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A Sense of Wonder: Gregory of Tours, Medicine and Science[1]

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Among the interests I shared with Denis Bethell was a fascination with early medieval historians, among whom above all was the Venerable Bede — St. Bede, as Denis used to call him to tease me, and whom, to tease Denis, I used to compare disparagingly with Gregory of Tours. Then there was our fascination with SF — science fiction. One memorable product of Denis's periods in Phoenix and Santa Barbara during the 1970s, from my point of view, was the pile of American SF books he brought back for me each time — after having read them himself, of course. Denis would no doubt be amused at the way in which my part-time interest developed during the 1980s: I now publish regular SF reviews for several publications, write academic articles on the history of SF — including two on the spate of science fiction written in Ulster in the late nineteenth century[2] — and edit *Foundation*, the only academic journal of SF criticism outside North America. Denis and I could see the connections between these apparently disparate interests: science fiction, or speculative fiction, or SF, is essentially, and at its best, an historical fiction. It is speculation on and construction of the history of the future. Indeed, in

1. This essay began life as the Denis Bethell Memorial Lecture for 1989. It was delivered in May of that year at University College, Dublin in the History Board Room — a room memorable not only for the many endless departmental meetings which I attended between 1970 and 1978, but also as the venue for the seminars for the M.Phil in Medieval Studies. The first M.Phil students arrived in 1970, and the first seminar series was on 'Early Medieval Kingship'. The organiser of the whole programme was, of course, Denis Bethell, who did so much to animate and inspire the M.Phil course, and, indeed, all aspects of medieval studies in U.C.D. In the preface to my book *The Origins of France: From Clovis to the Capetians, 500–1000*, which was published in 1982 by Macmillan in the series *New Studies in Medieval History* under the general editorship of Denis Bethell and was dedicated to him in the year of his death, I wrote that 'I learnt more from Denis Bethell about my subject, and about the art of teaching, than I have from anyone else'. It was a great honour and privilege to be invited to deliver the Denis Bethell Memorial Lecture, not to mourn Denis's passing, but to remember with affection and gratitude his presence and his inspiration. And it is a great pleasure to be able to record the fact here.

2. '1886: Past Views of Ireland's Future', *Foundation* 36 (1986), pp. 21–30 and 'The Anglo-Irish Disagreement: Past Irish Futures', *The Linen Hall Review* 3 (1986), pp. 5–8

the case of alternative history SF is the history of the past.[3] It is history with all the usual constraints of plausibility, causation, and so on, but without the constraints of evidence. (It is not unlike early medieval history in that respect.) In brief, it is a *poetic* version of history — history supplied with a sense of wonder. A remark Denis once made during a session in the course that he and I taught for five or six years, called 'Problems in Evidence' (a course that was in fact about Bede), may serve as an epigraph to this essay: 'Hagiography is the early medieval version of science fiction'.

'A Sense of Wonder', the title of this essay, would have a familiar ring about it to any science fiction critic: it is the phrase used since the 1930s at least to typify the particular and most characteristic aspect of SF, 'which is at the root of the excitement of science fiction' — 'awe at the vastness of space and time'.[4] The Romanian literary critic Professor Cornel Robu has recently argued that it is a modern manifestation of the Sublime, first analysed properly by Edmund Burke, and serving throughout the Romantic period as a central aesthetic principle in both literature and art.[5] The essence of the Sublime is the sense of wonder, awe, or even terror, induced by the infinite, the enormous, the inexplicable, above all as manifested in the natural world: it is an aspect of religious feeling, and an emotion lying behind many a scientist's curiosity. For both Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, and one suspects for many SF readers, the Sublime can most readily be encountered in the starry sky. In *De cursu stellarum* Gregory of Tours himself described the fourteen *miracula* or wonders of the world that included not only the seven great man-made wonders of the ancients — most of which, as he says, have disappeared — but also the seven greater wonders of the natural world. Here he lists tides, the growth of seeds, the phoenix (the symbol of resurrection), Mount Etna, the springs of Grenoble, and above all the great *miracula* of the sky — the sun and moon and the stars.[6] Gregory's description of the movement of the stars, including drawings of the major constellations, has been called 'impressively accurate', while S.C. McCluskey has noted that the stellar observations in

3. On which see E. James, 'The Historian and SF', *Foundation* 35 (1985/86), pp. 5–13; and for an up-to-date bibliography, Barton C. Hacker and Gordon B. Chamberlain, 'Pasts that Might Have Been, ii, A Revised Bibliography of Alternative History', in *Alternative Histories: Eleven Stories of the World As it Might Have Been*, ed. C. G. Waugh and M. H. Greenberg (New York, 1986), pp. 301–63.

4. The phrases are those of the medievalist and SF editor David Hartwell, in *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction* (New York, 1984), p. 42, who provides the best analysis of the sense of wonder from a reader-response point of view.

5. C. Robu, 'A Key to Science Fiction: the Sublime', *Foundation* 42 (1988), pp. 21–37.

6. *De cursu stellarum* is the title of the work given to the sole manuscript of what Gregory called *De cursibus ecclesiasticis*; it is edited by A. Krusch, *MGH: Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, vol. I, part II, pp. 404–22 (hereafter cited as Krusch II). This work has been translated by W. C. McDermott in E. Peters, ed., *Monks, Bishops and Pagans* (Philadelphia, 1975), pp. 209–18. Krusch's edition of Gregory's works originally appeared in one volume, with continuous pagination. My citations are from the 1951 reprint, where the *Histories* retain the same pagination as in vol. I, part I (hereafter cited as Krusch I). Those works found in volume I, part II are paginated from pp. 1–427 rather than as the original pp. 451–877.

the treatise are precise enough to locate those observations in northern Gaul towards the end of the sixth century, thus confirming the authorship of a treatise which is ascribed to Gregory only in one of the eight manuscripts.[7]

Tides, the growth of seeds, the movement of the stars and the sun are wonders which come directly from God and, unlike human wonders, 'in no age grow old, by no accident fall, by no loss are diminished, except when the Master shall have ordained that the universe be destroyed'.[8] Gregory could not explain the wonders of tides or heavenly movements in rational terms, any more than he could explain wonders of healing by saints; but he could contemplate them, and the sense of wonder which he derived from them suffuses all his writings.

