

Saints and their Communities

*Miracle Stories in
Twelfth Century England*

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ODCC *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford, 1997).

PL *Patrologia Latina*.

PP *Past and Present*.

PR *Pipe Roll*.

PRS *Pipe Roll Society*.

PSLA *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*.

RR4-N *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066–1154*.

RR4-N W1 *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066–1087*, ed. D. Bates (Oxford, 1998).

RS *Rolls Series*.

SCH *Studies in Church History*.

VCH *Victoria County History*.

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Introduction

Miracles were a ubiquitous feature of medieval Christian culture. We might even say, following a strict Augustinian line, that there could be no Christian society without the miraculous. God's creation of the world and Christ's resurrection were the supreme miracles that provided the occasion for man's existence and his hope for salvation after he ceased to exist.¹ In addition to those miracles of the scriptures which 'testify to that one supreme miracle of salvation', St Augustine took pains to emphasize that 'even now miracles are being performed either by his sacrament or by the prayers or the memorials of his saints'.² Augustine saw the saints as enjoying a particular role in boosting the Christian faithful with a reminder of God's power, manifest in the form of miracles. To illustrate this point, he included in his *City of God* a collection of miracles he had had related to him or that he himself had witnessed, associated with the recently discovered relics of St Stephen the protomartyr.³

The subsequent discussion and recording of miracles in a variety of narrative sources throughout the medieval period testifies to their universal acceptance as a fundamental aspect of religious belief and practice. Through miracles the personal and communal aspects of Christian identity merged. In the medieval Christian experience of everyday life a miracle was always potentially a place of resort. An aspect of the twelfth-century growth in learning was the colonization of the miraculous by what we would recognize as more rational procedures of inquiry into knowledge. In other words, the natural gained ground on the

¹ B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000–1215* (Aldershot, 1982, 1987), 3.

² St Augustine, *The City of God*, tr. H. Bettenson (London, 1972), 21.8, 1034.

³ *Ibid.* 1035–47; and for the discovery of St Stephen's relics by a priest called Lucian in 415, see ODCC, 1540.

supernatural as a mode of explanation.⁴ Despite this development, and the alternative explanations it offered for experiences hitherto categorized as miraculous, medieval scholars and the societies they represented in writing never accepted the redundancy of the miraculous as a mental category as did later European intellectual communities. Twelfth-century England was no exception to this observation.

My introduction aims to delimit the field of my inquiry into the miraculous and to describe a number of important themes that inform my interpretation of the material. I will deal in turn with a number of issues related to the sources, historiography, theory, and methodology associated with the subject of the miraculous in twelfth-century England. The aims are threefold: to locate my study in relation to other works on the material relevant to my chosen period; to situate my own findings within their proper historical and functional contexts; and to explore the opportunities for writing a social history of the miraculous using the insights of other academic disciplines, namely anthropology and social theory.

Miracles were primarily shared experiences. The historian's fate is to encounter them in writing. This simple insight informs my study. Its implications will be discussed below. The miraculous appears in all kinds of written material of the period. Chronicles, annals, theological treatises,⁵ and anthologies of *exempla* produced for preaching purposes⁶ all to a greater or a lesser extent dealt in the currency of the miraculous, despite falling outside the sub-genres of hagiography with which it is primarily associated. The sources chosen for this study are collections of miracle narratives associated with the relics of saints enshrined at the heart of monastic communities. To make the material more manageable, and to allow space for more detailed discussion, I have chosen six cults and the twelfth-century miracle collections they produced. These are, chronologically, the cult of St Edmund at Bury, the relic tour of the canons of St Mary of Laon, the cults of St Ithamar of Rochester, St William of Norwich, St Frideswide, and the cult of the hand of St James at Reading. Each is treated as a case study taking up one chapter.

⁴ B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 4-9.

⁵ See Guibert de Nogent, *De Pignoribus Sanctorum*, ed. J.-P. Migne, PL 156 (Paris, 1853), cols. 607-80.

⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. J. Strange, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1851).

These collections predominantly document miracles that took place after the death of the saint with whom they are associated. Such posthumous miracles, like those recorded as occurring during the life of the saint, were witness to the sanctity of the saintly subject. Posthumous miracles do not appear exclusively in miracle collections; they occur also in monastic chronicles and are appended to accounts of saints' lives. They were included in accounts of a saint's translations as authoritative signs of the sanctity of the newly enshrined saint. They did so by equipping the saint with the miraculous qualifications of sanctity as conventionally defined in hagiographical literature.⁷ They also affirmed the saint's contentment with his (or her) new surroundings and custodians.

Posthumous miracles were also intended to draw attention to saints and the terms by which their heavenly patronage might be sought. In this task, hagiographers enjoyed scope to observe and document ritual engagements and to hear oral accounts of the laity's engagements with an enshrined saint. It is this attention to these local circumstances that makes posthumous miracles a potentially rewarding subject for the study of religious communities and practices. This book has two basic aims. First, it explores how these narratives served the spiritual and material needs of their authors. Secondly, it aims to explore to what extent they reveal forms of creative engagement with relics extending beyond the institutional and intellectual loyalties of their authors.

Before attempting to address questions of context and function specifically related to my chosen case studies, some general discussion of the history of saints' shrines in the century or so after the Norman Conquest of England is needed. The relative paucity of miracle collections for the late Anglo-Saxon period makes it difficult to present a detailed survey of the cult of saints' relics prior to the conquest. The hagiography of the period tended to be literary and limited geographically to the more important monastic institutions.⁸ In this scholars have found contrasts with the Celtic churches of Wales, Ireland and Brittany. John Blair has

⁷ See P. Morison, 'The Miraculous and French Society, 950-1100' (Oxford D. Phil. thesis, 1983), 18, for the view that miracles *in vita* served the rhetorical needs of a 'notoriously stereotyped genre'. See also R. Bartlett, 'Rewriting Saints' Lives: The Case of Gerald of Wales', *Speculum*, 58 (1983), 598, for the more optimistic opinion that 'Saints' lives were both part of a genre of immense longevity and the products of individual circumstances and environments'.

