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Local Pilgrimages and Their Shrines in Pre-Modern Europe

By James Bugslag, University of Manitoba

When people think of medieval pilgrimage, most usually the road to Santiago de Compostela comes into view in the mind's eye, or the even longer and more dangerous voyage to the Holy Land. It is no wonder that these remarkable journeys and the spiritual motivations that sparked them should have attracted so much attention. They have an epic grandeur and a transformational potential that speak directly to impulses that are still felt by pious and adventuresome souls today. Less well known, however, are the more prosaic and far more numerous pilgrimages that took place regionally or locally in medieval and early-modern Europe. Far more so than for the major pilgrimages, these local pilgrimages were rooted in a past that has all but disappeared from the mechanized, urban world of the 21st century and whose concerns no longer spark the popular imagination. Yet, local pilgrimage is a fascinating historical phenomenon, and the fact that it has been relatively ignored offers exciting potential for further study.

This special section of this issue of *Peregrinations* is devoted to local pilgrimage. The idea for this project sprang from a session dedicated to Local Pilgrimage Shrines at the 40th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo in May 2005.¹ Besides this introductory essay, the other two articles gathered here originated as papers read in this session, and each of them highlights pertinent aspects of local pilgrimage. These studies do not even begin to exhaust this rich subject. Rather, our intention is more to draw attention to local pilgrimage in the hope of spurring further interest in what may be described as a growing field of study. Each article, thus, focuses on different concerns and perspectives.

Local pilgrimage has certainly not been entirely ignored in the past, but it has benefited much less from scholarly attention not only due to its overshadowing by what William Christian, Jr., has called the “more touristic” pilgrimages but, as well, due to the generally less well documented nature of local pilgrimage. The situation is well exemplified by the 1472 will of William Ecopp, rector of the parish church at Heselton in Yorkshire, in which he left “a string of bequests” for various pilgrimages to be performed throughout England. As Diana Webb has pointed out, these ranged from major – and relatively well documented – sites such as Canterbury and Walsingham “to a number of north-country shrines of the Virgin which are otherwise unknown as objects of

¹ “Local Pilgrimages and Their Shrines in Pre-Modern Europe,” sponsored by the International Society for the Study of Pilgrimage Arts, and organized by James Bugslag. Susan Kerr delivered a paper in this session on “Image and Legend in the Pilgrimage to S. Miguel de Aralar” which does not appear here. Likewise, Stella Singer (Univ. of Pennsylvania), who delivered a paper on “‘Falsingham’ or Allegory of Place? Walsingham's Local Genius,” was unable to contribute to the current issue of *Peregrinations*, but her paper is part of an on-going research project which we hope will appear in the near future.

pilgrimage.”² Ronald Finucane has made the point that most of what we know of medieval pilgrimage shrines comes from the collections of miracles that were recorded at them.³ Written miracle collections, however, depended on the presence of both an institutional organization and literate recorders, which could only be expected where a shrine was associated with an ecclesiastical institution, such as a monastery. Thus, although Finucane has studied a variety of major and minor pilgrimage shrines in England, the local ones he selected were unusually well provided with documentation by monks or canons living in a community at the site: the shrine of St. Godric at Finchale was controlled by a Benedictine community dependent on Durham Cathedral Priory; that of St. Frideswide at Oxford by a priory of Augustinian canons. Anders Fröjmark, in his article in this issue of *Peregrinations*, makes use of similar sources to chart in admirable detail the nature of local pilgrimages to some Swedish shrines.

Most local pilgrimage shrines of pre-modern Europe, however, lacked the institutional basis for such documentation. Many of them were served by parish priests who, particularly in rural areas, would have been only marginally more literate than their uneducated flocks. A considerable number of local shrines lay outside of the institutional framework of the Church altogether, and were thus even further devoid of documentation. Moreover, the legislation promulgated by the Roman Church regarding pilgrimage also tended to leave local pilgrimages unmentioned. For understandable reasons, pilgrims traveling far from their homes for substantial periods of time were in greater need of institutional and legal safeguards. Modern scholars regarding such legislation have thus been presented with a skewed vision of pilgrimage. In the 13th century, for example, lawyers and theologians “distinguished between voluntary pilgrimages undertaken as an act of personal piety, and compulsory ones imposed by confessors or courts of law.”⁴ Although Jonathan Sumption discounts such a clear-cut distinction, this legalistic view of pilgrimage can easily be conflated with the vision of pilgrimage encouraged from above by the Catholic Church during the 19th century, when many long-standing pilgrimages were “revived” in a form purified of many traditional reasons for local pilgrimage. They tend to draw us back to the long road to Santiago, or Rome, or Jerusalem, which now conjures up a mixed vision of pious devotion and tourism.

Thus, the phenomenon of medieval local pilgrimage is difficult to grasp both through lack of documentation and through the all too frequent circumstance of being considered through the ideological screen of homogeneous ecclesiastical orthodoxy. In fact, much local pilgrimage defied such categorization, and the range of motivations for it was broad and varied. All legitimate medieval pilgrimage might fairly be seen as “acts of personal piety,” yet pilgrimages were undertaken for a vast number of reasons that immediately emphasize the radical absence of the essentially modern distinction between

² Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage, c.700-c.1500* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 148. For details of this will, see Edmund Waterton, *Pietas Mariana Britannica: A History of English Devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin Marye Mother of God, with a Catalogue of Shrines, Sanctuaries, Offerings, Bequests, and Other Memorials of the Piety of Our Forefathers* (London, 1879), p. 43. The will is also discussed by Richard Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Stroud, 2004), p. 187.

³ Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (New York, 1995).⁴ Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (London, 1975), p. 98.

the secular and the sacred. Nine-tenths of all recorded medieval shrine miracles between the 12th and 15th centuries, for example, involved physical healing of human illnesses and injuries, at least as recorded at English shrines.⁵ Benedicta Ward has sensibly pointed out that most such healing miracles were associated with local shrines.⁶ There was even some measure of opposition to non-local curative pilgrimages. The enemies of Coutances Cathedral attempted to dissuade a pilgrim from going there by asking her, “why go to a strange church to seek the help of the Blessed Virgin whose power is universal and could just as easily cure you in your own home?”⁷ On the other hand, the Coutances miracle collection tells of a local who was divinely chastised by the Virgin herself for doubting that the Virgin of Coutances was more powerful than the Virgin of Bayeux.⁸ Ward also cites the early 12th-century case of the cripple Glutinus, who prayed for a cure for ten days in Exeter Cathedral without success, after which the canons, discovering that he was actually from the diocese of Salisbury, made him return there, where he was cured. Herman, the canon of Laon Cathedral who recorded this miracle in 1113, was of the extraordinary opinion that “no one can be cured outside his own diocese.”⁹

Before the 19th century, medical knowledge and institutionalized medical care were of negligible help to the vast majority of the population, whose principal recourse was to divine thaumaturgical aid.¹⁰ Agricultural science and meteorology were similarly undeveloped, so people also resorted to the relics of the saints and miraculous images to ensure the fertility of crops and animals, to bring rains during drought or to stop the flooding of fields, to avert insect infestation, and generally to aid the essentially agricultural economy of a largely agrarian populace in the uncertain business of survival. In a time before the institution of effective police forces, people might resort to pilgrimage to recover stolen, or simply lost, articles, to apprehend criminals or to escape unjust incarceration. The people of the Middle Ages – and even, to a surprising extent, the early-modern period – lived in a “magical universe” in which a pious concern for

⁵ Finucane (1995), p. 59.

