A COMPANION TO MEDIEVAL PILGRIMAGE

Edited by
ANDREW JOTISCHKY
and **WILLIAM J. PURKIS**

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback): 9781641891790
e-ISBN (PDF): 9781802702774

www.arc-humanities.org
Printed and bound in the UK (by CPI Group [UK] Ltd), USA (by Bookmasters),
and elsewhere using print-on-demand technology.

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Chapter 3

PILGRIMAGE AND THE MIRACULOUS

PHILIP BOOTH

IN THE POPULAR imagination, few things appear to be more closely associated with medieval Christian traditions of pilgrimage than the occurrence of miracles. Even today, when people think of those most popular of contemporary pilgrimage destinations, like Lourdes, it is the miraculous healing of those afflicted by various illnesses and diseases that they imagine.[1] And while medieval ideas about miracles, the miraculous, and even pilgrimage are different from modern ones, the miraculous, for several reasons, formed an integral part of why medieval people went on pilgrimage. With a focus on Latin Christian pilgrimage during the period ca. 500–1500, this chapter's intention is to focus on the relationship between the pilgrim and pilgrimage, the shrine centre, and the miraculous during the Middle Ages. It will highlight the ways in which miracles encouraged and prompted pilgrimage throughout the period, as well as discuss how knowledge of these miraculous occurrences spread with the assistance of these pilgrims. Indeed, while it will discuss how miracles were recorded and knowledge of them preserved, it will also show that it was an oral culture of retelling miracles which acted as the true vehicle for miraculous material. To do this, we must first outline medieval understanding of miracles, medieval pilgrimage shrines, miracle collecting, and how scholars have dealt with these, before moving on to discuss the ways in which miracles encouraged pilgrimage and the role pilgrims played in the spread of miraculous material. Overall, it will

1 Gesler, "Lourdes."

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demonstrate that while texts served as an important part in this dissemination process, orality was central to the pilgrimage experience and the spread of miracles, the promotion of cults, and the creation miraculous traditions.

An important note at this stage relates to the use of the term pilgrim. While medieval Latin Christianity developed and possessed the linguistic markers to identify pilgrims, the Latin term *peregrinus* and its equivalents were not uniformly utilized in relation to people and activities which we might today consider as distinct expressions of pilgrimage.[2] This is especially true of many of the texts relating to miracles and the "pilgrims" connected with them, where we see the term *peregrinus* used only occasionally. Recently, this has led some to prefer terms such as "cure-seeker" or other linguistic markers instead of the more traditional "pilgrim."[3] Nevertheless, while further research needs to be undertaken to explain more satisfactorily the relative absence of the standard Latin designation of *peregrinus* in texts relating to miracles, we will maintain the use of the standard descriptors of pilgrim and pilgrimage for the present discussion.

Understanding the Miraculous in the Medieval Period

The medieval period is often seen as an era of superstition and belief. In this pre-enlightenment "age of faith," a belief in miracles was an apparently fundamental component of a world view which allowed medieval people to make sense of things which we, in modernity, are now able to understand in terms of scientific knowledge.[4] Though such a view may be accepted in some circles, the reality was that while miracles were a fundamental part of medieval Christian belief systems, the way medieval people viewed and understood miracles—from the popular level to the complex musings of theologians—was extremely nuanced and varied.[5] Medieval Christian theo-

2 I have also written about this problem elsewhere in relation to Holy Land pilgrimage. See Booth, "Beyond Turner," 168–76.

3 See for example Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 24–25.

4 Justice, "Miracles."

5 For the standard introductions on medieval miracles see Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do Such Great Things*, Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, and Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*. To these might be added more recent compendium volumes such as Mesley and Wilson, *Contextualizing Miracles in the Christian West* and Katajala-Peltomaa, Kuuliala, and McCleery, *Companion to Medieval Miracles Collections*, with particular reference to the following chapter in that volume: Craig, "Pilgrimage as a Feature of Miracles," 164–85.

logies of the miraculous advocated, first and foremost, that the miraculous was everywhere because creation itself was believed to be inherently miraculous. That being said, the world of a medieval European was still full of wonders (*miriabilier*), things to be marvelled at, and miracles (*miracula*) in the sense of phenomena that we might better understand as such.[6] Within the circles of medieval theologians, the latter (these more apparent miracles of the healing of the sick or the raising of the dead) were the result of mankind's complacency when it came to the more day-to-day evidence of God's power and because of God's need to remind mankind of his omnipotence through the exhibiting of certain signs. Indeed, some medieval authors even referred to miracles as *signa* (signs) rather than *miracula* (miracles).[7] The biblical precedent here is also important. If we think of the first overt demonstration of miraculous power in Christ's ministry, the turning of water to wine at the marriage feast of Cana is described in the Gospel of John as a sign (*hoc fecit initium signorum*) with the intent to manifest his glory.[8]

As miraculous theory was refined during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was an increased theological awareness that this miraculous power could be exhibited not just remotely through God alone, but also through those who earned for themselves a position of special favour with God through a holy life or death. The burgeoning popularity of the cult of saints and relics was crucial in this regard.[9] Of course, saints and their physical remains had no power in and of themselves. The bodies of saints were understood to derive their power from the saints' abilities to intercede with God on mankind's behalf. By petitioning a saint for a miracle, technically speaking, the pilgrim (or another individual) was asking the saint to ask God to perform a miracle through the saint. Furthermore, the belief that a saint was present in their bodily remains on earth meant that people could tap into this intercessory power through the bones of a dead saint as easily as through a living holy woman or man. Relics were, therefore, conduits of divine power. Whether the rank and file of the medieval laity understood all the theological nuances associated with ideas about miracles, saints, and relics is impossible for us to tell given the sources we have at our disposal.[10] What is clear, however, is that medieval people believed (or at least hoped)