⁸ *Hagiographies*, 4 vols., ed. G. Philipart (Turnhout, 1994-), 216-17.

recently questioned this convenient categorization that may have more to do with outdated notions of early medieval Celtic and Anglo-Saxon churches than with what a closer reading of the evidence might suggest. Blair has made a good case, so far as the evidence will permit, for the dynamic and diffuse nature of Anglo-Saxon saints' cults. He emphasizes the similarities between them and their western counterparts in terms of their folkloric content, and associations not simply with centrally administered shrines but with features on the landscape and with popular oral traditions.⁹

Hagiography in the decades after the Norman Conquest accounted for a great deal more parchment than in the late Anglo-Saxon period. Saints' *vita*e, liturgical material, and accounts of translations as well as collections of miracle narratives all expanded and diversified the existing corpus of English hagiography. Those most responsible for this new body of writing were the Benedictine monasteries. The tenth-century Benedictine reform movement had already made use of saints' cults to secure their symbolic capital and attract material patronage.¹⁰ Benedictine monasticism remained at the forefront of cult promotion for the century and a half after the Conquest.

The increase in hagiographical production has been traditionally attributed to Norman scepticism towards the Anglo-Saxon saints. Successive generations of English religious communities, it was thought, were happy to accept and commemorate the sanctity of the bones of dubious provenance that surrounded them. In contrast, the newly installed Norman abbots and bishops, as part of a wider programme of reform and spring cleaning of the Anglo-Saxon church, questioned this English credulity and sought firmer grounds for the retention of certain relics. Inquiries into the lives of the saints or even the ritual consignment of saints' relics to the ordeal of fire were methods used for this purpose.¹¹

⁹ John Blair, 'A Saint for Every Minster?', in A. Thacker and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), 455–94.

¹⁰ See A. Thacker, 'Saint-Making and Relic Collecting by Oswald and his Communities', in N. Brooks and C. Cubitt (eds.), *St Oswald of Worcester: Life and Influence* (London, 1996), 244–68, idem, 'Aethelwold and Abingdon', in B. Yorke (ed.), *Bishop Aethelwold: His Career and Influence* (Woodbridge, 1988), 59–63, and Wulfstan of Winchester, *Vita S. Aethelwoldi*, ed. M. Lapidge and M. Winterbottom, in *Wulfstan of Winchester: The Life of St Aethelwold* (Oxford, 1991).

¹¹ *Acta Proborum Virorum*, ed. W. D. Macray, *Chronicon Abbatiae de Evesham ad Annum 1418*, RS 29 (London, 1863), 323–4. And see D. J. A. Matthew, *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1966), 202–5 for Walter of Caen at Evesham.

Those relics whose authenticity were tested and found wanting were discarded or relegated to inaccessible positions in the new Anglo-Norman church buildings, and dropped from liturgical calendars.¹² The hero or villain of the piece, depending on whether the episode is seen as necessary reform or regrettable suppression, was Archbishop Lanfranc, whose doubt over the sanctity of St Elphege is most vividly portrayed by Eadmer in his *Vita S. Anselmi*.¹³

More recent reviews of the evidence have qualified this view of Norman scepticism. The prodigious output of hagiography in the late eleventh century by specialist journeymen of the genre, such as Goscelin of St Bertin¹⁴ or by house historians like Eadmer and Osbern of Canterbury,¹⁵ led Susan Ridyard to suggest that too negative an interpretation of the historical circumstances has prevailed. Ridyard noted that 'in terms of both publicity and veneration, the Norman Conquest was perhaps one of the better things ever to happen to the saints of the Anglo-Saxons'.¹⁶ If they were nostalgic for the Anglo-Saxon past, English monastic communities must have been painfully aware that their saints had failed to see off the Norman invaders and their novel customs. At the same time, the Norman ecclesiastics did not disdain the relics of the Anglo-Saxons for long before realizing the opportunity they presented 'in the definition both of [their religious communities'] internal relations and of their relations with external secular and ecclesiastical powers'.¹⁷

Since Ridyard's article it has been suggested that Archbishop Lanfranc was reluctant to cultivate St Dunstan's and St Elphege's patronage for reasons other than scepticism. Rather he sought to shift attention from the tombs of Anglo-Saxon saints to the central symbols of the Christian Church, Christ and the Eucharist.¹⁸ In fact, in his *Vita S. Dunstani*,

¹² R. W. Southern, *St Anselm and his Biographer* (Cambridge, 1963), 263–7.

¹³ Eadmer of Canterbury, *Vita S. Anselmi*, ed. R. W. Southern, *The Life of St Anselm by Eadmer*, 2nd edn. (London, 1972), 50–54.

¹⁴ For Goscelin's oeuvre see *Hagiographica*, iii, 225–33, and for an important review of the contexts informing the conventions his work adopted see P. A. Hayward, 'Translation Narratives in Post-Conquest Hagiography and English Resistance to the Norman Conquest', *A-NS* 21 (1999), 73–85.

¹⁵ S. J. Ridyard, 'Conspicua Veneration: Post-Conquest Attitudes to the Saints of the Anglo-Saxons', *A-NS* 9 (1987), 206.

¹⁶ Ibid. 205.

¹⁷ J. C. Rubenstein, 'The Post-Conquest Hagiography of Christ Church, Canterbury' (Oxford M.Phil. thesis, 1991), 131–6; and see idem, 'Liturgy Against History: The Compelling Visions of Lanfranc and Eadmer of Canterbury', *Speculum*, 74 (1999), 279–309.

