

Miraculous Mountains, Hole-y Shrines: Sacred Dust and Healing in Late Antiquity

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The physical consumption of holy material during the fifth and sixth centuries may strike a reader as a bit unusual, but the ingestion of inedible substances such as earth, clay, or even dust from a saint's tomb calls for more attention. In the context of a world adjusting to the rise of the cult of relics, these materials could be considered as a type of medicine imbued with spiritual power, either in the form of tokens fashioned at the site of Symeon Stylites' column in Syria or the tomb dust of saints in Gaul as described in the works of Gregory of Tours. With a focus on central Gaul, this article aims to examine the materiality, connections, and potential explanations for this practice.

Der physische Konsum heiliger Materialien im fünften und sechsten Jahrhundert mag einem Leser etwas ungewöhnlich erscheinen, aber die Einnahme ungenießbarer Substanzen wie von einem Heiligengrab stammende Erde, Ton oder sogar Staub verdient besondere Aufmerksamkeit. Im Kontext einer Welt, die sich an den Aufstieg des Reliquienkults anpasst, könnten diese Materialien als eine Art Medizin betrachtet werden, die mit spiritueller Kraft erfüllt ist, sei es in Form von Zeichen, die an der Säule des Symeon Stylites in Syrien gefertigt wurden, oder als Grabstaub von Heiligen in Gallien, wie es in den Werken von Gregor von Tours beschrieben wird. Mit einem Fokus auf Zentralgallien zielt dieser Artikel darauf ab, die Materialität, Verbindungen und möglichen Erklärungen für diese Praxis zu untersuchen.

1. Introduction

*This article is based on research from the MA thesis "Eat My Dust." See Lauren Baker. *Eat My Dust: Ingesting the sacred in the works of Gregory of Tours*, MA Thesis, CEU, Wien 2024 (online: https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/179qfpk/alma991003608052208861)

The consumption of holy tomb dust in Late Antiquity may strike a reader as being a little unconventional, and it was evidently just as unusual for most of the Mediterranean regions at that time. There are the only two locations before the sixth century that feature the ingestion of holy dust, whether it be scraped from the tomb of a dead Gallic saint, or a holy



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man living atop a pillar in Syria. The first is found in the works of Gregory of Tours, a sixth century bishop in Gaul, whose rich histories and hagiographies have helped to illuminate the social and religious worlds of the Merovingian period. The second is from the hagiographies of two Syrian holy men by the same name: Symeon Stylites, the Elder and the Younger, both of whose roles fixed them on top of a pillar where they lived for decades acting as an intermediary between God and man (the latter upon his “miraculous mountain,” the dirt of which was considered holy). But despite the differences in location, source, and figure, the practical elements of healing holy dust are remarkably similar.

This article aims to explore the relationship between a possible Syrian influence on the West’s growing interaction with relics, as well as other findings related to the tangible effects of burial sites in Gaul from which believers extracted holy dust from. In terms of materiality, it is impossible to know what this dust consisted of, and will rather be defined as any dust which the believer considered holy or miraculous (as indicated by the Latin *pulvis*). As a disclaimer, some of the early Christian writers discussed below likely used dust rhetorically, others used “dust” and “ashes” almost interchangeably, and others noted only the dust as a contact relic procured from a saint’s tomb. Because ashes are defined as the remains of a saint, they will not be the primary focus of this article (especially I have yet to find any evidence of ingestion). In addition, the dust – or perhaps more accurately, dirt or clay – from the base of Symeon the Younger’s pillar is included due to the direct comparison in the practice of mixing with water and consuming. Indeed, while the materiality would have been different between tomb dust and tokens formed from the clay at the base of Symeon’s pillar, it was treated in very similar ways.

Seeking an origin for the practical uses and treatment of holy dust is a difficult task. Very little exists in the Bible (with the exception of Christ healing a blind man with a mixture of saliva and dirt), and is therefore unlikely to be the source for either Gregory or Symeon’s hagiographies.¹ Instead, one might look to the evolving notions and practices of Christianity in the following centuries. A shift in the perception and frequency of miracles began in the fourth and fifth centuries: previously, miracles had been limited to biblical acts of Christ and his apostles, but as popular holy martyrs became saints, they too became the source of miracles.