⁶ It should be pointed out, however, that whereas in the 11th and 12th centuries most miraculous cures took place at a pilgrimage shrine, by the 14th and 15th centuries, most miraculous cures took place at some distance from the shrine involved and were followed by pilgrimages to the shrine to fulfill a vow made previous to the cure, or to give thanks. This, at least, was the case in France; see Webb (2002), p. 58, citing Pierre-André Sigal, *L'Homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale* (Paris, 1985). Cf. also Sumption (1975), p. 140; Finucane (1995), p. 69.

⁷ Sumption (1975), pp. 50-51.⁸ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989), p. 120, citing John of Coutances, *Mirac. Eccl. Constatiensis* 6 in E.A. Pigeon, ed., *Histoire de la cathédrale de Coutances* (Coutances, 1876), pp. 370-72.

⁹ Cited in Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 140. See Herman, *De Miraculis S. Mariae Laudunensis*, PL, vol. 156, col. 961- 1020.

¹⁰ Even less well documented than local pilgrimage were the activities of local wise men and wise women and the “leechcraft” they practiced, which was also resorted to for medical aid.

their own salvation was not seen to be at odds with concerns we now tend to consider as “secular.”¹¹

Local pilgrimages tend to emphasize this situation far more than major ones, and our knowledge of many local cults in the Middle Ages is based solely on the Church's recorded attempts to suppress them. Negative attitudes towards local devotions were recorded all through the Middle Ages. St. Bernard, for example, looked down on “the vulgar masses who are incapable of truly spiritual feelings.”¹² More particularly, plebian pilgrimage was often censured.¹³ Not only were particular local pilgrimage practices occasionally condemned, but there was a deep distrust on the part of the church of reports of miracles at local shrines that emanated from the people rather than from church authorities. Their attitude was the same even at major shrines, where peasant testimonies could be properly screened by educated clerics. Thus, William of Canterbury, one of the recorders of Becket's miracles in the late 12th century, “expected beggars to be liars and the nobility to tell the truth.”¹⁴ The church increasingly sought to control not only reports of miracles at pilgrimage shrines, but the shrines themselves. Many local pilgrimages emerged in the Middle Ages at the graves of local hermits and holy people who were not canonically recognized as saints, and bishops sometimes felt compelled specifically to terminate devotion to these would-be local shrines. Nevertheless, “the mediaeval Church not only did not but could not control and direct popular religion. ... In fact, in so far as one can trace the movement of ideas in the history of medieval piety it is often in the reverse direction. Popular religious practices continually influence the behavior of the establishment.”¹⁵

In the 16th century, however, what was once an uneasy accommodation of many local practices became more severe. The Protestant Reformation led to widespread destruction of relics and miraculous images and condemnation of pilgrimage practices in general that erased pilgrimage from substantial parts of Europe. Even in areas which did not become Protestant, religious unrest led to the destruction of many local shrines, by the Huguenots in France, for example. Attitudes, too, were changing. The Catholic followers of Erasmus condemned many of the ideas on which pilgrimage depended, such as the thaumaturgical “specialization” of saints, which they associated specifically with Roman and Greek deities, and they denied “the notion that God's grace was more common at certain places (the basis for shrines and pilgrimage).”¹⁶ Later, the Council of Trent sought to assert clerical authority over local religious activity and to separate clearly the profane from the sacred. Their attempts, however, met with only limited

¹¹ See, for example, Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London and New York, 2000); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1971).

¹² Cited in Sumption (1975), p. 155.

¹³ Webb (2002), p. 75.

¹⁴ Finucane (1995), p. 155.

¹⁵ Sumption (1975), p. 53.

¹⁶ William A. Christian, Jr., *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 161-62.

success. Comparisons between recorded practices and those forbidden by the church provide “[a] picture of a stubborn, combative laity that defended its own culture and religious customs against clerical intrusions.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, both the enlightened humanism of Catholic reformers such as Erasmus and legislation by the Counter-Reformation church hierarchy rapidly influenced “educated” opinion more generally. Since the Early Modern period, “enlightened” or pious critics have denounced much local pilgrimage practice – when it has not been ignored it altogether. Concerning medieval pilgrimage in general, the English historian Edward Gibbon (1737-94) railed “with astonishment and indignation [at] the profane spectacle which had succeeded to the pure and spiritual worship of a Christian congregation” in the more spiritually pure age, as he saw it, of early Christianity.¹⁸ This “profane spectacle” was particularly evident in relation to many local pilgrimages. Thus, Jacques Toussaert, in a study published as recently as 1963, in describing the local cult surrounding the statue of Notre-Dame des Dunes, dug up in 1403 at Dunkerque during excavations which also revealed a previously unknown spring of water (a common conjunction, as we shall see) and which, particularly among sailors, gained a miraculous reputation that is still recognized to this day, judges:

If it is permitted to refer to a current devotion which has preserved characteristics that are still fairly medieval, one could say that it proceeds from the most varied religious sentiments, from the most pure and filial veneration to a marked superstition. For some, the Marian devotion is grounded in an authentically Christian life; for others, it is a fetishism diluted or coloured with Christianity. One can understand that sailors, with their hard and dangerous lives, particularly in ancient times, were often not very open to religious emotions, and thus relatively closed to everyday religious sentiment; their life did not facilitate, moreover, a regular religious practice, but in their distress, they recognized a devotion to, essentially, the god of the sea, to protect them in moments of danger. The ship models, offered as *ex votos* before the statue of the Virgin, do not constitute typically Christian marks of religious sentiment.¹⁹

Two comments are worth making about these value judgments. Firstly, the radical disjunction discernable between the “sacred” and the “secular” registers primarily his own, modern sense of religious values, which he is imposing on the Middle Ages. He was undoubtedly a devout Christian himself, but living in a mechanical universe very different from the medieval reality. Before barometric pressure and the Gulf Stream were known, it was believed that God made storms at sea, as often as not specifically because of the sinful lives of the sailors whose lives were endangered. Recourse to relics or miraculous images was not, in these circumstances, “superstitious.” It was part of the medieval magical universe, in which the phenomenon of local pilgrimage operated.