Osbern took especial care to portray his subject as an important spiritual support to Lanfranc in his tasks of reforming the monks and recovering monastic land from Odo of Bayeux.¹⁹ A recent detailed review of the liturgical evidence has also failed to deliver any substantial proof of a deliberate and systematic Lanfrancian purge of the Anglo-Saxon Calendar,²⁰ as has been traditionally claimed.

Whilst some relics undoubtedly fell by the wayside, others had their status within monastic communities revived and bolstered by new literary commissions. Norman abbots and bishops at reformed houses like Ely, Bury St Edmunds, St Albans, and Abingdon adopted the Anglo-Saxon saints with a 'businesslike readiness to make the heroes of the past serve the politics of the present'.²¹ New texts commemorating old saints became an important part of the Norman reorganization of the English church.

The large hagiographical output for the post-Conquest period was thus part of a process of cultural and political assimilation between English monastic communities and those Norman ecclesiastics installed to positions of authority over them. The spiritual patronage offered by Anglo-Saxon saints provided, in the words of a historian of early medieval France, 'a justification for authority, a rationale for power, and an issue around which social support could be mobilized'.²² It was an enterprise that lent continuity and stability to a phase of history accelerated by the events of 1066.²³ It was an important, if sometimes torrid, exercise in cooperation and conciliation that allowed the English to invent and celebrate a past that featured their spiritual heroes intervening powerfully in society and provided the Normans with the opportunity to consolidate their positions within their new institutions and within wider society.²⁴ This rediscovery of the past, as such processes invariably

¹⁹ N. Ramsey and M. Sparks, 'The Cult of St Dunstan at Christ Church, Canterbury', in N. Ramsey, M. Sparks, and T. Tanton-Brown (eds.), *St Dunstan: His Life, Times and Cult* (Woodbridge, 1992), 311–23.

²⁰ R. W. Pfaff, *Liturgical Calendars, Saints, and Services in Medieval England* (Aldershot, 1998), 108.

²¹ Ridyard, 'Contingua Veneratio', 205. Ridyard also studied Malmesbury, Durham, Evesham, and Canterbury.

²² P. Fouracre, 'The Origins of the Carolingian Attempt to Regulate the Cult of Saints', in J. Howard-Johnson and P. A. Hayward (eds.), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford, 1999), 165.

²³ Chapter 2, on the cult of St Edmund at Bury, illustrates these themes in more detail.

²⁴ Hayward, 'Translation Narratives', 89–93.

did, allowed a degree of invention that obscures our view of the late Anglo-Saxon cult of saints.²⁵ As discussed above, John Blair has recently given us an interesting and unexpected glimpse of the circumstances that prevailed prior to the Conquest. Over the next century the cult of saints came more under the central organization of high-status Benedictine religious institutions.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

One of the most vivid features of the post-Conquest cult of saints' relics was that its popular dimensions attracted the attention of hagiographers more than ever before. Along with the liturgical commemoration of saints and the inquiries commissioned into their lives, the ritual translation of saints to accessible spaces within the great new cathedrals and monastic churches was clearly intended to publicize the presence of saints to wider audiences than those of the monasteries and cathedral priories.

Two landmarks provide our most significant views of the historical landscape of twelfth-century, shrine-based miracle-working in England. Neither of them fully accounts for the phenomenon of posthumous miracle-working, the characteristics of which will be discussed below. Both in different ways, however, set trends in the management and promotion of saints' shrines for others to follow. The first of these events occurred in the week of the 8–13 September 1091. The venue was St Augustine's, Canterbury; the occasion the translation of the first six abbots of the monastery to custom-built shrines at the east end of the new abbey.²⁶ The scale of the ceremony and the crowds of lay people involved in it distinguished the event from any translation preceding it for some time in England.²⁷ It marked a trend in translations at monasteries and cathedral priories that endured for at least two decades and

²⁵ Compare with P. Geary's study of documentary sources and archival practice at this time, which emphasizes the selective nature of textually as much as orally generated memories. *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994).

²⁶ See Goscelin of Canterbury, *Translatio S. Augustini*, ed. D. Papebroch (1688), in AASS, 6 May, 411–43.

²⁷ The previous celebrated one being that of St Swithun in 973.

laid the beginnings of an infrastructure supporting pilgrimage and posthumous miracle-working in the long term.²⁸

The second important landmark in the history of twelfth-century posthumous miracle-working was the martyrdom and canonization of St Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury. The cult of St Thomas is by far the most documented of the English cults of this period, easily able to support an historical study on its own.²⁹ Two monks of Christ Church collected hundreds of posthumous miracles at Canterbury.³⁰ These collections stimulated a revival of interest in posthumous miracles, whose influence can be gauged from the contents of miracle collections newly commissioned in their wake.³¹ Their influence on the promoters of the cults of St William of Norwich and St Frideswide of Oxford will be discussed below.

These two events each gave a new impetus to the cult of saints in twelfth-century England. They encouraged an increased willingness among ecclesiastical institutions to engage with the laity through a highly flexible sacred economy in which, in exchange for access to a saintly patron and the provision of a sacred space for physical, social, and spiritual rehabilitation, monastic communities flexed their social muscles across a secular landscape among groups that otherwise might have felt remote from them or of ambivalent status with regard to them. Such a development served a variety of practical and pastoral ends for religious communities seeking both to secure their material and ideological interests in the world while trying to sustain a fundamental and distinctive kind of detachment from it. As well as protecting the interests of their custodian communities, the relics of enshrined saints became the object of voluntary associations forged autonomously by the laity across urban and rural space and through diverse social groups. A detailed investigation into this aspect of religious culture forms a major part of my inquiry in this book. It proceeds first, however, from a discussion of the existing works on the subject and the proposal of further approaches informed by these and other works.

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²⁸ R. Sharpe, 'The Setting of St Augustine's Translation, 1091', in R. Eales and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Canterbury and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1995), 1–14.

²⁹ For this reason it falls outside the parameters of this one.