This turn occurred during the rise of the cult of saints, a period in Late Antiquity during which the remains of saints, their shrines, and their contact items (such as a robe or staff) were considered to be imbued with miraculous holy power. During approximately the same period, texts of fourth and fifth century Christian writers began to include an increase in references to dust (both literally and metaphorically). The earliest mention of dust in this context is in a homily from Bishop Gregory of Nyssa in 380 stating that the pilgrims visiting the tomb of Theodore the Recruit were “allowed to take no more than some dust from outside his grave, and that this is already a powerful relic.”² Later, in the late fourth or early fifth century, the Poems of Paulinus of Nola present dust and ashes almost interchangeably, but his explicit use of the word *pulvis* makes these accounts relevant to this study. Despite the often metaphorical use of

1 John 9:1–7; for repeats of this practice in 15th century Ethiopia, see: Budge 1928.

2 Wiśniewski 2019, p. 132.

this term, the reality of this substance comes in the form of “increase miracles,” in which a holy substance overflows beyond its vessel in wondrous abundance (for example, oil from a lamp, dust from a saint’s tomb, or an altar holding the “the sacred ashes and fragrantly breath[ing] forth the power of the holy dust”).³

In the following decades, a heated early fifth century exchange erupted between Jerome of Stridon, an early Christian theologian, and Vigilantius, a Gallic clergyman, although only Jerome’s response remains in *Contra Vigilantium*. Evidently, Vigilantius had delivered harsh criticisms of relic veneration using what he describes as a “worthless bit of dust and ashes” to belittle and discredit remains of the dead, even going so far as to suggest that this behavior introduced idolatrous practices into the church.⁴ But Jerome was undeterred, and his response fell in line with the prevailing notion among the clergy that even the particle traces of a saint was “equal to that of an undivided martyr”.⁵ While there is a strong likelihood that the choice of words was rhetorical, it is also worth considering the possibility that Vigilantius’ position was the result of more literal changes in Gaul regarding how relics were being handled.

Finally, Augustine of Hippo and Lucian of Caphargamala in their writings describe the relics of Saint Stephen, whose cult gained popularity in the early fifth century. The former references “favours from the dust of the dead”, while the latter describes a more physical interaction: the soil with dust (*terram cum pulvere*) where Stephen had decomposed would be carried away by pilgrims as “great relics,” describing something very similar to Gregory of Nyssa’s account above.⁶ It would seem that the presence of “holy dust” was a recurring device; even if rhetorical, it was a familiar motif among Christian writers and had the potential to be interpreted more literally. As a healing substance, however, dust was not at this stage a catalyst for healing miracles; if any holy material was to cure the sick, it was the more traditional substances of holy oil and water.

2. Holy Dust in Gaul

Gregory of Tours would have been familiar with these above texts, and many more. His upbringing frames the context in which he became bishop: his family, aptly described by Raymond Van Dam as a “dynastic merger” of senatorial and ecclesiastical importance, was deeply entangled in Gaul’s religious landscape (especially in the Clermont area where Gregory spent his childhood and adolescence).⁷ Although highly unusual, his father kept a private relic collection which included an apotropaic amulet containing ashes of an unknown saint. His mother, who he maintained a close relationship with throughout his life, was particularly pious.

3 Paulin de Nole 1975, chaps. 19.395, 21.583–643; for more metaphorical descriptions, see chaps. 19.363, 21.583, 27.395.

4 Jerome of Stridon 1893, chap. 8.

5 Théodoret de Cyr 1958, pp. 10–11; Wiśniewski 2019, p. 194; Lappin 2018, p. 20.

6 Augustine 1990, sermo 317.1; Lappin, 2018, p. 146: “The sermon was clearly preached just after Stephen’s relics (just small packets of dust from the recently discovered tomb) had arrived, and been distributed throughout the African provinces,” and even more, that the presence of “little packets of dust from his recently discovered tomb in Palestine”. Wiśniewski 2019, p. 170.