Thus, this essay endeavours to unite two of Denis Bethell's interests — and two of mine — by focusing on Gregory of Tours, one of the most crucial figures in early medieval history not only because of the importance of his writings as a source for the history of post-Roman Europe, but also because of the way he has often been taken as typical of his age, and indeed of the whole 'Dark Ages'. By his own admission or claim, Gregory was uneducated, unsophisticated, uncritical, naive, credulous, superstitious and an admirer of violent and brutal authority (although this latter aspect, for Professor Vinay, writing his major study of *San Gregorio di Tours* in Mussolini's Italy, was in fact Gregory's only redeeming feature).[9] It is thanks to this stereotype of Gregory, of course, that his 'impressively accurate' astronomical treatise has appeared so surprising to many.

Gregory of Tours (d. 594) was born around 540 into a wealthy Roman senatorial family living in the Auvergne in central Gaul — an area savagely incorporated into the Frankish kingdom of Austrasia by the Franks after Theuderic's attack in the 520s[10] — but as he proudly and perhaps accurately states, his family also supplied the city of Tours with all but five of its bishops.[11] He followed his mother's cousin Eufronius to the see of Tours in 573, remaining bishop of this metropolitan see, strategically and unfortunately situated in an area often in dispute between the reigning Frankish kings of the Merovingian dynasty in the later sixth century. He remained bishop, playing

7. Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), p. 131; S. C. McCluskey, 'Gregory of Tours, Monastic Timekeeping, and Early Christian Attitudes to Astronomy,' *Isis* 81 (1990), pp. 9–22, at p. 18.

8. Peters, ed., *Monks, Bishops and Pagans*, p. 213.

9. Goffart states in *Narrators of Barbarian History*, p. 130, that 'Vinay's conclusion tempts one to ask, maliciously, whether admiration for barbaric vigor is necessarily less infantile than belief in miracles'.

10. For the date, see I. N. Wood, 'The Ecclesiastical Politics of Merovingian Clermont', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. P. Wormald, et al. (Oxford, 1983), p. 38, n. 8.

11. A claim discussed by R. W. Mathisen, 'The Family of Georgius Florentius Gregorius and the Bishops of Tours', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 12 (1984), pp. 83–95 and L. Piétri, *La ville de Tours du IVe au VIe siécle: naissance d'une ville chrétienne* (Rome, 1983).

an important political and ecclesiastical role in Frankish affairs — by his own account — for twenty-one years. He wrote, as he tells us, 'Ten books of *Historiae*, seven books of *Miracula* [which I am going to translate, following Professor Goffart, as *Wonders*], and one on the *Life of the Fathers*. I have also composed a book of *Commentaries on the Psalms*; I also wrote a book on the *Offices of the Church*'.[12] It is an impressive body of work, totally overshadowing the rest of our surviving material from sixth-century Gaul in its scope, detail and vividness; and, perhaps most important of all, in what it reveals of one individual, Gregory himself. The primary objective is thus to try to get a little closer to Gregory and how his mind worked through a study of his own experiences and a few of those of his family members. This will involve looking at his attitude to 'wonders': for it is this, above all, which has brought down on his head the scorn of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians, who commonly regard a religion which lays more stress on miracles than on theology or even moral teaching as a degenerate form of Christianity fitted only for a degenerate and superstitious age. I hope to show how, on the contrary, Gregory's attitude to wonders shows intellectual curiosity and even a proto-scientific attitude to experimentation. I shall for the most part take Gregory's accounts at face value, while being aware of the possibility of the use of miracle-stories as metaphor,[13] of the importance of searching for literary (and especially biblical) parallels and sources of inspiration. As William McCready has argued in his study of Gregory's contemporary Gregory the Great and his attitude to miracles, an enthusiasm for seeing miracle stories in largely literary terms can mislead the modern historian who is trying to understand the mental world of the sixth century:

> [Gregory the Great] perceived the world scripturally. He thought of it as another book of the Bible, and believed his basic exegetical principles could be extended to the realm of nature as well. To Gregory's mind, the world is not, or not simply, a machine functioning on its own; it is a realm in which God converses with us by means of the very structure he has posited in things, and it is open at any moment to his direct intervention.[14]

12. He lists his works in *Historiae*, x, p. 31 (Krusch I, pp. 535–36). Of these books Gregory's *Histories* have been translated into English by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1974) and O. M. Dalton (Oxford, 1926), both giving it its later Merovingian name of the *History of the Franks*. The *Glory of the Confessors* and the *Glory of the Martyrs* are translated by Raymond Van Dam (both Liverpool, 1988). The *Life of the Fathers* has been translated by me (Liverpool, 1985; second edition 1991). So far only book one of the *Wonders of St. Martin* has been published (in E. Peters, *Monks, Bishops and Pagans*), but Raymond Van Dam is currently working on a translation of the four books of this text and of the *Passion and Wonders of St. Julian*. These two translations will appear in a book provisionally titled *Miracle Stories in Late Antique Gaul*. I am most grateful to Professor Van Dam for making his draft manuscript available to me in its entirety; I have used his translation of *Wonders of St. Martin* and *Passion and Wonders of St. Julian* in what follows. Van Dam without a page reference relates to this work.

13. As admirably discussed in G. De Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam, 1987).

14. W. C. McCready, *Signs of Sanctity: Miracles in the Thought of Gregory the Great* (Toronto, 1989), p. 259.

By confining myself largely to those miracles witnessed by Gregory and those close to him, I hope to be able to get closer to understanding Gregory of Tours's own perspective on the world.