³⁰ See *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 7 vols., ed. J. C. Robertson, RS 67 (London, 1875–85).

³¹ For a useful discussion of this see D. Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (London, 2000), 50–61.

The posthumous miracles of saints recorded at shrines across Latin Christendom have received much scholarly attention in recent decades.³² In the case of twelfth-century England, two pioneering studies deserve particular attention: Benedicte Ward's *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, and Ronald Finucane's *Miracles and Pilgrims*.³³ The subtitles of both these books give a useful insight into the preliminary interests of their authors, Ward's addressing questions of theory, record and event, and Finucane's promising a survey of popular beliefs. The concerns of both these studies have done much to provoke my own inquiries into the subject and provide much of the groundwork upon which this book attempts to build. A common criticism that might be levelled at both these works, and one that this book seeks to address, is the reductionist interpretations to which these authors subject their sources.

Ward's book is impressive for the author's mastery of a vast and varied collection of sources related to the miraculous. Its great strength is its acute understanding of the theological and intellectual aspects of the miraculous. It might be suggested, however, that the 'medieval mind' Ward alludes to in her title is perhaps too intellectual to be representative of the popular dimensions of belief about shrine-based, miracle-working.³⁴ Ward's discussion of posthumous miracles is contained in the central chapters of her book. Her introduction to the material on posthumous miracles falls within the chapter entitled 'Practical Contexts of Miracles'. Their functions she observes as being those laid down by Augustine: to convert unbelievers and to strengthen the faith of believers. These are the reasons reproduced at the beginning of miracle collections by, among other authors, Philip, prior of St Frideswide's, Oxford. Working within such parameters, the perceptions of the thousands of lay pilgrims mentioned in the collections tend to get taken for granted. They are classed as 'simple and unlearned', and have 'popular expectations of the miraculous' requiring little explanation. Without any sensitivity to the social as well as the intellectual setting

³² Any doubts on this matter should be dispelled by a perusal of the bibliography in S. Wilson (ed.), *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History* (Cambridge, 1983), 309–417. For evidence of the continuance of this historiographical trend, and for a survey of its main features, see P. J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1994), 9–27.

³³ R. C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London, 1977; repr. with new introduction, 1995). For Ward, see n. 1 above.

³⁴ P. Morrison, *EHR*, 100 (1985), 656–97.

of the miraculous, the level of historical insight in the book is compromised. Ward sees the twelfth century, with regard to post-humous miracles, as a watershed between two different types of shrine, which for convenience she labels 'traditional' and 'modern'.³⁵ At the former, miracles tended to protect the monastic home of the relic and to punish those who threatened it. Examples of these cults, which are discussed in detail, are those of St Faith, St Benedict, and St Cuthbert. In contrast, pilgrims typically came to modern shrines in faithful anticipation of a cure. This departure from the traditional is identified in the cults of St William, St Godric, and St Frideswide. In the cult of St Thomas of Canterbury are identified elements of both traditional and modern.³⁶ In fact, aspects of traditional and modern often appear in the same sources. It isn't clear therefore that these terms are useful in explaining shifts in the use of saints' relics by religious communities. It is an aim of this book to show that these chronological categories lack conviction because their criteria are not sufficiently related to their appropriate social and economic contexts. The case studies offered in this book attempt to explore further this aspect of Ward's findings.

Finucane's main achievement is a statistically generated social survey of what Ward would call the modern shrines, those at which the resident saint's primary role was to heal pilgrims. The work has rightly been admired as one of the first to treat miracle collections to statistical analysis with a view to writing the history of popular belief.³⁷ Its method and the assumptions behind its formulation, however, arguably limit the extent of historical value that can be derived from the sources. If the work is to be applauded for its innovative and serious treatment of the sources, it also raises questions about strategies for the historical representation of popular belief and about the extent to which a sense of 'popular belief' can be captured in data abstracted from highly normative sources. It has been suggested of his work that Finucane's account conveys a sense of 'timelessness, [a] lack of any sense of chronology or development'.³⁸ The impression is reinforced by the occasional use he

³⁵ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 36, 67.

³⁷ See R. Bartlett for the view that 'the results of such analyses are the most clearly original of the scholarly achievements of the last twenty years', in 'The Hagiography of Angerlin England', in P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England*, v (Woodbridge, 1995), 45.

³⁸ See C. N. L. Brooke's review in *History*, 63 (1978), 442.

³⁶ Ibid. 89, 109.

makes of information taken from sources remote from each other in time and genre. Thus in a discussion of doctors' fees and miracle stories, he is happy to combine material from the miracles of Thomas Becket with the observations of Chaucer, Langland, and Froissart.³⁹ The risk of such an approach is the reification of 'medieval popular belief' as belonging to a paradigm of 'traditional' society constructed in the light of modern scientific epistemology. The book presents an allegory of pastoral life in which miracles are a consolation for the material and medical deficiencies of a not-so-merry England.⁴⁰ It does so by couching popular perceptions of the miracle cure (by far the most attention-grabbing type of miracle from a statistical perspective) in terms of medieval ignorance of modern categories of medical knowledge. From the social details in the miracle stories Finucane produces a taxonomy of miracles based on bio-medical categories of illness: the alleviation of which he explains in terms of chronic and remissive patterns of illness, psychogenic ailments and self-limiting diseases often linked to the changing availability of nutritional resources. The explanation makes the medieval miracle more readily understandable to the modern mind. It fails however to convey the full cultural value of the miraculous as experienced by its participants, whose beliefs are reduced to a series of misunderstandings about illness.

Between the publications of these two books, Peter Brown published his seminal work on the cult of saints.⁴¹ Alongside his earlier essays, the book opened up new possibilities for the interpretation of the post-humous miracle. Brown examined the Enlightenment critique of 'popular religion' as expounded by Hume and traced its descent among the 'mental furniture' of subsequent writers. He found that the phrase 'popular religion' was habitually associated with those who failed to follow literate, monotheistic, and by implication, true Christian values.

