cults grew and flourished in Gaul. He also approaches saints' cults from several different interpretive perspectives in order to demonstrate their complexity and uncover the many different ways they could influence people's lives.

The book is divided into two distinct parts. The first part is descriptive and analytical, drawing primarily upon Gregory's writings.

The first chapter presents in-depth portraits of three different cults in Gaul—the cults of Martin, Hilary of Poitiers, and Julian. Through detailed narratives, Van Dam shows how each cult evolved in its own distinctive way. Martin's cult developed slowly, due in part to the bishops of Tours, who were reluctant to venerate an ascetic monk-bishop who might draw attention to their own inadequacies. Over

time, however, the bishops “domesticated” Martin and appropriated him for their own ends, so that by the sixth and seventh centuries Merovingian kings, fearing the power of Martin’s cult, kept their distance from Tours. In Poitiers, the cult of Hilary was slow to expand due to the presence of Queen Radegund, whose influence and rival collection of relics temporarily overshadowed Hilary. In Clermont, the episcopal seat of the Auvergne, the rural cult of Julian never acquired the status of Martin or Hilary despite the patronage of Gregory and others. Van Dam seems at a loss to explain why this should be so, other than to point to the simple fact that Julian faced stiff competition from other local saints, none of which Julian was ever quite able to displace. Thus, Van Dam makes an important point by juxtaposing these three cults. On the face of it, one might have expected them to follow parallel courses during this time when saints’ cults in general were expanding in the West. That they did not do so underlines the importance of understanding local variations before making sweeping generalizations about the “rise and function” of saints’ cults.

The second chapter shifts attention away from the cults toward those who venerated them. Through a skillful and ingenious reconstruction of the life and career of Gregory of Tours, Van Dam is able to breathe life into the dynamic relationship that existed between an aspiring churchman in the sixth century and his “extended family of saints.” Through Gregory, Van Dam shows how “durable relationships” with saints began in childhood and were never really lost. Gregory’s paternal connection with the saints of the Auvergne, for example, remained throughout his life so that whenever he passed through Clermont he would pay homage to Julian, whom he called his “own special patron.” When ill, he would also make pilgrimages to the shrines of particular saints. Van Dam suggests that Gregory even found in the saints substitutes for his father, who died when he was young. At the very least, one can easily see how Gregory and others in late antique Gaul might have imagined their surrounding landscape peopled by saints who held out to them the prospect of comfort, healing, and spiritual renewal. Thus, even when Gregory became bishop of Tours he still maintained close ties with several different saints, but it was Martin who took center stage. Van Dam brilliantly shows how Gregory’s success as bishop was inextricably tied to Martin, and how both bishop and saint benefited from their relationship. Gregory was successful in the arenas of royal and ecclesiastical politics, but Van Dam does not reduce him to an opportunist whose devotion to Martin could be explained simply in terms of power and authority. Instead Gregory emerges as a man of complex emotions and motives in whom “genuine affection” for the saints was not at all out of place.

The final two chapters of part 1 look more broadly at the social impact of cults on communities. Chapter 3 offers a refreshing reappraisal of illness and miraculous healing in the late antique world. Sidestepping tiresome biological or psychological approaches which explain, or explain away, a significant facet of late antique experience, Van Dam employs anthropological methods that focus on social experience and symbolic meaning. He considers how rituals of healing affect the community and the social hierarchy. Chapter 4, on pilgrimages to shrines, is more problematical. Using Gregory’s miracle stories from Tours, he identifies some 160 pilgrims who came to the shrines of St. Martin from known geographical origins

across Gaul. Taking this as a representative sample, he deduces the extent to which Martin's cult (and hence the ecclesiastical influence of the bishop of Tours) had spread in sixth-century Gaul. The findings are fascinating but it is hard not to question the representative nature of the sample. He ends chapter 4 by discussing Gregory's miracle stories. This serves as a nice transition to the second part of the book, which contains translations of miracle stories by Fortunatus (about the cult of Hilary of Poitiers) and by Gregory (about the cults of Martin and Julian). Thus, students and teachers should welcome this book because it supplements the corpus of texts from this period available in translation.

For this reviewer, the most compelling feature of this book is the overall impression of saints' cults that it ultimately leaves with the reader. In short, Van Dam moves away from, rather than toward, a unified picture of saints' cults. In the end, this is the most striking difference from Peter Brown's book. If in the past we thought of the "cult of the saints" as though it had recognizable contours and uniform functions, by the end of this book one nearly despairs of ever again being able to construct such a neat and universal picture. By dwelling on the ways in which local politics, culture, geography, and even individual personalities contributed to the uneven development of saints' cults in Gaul, Van Dam shows us their sheer "unpredictability." In the process, he has given us an unquestionably richer picture that can only enhance our understanding of the times. Consequently, one cannot help but develop a deeper appreciation for the people who revered these cults. They were multi-faceted people with complex motives who defy simple categorization. More studies like this one are needed. If Van Dam is right, they will only add to the marvelously complex picture he himself has begun to paint.

Peter J. Potter, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park