Gregory was born into a world of pain that could only ultimately be relieved by prayer and subsequent miracle. 'After the pains of childbirth had passed by and she gave birth', he wrote, 'my mother developed a pain in the muscle of her lower leg.' The pain was so severe that she would sometimes faint, and only warmth or ointment could relieve it. Thirty-four years later, at the time of Gregory's ordination as bishop, his mother came to Tours. She stayed for two or three months by the shrine of St. Martin, where she was cured.[15] Gregory's father Florentius suffered from gout. The infant Gregory, who had only just learnt his letters, had a vision in which he was told to write a name on a small chip of wood and put it under his father's pillow. A dutiful little boy, he went to his mother Armentaria, who told the boy to do as the figure in the vision had said. Gregory's father recovered. But a year later he was ill again; this time the vision asked Gregory if he had read the Book of Tobit. (He hadn't.) He was told to do as was written there: catch a fish and burn its heart and liver. As the smoke reached Gregory's father's nose, he was cured.[16]

Gregory's father was clearly devoted to relics. He carried some with him at the time of Theuderic's capture of Clermont: ground ashes in a gold medallion. 'Although he did not even know the name of the blessed men whose relics they were', Gregory reported, 'he was accustomed to relate that he had been rescued from many dangers' — from bandits, floods and violent men. The relics were passed on to Gregory's mother. There was a fire in the straw, while she picnicked with threshers (an interesting sidelight on the everyday life of senatorial folk in sixth-century Gaul); she held the relics in front of the fire and it died down.[17] The relics were passed on to Gregory. While travelling from Burgundy to Clermont a storm rose up; he lifted the relics above his head and divided the clouds, so that it rained on either side of him but not on the road. 'Then, as a presumptuous man is expected to behave, I began to be inflamed by the arrogance of vain glory', and his horse threw him to the ground.[18]

Gregory always made sure that he travelled with relics, in '[a bag] around the neck, just like those amulets we find the likes of Caesarius and Gregory of Tours condemning so forcefully'.[19] He writes, 'I was as usual wearing the relics of the Blessed Virgin Mary along with those of the Holy Apostles and the Blessed Martin, that had been placed in a gold cross'. He found a cottage on fire. The family who lived there tried to put it out with water, but in vain. 'Lifting the cross from my chest I held it up against the fire; soon, in the

15. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iii. 10; Krusch II, p. 185.
16. *Glory of the Confessors*, p. 39; Krusch II, p. 322.
17. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 83; Krusch II, p. 94.
18. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 83; Krusch II, p. 95.
19. Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton and Oxford, 1991), p. 304.

presence of the holy relics, the entire fire stopped'.[20] When bishop, Gregory went to see Bishop Egidius of Reims (one of the villains of the *History*); he took with him relics of St. Martin, 'although rashly', he says, as if suddenly remembering the rulings of the church councils. Siggo, the referendary of the late King Sigibert, had gone deaf in one ear three days earlier; it was cured while speaking to Gregory, and Gregory attributed this to Martin.[21] Martin of Tours, bishop some two centuries before Gregory, was of course Gregory's special protector. When he went to Cavaillon in Provence to visit his mother he brought some of Martin's dust with him in case any of his people fell ill: a sensible travel precaution. A servant indeed fell ill on arrival and after three days was brought to Gregory, who cured him with dust.

> I myself suffered from a painful toothache. When not just my teeth but my entire head was pierced by the pounding of my veins and by my stinging pains, I sought assistance [from this dust]. Soon my pain lessened and I recovered. O indescribable antidote! O unspeakable balm! O praiseworthy remedy! O heavenly purgative, if I may say so! This dust overwhelms the subtleties of doctors, surpasses sweet scents, and is more powerful than all strong ointments. Like scammony it purges the stomach, and like hyssop, the lungs; and like pyrethrum it cleanses even the head. Not only does it strengthen disabled limbs but — something that is more important than all these — it removes and lightens those very blemishes of conscience.[22]

This close comparison between the physical effects of relics and those of medicine is one that we shall return to; the passage not only demonstrates Gregory's familiarity with medical practices, but also shows that he believes relics to be more efficacious because, unlike herbs, they heal the conscience.

Some of the wonders witnessed by Gregory were of a very different kind from cures worked by relics. 'After my ordination I went to the Auvergne and visited Brioude', Gregory writes, which was for the festival of one of the favourite saints of his family, St. Julian of Brioude. After the festival he took some of the fringe of the veil hanging over the tomb because monks of Tours building a basilica for St. Julian wanted some relics. 'I secretly took my reliquary and at nightfall hurried to the church of St. Martin. A trustworthy man, who was at the time standing at a distance, told me that when I entered the church he saw an immense flash of light fall from heaven, descend over the church, and then enter as it were inside'.[23] Light often signified that heavenly virtue was close by.[24] There were relics of the Virgin Mary at Marsat in the

20. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 10; Krusch II, p. 45.
21. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iii, 17; Krusch II, p. 187.
22. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iii, 60; Krusch II, p. 197, transl. Van Dam. Krusch reads 'Cavaillon', but as Van Dam suggests this could be because of Gregory's erratic spelling; it may well be Chalon-sur-Saône, i.e., *Cabillonum* rather than *Cabellio*.
23. *Passion and Wonders of St. Julian* 34; Krusch II, p. 128, transl. Van Dam.
24. On the symbolism of light, see the excellent discussion in De Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower*, pp. 133–211.

Auvergne. Gregory travelled in the dark to vigils at the church and saw a bright light shining inside the building. But the door was locked with a key and there was no sound. The custodian unlocked the door for Gregory, and at the glow of Gregory's candle the bright light disappeared — 'I think because of the blackness of my sins. Inside I could find nothing from which that bright light had originated except the power of the glorious Virgin'.[25] An even more wondrous happening was in an oratory in Tours dedicated by Gregory, to be sanctified by relics of Saturninus, Martin, Illidius and others.