³⁹ R. C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 64-5.

⁴⁰ See J. Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (London, 1986), 98-121, for a discussion of the prevailing models by which western observers of other cultures organize their data; and M. Gilsenan, 'Very like a Camel: The Appearance of an Anthropologist's Middle East', in R. Pardon (ed.), *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing* (Edinburgh, 1990), 222-39, for a personal perspective and commentary on the implications of these insights.

⁴¹ P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), 13-15.

'Popular religion' belonged to the vulgar, polytheistic primitives who periodically, in the history of the Church, swamped the guardians of Christian monotheism with age-old superstitious practices. Vestiges of Roman paganism and barbarian superstition were by turns used to explain the rise of the cult of the saints in late antiquity. Brown replaced Hume's model with one that recognized elite complicity in 'superstitious' practice and allowed for a more dynamic and de-stigmatized version of popular religion. In the late antique period, Brown's elites were the bishops. Through their management and promotion of saints' shrines they penetrated the countryside around episcopal centres with a metaphorical grid of Christian values, articulating 'new forms of the exercise of power, new bonds of human dependence, new intimate hopes for protection and justice in a changing world'.⁴²

Brown's work has attracted the admiration of a generation of scholars dealing with these kinds of sources. His insights have become a new orthodoxy that in turn has attracted criticism.⁴³ Despite Brown's stated aim to bring the history of popular beliefs into line with general historiography emphasizing change rather than continuity in late antique society, and despite his explanation for the rise of the cult of the saints as well as its function, some critics have tended to see him as a champion of essentially anti-historical methods derived from anthropology. These intellectual reservations quite understandably proceed from the historian's interest in the particular, in charting change over time and in allowing individuals the free will to act decisively upon their worlds. The suspicion is that functionalist explanations preclude the possibility of these fundamental elements that constitute history. Accompanying these criticisms can sometimes be hostility towards what is perceived as the secularist dimension of Brown's thesis, his readiness to acknowledge sanctity as a form of social power.⁴⁴ Such critics would like to see sanctity

⁴² P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), 22.

⁴³ Testimony to the admiration and critical scrutiny to which Peter Brown's work has been subjected can be found in J. Howard-Johnston and P. A. Hayward (eds.), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1999), and S. Elms, 'Introduction', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6 (1998), 343–51.

⁴⁴ For H. Chadwick's reference to 'trendy non-religious explanations' see R. Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1993), 7; and for Thomas Head's comments on French discomfort at Brown's secularism see *JEH* 48 (1997), 142. The irony of this criticism is apparent in the way that Brown's thesis actually

as something less malleable and at the very worst, a form of social power that only yields up its rewards to those who deserve its support. Despite these reservations, Brown's insights have remained tremendously influential to subsequent historical research on the holy and Christian society, the present book being no exception. In the remainder of this introduction I intend to set up a flexible theoretical framework informed by Brown's insights and those insights of other disciplines, within which interactions between monasteries and the laity can be seen to have been mediated through the miraculous.

THEORY AND METHOD: CONTEXTUALIZING MIRACLE NARRATIVES

The title of the book is designed to hint at the diverse and provisional notions of association operating through the cults of saints. Cults are 'negotiating communities', their particular characters constructed through processes of story-telling and ritual. I will argue that miracles are the result of normative processes of negotiation and that medieval communities shared a sense of their Christian identity through their communal negotiation of the miraculous. This insight has been most successfully encapsulated in the words of Michael Gilsenan, an anthropologist working on the Muslim religious beliefs and practices:

One of the key signs of grace and authority, the most concentrated and dramatic for the believer, is those acts of wonder and power that we call miracles... Now every time the anthropologist sits down in a café and hears these narratives in the company of others who are far more than merely an audience but are really, participants, he, too, is an active participant. He, too is an actor in the drama, because the miracle is performed each time it is retold... It does not therefore matter, whether or not such and such happened or what the original miracle was, and if he goes looking for it, he will be chasing himself up a blind alley. There are endless versions of 'the same' miracle. Miracles are made every day in cafés and conversations, and it is there that they are created, reproduced and transformed.⁴⁵

turns the 'two-tier model' on its head rather than dismantling it, and in doing so preserves the religious core of the cultural phenomenon.

⁴⁵ M. Gilsenan, *Reconfiguring Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London, 1982; repr. 2000), 75.

I do not propose therefore to define the miracle too nicely at the outset. This task is best left to the theologians. Rather I hope to demonstrate the historical value to be gained from examining it as the product of communal participation in a process. Perhaps the most general outline of a definition can be permitted in the observation that the miracle is a cultural phenomenon that existed in medieval society as a possibility for social practice. Three important areas of inquiry proceed from this working definition. The first concerns an assessment of the circumstances in which miracles were experienced. In other words, what kinds of events were chosen from the seemingly limitless range of possibilities available in everyday life, and who did the choosing? Close to this question lies a second field of inquiry concerning negotiation. How were miracles authorized? In what sense can we identify the owners of or participants in a miracle experience? The third and final series of questions prompted by this working definition concerns function. What was the range of sociological functions served by twelfth-century posthumous miracles?