¹⁷ Christian (1981), p. 167.

¹⁸ 28th Chapter, section four; cited in Finucane (1995), p. 20.

¹⁹ Jacques Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du moyen-âge* (Paris, 1963), pp. 272-73. My translation from the French.

Certainly, many of the pilgrims who made vows to Notre-Dame des Dunes, in terror, when their lives were in peril at sea and afterwards, in order to fulfill their vows, made a pilgrimage of thanksgiving and offered a votive ship model to the Virgin, may not have lived conventionally “pious” lives, but as their last recourse, they turned to the saints, as they were manifested and embodied in the relics or images they were familiar with in their own circumscribed experience. This was the basis of a great deal of local pilgrimage. Toussaert contemptuously refers to this attitude as “fetishism,” which he assumes is not “authentically Christian.” In actuality, the word “fetish,” now used generally to describe an inanimate object with magical power or through which spiritual influence may pass, was first used by Portuguese explorers, in connection with African religious figures, in the late 15th century; they derived it from the Portuguese word *feiticos* which could refer specifically to Christian relics and miraculous images.²⁰ As Jonathan Sumption put it, for the masses, “Christianity remained . . . a ritual framework of life, rather than a body of coherent beliefs and commanding ideals.”²¹

Secondly, Toussaert is simply wrong when he states that pilgrimages of thanksgiving to local pilgrimage shrines, accompanied by such material gestures as the donation of *ex votos*, “do not constitute typically Christian marks of religious sentiment.” During at least the late Middle Ages, they were very typical, although this is now difficult to appreciate because almost none of these works of popular medieval religious art have survived.²² Medieval pilgrimage shrines were commonly filled with votive objects of all kinds, which not only registered, individually, belief in the thaumaturgical effectiveness of the shrine, but collectively, they materially helped to construct such belief. I will return to some of these themes later, but for now, what I would like to emphasize is that it is necessary to adopt a post-modern perspective on pilgrimage shrines. In other words, our own ideological preconceptions must be distinguished from those of the Middle Ages, when vastly different attitudes towards pilgrimage prevailed, which do not, in substantial respects, match contemporary expectations.²³

When we come to consider what is known of the phenomenon of local pilgrimage, bearing in mind the lack of standard historical sources, we are faced with considerable

²⁰ “Fetishism”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 9 (Chicago, London and Toronto, 1960), pp. 200-01.

²¹ Sumption (1975), pp. 267-68.

²² On some rare surviving examples of late medieval wax *ex votos*, see U.M. Radford, “The Wax Images Found in Exeter Cathedral,” *Antiquaries Journal* XXIX (1949), 164-68, pl. XIX-XXI; *Iconoclasme. Vie et mort de l'image médiévale*, exh. cat. (Berne, 2001), p. 249. On *ex votos* in general, see the remarkable study by Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Ex Voto. Zeichen und Abbild im christlichen Votivbrauchtum* (Zürich, 1972).

²³ Another pertinent aspect of our expectations that must be distinguished from those of the Middle Ages comes from the fact, not always obvious, that we are divided from the Middle Ages by our own scientific, technological and economic success and no longer constitute a society “with a weak coefficient of security,” in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which often, he claims, “cede to a psychological therapeutic” which undoubtedly formed a part of pre-modern local pilgrimage; see Aline Rousselle, *Croire et guérir. La foi en Gaule dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 1990), p. 295, note 36.

methodological problems.²⁴ As often as not, information on local pilgrimages is limited to the writing down, by early-modern and later local historians, folklorists, and religious enthusiasts, of oral traditions. Whatever the sources, tradition has attached to many local pilgrimage shrines accounts that must certainly be considered more as legendary than as historical documentation. Historians have not been kind to this potentially useful evidence: “Elaborate justificatory legends were composed afterwards to clothe them with a spurious antiquity.”²⁵ Thus did Jonathan Sumption, an important and exemplary historian of pilgrimage, write them off. More recently, more positive approaches to this material have been suggested by ethnographers who, rather than treat such legends as “historical evidence,” treat them, in a structuralist manner, as answering social needs for local populations.²⁶ A great many of these legends seek to justify the location of sacrality with respect to specific, sometimes very small communities. Many of these legends are associated with Marian shrines, although they also accrue to the shrines of local saints. What is striking among shrine legends is that, although they are tailored to specific localities and circumstances, the same topoi and patterns recur frequently in many of them.

In order to exemplify the hundreds of very similar legends concerning the origins of miraculous statues of the Virgin Mary, from all over Europe, let us consider a paradigmatic account, mentioning, as well, some common variants. Typically, the statue’s origin is miraculous. The accounts usually begin with a shepherd or shepherdess, or some other type of agricultural worker, who perhaps notices that an ox or bull in their herd keeps returning to the same spot; although it does not eat, it is fatter and healthier than the rest of the herd. The shepherd follows it, and alerted by the animal pawing the ground with its hooves and horns, digs up a statue of the Virgin. Alternately, the shepherd finds the statue in a tree. Sometimes grottoes also played a role. Immediately, a spring gushes forth from the ground at the find spot. The shepherd takes the statue to his parish church, but the next day, it has miraculously returned to the find spot, and after several such attempts, a rustic chapel is built – as it is put in countless stories – on the site that the Virgin has herself chosen. Miraculous cures and interventions soon become associated with both the spring and the statue.

²⁴ Rousselle (1990), pp. 210ff. contains some interesting discussion of method and historiography concerning the interpretation of curative shrines in Late Antiquity and the conversion period that are also relevant for a consideration of medieval and early-modern shrines.

²⁵ Sumption (1975), p. 279.²⁶ For some decades, anthropologists have been producing a growing literature on pilgrimage. A ground-breaking milestone in this development was Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York, 1978), which was, however, primarily focused on major, long-distance pilgrimage. More recently, the very interesting Introduction to John Eade and Michael Sallnow, eds, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (1991; Urbana, 2000), provides a critical update on the Turners’ approach and extends consideration more usefully to include local pilgrimage.