7 Van Dam 1993, p. 55.

When Gregory had a vision as a child of how to heal his father's gout, she immediately carried out the instructions to the letter (with great results). As an adolescent, he witnessed exorcisms performed with the help of his grandfather's stick (who had been the Bishop of Langres; the stick was presumably for walking), and would later describe many of his family members as saints. With his education in the charge of his ecclesiastical uncles, Gregory chose to become a cleric himself at the age of thirteen, and by age twenty-five formally declared his relationship with Saint Martin (while continuing his studies in Clermont). It was only ten years later in 573 that Gregory became bishop of Tours, upon which he immediately began writing his *Life of Martin* which he continued throughout his tenure.⁸

While Gregory's hagiography of Martin is well-known among medievalists, there were three hagiographies written before his. The first is from the Gallic clergyman Sulpicius Severus, written in the early fifth century shortly after Martin's death in 397. Because Severus lived during the time of Martin, his accounts are mostly of the miracles performed during the saint's life, and leave little room for posthumous miracles. Another well-known *Vita Martinii* is by Venantius Fortunatus, a poet and contemporary of Gregory, who essentially presented a verse paraphrase of Severus' version. These texts showcase the living miracles of Martin, often performed through objects – such as a letter which cured a girl of fever, or the fringe of Martin's garment curing the sick.⁹ Martin himself would work miracles as well, such as curing an eye affliction with a paintbrush and a leper with a kiss.¹⁰ However, the only ingestion miracle is the use of holy oil poured into the mouth of a mute girl, thus reviving her.¹¹ Otherwise, there is no mention of dust nor medicinal substances in either of these texts.

However, there was another, more obscure hagiography of Martin from the fifth century by Paulinus of Périgueux, written at the behest of then-bishop Perpetuus of Tours. Books 1–5 of this text focus on Martin's life and miracles, but Book 6 makes an unprecedented departure into the realm of posthumous miracles occurring at his tomb. A most remarkable passage follows:

“The fortunate bishop Perpetuus, one who revered the Lord not only in name, and following in the footsteps of his gracious teacher, Martin, used to consecrate oil that had been brought to him with an unhesitating faith, in order that that famous spirit might bedew it, and a new air of a nearby grace might imbue it. When the venerable man wished to produce this remedy, and to make use of this good, well-known for

8 Due to the bounty of scholarship on Gregory of Tours' life, this article will limit his details according to relevance. For more information on Gregory and his world, see edited volumes *The World of Gregory of Tours* (Mitchel/Wood 2002) and *A Companion to Gregory of Tours* (Murray 2016).

9 Sulpitius [sic] Severus 1894a, chap. XVII: “[...] while his daughter was in agony from the burning fever of a quartan ague, inserted in the bosom of the girl, at the very paroxysm of the heat, a letter of Martin which happened to have been brought to him, and immediately the fever was dispelled.”; chap. XIX: “[...] threads from Martin's garment, or such as had been plucked from the sackcloth which he wore, wrought frequent miracles upon those who were sick.”

10 Sulpitius [sic] Severus 1894a, chap. XVII: “Martin touched his eye with a painter's brush, and, all pain being removed, thus restored it to its former soundness.” Ibid: “[...] he gave a kiss to a leper, of miserable appearance, while all shuddered at seeing him to do so.”

