CHAPTER 11

Gregory of Tours, Hagiography, and the Cult of the Saints in the Sixth Century

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11.1 Introduction

Just before he had assumed his post as bishop of Tours in 573, Gregory came down with dysentery. He wrote of the ordeal at the beginning of his second book on Martin's miracles. The account points to the interplay of illness and change. His leaving the Auvergne, his new ecclesiastical status, the sudden proximity of death, and an enlivened sense of moral inadequacy meet in sickness. As one commentator has noted, infirmity tended to strike this cleric during times of transition.2 Despite his distinguished ancestry, vulnerability rather than privilege is conveyed in the description of the person who was about to assume one of Gaul's prized metropolitan sees. Indeed, the autobiographical

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1 On the date of the ordination, shortly before the end of August, see Krusch, MGH SRM 1.1, 2nd ed., xi, and Raymond Van Dam, Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul (Princeton, 1993), 228 n. 49. As for the compositional dates of the VM’s four books, see the conflicting positions cited by Van Dam, ibid., 199 n. 2; more recently, and with attention to the problems in modern scholarship regarding the dating of Gregory’s works: Alexander Callander Murray, “Chronology and the Composition of the Histories of Gregory of Tours,” Journal of Late Antiquity 1/1 (2008), 157–196 (especially, 162 for the dating of VM 1); and see Shaw, above, ch. 4.

2 Van Dam, Saints, 91: “His entrance into and then his promotion up the ecclesiastical hierarchy neatly corresponded to a sequence of illnesses.” I am greatly indebted to the rich discussion Van Dam gives to introduce his translations of Gregory’s miracula.
opening discounts Gregory’s agency in his acquiring of the position. It was
divine assistance, not his deservedness (“non meo merito”), that got him
selected. In pinpointing his unworthiness for ecclesiastical advancement,
Gregory cited his moral foulness (“conscientia teterrimus”) and the pervasive-
ness of his sins (“peccatis obvolutus”). Of course, besides God’s help, he could
have mentioned as well the assistance of Frankish royalty in his questionable
elevation to the episcopal rank.3 But even if Gregory had a clear conscience
regarding the role of political connections in his unexpected promotion, we
would be mistaken to take the remark about his corruption as a token of false
contriteness. Sin was as real to Gregory as dysentery.

When the symptoms hit, the bishop was at a villa, not yet settled in to the
episcopal residence of his see. With him, as the disorder was running its course,
were a doctor named Armentarius and an anonymous deacon. Unable to eat,
feverish, and with piercing intestinal pain, he first tried medicinal treatment.
It was of no use. On the verge of death, a point mentioned three times, he asked
the deacon to obtain dust from Saint Martin’s tomb. What happened next is
typical for this collection of texts:

He brought back some of the sacred dust that they mixed [in water] and
gave me to drink. As soon as I drank it all the pain vanished, and I received
my health from the tomb. The assistance available at the tomb was so
effective that after this [cure] had occurred at the third hour, on the same
day at the sixth hour I was healthy and went for a meal. (VM 2.1)4

To frame the present inquiry, let us ask a basic though not easily answerable
question. It is the sort of question that has worn thin. Nonetheless, it deserves
to be posed for the sake of those coming fresh to Gregory’s hagiography as
well as those already familiar with it, since the answer registers how far we
have come in our approach, while also suggesting directions in which to go.5
The question is this: how should we handle an account in which the narrator
asserts that the ingestion of saintly tomb dust saved his life? The first step in

3 On the canonical irregularities of Gregory’s consecration and the likely delay in taking his
post, see Edward James, The Origins of the France: From Clovis to the Capetians 500–1000
(London, 1982), 51; Van Dam, Saints, 62–64; Ian Wood, “The Individuality of Gregory of Tours,”
in The World of Gregory of Tours, (eds.) Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden, 2002), 43;
idem, Gregory of Tours (Bangor, 1994), 8–11.
4 Translations of the VM are from Van Dam’s Saints, which follow the section numbers of
Krusch’s Latin edition.
5 See Peter Brown, “Gregory of Tours: Introduction,” in The World of Gregory of Tours, (ed.)
Mitchell/Wood (Leiden, 2002), 1.