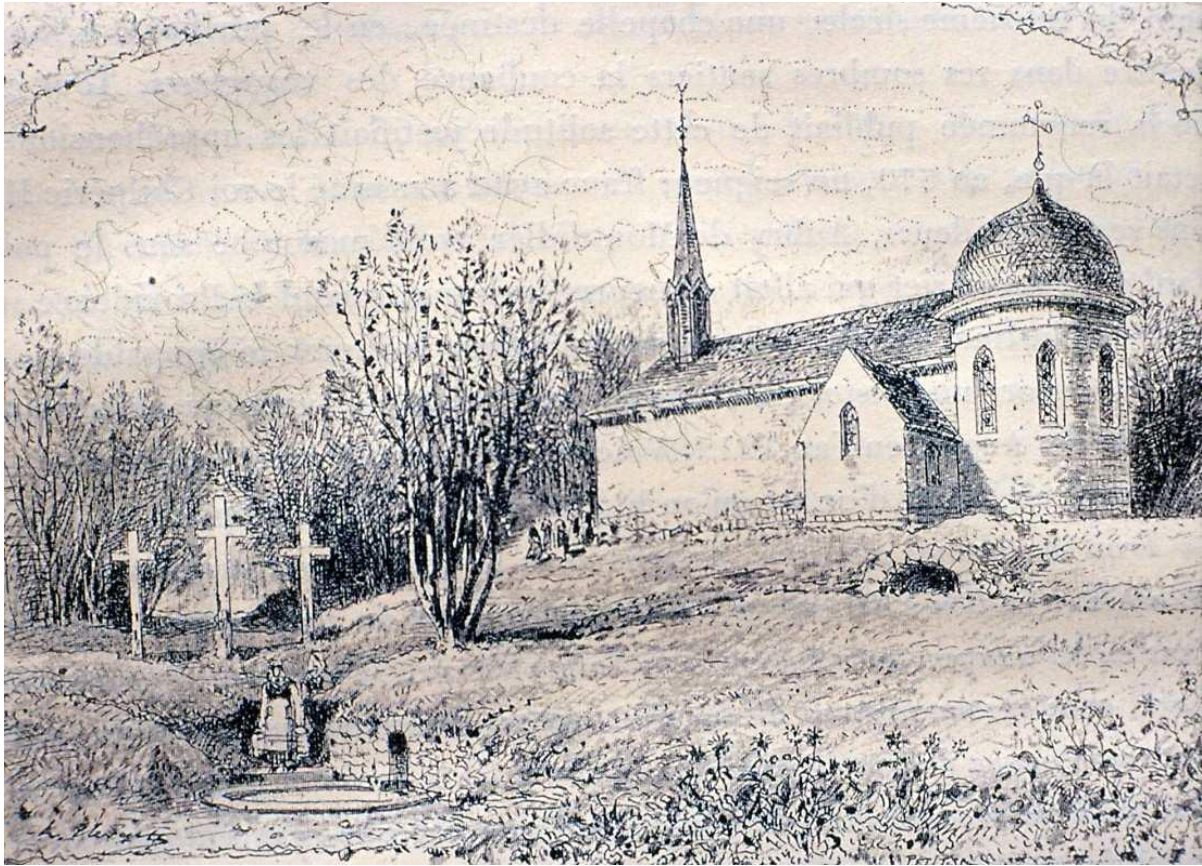


Figure 1. The chapel of Notre-Dame des Anges at Clichy-sous-Bois, as it was in c.1890
(Photo: Drochon, 1890, p. 35).

Two more concrete examples of such local pilgrimage shrines are provided by the chapel of Notre-Dame de Grâce at Scheut, which is treated in detail in Yvonne Yui's article in this issue of *Peregrinations*, and the chapel of Notre-Dame des Anges at Clichy-sous-Bois, (**fig. 1**) just on the outskirts of Paris, which, according to tradition, originated when three merchants were robbed on this site in 1212 and tied to three oak trees. After having made a vow to the Virgin Mary, the merchants were miraculously released by angels, and a spring gushed forth at the foot of the trees. A small oratory was built and provided with a statue of the Virgin, and the site became known for miraculous cures, particularly of fevers. The church has been rebuilt many times since then, but the statue and the spring are still apparent, and three crosses now mark the site of the three oaks.²⁷ The conjunction of a statue, a spring and the implied presence of trees is typical of small Marian shrines.

Such foundation legends help to validate and, in a sense, construct the sacrality of a local landscape, and they do so in a manner that considerably predates the beginnings of

²⁷ Jean-Emmanuel B. Drochon, *Histoire illustrée des pèlerinages français de la très sainte Vierge* (Paris, 1890), pp. 35-37; I. Couturier de Chefdu Bois, *Mille pèlerinages de Notre-Dame, Région A: Normandie, Artois et Picardie, Ile-de-France, Maine, Anjou, Orléanais, Blesois et Touraine, Poitou, Vendée, Aunis et Saintonge, Bretagne* (Paris, 1953), pp. 102-03.

“Christian” pilgrimage to many sites. The very same significant landscape features that crop up in relation to miraculous statues – rocks, trees, springs – were determiners of sacrality before and during the conversion period, and early missionaries and councils often specifically condemned the worship of or vows made to rocks, trees and springs.²⁸ Hardly any council, general or particular, did not proscribe some superstitious practice. The second Council of Arles in 452 and, later, the second Council of Tours in 567 both enjoined pastors to chase from the church anyone coming with vows to rocks, trees or springs: “quemcumque in hac fatuitate persistere viderint, vel ad nescio quas petras, aut arbores, aut ad fontes, designata loca gentilium, perpetrare ... ab Ecclesia sancta auctoritate repellent.” Two capitularies of Charlemagne forbade the lighting of candles or torches and rendering devotion to trees, springs or rocks.²⁹ Councils at Rouen and Toledo in the 7th century made the same condemnations.³⁰

Francis Jones has emphasized that these condemnations were repeated century after century, a clear indication of the unwillingness of the agricultural peasantry of Europe to give up the propitiatory practices that had assured their survival for millennia. Jones also detects a distinct shift in the tenor of the church's attitude towards the sacralized elements of the landscape at around the same time that pilgrimage was coming to its peak in Europe and, as well, at the same time that statues of the Virgin and other saints were beginning to appear in substantial numbers. He cites, for example, the 26th canon of St. Anselm, dating from 1102, which decreed: “Let no one attribute reverence or sanctity to a dead body or a fountain without the bishop's authority.”³¹ Rather than try to stamp out these practices, by this time, the church was trying to control them, and it would appear that this was commonly done by building chapels near such significant landscape features, and even by “baptizing” a sacred spring or tree by placing the image of a saint there. In his famous letter of 597 to St. Augustine of Canterbury, Pope Gregory the Great actually recommended such a stratagem. Virtually the same observations were made by Dom Grenier in the mid-19th century, that zealous priests substituted, with pious skill, crosses and small chapels for trees and rocks: a great number of them could still be seen in his time besides the main roads in Picardy, or else people placed relics in the trunks of trees, objects of superstitious devotion.³² This is a process that has been

²⁸ On healing shrines associated with springs and their fate during the conversion period, see Rousselle (1990). This interdisciplinary study contains an in-depth examination of the relationship between medicine and thaumaturgical healing during the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. It focuses solely on spring shrines, since they are the best archaeologically documented type of healing shrine in Late Antiquity. Understandably, as well, the shrines considered were all major shrines supported from nearby cities. She claims too finally, I believe, the abandonment of such sacral sites in favour of the burgeoning thaumaturgical regimen based on the relics of saints.