11 Sulpitius [sic] Severus 1894b, chap. 3.2: Martin “blesses a little oil, while he utters the formula of exorcism; and holding the tongue of the girl with his fingers, he thus pours the consecrated liquid into her mouth.”

all kinds of healings, he quickly scraped dust from the blessed marble (*abrasus propere benedicto e marmore pulvis*). When mixed with the holy oil this dust doubled the oil's powers, so that thus the besprinkled fluid's doubled potency, when touched, would increase faith; when shared, would increase health. But when indeed oil sensed the proximity of the scant grain, swift grace raised the level of the olive oil upon contact, and swelling in volume it boiled over and overflowed. In the sight of all the oil's abundant plenty grew when the bishop added the holy gift of the powder. Rising higher than the mouth of its container, the diffusion of oil moistened the outside of the flask. Yet nevertheless, the overflowing gift did not sustain loss. It both shot upwards, flowing, and yet was always replenished."¹²

This is the first mention of dust in all of the *Vitae Martinii*, and even better, was written a full century before Gregory. Moreover, Paulinus of Périgueux specifically states that the scraping of dust from the saint's tomb was "well-known for all kinds of healings" and attributes the dust itself as the cause of the miracle. This detail creates a link between popular practices in fifth century Gaul and Gregory's enthusiastic documentation of holy healing dust in the sixth century.

Gregory proudly confirms that he was familiar with the above hagiographies, even retelling in detail bishop Perpetuus of Tours' miracle of the dust and overflowing oil.¹³ But Gregory's *Life of Martin* is set apart by the fact that he focuses entirely on Martin's posthumous healing miracles and includes nothing about his life. Additionally, Gregory promotes healing miracles of sacred dust above all other holy substances at roughly 40 %, with more familiar substances such as holy oil or water trailing behind at 19 % and 13 % respectively. Even more unique is the means of use: of these miracles, tomb dust is overwhelmingly ingested as the default means of application. In fact, the ingestion of tomb dust as a recurring motif makes up over a third of all of Gregory's miracles involving a substance of any kind.



Fig. Remaining relic of Saint Martin's skull in Tours. Image provided by author.

¹² Mount 2015, chap. 6.8, lines 298–319.

¹³ Gregory Bishop of Tours 2015, Four books concerning the Miraculous Deeds of Saint Martin, chap. 1.2.

One may consider selfish motivations for Gregory's emphasis placed on Saint Martin's dust miracles, and it is possible that he sought to elevate his diocese, himself, or even his family. However, Saint Martin's basilica was already one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the West, and because his family already enjoyed both secular and ecclesiastical power, there is little reason that this miracle should be aligned with them, especially so far from their own territory. Moreover, while Saint Martin takes the lion's share of dust miracles, there are other dust-producing saint's tombs, and so the miracle is not confined to Gregory's domain. Finally, Gregory's upbringing in the church does not indicate that his presentation of miracle stories were insincere; his worldview was constructed around the figures and practices of his family and their connections to relics and miracles of healing. With these in mind, one can conclude that Gregory's faith in the power of miracles was genuine.

Considering the possibility of that Gregory's used of dust was influenced by early Christian magical practices is unavoidable, but research into these possible connections involving has revealed little connection.¹⁴ Another possible explanation for this phenomenon's popularity is that Gregory was taking extant pre-Christian practices and placing them in a Christian context. This is not an unreasonable conclusion; in the world of healing in sixth century Gaul, Gregory refers to what he describes as pagan "wizards" and "soothsayers" (individuals which today could more accurately be called natural healers). Pre-Christian practices in Gaul were alive and well in the form of fortune-telling, protective amulets, and healing practices, both in rural populations and urban aristocracies.¹⁵

Even Gregory unselfconsciously included himself among amulet users, but the difference for him was in the source of power: while natural healers called upon dangerous supernatural forces, a Christian amulet containing the relics of saints or tomb dust operated on holy power. But even in these descriptions of objects and practices which seemingly traverses both supernatural and Christian worlds, there is no account of anything that resembles the use of dust. As such, the ingestion of tomb dust cannot be explained as a Christianized local custom.