6 Bynum, "Miracles and Marvels," 799–818; and Bynum, "Wonder," 1–26.

7 Ward, "Miracles in the Middle Ages," 149–64.

8 The Gospel of John, 2:11.

9 For the history of this development see Brown, *The Cult of Saints.*

10 Justice, "Miracles?," 1–29.

that by visiting the relics of a saint and petitioning that saint on their behalf, individuals could arrange for God to intercede in their lives with very real and tangible effects. Moreover, with the belief that this power resided in physical objects associated with saints—their bones, their blood, their hair, pieces of clothing, or any other object that had been in contact with a saint's (or indeed Christ's or Mary's) body—came the belief that this power was most easily accessed in the places where this holy matter was to be found.[11] Accordingly, through their attempts to interact with this holy matter, as evidenced through pilgrimage, medieval people showed that they understood these things to be of great spiritual and physical worth irrespective of the theological underpinnings behind their interactions with these objects and places. All of this meant that, during the Middle Ages, the miraculous became associated with particular objects or relics and, in turn, those places where such relics resided.

The Shrine and the Miraculous

It was to these relics, which were believed to possess a direct line to God through the saint, that pilgrims were drawn throughout the Middle Ages. However, the relic and saint did not rest in isolation, and pilgrims in search of encounters with the miraculous had to interact with much more than simply the remains of long-dead saints when visiting the shrine. On arrival at the intended destination, the first space a pilgrim would encounter was the church itself. While most churches in the Middle Ages were small affairs, some pilgrimage churches ranked among the largest and most impressive in medieval Europe. Indeed, when we think of many of the great medieval churches—such as Canterbury and Durham in England, Chartres in France, Wilsnack in Germany, St. Peter's in Rome, or Santiago de Compostela in Spain—we have to remember that their size was as much to do with their need to accommodate large numbers of visitors as their position, in some cases, as episcopal centres.[12] Moreover, these churches were sometimes even redesigned to better accommodate processional activities, pilgrimage, and shrines.[13] Beyond the physical structure of the church, the shrine containing the relics of the saint would often be separated by the place-

11 Smith, "Portable Christianity," 143–67.

12 Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines*, 63–91. Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things*, 425–32.

13 Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines*, 63–91.

ment of a screen, surrounded by iron bars, or with the shrine enclosed in its own chapel. Nevertheless, inside such spectacular architectural spaces, these highly decorated tombs—bedecked with candles, votive offerings, and enveloped with the smell of incense—would have provided pilgrims with a powerful sensory experience and helped them to feel that they were entering a space where miracles were possible.[14] Even exercising careful control and access to the spaces at certain times or under the supervision of the shrine's custodians might do little to deter the medieval pilgrim.[15]

Once at the shrine, or as close to it as the incumbent clergy would allow the pilgrim, there was a number of ways in which a pilgrim could interact with the holy matter there. Although it was very rare for pilgrims to be furnished with direct contact with a relic, the desire to be as close as physically possible to the relics of the saints was facilitated in many shrines by the inclusion of holes or niches in which pilgrims could kneel to pray or into which they might crawl to enter the relic's immediate vicinity.[16] From a position as close to the shrine as possible, pilgrims often attempted to take away with them some of the shrine itself in the form of stone chippings or dust. Another material targeted for removal from a shrine by pilgrims was water into which a relic had been dipped or into which dust from the tomb had been mixed. Oil from lamps situated close to the tomb were also favoured as sacred souvenirs, and authorized souvenirs such as pilgrim badges were another very popular type of memento.[17] These items were then taken home, saved against a later need, worn on a pilgrim's person, sent to a loved one or other acquaintance of the pilgrim for their use, or used for more "mundane" tasks, such as sprinkling on crops. If the pilgrim were fortunate enough to be of a higher social standing, or a prominent member of the clergy, they might even have been allowed to take some of the relic itself, such as a scrap of bone or perhaps a finger.[18] Desire to take away relics from sacred centres

14 For the sensory experience of pilgrimage, see Wells, "Pilgrimage Experience of the Medieval Church," 122–46.

15 Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines*, 96–99; Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 187–92; and Jenkins, "Replication or Rivalry."

16 Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines*, 45, 100.

17 Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do Such Great Things*, 244–50; Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, 85–88; Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs*. See also the essay by Amy Jeffs and Gabriel Byng in this volume.

18 On the importance of relics and the lengths that some people would go to obtain them see Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 3–27. See also, Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do Such Great Things*, 239–42.

was so potent that some went to great lengths to obtain them. One story of the True Cross in Jerusalem tells how deacons stood guard over the cross whenever it was put on display because one enterprising pilgrim, feigning to kiss it, had bitten off a small piece instead.[19]

The significance of all these interactions, however, lay in the proximity of an item or an individual to a relic. Relics were believed to possess what Ronald Finucane has called "holy radioactivity."[20] This meant that the power of God, emanating from the relic, could invest nearby objects with this same power. Such objects—bits of cloth, oil in nearby lamps, dust from tombs—have traditionally been referred to in scholarship as secondary (or even tertiary) relics, with the Latin term *brandea* used to describe some of this "subordinate" holy matter. Modern commentators have, at various times and by various means, attempted to categorize these different objects based on their perceived worth, apparent authenticity, or levels of descent from the remains of a holy person. However, careful analysis of the descriptors deployed and usage of these objects during the medieval period has demonstrated that while categorising these items into distinct groups may be of interest to current commentators, such processes of categorization held little interest for those who owned relics during the middle age.[21] Partibility was a crucial element of medieval relic veneration, and while *we* might grant more value to the whole body of a saint than to a scrap of cloth which had come in contact with some small bone fragment, medieval people were not so fussy. All these objects possessed the same *virtus* or power, and they were equally efficacious when it came to securing miracles in times of need. This goes some way toward explaining why medieval people would go to such great lengths, travelling such great distances in some instances, to obtain or interact with these relatively small items. Indeed, some of medieval Europe's most sacred relics— such as the Crown of Thorns or fragments of the True Cross—were what we might call secondary relics, considered sacred because they had been invested with Christ's power by their proximity to him during his Passion. But their "secondary" status did not diminish their value or power in anyway as far as medieval people were concerned. In the same sense, dust taken from a shrine was believed to be imbued with the same power as the relic itself. Pilgrims hoped that through these contact relics God could show his power in their lives and, by extension, pilgrims

19 McGowan and Bradshaw, trans., *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 176.

20 Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 26.