> One night I kept vigils in the holy church [of St. Martin]; at dawn I went to the oratory and sanctified the altar I had set up. I returned to the church of St. Martin and with the accompaniment of crosses and burning candles formally transferred the holy relics. . . . A large group of clerics and deacons dressed in white was present, as well as the illustrious order of distinguished citizens and a large crowd of people of the next rank. After I lifted and carried the holy relics that were [placed] in wooden coffers and adorned with shrouds, I came to the door of the oratory. As I entered, suddenly a frightening flash filled the room, so that the eyes of the bystanders were closed out of fear and because of the great brightness. The flash, so to speak, flared about through the entire oratory and made me very afraid. No one could know what this was, although everyone was prostrate with fear, and lay on the ground. I said: 'Do not be afraid . . . . Remember the book about the life of the blessed Martin and recall how a ball of fire rose from Martin's head as he recited the sacred words, and how it was seen to ascend al the way to heaven . . . . That earlier miracle was seen by only a few people, but this one appeared to all the people . . . . That earlier miracle was kept secret to avoid ostentation, but this one was made manifest to everyone for glorification'.[26]

In Gregory's view of wonders there is the clear understanding that they were not necessarily seen by all. Often only the spiritually worthy were allowed to be witnesses. He tells us that one year at the festival of St. Polycarp in Riom, as a deacon carried a vessel holding the unconsecrated host into the church the vessel floated above his hand, and he could not grip it. This happened because he was polluted in his conscience, in Gregory's view; some said he had often committed adultery. Only one priest and three women saw the happening: one of whom was Gregory's mother Armentaria. 'I was present then at the festival', Gregory adds, 'but I was not worthy to see this'.[27] Another instance of Gregory's own wonder-blindness was when the holy Salvius of Albi asked Gregory if he could see the naked sword of the wrath of God hanging over King Chilperic's house. 'No', I answered, 'I can see nothing'.[28] It was not that Gregory did not have visions himself on occasion. Once, while at dinner in Orleans, he told King Guntram how he had seen a vision of the same

25. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 8; Krusch II, p. 43; transl. Van Dam, p. 29.
26. *Glory of the Confessors*, p. 20; Krusch II, pp. 309–10, trans. Van Dam, pp. 34–35. There are other stories about this mystical fire at ibid., pp. 37–38.
27. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 85; Krusch II, p. 96, trans. Van Dam, p. 110.
28. Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, book v, p. 50; Krusch I, p. 263.

Chilperic, Guntram's late brother, tonsured and sitting of a throne covered in a black cloth, with candles in front of him. If he expected the king to be impressed, he had underestimated the formidable Guntram, who was able to cap this with *his* vision of brother Chilperic, in hell, with his limbs broken, boiling and melting in a cauldron. 'As the king said all this to our great astonishment, the meal came to an end and we rose from our seats'.[29]

The question of worthiness operated in other ways as well. A beggar was accustomed to sit on top of the tomb of St. Venerandus:

> as I myself saw with my own eyes. But I believe that, as human weakness demonstrates, this man was involved in some improper misdeed, because with a loud explosion he was struck by the power of the man lying [in the tomb], and was tossed far away. The tomb split down the middle; still now it can be seen to be cracked. In my opinion the buried man thought that the man who usually sat upon his remains was unworthy of himself.[30]

Rather less risible, and more common, are stories about the treatment of privately owned relics. For example, one of Gregory's men brought back some wood from St. Martin's bed and kept it in his house. 'His family began to be severely ill — I think [because] this wood was not honoured or respected as was appropriate for it'. In a vision the man was told to look after the relic properly. He brought it to Gregory, who put it in a suitable place; the man's family recovered.[31]

These various anecdotes are enough to give some flavour of the wonders which Gregory experienced. Many of the problems in dealing with such material will be immediately apparent. If one is merely taking these stories at face value, to what extent is Gregory interpreting natural phenomena or coincidence in terms of divine intervention? What is the influence of the literary models he has in mind, ranging from the Bible to Sulpicius Severus's *Life of St. Martin*? To what extent is Gregory deliberately interpreting events and happenings in propagandist terms, trying to persuade a very largely sceptical audience of the reality of wonder? The traditional view, of course, is that the credulous Gregory merely reflects his credulous and superstitious age. In fact Gregory often portrays the amazement of the sceptic in the face of a witnessed miracle, and often seems to be trying hard to persuade his readers that the miracles really happened: like his contemporary Pope Gregory the Great, who in his *Dialogues* says that many Christians in the Italy of his day do not believe in life after death or the resurrection, and are sceptical about the miracle-stories which offer proof of those truths.[32] Not infrequently Gregory

29. Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, viii, p. 5; Krusch I, p. 374.
30. *Glory of the Confessors*, p. 35; Krusch II, p. 320, transl. Van Dam, p. 49.
31. *Wonders of St. Martin*, i, p. 35; Krusch II, p. 155, transl. Van Dam.
32. McCready, *Signs of Sanctity*, esp. pp. 207-11, discusses the sceptics revealed in Gregory I's writings. He argues that although it was customary in hagiography to suggest that disbelief could greet the story of a miracle, stories of scepticism (particularly scepticism concerning a particular miracle, or the claims of a particular saint's cult) have often to be taken at face value.

of Tours portrays himself as the sceptic in order, arguably, to win over the sympathy of the skeptical reader. For instance, in relation to the miracles which took place in front of the relic of the True Cross in the royal nunnery at Poitiers:

> Often I heard how even the lamps that were lit in front of these relics bubbled up because of the divine power and dripped so much oil that frequently they filled a vessel underneath. But because of the foolishness of my closed mind I was never motivated to believe these stories until that power which is at present being revealed reproved my slow-witted hesitation.[33]

He greeted the founder, the aged queen Radegund, and saw a lamp dripping oil onto the ground. He thought it was cracked, and he reproved Abbess Agnes, in proper episcopal style. But then,

> [I saw the lamp] heaving in great waves like a boiling pot, overflowing in swelling surges throughout that hour and (I believe in order to censure my incredulity) being more and more replenished, so that in the space of one hour the container produced more than four times the oil that it held. Stunned, I was silent, and finally I proclaimed the power of the venerable cross.[34]