What on earth, one might ask, were these sick people consuming? The recipe for this miraculous tonic was usually a simple mixture of water and the dust scratched from the tomb of a saint. Although the materiality of other tombs across central Gaul is difficult to ascertain, the tomb of Saint Martin in Tours can at least be known with some certainty through the account of a new marble cover obtained for Martin's sarcophagus while bishop Perpetuus of Tours constructed his new basilica. Interestingly, marble's chemical composition is made mostly of calcium carbonate (CaCO₃), the active ingredient used in the production of antacids. This is an intriguing coincidence given that the most commonly associated afflictions treated with tomb dust were intestinal issues and fevers. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the amount of dust which could be quickly scratched from a solid slab of marble would have been enough to effectively treat intestinal problems – let alone Gregory's reports of

14 For more specifically on ancient Christian magical practices, see below as well as Meyer 1999.

15 For more on "pagan survivals" see Mitchell/Wood 2002, p. 233; Klingshirn 2020, p. 968; Filotas 2005, pp. 15, 27.

dysentery. As a topical cure for boils or blisters, its mixture with olive oil may have some amount of soothing effect, but this would have been attributed to the oil and not the dust. As for the rest, one can safely assume that the more miraculous dust cures for the possessed, blind, mute, deaf, or paralyzed would have been entirely faith-based.

The mechanism of healing was therefore of a spiritual nature, and in the broader world of healing in sixth century Gaul, Gregory presents saints' miracles at the top of a hierarchy above the natural healers and secular physicians. The advantage of saints was that they could heal not just the body but the soul, the root cause of physical maladies, and by performing penance, the afflicted could make their souls worthy of forgiveness and healing. Often the sick or disabled would physically attend the basilica, staying overnight or longer, and engage in any number of behaviors such as crying, prostrating before the tomb, and praying without ceasing. These were all spiritually cleansing and preparatory actions required for healing. As noted by Peter Brown,¹⁶ forces of good and evil permeated Gregory's world and manifested physically as correlated with an individual's sin – the physician could only treat the physical body, and soothsayers would invariably make the situation worse. It was only God's will, acting through a saint, which could successfully cure illness, disease, or disability.

However, holy dust was not bound by these rules, nor was its healing power conditional. Simple possession was enough to cure the sick, protect a traveler, or beat back a fire without any acts of penance required. This inconsistency creates a spectrum in Gregory's hagiographies: on one hand, the "patient" needed to meet requirements of behavioral acts in order to be worthy. On the other hand, the "medicine" did not even need to be obtained by the beneficiary; one could simply scratch a bit of dust from a saint's tomb to bring home and use on oneself, someone else, or just keep for later in case of emergencies. In the words of Valerie Flint, "Gregory of Tours administers tomb-dust in water rather as we do aspirin, and with a seemingly higher rate of success."¹⁷

3. Holy Dust in Syria

The materiality of holy dust varies a little more in the East, although its uses bear a striking resemblance. Outside of Syria, there are only two fourth century miracles involving dust: an individual by the name of Paphnouthios in upper Egypt is credited with the resurrection of a still-born baby using dust from the doorway of Apa Aaron (a living saint),¹⁸ and the miracles of healing and exorcism from the dust of Saint Cyprian described by Gregory of Nazianzus (an account particularly similar to Gregory of Tours').¹⁹ Otherwise, Syria offers the richest examples of holy dust used as medicine for both external and internal afflictions. As far back as the third century, the apocryphal Acts of Thomas delivers an early example of this substance as a healing contact relic in which King Mazdai took

¹⁶ Brown 1982, p. 232.

¹⁷ Flint 1989, p. 137.

¹⁸ Schenke 2014, CSLA E00144.

¹⁹ Rizos 2016, CSLA E00966.

dust from where an apostle had laid and used it to cure his son.²⁰ Additionally, a fifth century account from Bishop Theodoret of Cyrus includes a description of a hill on which the ascetic James lived, which became so blessed that it drew pilgrims far and wide to collect the earth of this hill and use it as *prophylactica*.²¹