²⁹ These early decrees are cited in Dom Grenier, *Introduction à l'histoire général de la province de Picardie* (Amiens, 1856), p. 410.

³⁰ Francis Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales* (Cardiff, 1992), p. 22.

³¹ Jones (1992), pp. 22-23.

³² Grenier (1856), p. 410.

called “guided syncretism.”³³ One can easily believe that this process was replicated at many local pilgrimage shrines throughout Europe.

Often, as well, the inception of a local cult is extrapolated in legend back to a period long before it could reasonably have existed. This is quite obvious when statues are involved: dates are cited for them long before such statues began to appear widely in the 11th and 12th centuries. Although hardly involving a singularly local shrine, the undoubtedly late 11th-century statue of Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre in the crypt of Chartres Cathedral (destroyed at the French Revolution) was reputed by the late Middle Ages to have been made by at Chartres before the birth of Christ by the Druids, who had sent a deputation to the Holy Land to consult with the prophet Isaiah as to its manufacture.³⁴ As Richard Marks has recently noted, the chronology of medieval devotional images has not been explored in great depth.³⁵ Their numbers, nevertheless, began to multiply through the 13th century. Marks, for example, cites the 1287 synodal statutes of Bishop Peter Quinel of Exeter, according to which each church in the diocese was required to have an image of the Virgin Mary.³⁶ This proliferation of devotional images can undoubtedly be considered a precondition for the miraculous reputations that some images came to have through the later Middle Ages and Early Modern period.³⁷

Through both of these means, inscribing a local pilgrimage into a local “sacred landscape” and extending its origins deep into the past, legends associated with local pilgrimages actively constructed a sense of local identity. It goes without saying that such legends cannot be taken, in a historical sense, literally, yet there remain tantalizing connections between the devotional practices typical of so many local shrines and those of the distant pre-Christian past. In dealing with such phenomena in a slightly different context, the historian of popular culture, Stephen Wilson, refuses to consider the thaumaturgical character of sacred landscape features in terms of “residual paganism.” He discards the “remnant” theory of magic and folklore in favor of a “general” theory of the perennial nature of magic in the pre-modern era, and its ability to take from and to colonize all religions, including both Christianity and that highly fuzzy catch-all, pre-Christian “paganism.” The implications of this approach for studying local pilgrimage shrines are particularly fruitful. Although some natural landscape forms associated with medieval shrines may, indeed, have experienced a continual cultic activity that originated before the site was Christianized, this is not always the case. In many instances, general attitudes are involved that replicate at various times and in various places the same conjunction of sacral elements.

³³ Turner and Turner (1978), p. 59.

³⁴ Maurice Jusselin, “Les traditions de l’église de Chartres, à propos d’une bulle du pape Léon X concernant la construction de la clôture du chœur,” *Mémoires de la Société archéologique d’Eure-et-Loir*, vol. 15 (1915-22), 1-26.

³⁵ Richard Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Stroud, 2004), p. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁷ Marks (2004) distinguishes between a devotional image, which would not have been the object of pilgrimage, and a cult image, which was considered to have miraculous power and which might attract pilgrimage.



Figure 2. The chapel of Notre-Dame de la Paix erected in a 600-year-old oak tree at Allouville in 1696, as it was in c. 1890 (Photo: Drochon, 1890, p. 135).

Thus, at the local shrine of St. Godric (d. 1170) at Finchale in northern England, which was founded on the reputed site of the saint's hermitage, Reginald of Durham recounts the miraculous cure, at a later date, of a woman from Esindene who, fourteen years previously had been poisoned by her husband's mistress and had lived in distress ever since. On arriving at Finchale, "she claimed to see Godric with St. Thomas and St. Cuthbert in a tree outside the church, though bystanders only saw three white birds." At that moment she was cured.³⁸ Conjunctions between Christian elements and such natural markers of the sacred as trees and springs continued to be newly constructed well into the early modern period. At Allouville in Normandy, presumably to sanctify an already established devotion to an 800-year-old oak tree in the village, the curate erected an altar to the Virgin in it as late as 1696. **(fig. 2)** (Unlike many local shrines in France, this one was preserved at the French Revolution, thanks to an ingenious stratagem of the devout local school master, who attached a sign to the tree carrying the inscription, "Temple de la Raison"!) A pilgrimage still takes place here on 2 July.³⁹

Besides inscribing local shrines into a sacral landscape, such legends also inscribe these shrines into a local social context. This is nicely illustrated by the legends associated with the obscure local shrine of St. Walstan at Bawburgh in the "splendid isolation" of rural East Anglia. Walstan is supposed to have been high born, possibly even of royal descent, which accorded him the prestige of high social status. Nevertheless, as was typical of many medieval saints, he renounced his inherited status:

St. Walstan voluntarily embraced a life of poverty, and hired himself as a common labourer to a farmer at Taverham in this county. Walstan is alleged to have given away his food, and the very shoes off his feet, in charity to the poor; but when his mistress came to rebuke him for his thoughtlessness and want of thrift, she found him barefooted, loading a cart of thorns, yet totally unhurt. The time of his death having been miraculously revealed to him, Walstan's last request to his master was, that his body might be placed in a cart drawn by two unbroken oxen, and that they should be left entirely to themselves. On two occasions they are said to have stopped with the sacred body, viz., once on the top of a hill, from which a fountain gushed forth: it is further said that they crossed over a deep pond of water as if it had been a solid mass of earth or stone. At last they are said to have reached Bauburgh, the place of Walstan's birth, where the saint was buried, and a church built over his mortal remains.⁴⁰

³⁸ Cited in Ward (1987), p. 107. See Reginald of Durham, *Libellus de Vita et Miraculis S. Godrici, Heremitaie de Finchale; appendix miraculorum*, ed. J. Stephenson, Surtees Society, vol. 20 (London, 1847).

³⁹ Jean-Emmanuel B. Drochon, *Histoire illustrée des pèlerinages français de la très sainte Vierge* (Paris, 1890), p. 135; E.-F. Laugier and Jean Gavot, "Oratoires : niches et chapelles d'arbres," *Arts et traditions populaires*, vol. 17, no. 1-2 (Jan.-June 1969), 107-18, esp. 114. The website of the commune at Allouville contains recent photographs and also shows the current local "representation" of the shrine.