21 Smith, "Relics," 41–60.

themselves hoped that by coming close to a relic they too might benefit from this "holy radioactivity."

For the pilgrim looking for an immediate cure for a physical ailment, there were several ways in which this could be affected. Prayer and supplication were part and parcel of the performative devotion of a miracle-expectant pilgrim. The leaving of offerings was also an accepted way of securing a miracle. To cite but one example, a miracle included as part of Thomas of Monmouth's *Life and Passion of William of Norwich* (ca. 1173) tells of a woman who had suffered for several years from a heart condition but was cured. In order to obtain the cure, the woman had visited the tomb, prayed, offered a candle and retired, returning three days later to pray once again this time offering a candle "made to the measure of the tomb."[22] Such stories can be found repeated throughout medieval miracles accounts with the processes of movement, prayers, and the giving of offerings key within the curative narrative. Indeed, the performative processes for obtaining miracles were so well understood that accounts of these miracles found in collections are often quite formulaic with Simon Yarrow identifying seven distinct steps in the "sequence of symbolic action" leading to a cure: (1) the identification of a problem by the community (or individual) involved; (2) a plan is formed targeting a particular saint or cult; (3) this saint is then approached, physically or through oaths and promises; (4) this is then followed by ritual engagement with the saint; (5) the healing is then witnessed; (6) a record is made; (7) before that record is finally shared.[23]

With this in mind, it is worth citing some "standard" examples, taken from the *Miracles of the Hand of St. James.* The hand was held at Reading Abbey and a miracle collection associated with this relic was composed sometime in the middle of the twelfth century.[24] In their simplest forms, miracles might appear like the one performed on a certain woman from near Oxford whose miracle story runs:

> There was a certain woman in the Oxford region who had been confined to bed for two years, bent up and shrunken. And she was advised in a dream to have herself taken to St. James at Reading. Her brother, therefore, set her in a two-wheeled carriage and she set out for Reading. And it happened that as she went she was cured. And from the place where she was healed she came with her brother to Reading on foot, without the vehicle, and, when she had

22 Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, 98–99.

23 Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities*, 13–14.

24 Kemp, "The Miracles of the Hand of St. James."

> made her votive offering, she and her brother told us what had happened to her and how she had been cured.[25]

The story of the knight Robert of Stanford presents a similar example:

> A certain knight named Robert of Stanford was overtaken and long afflicted by a very severe fever. He therefore came to Reading to pray for a cure and plead with the blessed apostle. And after prayer he asked that water of blessed James [i.e. water which James' hand had been dipped in] be given to him to drink for a little while. No sooner had he tasted it than it brought about a cure within him. He proceeded to vomit again and again until the harmful liquid was brought up and the feverish heat was reduced by the vomiting. Full of joy and praise he returned home cured.[26]

The processes outlined by Yarrow can be clearly observed in both miracle accounts. However, on a more basic level, these stories speak to the experiences of two individuals who found respite for their afflictions through physical movement to a sacred centre and the performance of various ritualistic behaviours there such as the leaving of offerings, prayer, and direct interaction with holy matter.

It is also worth highlighting two other common practices, evidenced in the above-cited examples, which miracle-seeking pilgrims engaged in. One option available to bring oneself into even closer proximity with holy matter was ingesting some of the dust or other matter found at the tomb. In most cases this was done by adding it to a little water, as in the case of Becket's blood, or by running water over the relic where the item was insoluble. While this might seem hazardous, and could often induce violent vomiting, the effectiveness of such a course of action is a common trope in medieval miracle stories. The son of a man named Aluric, who worked in the monk's tailor's workshop at Norwich, was cured from a badly swollen throat by drinking "the scrapings off the tomb slab mingled with holy water."[27] Another no less effective method of obtaining the needed help was to spend an extended period of time, sometimes several days, at the tomb.[28] The cure of a wealthy German named Hainricus at the tomb of St. Maximinus of Micy was accomplished by Hainricus spending several days at the church

25 Kemp, "The Miracles of the Hand of St. James," 17.

26 Kemp, "The Miracles of the Hand of St. James," 17.

27 Thomas of Monmouth; *Life and Passion of Passion of William of Norwich*,106. See also Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things*, 248–49.

28 Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do Such Great Things*, 616.

before finally being healed on the saint's feast day.[29] Similarly, the cure of John, a clerk from Barking, was affected by spending "the night in prayer and carrying out of vigils" before the hand of St. James at Reading on his feast day.[30] It is clear from these examples that pilgrims would go to great lengths to obtain the miraculous intervention which they hoped to receive by visiting any one of Europe's pilgrimage destinations.

Collecting Miracles

Naturally with all these miracles occurring in and around the medieval shrine, those clerics who maintained them became interested in recording evidence of the miraculous power of the relics which they possessed. Collections of miracle stories—often referred to as *miracula,* many of which are also contained in the biographies of saints—were as old as the cult of relics and saints themselves. We know, for example, that St. Augustine commissioned the recording of miracles of St. Stephen in his diocese at Hippo.[31] However, the most famous collections of miracles, and the ones that served as the model for the writing of *miracula* for much of the Middle Ages, were first and foremost Sulpicius Severus's *Life of St. Martin* and Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*.[32] From these early origins, textual miracle collecting continued apace throughout the Middle Ages, seeing its heyday between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, with a particular focus in scholarship on the large corpus of miracles coming out of England in the twelfth century and the large number of less place-centred Marian collections that developed in the later medieval period. Many new cults were established in the general rejuvenation of religious life.[33] The importance of miracle collecting also grew in the face of the growth of the canonization process which often required a properly recorded (and corroborated) list of authentic miracles. This growing interest in collecting miracles is evidenced not only by the number of such texts produced during this period, but also in their growing size.[34]

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29 Head, "I Vow Myself To Be Your Servant," 215–51.