On another occasion a man arrived in Tours with a very old silk robe, claiming that the True Cross had been wrapped in it in Jerusalem. 'Because of my ignorance [*rusticitas*] this claim seemed outrageous'. Gregory asked the man how he had got the relic, since he knew that dubious-looking people were kept away from the Cross by men with whips. The man said that he had had it from Abbot Futes, a favourite of the Empress Sophia. For some reason this man gave Gregory this enormously valuable relic. What did Gregory do? He washed it and gave the water to people to drink: they were healed. After this successful experiment, he cut off some pieces and gave them to monks, one to an abbot, who later declared under oath that it had healed twelve possessed people, three blind people and two paralytics. He placed a piece in mouth of a mute man and restored his speech.[35]

This spirit of experiment, indeed of trial and error, is in fact interestingly documented several times in the course of the *Wonders*: we can sometimes see what lies behind the bald statement in the prologue to the *Wonders of St. Martin*, book three, when he says simply that each time he had a headache or a fever, pains in the limbs or eye trouble, he was cured by Martin.[36] It seems that this resort to Martin or another saint was not always so automatic as that statement might suggest. When Gregory was going to Brioude for a festival one time, a headache began: Gregory rationally ascribes this to having been out in the sun too long. The headache got worse and developed into a fever.

33. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 5; Krusch II, p. 40, transl. Van Dam, pp. 23–24.
34. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 5; Krusch II, p. 40, transl. Van Dam, pp. 23–24.
35. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 5; Krusch II, pp. 41–42, transl. Van Dam, p. 26.
36. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iii, prologue; Krusch II, p. 182.

But it was only three days later that he sought a saintly cure: he went to Julian's spring (where Julian's head had been washed after his execution and martyrdom), to sprinkle himself with water and to pray. 'Immediately the pain departed'.[37] On another occasion, while in Tours, Gregory ate some fish at the dinner-table, after making sign of the cross over it. Despite this precaution, a fishbone stuck in his throat; he could not swallow at all, even saliva. For three days he was in agony, not even being able to cough or spit. After three days he made the journey of about half a mile to Martin's shrine and was cured.

> I do not know what had become of the troublesome sharp bone. I did not expel it by vomiting, nor did I feel it drop into my stomach. I know only this one fact, that I felt that I had been cured so quickly that I thought someone had used his hand to pull away the obstruction that had lacerated my throat.[38]

There were other options available, other than waiting to see if the pain would go away, or going to the shrine of a saint: one was going to a doctor. Caesarius of Arles seems to have had considerable respect for doctors: he urged anxious mothers to consult a doctor about the health of their children, lamenting when they did not.[39] Doctors appear reasonably frequently in Gregory's works. The royal court had them: King Guntram's only evil deed in Gregory's eyes was yielding to his dying wife's request to kill the doctors if they failed to cure her. Marileif is referred to as the *primus medicorum* of Chilperic's court, suggesting that there were several.[40] From Gregory's writings we know of practising doctors in Tours, Bourges, Langres and Vienne.[41] Monasteries had doctors: Reovalis, at the nunnery of the Holy Cross in Poitiers, had been trained in Constantinople itself.[42]

Almost nothing is known about the training or level of expertise of these doctors. One or two Merovingian medical treatises survive, while Gallo-Roman

37. *Wonders of St. Julian*, p. 25; Krusch II, p. 125, transl. Van Dam. We may note that cures are adopted according to the illness; he goes out of his way to use water from the spring associated with St. Julian's head, or to touch his head to the veil over Martin's tomb, in order to cure headache; stomach-ache is cured by taking draughts of water and dust into the stomach.

38. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iii, p. 1; Krusch II, p. 182, transl. Van Dam.

39. Caesarius, sermon 5, translated by Sr. M. M. Mueller, in *Saint Caesarius of Arles: Sermons* (Washington, 1956), 1, pp. 36–37, and cited by Valerie I. J. Flint, 'The Early Medieval "Medicus", the Saint — and the Enchanter', *Social History of Medicine* 2 (1989), pp. 127–45, at p. 132.

40. Austrechild's death is recorded in Gregory's *Histories*, book v, p. 35 (Krusch I, pp. 241–42). For Marileif, see *Histories*, book v, p. 14 (Krusch I, p. 209) and book vii, p. 25 (Krusch I, p. 344). He had been unfree, in the service of the church, but had clearly made a considerable fortune from his medical practice: these two passages relate to the two occasions on which he was reduced to penury, with all his gold and silver and other possessions being taken from him.

41. *Wonders of St. Martin*, ii, pp. 1 and 18, and Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, book v, pp. 5 and 6.

42. Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, book x, p. 15. For a discussion of these references, and others, see the section on 'Ärzte' in M. Weidemann, *Kulturgeschichte der Merowingerzeit nach den Werken Gregors von Tours* ii (Mainz, 1982), pp. 302-3, and for a discussion of other Merovingian doctors, see Flint, 'The Early Medieval "Medicus"', pp. 131–33.

medical works were still being copied. It has been thought that Gregory probably had access to them; there are at least twenty-eight technical medical terms in his works, mostly drawn from Greek.[43] He describes melancholia fairly precisely, in Galenic terms, and mentions a number of specific herbal cures. He frequently mentions the use of cupping-vessels:[44] he says that a priest at St. Martin's in Tours, beaten up by an aristocratic thug, would have died if doctors (*sic*) had not arrived with *ventusae*, cupping-vessels. He also says that Leunast, archdeacon of Bourges, saw doctors unsuccessfully for his cataracts.[45] This may imply that delicate operations to remove cataracts were still performed, as they had been in Roman times. The recent find of a set of instruments for eye-surgery in the bed of the River Saône at Montbellet (accordingly unfortunately not in an archaeologically datable context) shows the sophistication not only of the available surgery but of the instruments themselves. Three of them in the metal case were handled needles, but two were 'needle syringes comprising a retractable needle within a pointed tube of tiny bore . . . [with which the doctor] could have both broken up the cataract and removed the fragments by suction'.[46] There is a catalogue of Roman surgical instruments that have been found in graves of the Roman period,[47] but there has been no similar work, to my knowledge on what, if anything, has survived in Merovingian graves.[48] It is not unlikely that a good proportion of Roman medical knowledge survived and, as we have seen, expertise might be updated by contacts with Constantinople.