⁴⁰ Richard Hart, "The Shrines and Pilgrimages of the County of Norfolk," *Norfolk Archaeology* vol. 6 (1865), 277-94, at pp. 280-81.

The church is said to have been rebuilt in 1309 from offerings to St. Walstan. The topos of oxen leading a saint's body to the location where he wanted his shrine to be is a common one that, as we have seen, inscribes the site in a sacred landscape. But in this instance, St. Walstan is also inscribed within the local agrarian social structure: he was, out of devotion, a farm labourer, just like, undoubtedly, the vast majority of his devotees.

More precision can be given to this social dimension of local medieval shrines and pilgrimage practice from the study of their early-modern and contemporary continuations. Beginning from his direct ethnographic study of religious attitudes and practice in northern Spain during the late 1960s, William Christian, Jr., made some pioneering studies of the ethno-history of Spanish pilgrimage.⁴¹ Local pilgrimage operated in a substantially different way than “long-range” pilgrimage. The distinction drawn by the Turners between localized hierarchical secular roles and statuses, on the one hand, and the “communitas” of the pilgrimage experience, on the other, needs to be rethought in the context of local pilgrimage.⁴² At the local level, socio-cultural bonds were often forged and maintained through group pilgrimages. The liminal qualities of pilgrimage were effected within the circumscribed geography of individual communities and became inscribed in a broader range of liminal phenomena that “are embodied in the collaborative ‘work’ of a tribal or early agrarian society's annual ecological and social structural round, and are obligatory for all.”⁴³ In the tightly structured and organized religious system of the central and late Middle Ages, local pilgrimages “‘regress’ from voluntaristic processes to become pseudo-tribal initiatory institutions, stressing relics, ritualistic acts, and the ‘miraculous’ properties of wells, trees, places where saints stood or rested, and other concrete objects associated with holy individuals.”⁴⁴ In this respect, many local pilgrimage shrines in the later Middle Ages and early-modern periods attracted civic pilgrimages in response to vows undertaken when the commune was endangered by disease or disaster.

⁴¹ William A. Christian, Jr., *Person and God in a Spanish Valley* (New York and London, 1972); idem, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981); idem, *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton, 1981).

⁴² This point is made on a theoretical level in the Introduction to John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Urbana and Chicago, 2000), p. 5. See also the discussion in Robert Maniura, *Pilgrimage to Images in the Fifteenth Century: The Origins of the Cult of Our Lady of Czestochowa* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 86-90.

⁴³ Turner and Turner, p. 231.

⁴⁴ Turner and Turner, p. 232.

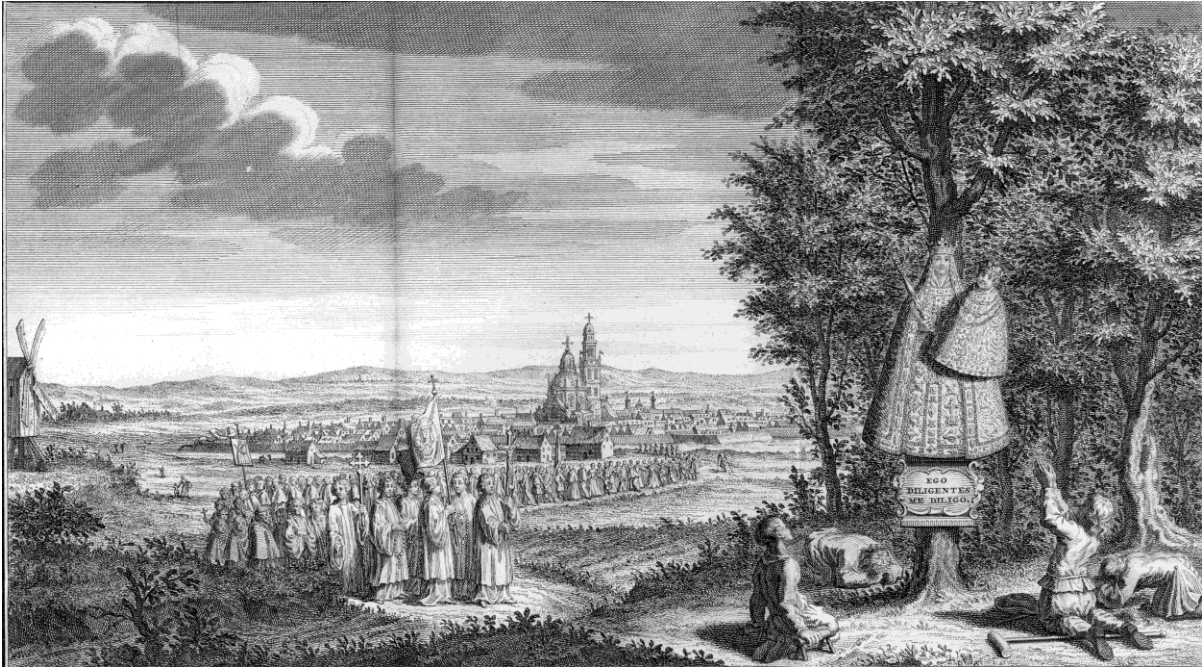


Figure 3. Retrospective visualization of the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Montaigu at Sherpenheuvel, or Sichem, Belgium, engraving, 1737 (Photo: courtesy of author).

This is clearly visualized in a print, dated 1737, depicting the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Montaigu, or Sherpenheuvel, in Belgium. (**fig. 3**) A pilgrimage developed to a statue of the Virgin and Child in an oak tree, according to legend, before the 13th century. It is documented as early as 1304. As is so common elsewhere, a legend arose that the statue refused to be moved: a shepherd, noticing that the statue had fallen, tried to take it away, but was crushed under its weight until his master replaced it in the oak. A shrine was built on the spot; it was destroyed in 1568 during the religious wars but rebuilt in 1602, from which time the miracles began to proliferate. In 1604, the bishop of Antwerp had the tree, now dead from the depredations of pilgrims seeking souvenirs, cut down.⁴⁵ Due to the increase in popularity of the shrine, a splendid new church was built in 1609-27 on a different site, by Archduke Albert, with the town built symmetrically around it. This new church contains a large replica of the oak behind the altar.⁴⁶ The church can be seen in the print, in the centre background, but as well, the artist has imagined the statue back in its original oak. There are cripples imploring the Virgin of Montaigu for intercession, in the hope of miraculous cures, but as well, a large communal procession is snaking its way from the town towards the shrine, replete with banners of various confraternities. Although in actual fact a nostalgic fiction, this image recreates some of the pertinent social aspects of many local pilgrimage shrines, accommodating both individual and communal needs and attentions.