The first limitation a historian must acknowledge in any inquiry into the process by which miracles are chosen is that set by the registrar of the miracles. Our only point of entry into the posthumous miracles of twelfth-century England is through the narratives preserved in writing by monastic authors. Such an observation is worth making if only to remind us of the viewpoint these narratives offer us as *post factum* written accounts. In answering the question 'to whom do such narratives belong?' we might describe them in the narrowest sense as products of particular authors. Collections of miracles were occasional pieces. They had their commissioners as well as their authors, both acting in response to some perceived need and sharing some collaborative responsibility for the shape of the final work. Written narratives were representations of the miraculous that owed their existence to the privileged. Their authors were privileged because they possessed access to the technology of writing as a means of fixing meaning and because they invariably claimed an exclusive relationship to the saint, whose physical residence at the heart of their community made them interested informants on the earthly interventions that God permitted their saints to make. As one historian has observed, 'religious communities bred men who looked on the preservation of their rights and interests as a primary duty, more important than truth in the last resort, and relics and wonders,

substantiated by the flimsiest of evidence, or no evidence at all, were accorded an importance in religious life'.⁴⁶

The comment raises questions about the notions of truth and evidence.⁴⁷ It also implies that the historian's first job in dealing with the events described in any collection of miracle narratives is to locate the source in its proper historical context by being sensitive to the material and ideological interests of its author and how these affected his selection, interpretation, and deployment of the material. In the context of hagiographical studies this has usefully been termed by one historian as the 'provincial viewpoint'.⁴⁸ It might also be called the 'relic's-eye view' of society.⁴⁹

After investigating the historical circumstances surrounding the production of a relic's-eye viewpoint in a miracle collection, we might then ask to whom else did these narratives belong? What other more diffuse viewpoints can be identified? In what form can a sense of wider authorization be discovered in the sources? As we have seen above, the problems associated with these questions have traditionally been resolved within the paradigm of 'elite' and 'popular' culture.

The insights of literary historians have taught us that 'popular culture' is a meaningless historical term unless understood in the context of its construction by historical agents, usually an elite.⁵⁰ The example of Bernard of Angers, a French hagiographer of the eleventh century, provides an illustration of such a construction. Bernard of Angers, in his collection of the miracles of St Faith, registered his bewilderment and disapproval in an extended commentary on the ancient practice of the people of Auvergne, Rouergue and the Toulousain who knelt before the statue of St Faith. In an attempt at mitigation for his own failure to intervene he recalls the horrible fate that befell a cleric, Odalric, who

⁴⁶ Southern, *St Anselm*, 276.

⁴⁷ Its implications have increasingly led historians to seek historically contextualized relative or provisional truths in the historical evidence rather than attempting to organize them according to some hierarchy of reliability in relation to some supposed objective definition of historical truth. A pioneer in this approach is W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours Bede and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988).

⁴⁸ D. W. Rollason, 'The Miracles of St Benedict: A Window on Early Medieval France', in H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (eds.), *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis* (London, 1985), 77.

⁴⁹ Morison, 'Miraculous and French Society', 87-8.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 16-22.

previously attempted to stop the practice.⁵¹ The episode provides us with an image of authentic 'popular culture'. Its appearance in the collection, however, is as part of a representation of the 'Other', by which its author sought more clearly to define his own position among an elite of literate arbiters of the orthodox. Bernard's point was that if he committed the sin of retreating from righteous confrontation, then at least he wasn't idolatrous like those engaged in the popular ritual.

The point of this example is that, if distinctions between 'elite' and 'popular' occur in the sources, they do so as rhetorical strategies. These of course have importance historically, belonging as they do to other dualist conceptions of the social world developed at this time.⁵² Their effect is to simplify and schematize a range of more complex historical entanglements between members of more widely variegated social groupings. The rhetorical scheme served by many miracle narratives was one of dysfunction and redemption (or damnation). The punishments and healings rehearsed in the miracle narratives helped foster a cosmological thought world of judgement and redemption among their audiences. When miracle registrars told pilgrims miracle stories they were educating them in forms of Christian practice that encouraged discipline, nurtured hope, and taught acceptance and recognition.

Simply to reproduce these stories is to echo the agenda of those elites, however well meaning we might imagine them to be. Common sense tells us that our hagiographers required the authentic, raw material of human experience if they aspired to achieve social purchase with their narratives. They could not afford to work purely from Bede or some other canonical text to find the fitting example. Bernard of Angers may have been observing a reality in terms of and according to the conceptual resources and literary conventions that made sense to him. But he was nevertheless observing something external and independent of those conventions. Likewise, hagiographers' representations of the historical reality, however schematized and topoi-ridden they might be, could not afford to play fast and loose with the expectations of those from

⁵¹ Bernard of Angers, *Liber Miraculorum Sancte Fidis*, in *The Book of Sainte Foy*, tr. P. Shewson (Philadelphia, 1995), 77–9.

⁵² M. Rubin, 'Religion and Culture in Town and Country: Reflections on a Great Divide', in D. Abulafia, et al. (eds.), *Church and City, 1000–1500: Essays in Honour of Christopher Brooke* (Cambridge, 1992), esp. pp. 17–22.

whose social practices they garnered their material. Such practices proceeded from the initiative of a wider body of the faithful than those literate elites who observed a monastic rule. The lay faithful were not simply passive, credulous, and occasionally misguided. They were in fact too large and too diverse in composition to be contained convincingly within any 'popular' paradigm. They were also imaginative and communally empowered by their licence collectively to negotiate the miraculous.⁵³

We must not, in summary, allow our suspicions of authorial intent to reject the possibility of any 'authentic' historical value in the sources. Rather, in the case of miracles and those who experienced them, we should formulate historical explanations in terms of functional meanings and the media through which these meanings were created and shared as provisional truths.⁵⁴ In doing so, we might occasionally be permitted a glimpse of the inconsistencies and tensions that must have lain behind many of these stories.

As noted above, our only surviving medium for comprehending the miraculous is those stories selected and presented to us by miracle registrars. But within the written narrative, for the very reason of the hagiographer's obligation to record the authentic, we might detect other narratives, narratives more fluid, more 'up for grabs' by the very nature of the means by which their content was constructed. Such narratives, to borrow a term from Clifford Geertz, might be called 'local knowledge'.⁵⁵ In every successful relic's-eye view of the world existed a healthy amount of local knowledge. Though preserved for us in written form, the media through which local knowledge was negotiated were visual, performative, and aural and as such they were strategies of communication notionally available to all and occurring independently of the written word.