But even by then, a far more influential figure had emerged: Symeon Stylites the Elder, a stylite perched atop a pillar serving the spiritual needs of his community as an intermediary between earth and heaven. In addition to spiritual support, stylites were also sought out for worldly issues – including illness or other maladies – and who frequently answered these pleas with miracles in the forms of words, visions.²² In contrast to Gregory’s accounts in which individuals could simply collect tomb dust and use as needed, the dust and earth at the base of Symeon’s pillar was formed into tokens pressed with the image of the saint and his column, forming a small medallion. These tokens are an example of *eulogia* (“blessing” in Greek). If used topically, the token could be simply placed on the source of pain, or otherwise scratched and mixed with water to form a type of clay which could be rubbed on the afflicted area. For internal issues, the token could be again scratched into water and drunk – remarkably similar to Gregory’s use of holy dust, even down to its association with digestive issues.²³ It is difficult to know the true materiality of these substances, but studies on nearby soil compositions and lake bed core samples can offer some insight on what this miracle substance may have been made of. The elder Symeon’s column was located in Aleppo, which features soil composed mostly of loam and loam clay, but also contained a high amount of calcium carbonate (likely due to the limestone in the soil).²⁴ Unfortunately, while the connection between calcium carbonate of the marble tomb and the “miraculous mountain” of Symeon the Elder might seem like a dazzling coincidence, it must be noted that this substance is one of the most common raw materials found in nature. Regardless, the practice of producing and dispersing tokens at the site of the stylite’s column clearly continued on from the Elder to the Younger, as evidenced by the 40–50 “terracotta” tokens which can be traced to his miracle site.²⁵ The same practice continued on with the sixth century Symeon the Younger, who would have been the most familiar to Gregory during his lifetime, whose holy dust found at his so-called Miraculous Mountain near Antioch (specifically modern day Samandağ in Turkey).

A 2017 study on lake sediments in Amik Lake (approximately 60 km north of modern Samandağ) yields evidence of silty and laminated clay interspersed veins of red clay between the first century AD and end of the fifth century. Specifically, the clays found during this period were composed of smectite (otherwise known as bentonite), kaolinite, and illite, in descending order of percentage.²⁶ A secondary publication from 2011 explores the medicinal uses of french green clay (Fe-smectite) as

20 Klijn 2003, p. 250–251.

21 Vikan 1984, p. 68.

22 Vikan 1989, p. 56; Vikan 1984, p. 68.

23 Vikan 1989 p. 56.; Lent 1915, p. 128: “‘Put some of that dust in it in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and give to him to drink.’ And immediately when he drank of that water, our Lord gave him deliverance.”

24 Al-ghajar 2022, p. 317.

25 Lafli/Buora 2020, p. 415.

26 El Ouahabi et al. 2017, fig. 2 and 3.

a topical agent, revealing antibacterial properties,²⁷ and the health food crowd may recognize both bentonite and kaolin clay from the beauty and wellness shelves as an all-purpose skin remedy. Bentonite clay has been used to treat gastrointestinal issues by increasing gut flora.²⁸ As it was associated with both skin and gastrointestinal treatments, it is indeed possible that the tokens of Symeon the Elder, scratched and mixed with water, could have had beneficial health results for those seeking treatment. In either case, this specific mixture of holy dust or clay with water, which might also contain holy oil, earth, or saint's ashes was apparently familiar enough to necessitate its own word; *hnana*, translated to “grace,” is a term found not just in the hagiographies of Symeon the Elder, but also in a fifth-century description of Bishop Maruta of Maipherqat wherein the mixture was used to treat the sick.²⁹ Along with these tokens, small apotropaic flasks containing oil or water were also made and distributed at the site of Symeon's column.³⁰ Interestingly, while Symeon the Elder was described accurately and by name in Gregory's hagiographies, Symeon the Younger never got his own chapter. Rather, Gregory's knowledge is revealed in the tale of a budding stylite in Gaul who was chastised by local bishops telling him “Such an obscure person as you can never be compared with Simeon the Stylite of Antioch!”³¹ Another giveaway of Gregory's familiarity with eastern practices is his description of the luminous ground surrounding Christ's tomb in Jerusalem, where pilgrims would sprinkle the earth with water and use it to form “tiny [clay] tokens” which could be used to cure ill people.³² These are certainly not coincidences – Gregory was informed of eastern practices through Syrian merchants, communities, and individuals in Gaul. In fact, a Syrian by the name of Johannes helped Gregory translate the tale of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, which had never before been translated into Latin. There is no question that Gregory had awareness and relationships with Syrian communities.

