

***Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul.* By Raymond Van Dam. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. P. 317, preface, key to abbreviations, introduction, list of editions and translations of period texts, bibliography map, index, ISBN 0-691-02112-0 pbk.)**

Moyra Byrne

Volume 20, Number 1-2, 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087745ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087745ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Byrne, M. (1998). Review of [*Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul.* By Raymond Van Dam. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. P. 317, preface, key to abbreviations, introduction, list of editions and translations of period texts, bibliography map, index, ISBN 0-691-02112-0 pbk.)]. *Ethnologies*, 20(1-2), 231-233. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087745ar>

- McNaughton, Janet. 1984. "C. Marius Barbeau and the Origins Controversy." *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 12: 60-4.
- McNaughton, Janet. 1981. "John Murray Gibbon and the Inter-War Folk Festivals." *Canadian Folklore Canadien*, 3, 1-2: 67-73.
- Preston, Richard J. 1976. "C. Marius Barbeau and the History of Canadian Anthropology." *The History of Canadian Anthropology*, J. Freedman (ed.). Proceedings, 3, Ottawa: Canadian Ethnology Society: 123-174.

ANNA KEARNEY GUIGNÉ

Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul. By Raymond Van Dam. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. P. 317, preface, key to abbreviations, introduction, list of editions and translations of period texts, bibliography, map, index, ISBN 0-691-02112-0 pbk.)

Raymond Van Dam is a professor of Roman History and a patristics scholar. It is clear from the character of three previous books that he has specialized in the study of the times, life and writings of Gregory, the sixth century bishop of Tours, whose collections of miracle stories provide the documentary inspiration for this fourth book. This reviewer is not otherwise very familiar with this period and place in history, nor with patristics scholarship. However, I find *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* to be rich in materials and methods that relate to those of anthropologists and folklorists.

Van Dam declares his commitment to "the conservative application of comparative studies," since, in his view, the subject of saints' cults, relics, and miracles demands an interdisciplinary use of up-to-date methodologies, as well as the deployment of comparative material from other periods and other disciplines (p. 6-7). Not unexpectedly, he reveals his particular debt to an anthropological approach, but not before concentrating on the historical and biographical settings in Chapters One and Two. In the first chapter Van Dam emphasizes the complex structure of tensions of rival authority characterizing Gaul after the demise of Roman administration, in the context of the growing influence of Christianity affecting all levels of society, and during the Merovingian dynasty of Frankish kings in northern Gaul. Here he weaves an

action-packed tapestry of such rivalries, where historical characters with meaty names such as Chlothar, Guntramn, or Radegund tangle with each other, and in which there is even an armed rebellion led by forty nuns. These tensions also inform Chapter Two, though its focus is the figure of Gregory and the chronological developments in his life, which include his twenty-year bishopric (573-593) and the special quality of his bond with his principal personal patron saint, St. Martin, who himself had been a bishop of Tours two centuries earlier. In part to illustrate his caution that each saint's cult is distinctive and not necessarily representative even of other contemporary cults, Van Dam, in the first chapter, detailed the development of the cults of saints Hilary and Julian, as well as of St. Martin, in this area of Gaul.

Van Dam's "conservative" policy manifests itself in welcome ways: balanced and interesting references to other scholarship, along with clear statements of his own book's aims and its limits; a step-by-step adherence to the data and sources he is working with; respect for the individuals and the different culture of another era. He repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the specificity of place and time. This makes a solid springboard for the juncture — which comes in Chapter Three, "Bodily Miracles" — when Van Dam straightforwardly addresses the awkward problem of interpreting the stories of miraculous healings in modern scholarship terms, since miracles by definition "seem to challenge a genuinely historical analysis" (p. 83). Without rejecting other interpretive strategies, Van Dam finds most rewarding an anthropological approach to health care systems which stresses a distinction between "diseases" which require "cures", and "illnesses" which require "healings": "'illnesses' include the social experiences and symbolic meanings attached to various ailments," and "the 'healings' associated with illnesses include symbols and rituals that redefine notions of community, others, and self" (p. 83). He goes on to describe the way saints' healings in the time of Gregory were typically *public rituals*: illnesses were viewed as manifestations of individual transgressions, but such transgressions affected the "health" of the entire community, so that healing and reintegration had to include both the ill and the healthy members. He points out the intriguing corollary that the saints' remedies thus tended to have quasi-judicial aspects, which could pose a threat to lay authorities.

In the fourth chapter, "Pilgrimages and Miracle Stories," Van Dam evokes a cognitive world of metaphor and symbolic association, a world in which hope and its temporary fulfillment depend on the identification of the symbolic with concrete place and spatial relationships; in which the achronic progress

of a collection of miracle stories parallels that of pilgrimage or of a church interior with its images and inscriptions; and in which miracle stories and saints' relics possess analogous functions. Just as Gregory nurtured St. Martin's cult to lasting prominence, St. Martin's cult served Gregory as he built and preserved his ecclesiastical career. Though he is better known today for his "History of the Franks," it was one of bishop Gregory's great acts of devotion and publicity to collect, and compile into four books, several hundred stories of miracles worked by St. Martin before and after his death — making St. Martin's the best documented cult of the late antique West. At the same time, a vital interplay between orality and written texts is documented through Gregory, the raconteur who was also a dedicated preserver of this ephemeral cultural material. The first complete translation of the stories occupies the second half of *Saints and Their Miracles*, along with several other related texts in translation. Among the latter is a set of inscriptions, preserved through later manuscripts, which once accompanied the painted murals in the church of St. Martin outside of Tours, and Van Dam notes that the survival of these texts makes this church unique in the Merovingian period.

The organization of this book is a pleasure to behold, mimicking as it does a pilgrimage. Starting from a diachronic place of everyday tumult and violence, one is led by stages to Van Dam's clear and imaginative interpretation of the religious philosophy and experience of early Merovingian society embodied at a saint's shrine. The final section, comprising the original texts — palpable objects that, despite a certain stylization, contain the concerns and emotions of another era — matches the function of relics after a pilgrimage. Van Dam's vigilant historian's perspective on his meticulous and imaginative evocation of interacting aspects of late antique Gaul might well serve anthropologists dealing with the phenomena and the ideology of saints' cults found in other settings, or those researching communities with public healing rituals, including perhaps the experiment in personal and social healing rituals taking place in the new South Africa.

MOYRA BYRNE
Washington, D.C.