⁵³ See R. I. Moore, 'Between Sanctity and Superstition: Saints and their Miracles in the Age of Revolution', in M. Rubin (ed.), *The Work of Jacques Le Goff and the Challenges of Medieval History* (Woodbridge, 1997), 58, for the notion of ancient communal power articulated through miracles.

⁵⁴ For the defence of history as 'something we all do, all the time, provisionally', see C. Wickham, 'Gossip and Resistance Among the Medieval Peasantry', pp. 160 (1998), 24. And P. Rousseau 'Ascetics as Mediators and as Teachers', in J. Howard-Johnson and P. A. Hayward (eds.), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1999), 46–59, for the function of the genre rather than the function of the holy man.

⁵⁵ See C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983).

In practice oral and ritual forms of autonomous narrative⁵⁶ coalesced, but here they will be discussed separately.

The first kind of autonomous narrative I wish to describe is that of ritual. The most common form of ritual was that of the miracle cure. As I mentioned above, I will make no attempt in this book to classify and diagnose the kinds of symptoms described in the accounts of miracle cures. This is not to deny the reality of suffering and pain ascribed to the afflicted, nor to reject such factors as self-limiting diseases, changed nutritional circumstances, the attention of a doctor in a monastic infirmary, or simply a change of scenery as credible explanations for a cure. The problem with such reasoning is that it, 'only confuses the understanding of a many-sided phenomenon by imposing a bogus scientism on it. The point is not whether the miracle "took place" but that people whose social affiliations can be the object of empirical study have explained an aspect of their behaviour in terms of it.'⁵⁷

The miraculous cures of pilgrims at saints' shrines conform in the written account to a pattern of behaviour that can be recognized as illness charged with ritual significance. Groups of pilgrims performed a sequence of symbolic actions and gestures that linked their everyday life with the divine as represented by the presence of a saint's relics. Through such symbolic communication was negotiated the social reality of a cure. The general form that ritual healings took can be outlined as follows:

1. *A community registers a problem*—An individual suffers with a continuing illness or disability, known to her family or neighbours and often compromising her productive status within it. Recourse to a doctor having failed, the matter gets taken up by the community.
2. *Adoption of a ritual strategy*—A saint's shrine is identified as a possible place of recourse for the individual, either by family or neighbours or through the personal recommendation of the saint in a vision.

⁵⁶ For use of the term 'autonomous narrative' in this context see S. Boesch Gajano, 'The Use and Abuse of Miracles in Early Medieval Culture', in L. K. Little and B. H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Oxford, 1998), 336.

⁵⁷ B. Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Philadelphia, 1990), 85; and see H. Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine: The Miracles of St Frideswide', in Mayr-Harting and Moore (eds.), *Studies Presented to R. H. C. Davis*, 196-7, for a more nuanced view of medical care and 'supernatural' assistance.

3. *The saint is solicited*—Oaths are made, gifts promised, and the individual is conveyed to the shrine, usually accompanied by a relative or neighbours or both.
4. *Ritual engagement*—At the shrine the individual is isolated from the group and interacts with the saint alone, often by offering a gift, sleeping or praying by the shrine, or touching the afflicted body part with the relic or some holy object or liquid associated with the saint.
5. *A healing is witnessed*—The blind see, the lame walk, the dumb speak. A miracle is seen to be done. The cure is often the culmination of some symbolic enactment of illness involving exaggerated bodily gestures.
6. *Record is made*—Witnesses confirm the result to a miracle registrar and, if happy with the testimony, the latter selects from it those elements that reproduce an attested route into the event, and places upon it a moral gloss.⁵⁸
7. *Recitation*—The event is recounted before a wider audience, either by the person cured or in the retelling of the story by monks to subsequent audiences.

At almost all its stages this pattern of engagement with a shrine was a communal event. The conventions underlying the ritual and authentically reproduced in the written account required the location of an individual in a social context.⁵⁹ The ill person had a history of illness or dysfunction known to her family, neighbours, or village. The pilgrimage was rarely a solitary undertaking. People from the village or the family, perhaps even the local priest, often accompanied the person. The timing of the pilgrimage and subsequent cure were important. Miracle registrars liked to advertise the particularly sympathetic hearing a saint might give on his feast day. This provided for maximum exposure of the sufferer to conditions of ritual arousal before an interested audience. Other noted occasions for miracles were before important visitors or during the

⁵⁸ I am grateful to Richard Sharpe for suggesting this phrase to me, which emphasizes the formal aspect of the ritual and its analogies in the witnessing of documents issued by monastic beneficiaries and royal charters.

⁵⁹ See H. Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine', 204-6 for the importance of the crowd and its change in attitude towards the sufferer effected by ritual.

monks' performance of divine office. All these details confirm the importance of interested audiences to the success of the cure.

The ritual cure was in fact a means by which the social anxieties and tensions that lay behind the seeking of a miracle were dramatized and hopefully resolved. The sick, ritualized body provided the site for the playing out of these tensions.⁶⁰ Before the cure could occur the body was first collapsed into symbolic, fragmented, unstable elements. Deformities and dysfunctions were exaggerated: bones cracked, the mad writhed more violently than ever. Afflicted body parts were reproduced in wax and offered at the shrine. Relics and liquids contaminated with the holiness of the saint caused the ritualized body to emit powerfully symbolic material of its own. Blood, tears, sweat, mucus, vomit, pus, spittle, all polluted the ritual space and undermined symbolically the boundaries by which groups of onlookers located themselves socially.⁶¹ The healing proceeded from the communal experience of these symbols which were often portrayed in terms of oppositions made between darkness and light, fragmentation and wholeness, interior and exterior, sin and redemption, violence and placidity, morbidity and vitality, and ultimately, disorder and order.