30 Kemp, "The Miracles of the Hand of St. James," 7.

31 Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 151–52.

32 Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 35.

33 See Constable, *Reformation,* on rejuvenation. See Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate* on English miracle writings. See also Craig, "Pilgrimage as a Feature of Miracles," 169–70; Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin*; Flory, *Marian Representations*; and Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 132–65 on Marian works.

34 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 1–8; Kemp, *Canonization and Authority.*

Miracles were collected by the custodians of the shrine by the simple process of listening to pilgrims who claimed they had benefited from a miracle and recording those miracles which they judged to have been communicated by reliable witnesses. This task was sometimes performed by a designated notary at the shrine before they were compiled in a more official volume. At Canterbury, for example, official protocol dictated that it was the job of the sacrist to receive reports from miracles. However, in reality, we know from the collections of Benedict of Peterborough (written 1171–1173) and William of Canterbury (1172–1175, 1176–1177) that all of the members of Canterbury's monastic community were involved in the collection of Becket miracles in the early stages of the cult and that first Benedict and then William took it upon themselves to attempt to order these various stories, preserved orally or on various scraps of writing, into something more like a coherent collection.[35] As such, these have not come down to us as simple lists of miracles, but often as carefully compiled pieces of work with, like any piece of writing, specific agendas and motivations. The careful production of these texts is evidenced by a complaint offered by the author of the miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour (1172–1173) who said: "However, the notary was unwell on the days when these things became known, and so he did not write down in the correct manner and with the proper headings those miracles."[36] On the other hand, Benedict of Peterborough wrote of his Canterbury miracle collection that: "the continual repetition of the same miracle may create disgust," complaining that the task before him was sometimes overwhelming.[37] What is clear from statements like these is that one of the primary concerns in producing these collections was organizing the vast amount of material at a shrine's disposal, though such a task was sometimes onerous for whoever that task fell to. That being said, there were certainly more miracles experienced than reported, and more miracles reported than could be recorded.

Nevertheless, a shrine's reasons for collecting miracles varied depending on the political, social, and cultural milieux in which a miracle collection was developed.[38] Many medieval miracle-working shrines and relics never produced a written miraculous corpus.[39] Those that did seem to have been

35 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 159–200.

36 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 137.

37 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 179–80.

38 For several examples of this see Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities*.

39 Smith, "Oral and Written," 309–43.

prompted to do so by particular circumstances affecting each individual community. While collections of miracles usually state that they were produced to preserve the memory of the great works of a saint, historians have generally identified three motivations for the composition of *miracula*: for purpose of promotion or propaganda; to establish the cult's position or help in processes of community identity creation; and/or to exert greater control of the miraculous materials being shared orally by the laity. The first explanation, which Benedicta Ward has referred as the "traditional" explanation, often sees these miracle collections as pieces of socio-political propaganda to assert a church's interests against the encroachments of powerful, lay members of society or others who might infringe upon the rights of the church community.[40] More problematic and reductive examples of this approach view miracle collections as pious advertisements or the medieval equivalent of a 5-star Trip Advisor review aimed at bringing paying "customers" (or pilgrims) through the door to fill the coffers of the shrine.[41] The result of this approach more generally is a picture of miracles and pilgrims as pawns in a grand clerical game of politics or marketing.

The second approach, though similar in some ways to the more nuanced proponents of the first explanation, has led to some really excellent work (informed by structural-functionalism and associated approaches to medieval religious history) on the role of these texts in the formation of community identities and the place of these communities within the broader social contexts within which they existed.[42] In line with this approach, Marcus Bull has argued that the driving force behind the creation of many of the medieval period's miracle collections was "the process of reacting to, and attempting to control, enforced change," highlighting how key moments in an institution's history—plague, fire, other disasters, institutional competition, or in the case of the Becket cult the violent murder of the Archbishop—could stimulate the creation of a miracle collection.[43] While traditionally understood as being produced for wider audiences in

40 Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 36, 67, 59, 109. As an example of this see Van Damme, *Saints and their Miracles*.

41 We might cite here the reductive approach displayed in Bell and Dale, "The Medieval Pilgrimage Business." This approach is enormously problematic as it attempts to shoehorn the complex relationships between relics, cults, shrines, and pilgrims into a model framed by the inappropriate use of modern economic jargon.

42 See Bailey, "Anthropological Approaches to Latin Miracle Narratives." Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities*, serves as a good example of this approach.

43 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 51.

an effort to promote a cult, miracle stories are now often seen instead as texts for the internal consumption of the monastic communities who created them.

The third explanation, in contrast, places more emphasis on the pilgrims themselves and the miracles they were experiencing. Rachel Koopmans, who has advanced other causes—such as changes in ecclesiastical leadership or the movement of a saint's body as being important stimuli for the creation of miracle collections—has also suggested that these collections were designed to "stabilise the oral stories…in a secure and unchanging format." Thus, they were much more about identity formation (or maintenance) for the community in question, and this "stiffening and deadening procedure" was "quite the opposite of a propagandistic effort."[44] Overall, Koopmans adds, "medieval miracle collections need to be viewed as secondary manifestations of the animating discourse: they fed off the oral world far more than they ever added to it."[45] Miracle collections should be viewed, therefore, as the tip of an iceberg of miraculous material, allowing us to view just a small percentage of an enormous network of oral retellings of miracles experienced by pilgrims and visitors who genuinely believed that their interactions with a shrine or relic granted them some form of divine favour. Indeed, as we shall see shortly, one of the primary problems one encounters in scholarship about pilgrims and miracles is that so many scholarly discussions revolve around considerations of power relations rather than the experiences of pilgrims. While such approaches can be fruitful, it is, nonetheless, lamentable, given that these *miracula* serve as one of the primary and most important evidential bases for our understanding of the relationship between miracles, shrine centres, and pilgrims. Historians, therefore, are continually confronted with the need to navigate the clerical voice which informs us about these occurrences, if we are to reach beyond these to see the experiences of medieval pilgrims at the shrine.