Gregory, whose own medical knowledge may not have been inconsiderable, used to frequent doctors or barber-surgeons himself. But there was quite clearly a doubt in his mind about either the value or the propriety of this. Once Gregory's tongue swelled up so that he could hardly speak. He went to the tomb of St. Martin and stuck his tongue between the wooden bars of the balustrade; the swelling went down. It came back again three days later. This time he touched his lip to the hangings and was cured: 'I believe that my pain was due to an abundance of blood, but because of the saint's power I did not wish to reduce my blood'.[49] On another occasion he had a very bad headache and touched his head to the veil hanging by or over Martin's tomb.

43. Listed by M. Bonnet, *Le latin de Grégoire de Tours* (Paris, 1890), pp. 218–20, and see the discussion in P. Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West* (Columbia, SC, 1976), pp. 205-6.

44. Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, book vii, p. 22; Krusch I, p. 341.

45. Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, book v, p. 6; Krusch I, p. 203.

46. R. Jackson, 'Roman Doctors and their Instruments: Recent Research into Ancient Practice'. *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3 (1990), pp. 5–27, at p. 8. Jackson's article includes an excellent bibliography of work in this area. The full publication of this find is M. Feugère, E. Künzl, and U. Weisser, 'Die Starnadeln von Montbellet (Saône-et-Loire): Ein Beitrag zur antiken und islamischen Augenheilkunde', *Jahrbuch der Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Mainz* 32 (1985), pp. 436-508.

47. E. Künzl, 'Medizinische Instrumente aus Sepulkralfunden der römischen Kaiserzeit', *Bonner Jahrbücher* 182 (1982), pp. 1–131.

48. The fairly crude abdominal hernia trusses made of iron that are found in a number of Merovingian graves are not much of a guide to Merovingian medical expertise.

49. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iv, p. 2; Krusch II, p. 200, transl. Van Dam.

The headache got better but the pain returned again three days later. He went to the tomb again: again a cure, but ten days later the headache returned in full force. 'It seemed best to let my blood; but three days after letting my blood I thought that my sufferings were due to my blood, and that they would immediately cease if a vein was at once cut; I think that this idea was inspired by a deceiving [demon]'. Gregory touched his head to the veil again and was finally cured.[50]

Gregory did not always resist this inner (demon-inspired) urge to go and see a doctor. Only two months after becoming a bishop, while staying in a villa, he was attacked by dysentery, fever and stomach pain. He began to think about how his funeral should be organised. There was a doctor with him, called Armentarius, but nothing he could do was of any use. As a last resort, or so it seems, Gregory drank some water containing dust from St. Martin's tomb (something that Gregory was happy, apparently, to recommend to others at the first sign of illness). By the end of that same day, he was eating again.[51] Nearly twenty years later — 'recently', he says in book four of the *Wonders of St. Martin*, which was probably the last book he finished — he fell prey to another bad stomach-ache. He tried hot baths and bound hot objects to his stomach; natural, common-sensical remedies, one might think, and significantly the first things that occurred to Gregory. After six days of constant pain, 'I remembered that a few years previously I had been healed from this sort of stomach-ache by the saint's power; the written account of this is found in the second book of this work'. He went to the tomb, secretly put a thread from the hangings above the tomb under his clothes and made the sign of the cross with it over his stomach; he was cured by the time he had left the church.[52]

Gregory liked to tell stories about doctors who failed in their cures and were shown to be inferior as healers to the relics of the saints. We have already seen the failure of Leudast's doctors to cure his cataracts; and the failure of the doctors to cure King Guntram's wife Austrechild, which resulted in their executions — though Gregory is at pains to say that he disapproved of such a procedure. There is the epileptic, who took the remedies offered by doctors but who did not achieve a real cure until he came to the tomb of Nicetius of Lyons;[53] and there are the examples in Gregory's own life. As Valerie Flint has shown, doctors appear as 'fall-guys' in other Merovingian literature as well. She points out, however, that

50. *Wonders of St. Martin*, ii, p. 60; Krusch II, pp. 179-80, transl. Van Dam.
51. *Wonders of St. Martin*, ii, p. 1; Krusch II, p. 159.
52. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iv, p. 1; Krusch II, pp. 199–200, transl. Van Dam, referring to ii, p. 1. It may be noted that *Wonders of St. Martin*, ii, iii and iv all begin (and ii and iii also end) with stories about Gregory's own illnesses and how they were cured by St. Martin, about which Van Dam notes that 'The timing of [Gregory's] illnesses was not coincidental, since in each case the recovery of his health accompanied a change in his ecclesiastical rank', and suggests that 'Notions of illness and healing provided another powerful idiom with which people could think about and describe their own identities'.
53. *Life of the Fathers*, viii, p. 8; Krusch II, p. 249.