⁴⁵ As was the case at other Marian shrines in 17th-century Belgium, copies of the Montaigu statue were made of the wood from this miraculous oak tree, many of them in turn acquiring miraculous reputations. See H.M. Gillett, *Shrines of Our Lady in England and Wales* (London, 1957), pp. 188-91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London, 1985), pp. 159-60.

The Turners also stress that the study of any particular pilgrimage must be undertaken as part of a “field” of pilgrimages, rather than in isolation, and this approach is particularly appropriate for many local pilgrimages.⁴⁷ Another ethnologist, Alban Bensa, undertook a study of modern local pilgrimage shrines in the western part of the diocese of Chartres.⁴⁸ Based on a still-living cult that was, in the mid-20th century, struggling to survive, he identified a remarkably dense network of local pilgrimage shrines dedicated to a host of local saints. Many of them, inscribed in a sacred landscape of springs, rocks and trees, occupied a liminal position between the “human” space of the village and the “savage” space of uncultivated woodlands, or in the liminal space between cultivated fields and pasturage.

Many of these small, local shrines specialized in a particular malady or problem, the health of horses, for example, or of children. When disease or misfortune struck, there was considerable choice in which shrine a person could choose for a pilgrimage. Sometimes, the local populace chose a shrine themselves, but when they were unsure of which shrine to turn to, they consulted a local wise woman, known as a “voyageuse,” who would choose a shrine and sometimes even make the pilgrimage for their client.⁴⁹ The “voyageuses” questioned by Bensa were quickly able to recite between twenty and thirty series: sickness or problem – shrine – saint. It is unclear whether the existence of “voyageuses” in 20th-century France represents a continuation of medieval practice, or whether it resulted from a conflation of previously separate “magical” regimes. During the early-modern period, the Church took active measures to suppress the wise men and wise women who had flourished outside of a specifically religious sphere during the Middle Ages. It is possible that they reacted by inscribing themselves into a local religious context, in order to continue playing the important role they had formerly assumed in medieval village life. Nevertheless, there were certainly comparable means of choosing pilgrimages during the Middle Ages, such as the drawing of lots or the burning of candles.⁵⁰

Bensa presents this region as a peasant space organized around each unity of life: the farm, the fields, the village. The commune thus became a highly differentiated sociological space where the network of social and symbolic relations were woven between locations. Within this totality, popular medical discourse was inseparable from a knowledge and practice of the particular spaces in which it was enregistered. Thus, local networks of pilgrimage shrines formed a locally-defined medico-geographical space that depended as much on a sacred landscape as on a wealth of local saints and shrines. Within this network of shrines there were specialists and generalists, just as in contemporary medicine. One particular saint may have been invoked to bring rains, another to stop flooding. There were specialists in curing fevers, in protecting livestock, and in protection of crops against insect infestations. Although there were exceptions,

⁴⁷ Turner and Turner, p. 132.

⁴⁸ Alban Bensa, *Les Saints guérisseurs du Perche-Gouët. Espace symbolique du bocage*, Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, vol. XVII (Paris, 1978).

⁴⁹ Bensa, pp. 40ff.

⁵⁰ Sumption (1975), p. 149; Finucane (1995), p. 63.

most shrines that were focused on the relics of a local saint tended to specialize in some way, while shrines focused on a miraculous image of the Virgin Mary tended to be more generalist. Nevertheless, as is understandable, the Virgin was widely invoked for women's medical problems, for fertility and child-birth problems, and for the protection of children. One particular type of Marian shrine that, of necessity, remained entirely local was known as a "sanctuaire à répit." Parents would bring their still-born infants to these shrines, invoking the Virgin to revive them just long enough to receive baptism, thus allowing them access to Paradise and avoiding eternal consignment to Limbo, which was thought to be the fate of the un-baptised.⁵¹

Although I have been concentrating on rural local pilgrimage shrines, since they are perhaps not so well known, there were certainly equivalent urban sacred geographies. Not all regions, moreover, were as densely supplied with local saints as that studied by Bensa. In areas where relics were sparse, miraculous images provided a limitless reservoir of sacral power to make up for the lack.⁵² The vast majority of miraculous images at local shrines were specifically images of the Virgin and Child. In Italy, with its strong ties to the Byzantine east, these tended to be panel paintings, icons in other words. In the rest of Europe, statues of the Virgin and Child were far more common. Such statues began appearing in large numbers only in the 11th and 12th centuries; yet how local Marian shrines emerged is not well documented. The history of popular Marian shrines before their very popular phase in the later Middle Ages remains in large measure unknown.⁵³

Whether local pilgrimage shrines were focused on the relic of a local saint, the site of an apparition or a miraculous image, however, they had certain functional similarities. They could, for example, respond both to individual and communal needs. Illness and injury most frequently provoked individual local pilgrimages. As Anders Fröjmark points out, in his article in this issue of *Peregrinations*, votive pilgrimage for miraculous interventions to an individual often involved small, informal groups which could generate impetus for further informal pilgrimage en route to the shrine. Epidemics or pandemics and environmental disasters or threats, on the other hand, often provoked an organized, communal response. The most common form that group invocation took was in the form of a vow (which could also form part of individual response). A confraternity or a commune vowed that if they were spared from disaster or relieved from

⁵¹ Maurice Vloberg, "Les réanimations d'enfants mort-nés dans les sanctuaires, dits « à répit », de la Vierge," *Sanctuaires et pèlerinages*, vol. 18 (1960), 17-32. One of the best documented "sanctuaires à répit" was that at Oberbüren, near Bern, Switzerland, where the altar statue of the Virgin developed a miraculous reputation from 1485, until the shrine was closed at the Reformation in 1528. Babies thus miraculously revived and baptized could also be buried in consecrated ground, and during recent archaeological excavations, the adjoining cemetery was found to contain the skeletal remains of over 250 small infants, including some very small fetuses. See *Iconoclisme* (2001), pp. 252-53, with further bibliography.

⁵² See Webb (2002), pp. 166-69. On the relation between the reception of relics and that of miraculous images, see Freedberg (1989), esp. pp. 93-98.

⁵³ Signori, Gabriela, "La bienheureuse polysémie. Miracles et pèlerinages à la Vierge: pouvoir thaumaturgique et modèles pastoraux (Xe-XIIIe siècles)," in Dominique Iogna-Prat, Éric Palazzo and Daniel Russo, eds, *Marie. Le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale* (Paris, 1996), p. 593.

the effects of an epidemic, they would make an annual votive pilgrimage to a local shrine, that is, a pilgrimage of thanksgiving for prayers answered. This must have resembled the evocation of the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Montaigu in **figure 3**. Many local shrines attracted such communal vows, and sometimes several communes were attracted to the same shrine. Since these communal pilgrimages tended to take place on the major feast day of the shrine, a substantial inter-communal concourse would activate the sacral potential of the shrine for a brief time, before it sank for the rest of the year into rural obscurity, when it would attract only intermittent individual petitioners.