44 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 5.

45 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 26.

Approaches to Miracles and Pilgrims[46]

The traditional method of conducting such negotiations can be easily summed up by the following quotation from Jonathan Sumption's *Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion*. With a definite hint of regret, Sumption wrote:

> But the historian, limited by the evidence at his disposal, can only work on the basis that miracles never happened, though the descriptions of them which contemporaries have left may provide valuable evidence of the attitudes of those who wrote them... Evidently, they were deluded, but the basis of their delusion is worth examining.[47]

In essence, it has been the historian's objective to "distinguish a core of authentic material from the moralising and embellishing accretions expected of hagiographers," disregarding the miracles in the process.[48]

This perspective, which approaches the medieval mind as overly credulous and miracle collections as something to sift through for kernels of truth, runs alongside a longer-standing approach, used since the Reformation, which sees miracles as fraudulent creations of a deceitful clergy, with pilgrims as the gullible believers who fell for these inventions. Even when they have not been rejected outright, historians have rarely accepted on face value the miraculous claims of medieval miracle narratives, preferring instead to place the "truth" of the matter in the region of the unknowable. Although Robert Bartlett has suggested that the "what really happened" question is "not an illegitimate question, and it is one that can, at times, be answered,"[49] the general stance of historians can be found enshrined in the justification presented toward the end of Benedicta Ward's, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*:

> It will seem that I have avoided a direct answer to the question of whether miracles 'really' happened. It seems to me that such a question is beyond the scope of a historical work; it belongs to theology and especially philosophy… Those who recorded or acclaimed a 'miracle' believed in it. People believed that they had experienced or witnessed certain events … [though] this is not

46 For a fuller discussion of current approaches to medieval miracles in connection with pilgrimage see Bailey, "Peter Brown and Victor Turner Revisited"; Cormack, "Better Off Dead"; and Craig, "Pilgrimage as a Feature of Miracles," 164–85.

47 Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 54–56.

48 Howard-Johnston, "Introduction," 16. Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe," 3.

49 Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things*, 333.

> a guarantee, of course, that the events were what the participants supposed them to be….[50]

While the critical edge has softened over the years, there is still a sense that historians think about miracles as either moralising inventions (what Stephen Justice has called the "didactic" explanation) or perceptual misunderstandings of reality (the "perceptual" explanation).[51] The "didactic" explanation has had a major influence on how the purpose and intent of *miracula* have been understood, allowing historians to justify looking at miracles as more than just miracles. This has led to many of the explanations for why *miracula* were written in the first place, as outlined above, even where historians continue to be cynical about the miracles themselves. Indeed, Marcus Bull has suggested two techniques deployed by historians to make sense of such texts when approached from such a "didactic" perspective. The first is the "circumvention" technique, in which the historian ignores the miracles and searches instead for information about medieval society. The second is the "expression" technique, in which the historian looks at the miracles directly but uses them as an expression of medieval social and cultural values.[52] Both such approaches have furnished historians with valuable insights into medieval European culture and society. Nevertheless, both the "expression" and "circumvention" techniques return us to the age-old attempts to "distinguish a core of authentic material" and again focus on the shrine, texts, and clergy as opposed to the miracles and pilgrims.

Alongside those taking a structuralist-functionalist approach to *miracula* texts and the clergy who wrote them—focusing on the ways in which these texts forged social communities[53]—others have painted these same clergy in a more reactive role, shifting historical agency back toward the pilgrims. Rachel Koopmans, for example, has suggested that "a cult did not need a text, and a text could not make a cult."[54] Instead, what was important were the "personal stories of a saint's intervention," and that "the creation and circulation of these stories required no money, no pen or parchment, no building… but simply a person seeing a saint's actions in his or her own life

50 Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 215.

51 Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe."

52 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 11–19.

53 Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities*; Bailey, "Peter Brown and Victor Turner Revisited."

54 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 5.

and telling other people about it."[55] What this approach has served to do is take away the clergy's exclusive role in the production of miracle collections and share that role with the laity (and sometimes clergy) who experienced these miracles first hand. The production of *miracula*, for Koopmans, was less a way of promoting a cult than a way of controlling or containing, within the pages of an authoritative account, the disparate oral traditions which evolved from the workings of the saints in people's lives. These qualitative approaches serve to bring the miracles and pilgrims to the fore through close readings of miracle accounts in an attempt to learn something about the experiences of medieval cure-seeking pilgrims.

Alongside approaches which prefer the qualitative analysis of medieval miracle collections are those which prefer a quantitative approach of which Finucane's seminal *Miracles and Pilgrims* stands as the most well-known expression.[56] Finucane's original motivation had been to uncover, again, that "core of authentic material" behind the ailments which are cured so frequently in miracle collections. These miracles, Finucane thought, were not in fact miracles, but examples of medieval medicine being incapable of providing accurate diagnoses. The blind were not truly blind, but rather suffering temporary loss of sight because of a lack of vitamins or some psychological trauma. The cures were not miraculous, but rather the natural healing of a minor ailment resultant from a change in environment, diet, and/or living conditions as a result of staying at or travelling to a distant shrine.[57] Understanding the real importance of the miracles lay not in the miracles themselves, but in understanding more acutely the inadequacies of medieval medicine. However, while this was one of Finucane's aims, his work also represents an empirical study of immense proportions, involving analysis from a social-historical perspective of over 3000 miracle accounts. This enabled Finucane to understand the relationship between miracles, pilgrims, and shrines by analysing trends in statistical data sets. Finucane used this data to determine things like the standard distances travelled by pilgrims seeking cures, the average social statuses of those who were cured

55 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 25.