> the role of fall-guy . . . can only be played by a figure of whose place in the public's attention his manipulator is certain. It is a painful, but at the same time a sure, attestation of social worth. If the hagiographer gives him such a status, then his status as a healer must have been in general high. It may have been . . . higher in fact than that of the saints in the contemporary community. Such a state of affairs would account to some extent for the gloating over the physician's failures.[54]

It would seem that Gregory had more sympathy with doctors than, in his miracle-stories, he was prepared to admit. Doctor Armentarius, mentioned in the previous paragraph (who failed to cure Gregory's stomach-ache), seems to have been brought with Gregory in his entourage, when he went to Tours as bishop; from his name (like that of Armentaria, Gregory's mother) one might imagine that he was related to Gregory; perhaps he was his personal physician. We have already noted Gregory's own medical knowledge; in some of these stories we have seen him prescribe physical or herbal cures for himself. In that paean of praise to the dust of St. Martin's tomb which I have quoted above, he clearly recognises the efficacy of herbal cures: even though they, unlike the dust, do not 'remove and lighten [the] blemishes of conscience'.[55] A virulent plague of blisters that struck the diocese of Tours was best treated by St. Martin, but Gregory's text implies that doctors might be efficacious too: 'The skill of doctors could be of no value for this illness *unless* the Lord's assistance was present'.[56] One of the frequent words of praise which Gregory uses of the saints or the relics of the saints was that they were doctors. For a tumour, 'the usual antidote was to be sought from the true doctor [Martin]'.[57] He continued, 'I thank omnipotent God who deigned to provide me with the sort of doctor who cleanses my infirmities, washes away my wounds and bestows effective remedies'.[58]

Clearly there were at least two possible paths to a cure: the rational, traditional one of medicine, and the equally rational one of divine help. There are also evinced in his writings at least two contemporary — and one might think, if it were not for Evans-Pritchard and modern anthropology, two conflicting — explanations of disease. We have seen that Gregory uses Galenic terminology and may have believed in Galenic explanations of illness; yet illness could also, or at the same time, be a result of the action of demons or a punishment for sin. At a time of bubonic plague, we see a bishop setting up road-blocks to prevent diseased people moving in from the south: a clear sign of the knowledge of the dangers of contact. Yet, there was another reason for bubonic plague. Gregory tells of how, when he went to Brioude at the time of Bishop Cautinus of Clermont, 'the territory of Clermont was devastated by

54. Flint, 'The Early Medieval "Medicus"', p. 136.
55. See above, p. 50 and n. 23.
56. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iii, p. 34; Krusch II, p. 190.
57. *Wonders of St. Martin*, ii, p. 52; Krusch II, p. 177.
58. *Wonders of St. Martin*, iii, preface; Krusch II, p. 182.

a ruinous plague that the people call the plague of the groin . . . because the people's sins were excessive'.[59] Secular doctors had no remedies against the excessive sins of their patients, even if their methods could be effective with some illnesses.

When the bubonic plague hit Clermont, one of Gregory's servants fell ill. The other servants did not send for Gregory, nor even a doctor, but a *hariolus*, a soothsayer, shaman or enchanter, who cast lots, hung amulets on the patient, and so on. This was a *third* avenue to health, but clearly *not* a valid option in Gregory's eyes: he was furious when he found out and no doubt felt his case was made when the young man died. When another servant fell ill, Gregory got his men to fetch some dust from Julian's tomb and he was cured.[60] If Gregory regarded doctors as uncertain, these folk-healers were positively dangerous.[61] Contemporary church councils, and writers like Caesarius or Eligius, frequently condemned this illicit form of medicine, particularly the use of ligatures and amulets.[62] But, as Professor Flint has recently pointed out, there may actually be little difference between what the cleric and the folk-healer actually does. Gregory describes how St. Monegundis cured a boy who had been made ill after drinking an evil magic potion. She stroked his stomach until she found the affected spot, then she 'took the green leaf of a vine, moistened it with saliva, made the sign of a cross on it, and put it on the stomach of the boy'.[63] 'But for the accepted status of the saint and (perhaps) the sign of the cross, such a process would have been hard to distinguish from the binding on of an herbal cure by a wise woman'.[64] Gregory wants to make distinctions between the three different kinds of cure available, but his texts show that there are considerable areas of overlap. Nor was this anything new. Although Pliny the Elder had contrasted magic and medicine in his discussion of healing, condemning the former, not a few of the legitimate remedies he described are, to us, indistinguishable from magic. The idea that divine help may well be better than entrusting oneself to doctors was also present in the ancient world. In the diaries of Rome's greatest hypochondriac, Aelius Aristides, we are told how, in one instance, the saviour (the god Asclepius) told him to avoid doctors and to trust to the god: he was cured, to the amazement (and no doubt annoyance) of the doctors.[65]

What is most striking about some of the cases which we have seen is Gregory's willingness to experiment. There is another nice example of this

59. *Wonders of St. Julian*, 46a; Krusch II, p. 132.
60. *Wonders of St. Julian*, 46a; Krusch II, p. 132.
61. On the complex interactions between saint, doctor and enchanter, see the excellent discussion in Flint, 'The Early Medieval "Medicus"', esp. pp. 140–45.
62. See Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, pp. 240–53.
63. *Life of the Fathers*, xix, p. 3; Krusch II, p. 289, transl. James, p. 128. Flint comments in *The Rise of Magic*, p. 302, n. 132, 'the translation offered by James . . . does not, I think, quite convey the air of active magic against which the saint contended here'.
64. Ibid., p. 303.
65. Quoted in R. Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* (London, 1988), p. 138.

from the second year of King Sigibert, that is, when Gregory was about twenty-four years old. Gregory fell ill, with oozing sores and fever; he could not eat or drink. He began to think about how his funeral should be organised (again). He invoked St. Martin and he recovered a little, enough for him to plan to visit the tomb. After two or three stops on the way, he fell ill again; he insisted on continuing, despite the advice of his companions, who were themselves feeling ill. Gregory prayed again, for his health and that of his companions, and felt better immediately after prayer. One of his clerics, Armentarius (the doctor we met above?), ill to the point of losing his mind, came to him fully recovered that same morning. 'Forty days later I drank wine with pleasure'. (A true Frenchman!) He eventually brought back three candles from the tomb of St. Martin, as if to see what they would do. First of all he tried giving pieces from them to the ill; he found it cured many of them. As a second interesting experiment he put some candle wax on some of the vines in 'one of our vineyards', and discovered that it stopped frost attacking them.[66]