Linked to the performance of ritual in the negotiation of the miraculous was the recitation of the miraculous. At most of the stages described above participants in the miraculous could engage in conversation. Miracle collections are packed with people in conversation: people sharing stories about their circumstances; people expressing doubt at what they have just seen; people talking to saints they meet in visions; people offering testimony to the truth of the miracle events they have witnessed. We need not accept as historically truthful the exact words sometimes reported by miracle registrars between, for example, the laity and the saints they encountered in visions. Their words were no doubt attributable to those who shared in the relic's-eye view. But we should see such reported dialogues as credible rehearsals of the

possibilities for such conversations. As such they were intended to implicate an audience in the process of constructing reality through narrative. Like the strategy of ritual, narratives, whether written or oral in source, constructed meanings in their recitation that retained and propagated a value of practical truth to those who shared them. In the words again of the anthropologist Michael Gilsenan: 'Varying from a single phrase evoking a known series of events to an elaborated rehearsal of a story of life and history in front of a participatory audience, narratives constitute everyday life.'⁶²

Between the custodian community and the laity, important vessels of local knowledge concerning the miraculous were those who were known to live respectable and pious lives. From a relic's-eye view, those with moral standing in the local community were useful carriers of local opinion. The registering of testimony from such people was an important condition of the miraculous without which our miracle registrars expressed a reluctance to announce its occurrence in their written narratives. In the miracle collections we are repeatedly reminded that some oral accounts of miracles to arrive at a shrine were not included because they didn't stand up to scrutiny, or because their witnesses were not of satisfactory character.

This sifting of evidences and registering of testimony followed a long established rhetoric of dysfunction and redemption ultimately inspired by the miracle stories of the gospels. It strengthened the claims to powerful influence in society that custodian communities could make for their saint, because it gave the impression of a discriminating and pre-existing community of believers. Miracle stories recollected to politically important individuals such as royalty, aristocrats, or important churchmen proved the power and status that such an authority was willing to countenance and concede to a saint in his realm or jurisdiction.⁶³

Conversely, it was important that those who might attempt to undermine this consensus with rumours or unhelpful narratives should

⁶⁰ See S. Kay and M. Rubin, *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester, 1996), 1-8, for the symbolic importance of the body in medieval society.

⁶¹ For the definition and importance of bodily matter as pollutants offending and challenging notions of social order, see M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), 115-29; and for the discussion of bodily emissions in a contemporary medieval context, see C. Leyser, 'Masculinity in Flux: Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages', in D. M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999), 103-20.

⁶² M. Gilsenan, 'Nightmares on the Brain of the Living: Narratives of Imagined Pasts and Presences in an Anthropology of North Lebanon' (unpublished article deposited in the Taylor Library, Oxford, 1994), 3.

⁶³ See Symeon of Durham, *Capitula de miraculis et translationibus in Synonitis Monachi Opera Omnia*, RS 74, 2 vols., ed. T. Arnold (London, 1879-85), ii, 343, for the record of a miracle retold at court.

be seen to be punished for their crimes. Traces of dissenting voices dealt with in this way can be heard in the miracle collections, reminding us that as likely a 'popular' medieval response to cult in any given social setting might be the active rejection of the miraculous as much as its acceptance.

A common dissenting voice was that of the agent of a local lord or the king, whose task of representing his lord's interests could often see him confronting the power of a neighbouring saint.⁶⁴ A good twelfth-century example of one such agent more than willing to advance the authority of his lord at the expense, in this case, of the hermit Wulfic of Haselbury Plucknett, was Drogo de Munci. Drogo was struck ill soon after proposing to Henry I that, 'the king would do well to send to the cell of this trickster and impound his money, for it was impossible that one to whom so many came should not have accumulated quite a treasure for himself'.⁶⁵

Another example of an unhelpful narrative (discussed in Chapter 2) cultivated by members of the royal household is that concerning the incorruption of St Edmund's body at Bury abbey. The chapter on St William of Norwich provides an interesting and not unrelated example of a still-born narrative of the Jewish ritual execution of a Christian that required considerable working up before it became an accepted feature of local knowledge and, regrettably, a *topos* subsequently appropriated by the universal church.

The aim of this book is to explore the functions of the miracle narratives in the twelfth century, as recorded at the shrines of saints across southern England. In this endeavour the current chapter has used the insights of social, anthropological, and ritual theory to set up a framework of interpretation within which, it is hoped, the full cultural significance of the sources can be recovered. I have argued that these sources are the product of a privileged section of the society and that as such they are selective and manipulative of the raw material that they record. In a similar vein Raymond Van Dam has written of Bishop Gregory of Tours, in his role of cult impresario, as 'manipulating and evaluating

holiness in order to affect the distribution of prestige and authority in his community'.⁶⁶

Nevertheless I hope to demonstrate that something of the diverse meanings of the miraculous associated with posthumous miracles can occasionally be discerned and located among wider social groups than simply those who enjoyed direct access to the written evidence. Hagiographers compiled collections of miracles to fabricate and publicize the kinds of interventions saints were willing to make in society. Through the representation of local knowledge in the form of rituals and narratives they recreated plausible experiences of the miraculous in writing that could contain, resolve, and order the social tensions and personal anxieties that were characteristic of socio-economic change in twelfth-century England, within a framework of Christian values. In other words, the work of miracle collectors provides evidence on the provision of ritual and narrative spaces by monasteries within which individuals could negotiate their own experiences of a Christian redemptive hegemony.

⁶⁴ R. Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1988), 194.

⁶⁵ Examples exist in late Anglo-Saxon lawsuits, see P. Wormald, 'A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Lawsuits', *A-SE* 17 (1988), nos. 154-6, 167, 171.

⁶⁶ John of Ford, *Vita Wulfic*, in *Wulfic of Haselbury* by John of Ford, ed. M. Bell, *Somerset Record Society*, 47 (1932), 64; and cited from H. Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century *Recluse*', *History*, 60 (1975), 342, whose translation it is.