56 Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*.

57 Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 59–99. See also Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 88. A recent, rather reductive, attempt to explain away miracles through modern understandings of medicine can be found in Scott, *Miracle Cures*. For the problems with this approach see McCleery, "Christ More Powerful than Galen?," 130; and Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 22–23.

at a particular shrine, or the apparent lifespan of a particular cult as well as the social conditions within which these cults existed.[58]

This quantitative approach to the history of miracles, shrines, and pilgrims has been replicated in other works, such as Ben Nilson's *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England*, in which Nilson used statistical information relating to donations to chart the fluctuating fortunes of various shrines across England.[59] More recent works have continued to approach miracle collections in similar ways to Finucane, most notably Ruth Salter's *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*.[60] Salter's work, though similar to Finucane and focusing on evidence from seven shrines from England in the twelfth century, avoids many of the pitfalls of her predecessors by not explaining away the miracles upon which her analysis rests. Instead, Salter's work draws heavily on approaches derived from the medical humanities and disability studies, a further development which will afford the study of miracles and pilgrimage with rich avenues for future research.[61] Moreover, the work represents a coming together of traditional approaches—the qualitative and quantitative—in a single place and serves as a good example of how the Finucane model for approaching miracles and pilgrimage can be taken forward in a more nuanced fashion. As Salter says: "Statistics can provide us with an important overview, but it is within the account details that we find information of the experiences of cure-seeking and miraculous healing."[62]

Pilgrimage to the Miraculous

With this in mind, we turn to think about the ways in which pilgrimage was undertaken *to* the miraculous, *for* the miraculous, and *because* of the miraculous. With the understanding that miracles served as a sign of the divine in the world, it should come as no surprise that locations or items which manifested miracles should also act as magnets for pilgrimage. What some might call pious curiosity, or—more precisely—a desire to come into closer proximity with objects and places which were imbued with divine energy, served to attract many medieval pilgrims to shrines. There are several examples, throughout the Middle Ages, where the manifestation of miracles led

58 Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 130–72.

59 Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines*.

60 Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*.

61 Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 27–90.

62 Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 22.

directly to pilgrimage. Perhaps one of the most interesting of these comes from the fourteenth century, when Wilsnack, a small town in what is now Germany, was propelled to international recognition by a set of remarkable miracles involving three eucharistic hosts. In 1383, the town of Wilsnack had been attacked by a group of marauding knights and put to the torch. Several days later, and after much rain, the parish priest returned to his devastated church to find three pieces of the host miraculously preserved, untouched by rain or fire. News of this discovery spread quickly, and it was not long before pilgrims flocked to see the miraculous host. Soon enough, miracles began to be reported, including the raising of the dead and the spontaneous bleeding of the hosts.[63] Until its eventual decline in the sixteenth century, Wilsnack welcomed thousands of pilgrims from Germany, Hungary, Austria, and France. Its widespread fame is also attested by the Wilsnack pilgrim badges that have been found in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, England, France, the Low Countries, Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia. The pilgrimage was so popular that before 1412, and again between 1471–1500, the church underwent extensive rebuilding work to accommodate the upsurge in visitors. Indeed, this pilgrim traffic was so financially lucrative that this building work was completed using only one-third of the income which pilgrims brought in. Of course, its meteoric rise meant that Wilsnack was not without its detractors, and strenuous efforts were made by papal legates and rival clergy to suppress the cult. However, at its height it was eclipsed only by Latin Christianity's top three pilgrimage destinations: Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela. What Wilsnack demonstrates, therefore, is that even in the later Middle Ages, if a miraculous occurrence could somehow enter the popular imagination, then it could turn even an insignificant town such as Wilsnack into a pilgrimage centre of international renown.

The perceived cause of the excitement is also important to note. Certainly, it had much to do with the increased eucharistic and blood piety which was evident during the later medieval period.[64] Yet Wilsnack's detractors seem to have highlighted three main ways in which the miracles were promoted. As part of a provincial synod organized to condemn the cult, and attended by the papal legate Nicholas of Cusa, the following statement was issued:

> We have heard from many reliable men and also have ourselves seen how the faithful stream to many places in the area of our legation to adore the pre-

63 For the history and a discussion of the cult at Wilsnack, see Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*; and Bynum "Bleeding Hosts." See also Sullivan, "The Holy Blood of Wilsnack."

64 Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 133–248.

> cious blood of Christ… In order to remove every opportunity for deception of simple folk, we therefore order that… the clergy… should no longer display or promulgate such miracles or allow pilgrim badges to be made of them.[65]

On the one hand, this is evidence of the clergy being actively involved in the promotion of the Wilsnack cult. A visual element is also clearly involved: the badges which were sold at Wilsnack were designed not only to serve as souvenirs for pilgrims, but also as advertisements for the shrine. Nor were these the only visual elements deployed in the promotion of a cult. At Canterbury, even the stained-glass windows were designed to promote the miraculous power of St. Thomas.[66] Yet, even in this instance—at the beginning of a new cult at Wilsnack—we see evidence of the oral transmission of miraculous news being an important part of the dissemination process. Margery Kempe confirms this, for her visit to Wilsnack, sometime after 1433, was prompted, we are told, when "suddenly a man… asked if she would like to go on pilgrimage… to a placed called Wilsnack, where the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is worshipped."[67] Evidently, while clerical promotion and visual propaganda were crucial in getting news out about miracles, the role of ordinary people sharing news of the miraculous with the people they met was just as important.