Although this might explain Gregory's familiarity, as well as a confirmation of sixth century Syrian presence in Gaul, it does not explain Paulinus of Périgueux's dust miracle in the century prior. However, looking back to the fifth century, there are many indicators that Syria had an impact on Gaul through trade and pilgrimage. This period saw an increase in trade between East and West, and we see later evidence of ecclesiastical figures sending clerics to the East or going on pilgrimage themselves – supported by the presence of Abu Minas flasks found along trade routes from Marseilles to Normandy.³³ Though these flasks are from fifth century Egypt, they indicate not only that pilgrims were returning home with them, but, as Harris³⁴ suggests, the pilgrims may have been traveling alongside merchants and likely sharing transportation, especially considering that the observable contents of the flasks were similar to those distributed at Symeon's column (usually oil or water). The

27 Williams/Haydel, 2010, p. 745

28 Moosavi 2017, p. 1178.

29 Larson-Miller 1992, p. 234.

30 Vikan 1989, p. 55.

31 Gregory Bishop of Tours 1974, chap. 8.15. These bishops would then proceed to knock this column down once the would-be stylite had descended.

32 Gregory Bishop of Tours 1988b, p. 6.

33 Harris 2003, pp. 68, 136.

34 Harris 2003, p. 136.

Syrian communities present in Gregory’s histories appear to be solidly established in their towns and cities, especially in Orleans in which “the speech of the Syrians contrasted sharply with that of those using Gallo-Roman and again with that of the Jews, as they each sang his praises in their own tongue”.³⁵ Additionally, a direct remark from fifth century Gallic writer Salvian of Marseilles expresses annoyance about “crowds of Syrian merchants who have occupied the greater part of nearly all cities”.³⁶ Considering this, it is not unreasonable to imagine that as Syrians settled in Gaul, they brought along spiritual notions and practices which might have influenced their surrounding communities.

4. Connections and Analysis

In an effort to find a connection between miracle sites outside of Tours and the East-West trade routes of the fifth century where Syrians may have built communities, the evidence is so scarce that a firm relationship cannot be established. However, placing the sites of other dust-giving tombs on a map does offer something of interest: while Saint Martin was the main provider of tomb dust, the tomb itself is never described as exhibiting the effects of common use, such as marks resulting from scratching or scraping. It would seem in the accounts of Martin’s dust, entry was limited only to those tombs that Gregory would grant access to (often other members of the clergy or nobility) with the exception of just one woman from his parish. For a tomb which delivered so many miracles through its dust, one would imagine a proud report from Gregory describing proof of use.

He does, however, describe pock-marks and perforations in 17 other sites of healing dust, indicating consistent and long term community use outside of Tours. Three of these are from the tombs of Jesus, Andrew the Apostle, and John the Evangelist, but because their inclusion was most likely intended to couch this specific miracle in the biblical world, they will not be included in this analysis. The remaining tombs are in Autun (1), Bourges (1), Brioude (2), Clermont (1), Cologne (1), Lyons (5), Trézelles (2), and Paris (1) – all of which are in Gaul. Nine of these miracles feature ingestion of dust, one of them features topical application, and three do not specify the means of healing. Out of these nine, there are four sites with descriptions of extensive use.³⁷

Although the first is not a tomb, the cell of the fifth century hermit Lupicinus functioned effectively the same way. This saint engaged in such a degree of self-mortification by hanging a stone from his neck that he would cough blood and saliva onto the walls, which after his death was scratched and collected by pilgrims or locals seeking to take away a healing relic. This wall was described by Gregory as having “as many little holes as it had merited drops of spittle from the mouth of the blessed man,” and stating further that he had seen its healing effects personally.³⁸

35 Gregory Bishop of Tours 1974, chap. 8.1.

36 Salvian 2008, p. 115.

37 For a detailed spreadsheet of all substances miracles found in Gregory’s texts, please reference the link in the appendix of Baker 2024. A direct link is also hosted on Mega and available here: <https://mega.nz/file/mLxFmIbb#j2mAdlpYoFLQtSI-EFFbiQU-tVuBoPCGbEFLomUNYnk>.