Gregory was never averse to trying something new. When he visited the moss-covered tomb of St. Tranquillus in Dijon, he tried stroking the painful blisters and sores on his hands with the moss; he was cured.[67] He discovered that splinters from the old wooden church of Saint-Medard of Soissons, used as toothpicks, cured toothache; he had the wooden staff that had once belonged to St. Medard in his possession, and used to hand out splinters to the afflicted.[68] He discovered that threads from the napkin worn by his great-uncle St. Nicetius of Lyons on the day of his death cured the blind.[69] When he was at Dijon he found many people pouring wine and cider into the depressions on top of the stone to which Benignus's feet had been (so Gregory believed) affixed with molten lead by pagan torturers. 'Then, once eyes afflicted with inflammation or some other sores are soaked, immediately the illness leaves and they are healed. I certainly experienced this. For when my eyes were severely inflamed I was touched with this holy ointment and immediately lost the pain'.[70]

Bringing this experimentation even more in line with the early fumbling experiments of the Royal Society in Restoration England, and showing, if Gregory is to be believed, that the attitude was not Gregory's alone, is an anecdote Gregory preserves in his *Wonders of St. Martin*. The messengers of King Chararic in Galicia come to the shrine of St. Martin in Tours for some relics of the saint. To be certain that they were not being short-changed, the messengers weighed a piece of silk cloak, placing it on the tomb of the saint overnight. In the morning they weighed it again: 'so much favour from the blessed man had been soaked into these relics that for a long time they raised the bronze weight in the air as far as the scale could have [leeway] to ascend'.[71]

66. *Wonders of St. Martin*, i, p. 32–34; Krusch II, p. 153–55.
67. *Glory of the Confessors*, p. 43; Krusch II, p. 324-25.
68. *Glory of the Confessors*, p. 93; Krusch II, p. 358.
69. *Life of the Fathers*, viii, p. 8; Krusch II, p. 248.
70. *Glory of the Martyrs*, p. 50; Krusch II, p. 72, transl. Van Dam, p. 76.
71. *Wonders of St. Martin*, i, p. 11; Krusch II, p. 145, transl. Van Dam.

To explain such experiences and beliefs in terms of credulity and superstition — that subjective, meaningless word which ought never to leave the historian's word-processor except ironically — is clearly no help at all. To use such anecdotes as examples of Gregory's naivety and simple-mindedness, as has been done by both Catholic and Protestant commentators, is also grossly unhistorical. As can now be seen, thanks to historians like Walter Goffart who have studied Gregory's *History* with care, Gregory was an intelligent and skilled man, who knew exactly what he was doing and had a clear view of the secular world. In his *History* he is constantly opposing the brutal, immoral and evil world of kings, aristocrats and peasants with the serenity and goodness to be found in God and in God's natural creation. The dividing line was between the world of God and the world of man, not between natural and supernatural, a distinction that was only really developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The growth of a seed into a tree and the movement of stars were great wonders, miracles worked every day by God; the removal of a headache by contact with a relic was equally inexplicable to Gregory, but clearly belonged to the same category of phenomena. He could not explain it but it frequently worked (and he had explanations for occasions when it did not). Gregory knew that contemporary doctors had a different explanation for illness and the workings of the human body; he also knew that their cures frequently did not work, whereas his own often did. 'Gregory of Tours administers tomb-dust in water rather as we do aspirin, and with a seemingly higher rate of success'.[72] Whether one wants to explain that by the placebo effect, by faulty statistics or by supernatural power is hardly important. What is clear is that Gregory's view of the world was not that of a credulous believer in tradition, but of a careful observer of the natural world who tried to put his observations together into a rational and consistent view of the universe. In short, his attitude was a scientific or, at the very least, a proto-scientific one.

72. Flint, 'The Early Medieval "Medicus"', p. 137.

4

Magic and Marriage in Ninth-Century Francia: Lothar, Hincmar — and Susanna

Valerie I.J. Flint

The Lothar Crystal is, both literally and figuratively, one of the finest jewels in the British Museum's collection.[1] A lenticular rock-crystal, measuring some four and a half inches in diameter, and now set in a much later copper-gilt mount,[2] it is so named from the fact that around its central medallion it carries an inscription: 'Lotharius rex Franc[orum me f]ieri jussit' ('Lothar king of the Franks ordered me to be made').[3] The crystal is, in addition, embellished with eight scenes, engraved in intaglio and placed clockwise round the circle of the crystal, ending in the central medallion. The orientation of the engravings, cut in reverse, and so meant to be seen from the unengraved side, shows that the object was intended to be viewed vertically. It may, then, have been designed to be worn perhaps on a chain around the neck, or to be set upon or in an object, perhaps a book-cover. The engraving is of the highest order, and all of the scenes are vivid and of an intense beauty. All are also biblical, being taken from the Story of Susanna, a tale attached (as c. 13) to the Vulgate Book of Daniel.[4]

The story in the Book of Daniel tells how Susanna, the beautiful wife of the wealthy Jewish citizen of Babylon, Joachim, was accosted by two elders and judges of the Jewish community as she went out to bathe alone in her garden one summer's day. The two elders had long lusted after her, and were waiting for her there. Susanna, however, resisted their attempts to seduce her, whereupon, in revenge and frustration, they accused her before her servants and her whole household of adultery with a young man in that same garden.

1. Inventory number M&LA 55, 12–1, 5, catalogue number 559.

2. P. Schramm and F. Mutherich, *Denkmale der deutschen Konige und Kaiser: ein Beitrag zur Herrschergechichte von Karl dem Grossen bis Friedrich II, 768–1250* (Munich, 1962), p. 126.

3. The inscription was reconstructed by E. Martène and U. Durand, *Voyage litteraire de deux religieux Benedictins* (Paris, 1724), p. 132.

4. Chapter 13 of the Book of Daniel has apocryphal, or deutero-canonical, status now, being translated by Jerome from a version apparently by Theodotion, not from the Septuagint. It does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. In the early middle ages it was, however, accepted as canonical on Jerome's authority.