Pilgrimage for the Miraculous

With news of miracles being spread by various methods, pilgrims were led to hope that in seeking out these places where divine power manifested itself, they could obtain for themselves the miraculous aid they required. This is perhaps the most traditional way for us to think about the relationship between miracles and pilgrims: the earnest pilgrim seeking out the shrine in search of a personal miracle. Of course, the first decision to be made by any pilgrim in this regard was where to go, and the sources suggest that pilgrims were happy to be persuaded one way or another. Reginald of Durham, who composed a miracle collection relating to St. Cuthbert, was aware of some pilgrims who drew lots to determine which pilgrimage destination they should visit.[68] More common in miracle stories are accounts of pilgrims

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65 Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 27–28.

66 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 9. See also Koopmans, "Pilgrimage Scenes"; and De Beer and Speakman, *Thomas Becket*.

67 Bale, trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 210.

68 Crumplin, "Rewriting History in the Cult of St. Cuthbert," 240, 274–75.

who had travelled far and wide before finding themselves in the right place for a cure to be affected, usually with the assistance of a vision. The miracles of the hand of St. James tells of two such instances. In one, a woman from Essex, afflicted with madness, was called to Reading by St. James after she had travelled "round the land seeking from the shrines of saints a cure and aid to health."[69] Again, we are told, a girl who "had gone round many saints' shrines and derived no benefit" had returned to Canterbury only to have St. James appear in a vision instructing her to go to Reading where she was cured.[70] Such examples show that pilgrims were willing to travel to wherever they believed they were most likely to obtain the aid they desired, even if that desire sometimes went unfulfilled. However, while pilgrims might choose to go to a distant location over a more convenient, local one, studies like Finucane's show that in most cases pilgrims sought cures and miracles at shrines within their immediate locale.[71]

Nevertheless, it becomes quickly apparent to anyone who reads one of the many miracle collections compiled during the Middle Ages that the distances travelled, and the miracles sought by Medieval pilgrims, were varied to say the least. If we take as an example the miracle collection of Our Lady of Rocamadour, composed sometime between 1166 and 1172, we are able to see the ways in which a desire to experience the miraculous drove many to seek out the shrines of Medieval Europe.[72] Cure-seekers seem to have made up a large portion of those pilgrims who visited Rocamadour either in search of a miracle or because one had already happened. People who were blind, crippled, deaf, mute, or living with various mental-health illnesses and physical disabilities, as well as those with illnesses such as scrofula, epilepsy, skin conditions, or those who had received wounds in battle or because of some other violent encounter, all sought the Virgin's aid at Rocamadour. However, people also sought out Our Lady of Rocamadour to give thanks for saving them from execution, falling from cliffs or trees, fire, imprisonment, robbery, shipwreck, war, and other causes of premature death. Alongside these are more curious miracles, such as the man healed from being bitten by his dog or the woman freed from a knife which stuck

69 Kemp, "The Miracles of the Hand of St. James," 9–10.

70 Kemp, "The Miracles of the Hand of St. James," 14–16.

71 See the example of Thomas of Cantilupe's cult at Hereford: Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 183–86. See also the analysis provided in Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 120–45.

72 See Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 1–94.

to the roof of her mouth as punishment for not looking after the packs of pilgrims bound for Rocamadour.[73] People also sought aid for animals. The *miracula* tell of a man who went on pilgrimage to give thanks for the safe return of his oxen (indeed, the oxen came with him), as well as the healing of horses, hawks, and a woman who visited to give thanks for the Virgin's help in finding her pet starling which had gone missing.

It has sometimes been suggested that certain saints specialized in certain types of cures or miraculous intervention or were better at attracting pilgrims from certain echelons of medieval society.[74] But we must be careful here that we are not simply falling foul to a trick of the evidential light. Part of this tendency to focus on particular cures in particular places probably had something to do with the fact that, as Koopmans has suggested, "certain problems were more likely to result in satisfying narratives than others, in part because people tend to imitate rather than innovate."[75] In other words, once one person reported a cure of a particular illness at a particular place, others were likely to follow in their footsteps. Ruth Salter has shown, for example, that miracles relating to easing childbirth were rare in the seven *miracula* that formed the basis for her analysis because it was naturally difficult to avail oneself of the assistance of a saint by visiting a shrine in the middle of labour.[76] Conversely, monks needing a cure from toothache were a much more common occurrence than lay persons probably because of their proximity to the shrine.[77] That being said, the fact that a saint or relic cult was often promoted by oral retellings of miracles meant that particular destinations could acquire a reputation for certain cures. Consequently, when medieval people found themselves in need, pilgrimage and the search for miracles—alongside other medical treatments—was the often the solution.

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73 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 165.

74 See, for example, Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 130–51.

75 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 39.

76 Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 62–69. Salter also notes that St. Margaret of Antioch seems to have been an exception to this rule and specialized in the alleviation of gynocentric problems.

77 Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers and Miraculous Healing*, 72–73. Though toothaches appear relatively infrequently, suggesting a preference for home remedies, when they do appear, they generally involve monks for whom beseeching the in-house holy object or place would be a straightforward answer to their dental problems.