38 Gregory Bishop of Tours 2007, chap. 13.2.

The next two, fourth century Cassianus of Autun and fifth century Theomastus of Mainz, were both bishops. The tomb of Cassianus had been “scratched by many ill people and was thought at that time to have been almost perforated”,³⁹ and the tomb of Theomastus, located just to the north of Trézelles, provided dust which if ingested could relieve toothaches and fevers, offering a “blessing sought so constantly that already the sarcophagus appears to have been perforated in one spot”.⁴⁰ The last case is of a fifth century monk, Alexander of Clermont, whose dust was also ingested for healing and was “sought so often that [the tomb] seems to spectators to have been perforated because of the constant profit of these benefits”.⁴¹

Something these four sites have in common is that they are all clustered in the approximate area of the Auvergne where Gregory grew up. Another is that they were easily accessible by the public, as opposed to the regulation necessary due to the number of pilgrims who visited Saint Martin’s Basilica. Lupicinus’ cell was tucked away in the old walls of a small village, available to anyone who wished to visit; Cassianus’ tomb was in a cemetery; and the tombs of Alexander and Theomastus were both located in church courtyards. Although there is no way to know for sure when these tombs were established, it may be noted that these saints were from the fourth and fifth centuries, placing them in alignment with many of the other shifts regarding relics and increased east-west relationships. Because there likely would not have been anything to stop a civilian from claiming this miracle of health, pockmarks developed in the decades (if not a full century) following their construction. At least by the time of Gregory’s writing, this was evidently an established practice in central Gaul.

The element of ingestion is more elusive, and one might consider the possibility that it was an invention of Gregory, inspired by local Syrian communities and relationships. He does not describe his family members eating or drinking anything miraculous to treat their various maladies, nor does he make note of any familiarity with the locations of the above four saints. Moreover, Paulinus of Périgueux’s first account of dust in his *Life of Martin* only acknowledges its health benefits, but does not elaborate on if it was administered externally or internally. But considering that Gregory’s first mention of ingesting dust as medicine happened immediately upon becoming bishop, as seen in book one of his *Life of Martin* (written very likely before he had any reason to work with Syrian translators for eastern miracles), plus the positioning of the perforated tombs in the area of Gregory’s home territory, this practice may have been common knowledge. Indeed, in his *Life of Julian*, he recalls that even as a deacon traveling with his family, he had instructed a sick servant to use dust from the tomb of Julian to create the same remedy. With this evidence, it is likely that the ingestion was already established in the practice of dust miracles and not attributable to Gregory, and in fact, the practice of ingesting holy dust may have not been unusual at all.

Although it is difficult to support a direct connection between Syria and Gaul, the fact that the fifth and sixth centuries saw increased trade,

³⁹ Gregory Bishop of Tours 1988a, chap. 77.

⁴⁰ Gregory Bishop of Tours 1988a, chap. 52.

⁴¹ Gregory Bishop of Tours 1988a, chap. 35.

pilgrimage, and growing Syrian communities in Gaul all suggest that eastern practices may have subtly influenced regional Christian traditions in the West. The timing and evidence provided above indicate that collecting and ingesting dust from saints' tombs likely emerged during the fourth and fifth centuries (at least sometime before Paulinus of Périgueux's first dust miracle of Saint Martin) and had been a familiar practice in central Gaul long before Gregory began his first writings. This period in Late Antiquity was an inflection point for how Christians would begin interacting with relics in new ways – even as a practical medicinal substance – and combined with even slight external influence could lead to the possibility of new traditions taking shape organically in certain regions.

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