Pilgrimage because of the Miraculous

When we look further at the information provided in miracle collections, what becomes clear is that the miracles which had blessed the lives of one pilgrim could influence another individual to embark on pilgrimage. Pilgrims (past and present) who had either experienced, seen, or heard of miraculous occurrences whilst on pilgrimage spoke to other individuals and travellers about their experiences. Returning to the *Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, we read of multiple instances when this was the case. Reporting the healing of a certain man named Gerbert of Creysse, the *miracula* notes that "When he heard about the many and great benefits which the Son of the most glorious Virgin confers upon pilgrims and strangers, through his Mother's intercession… he had himself carried to that church in a basket."[78] We also read the story of a pair of English knights, Hugh Gondeville and Robert Fitz Robert, who lost the ability to speak while on campaign in Ireland. They were also healed at Rocamadour after "They were warned, urged, and advised by some of their people who had heard of the unique Virgin of Rocamadour, or indeed had experienced her bounty" to visit the church.[79] A similar story appears in Book III of the miracles, involving Godfrey, the son of Count Hartmann of Attenburg. In this instance we are told that "even though he lived in the remote parts of Germany, Godfrey had heard about, and believed in, the kindness of the most Blessed Mary of Rocamadour, her manifold generosity and her healing of the sick."[80] All of these stories demonstrate the ways in which news about the miraculous power of a site could stimulate further pilgrimage. That pilgrims themselves were responsible for spreading this news is demonstrated not only by stories such as that of Robert and Hugh, but also by that of William Ulric from Montpellier, whose son was healed at a distance in return for a promised delivery of wax equal to his weight. When William arrived at the church he told the community not only of his son's own miraculous cure but the cure of two others who had been healed under similar circumstances.[81] Indeed, an unnamed woman is said to have come to the church in thanks for remote healing after "She had heard stories, and had learned from those with actual experience, about

78 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 126.

79 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 130.

80 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 172.

81 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 165–66.

how the glorious Mother of God and perpetual Virgin at Rocamadour performed great and various cures for those who were unwell."[82] Similarly, the *Miracles of the Hand of St. James* tell the story of Ysembela, who came to Reading because she recalled to her "mind the miracles which she had heard had been worked by blessed James" and of Osbert, the Abbot of Notley, who was cured after making a vow to go to Reading "on the advice of one of his canons."[83] Clearly, the oral retelling of what Rachel Koopmans has described as "personal experience stories" played an integral part in stimulating future pilgrimage.[84]

Noteworthy in any miracle collections is the fact that miracles need not always follow pilgrimage; miracle often *preceded* pilgrimage. As a result, another common practice among pilgrims was the presentation of votive offerings—some to give thanks for or in fulfilment of an oath that had been made in return for a cure. Other offerings were brought in hope of future support. The giving of wax or candles was common, as we have seen in the miracles of William at Rocamadour and the woman at St. William's shrine in Norwich. However, such offerings could take on a much grander form, as in the case of the man who promised to give a silver bird to Rocamadour in return for the healing of his hawk.[85] Taking the evidence of the shrine of St. Thomas of Cantilupe, Hereford, as an example, an inventory produced in 1307 of the shrines non-monetary offerings recorded 170 silver and 41 wax model ships; 129 silver and 1,424 wax models of men or their limbs; 77 images of animals; 108 crutches; 3 wooden and 1 wax vehicle from cured cripples (possibly referring to the medieval equivalent of a wheelchair); 97 night gowns; 116 gold and silver rings and brooches; 38 gold and silken garments; and a 'multitude' of wax eyes, breasts and ears, so many that they could not be counted.[86] This list demonstrates the vast range of items—and their worth—which might find their way into shrine collections as a result of the offering (votive, thanks, or otherwise) given by visitors and pilgrims.

82 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 196.

83 Kemp, "The Miracles of the Hand of St. James," 13–14.

84 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*.

85 Bull, trans., *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 187.

86 Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines*, 100–1.

Cycles of Sharing

What all of this should show is that expectations for the miraculous played a crucial role in stimulating pilgrimage on several levels. People went on pilgrimage *to* miracles, to visit places of miraculous importance, whether it be to Jerusalem and the site of the Passion (the greatest miracle in Christian redemption history) or to the miraculous bleeding hosts of Wilsnack. People also went on pilgrimage *for* the miraculous, to receive cures for illnesses or to petition the holy dead for their assistance in unlocking the power of heaven on their behalf. And people also travelled *because of* the miraculous. They went to give thanks for miracles they felt had happened in their lives. They also went because they, like Ysembela, Osbert of Notley, or any number of other "normal" people whose "personal experiences" are picked up in the pages of miracles collections, had heard of the efficacious power of a saint, relic, or place from others who had already received miraculous support. Accordingly, while both text and oral traditions worked in harmony to stimulate pilgrimage, each pilgrim connected to the miraculous and the shrine in a different way, and it appears that orality played the most important role in stimulating pilgrimage and spreading the news of the miraculous.[87] By reading between the lines of the miracle stories, a new world of orality opens up in which the telling and retelling of tales of miracles seems to been a vibrant part of everyday medieval life.[88] It was these cycles of sharing that inspired many to go and seek out miraculous help for themselves. Certainly, these stories of miracles can tell us about many other aspects of medieval life, and scholarship has repeatedly shown the myriad ways that miracle accounts can provide a greater appreciation of medieval society, structures of power, health and disabilities, and beliefs, among other things. Ultimately, miracles stories tell us about pilgrimage: the movement of people in search of a more profound and meaningful experience of the divine.

For medieval devotees, God's power was made manifest by miracles through an item of power, and news of that power reached the ears of those looking for divine aid. This prompted pilgrimage and, thus, further miracles or encounters with miraculous materials. These stories were then shared with other pilgrims, friends, and associates and, over time, these experi-

87 Smith, "Oral and Written," 335–43.

88 A useful example of this is the monastic shrine of Saydnaya in Syria, miraculous traditions, for which circulated in the East and West during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (and continue to do so to this day). More on the processes of sharing and the miracles of Saydnaya can be found in Booth, *Encountering Muslims and Miracles*.

ences made their way into text. These texts and oral retellings of the miracles of a saint or relic then prompted further pilgrimage and further encounters with miracles and an expanded range of oral and textual witnesses. Miracles and pilgrims, therefore, had a symbiotic relationship on more levels than is sometimes assumed, and it is to the pilgrims themselves, rather than texts such as *miracula*, that the role of chief agent in the process of sharing news of the miraculous should be ascribed. It was the pilgrims who were responsible for the creation and sustaining of the cult through their words and actions. It was their belief that God was able to intervene in their lives via means of holy matter and holy places that drove them to visit these places and objects and to tell others about their experiences.

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