In regarding such communal activity, it is particularly clear how closely much local pilgrimage was to what must be regarded as a related, or cognate, activity, namely processions.⁵⁴ Local pilgrimages and processions might be said to be related as what structuralists call an inversion. In a local pilgrimage, people progress, often in an organized group, towards the shrine, which functions as the unique and particular repository of sacral power. In a procession, the relic or miraculous image leaves its shrine, in a similarly ordered group, in order to disseminate its sacral power through its local community. Processions tended to be resorted to for the same reasons as communal local pilgrimages. It is not at all clear what determined whether a shrine was activated by either of these two alternatives. Both could operate in tandem, as can be seen by comparing two local shrines in the neighbourhood of Florence in Tuscany. The Cathedral of Prato, about 10 km north of Florence, possessed a famous Marian relic, the Sacra Cintola, the girdle supposedly thrown down to St. Thomas by the Virgin Mary as she was rising bodily into the heavens at her Assumption. According to legend, it came to Prato in 1194, but it is only documented from the 1270s. Particularly after 1350, when Prato came under Florentine control, the women of Florence made pilgrimages to the Sacra Cintola, invoking the Virgin's help in conceiving a child. The Sacra Cintola was carefully guarded in its cathedral shrine and was only displayed on a few occasions through the year, from a special pulpit. Its sacral power was thus closely limited to its shrine.⁵⁵ Contrasting with this local pilgrimage were the processions associated with the shrine of Our Lady of Impruneta, which was located about 6 km west of Florence. Florentines regularly resorted to this miraculous image of the Virgin, but none of its recorded miracles occurred at its shrine at Impruneta: they were all associated with processions of the image to Florence.⁵⁶ Thus in Florence, as undoubtedly elsewhere, local pilgrimage and procession combined to form part of a diversified local sacral economy.

Another factor that was certainly relevant to the operation of local pilgrimage shrines was their institutional status, which varied considerably. Many rural shrines

⁵⁴ Rita Tekippe, "Pilgrimage and Procession: Correlations of Meaning, Practice, and Effects," in Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe, eds, *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 2005), I, pp. 693-751; II, pl. 331-40.

⁵⁵ Brendan Cassidy, "A Relic, Some Pictures and the Mothers of Florence in the Late Fourteenth Century," *Gesta*, XXX/2 (1991), 91-99, who cites as the most authoritative studies on the Sacra Cintola: G. Bianchini, *Notizie storiche intorno alla Sacratissima Cintola di Maria Vergine che si conserva nella città di Prato in Toscana* (Florence, 1722); and G. Pelagatti, *Il Sacro Cingolo Mariano in Prato fino alla traslazione del 1395* (Prato, 1895).

⁵⁶ Richard C. Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance*, vol. 19 (1972), pp. 7-41.

appear to have begun more or less spontaneously. They might initially have attracted a pious local or a hermit, who would care for the original makeshift oratory that appeared at the site. As a pilgrimage became established, a more permanent shrine might be constructed. At the same time, it would begin to attract wider attention, and might have been subsumed into the church hierarchy by subordinating it to or incorporating it within a parish church. Outside of cities or villages, in a rural setting, the bishop might arrange the foundation of a monastery, collegiate foundation or Mendicant convent at the site, in order to oversee and regulate devotion at the shrine. Alternatively, however, many shrines continued to exist outside of the institution of the church, in the proprietorship either of the secular authorities of a commune or of a confraternity attached to the shrine. No systematic comparative study of the institutional framework of local pilgrimage shrines has yet been undertaken, but it is clear that friction often developed between competing claimants over the authority of a shrine. One of the social functions of miraculous foundation legends, in fact, appears to have been to validate the particular site and proprietorship of a shrine. Yvonne Yiu, in this issue of *Peregrinations*, examines in detail just such an instance of institutional friction over the proprietorship of a miraculous image at Scheut, in Belgium.

Both the geographical and chronological extent of local pilgrimage shrines varied considerably. It was certainly not the case that, once a local pilgrimage was established, its continued success was assured. In fact, there was considerable volatility in the attentions of local pilgrims. Reports of miracles might flare up at one shrine, making it momentarily popular, only to sink back into obscurity when the miracle reports slowed down or stopped. In many places with a certain density of potential local pilgrimages, another up-and-coming shrine might take up where a flagging shrine left off. In his study of the healing miracles associated with the relics of St. Gibrien in the abbey church of Saint-Remi at Reims in the northern Ile-de-France, Pierre-André Sigal was able to be quite detailed about one such evanescent local pilgrimage. This obscure Irish hermit saint supposedly died in 509 near Châlons-sur-Marne, and an oratory was built at the burial site. The small chapel was burnt by the Normans in c. 892, but the miraculous holy body remained intact. At that time, Count Haderic arranged for the relics of St. Gibrien to be transferred to the abbey church of Saint-Remi, probably for protection. In the time of King Philippe I, the gold and silver of his reliquary were stripped, in order to feed the poor during a famine, and it was only in 1145 that the relics could be translated to a new reliquary. This event provoked a sudden efflorescence of reported miracles, which were scrupulously recorded by one of the monks: 102 miracles were recorded between the translation, on 16 April, and 24 August, a period of about four months. Of these, typically, 98 involved miraculous cures, the vast majority occurring at the pilgrimage shrine. Since the dates of each miracle were noted, as well as the places from which the recipients of the miracles came, Sigal was able to chart their frequency and geographical range in some detail. Dividing the miracles into three principal periods and three zones, he compiled the following table.

Number of Miracles	Less than 30 km	30 – 60 km	More than 60 km	Total
16 Apr. – 8 May	27	2	9	38
11 May – 3 June	7	10	4	21
3 June – 24 Aug.	10	6	17	33
Total	44 (48%)	18 (20%)	30 (32%)	92

This table not only shows that almost half the miracles were quite local (within 30 km) but that, after an initial enthusiasm, the miracle reports began to subside. Quite remarkably, however, it also records a sort of shock-wave effect, with the majority of the miracle reports in each of the three periods involving people located farther and farther from the shrine. After this shock wave of thaumaturgical enthusiasm had played itself out, the miracle reports stopped just as suddenly as they had begun. Thus, began and ended what must have been quite a common form of local pilgrimage.⁵⁷

It is rare that enough information was recorded to be able to chart the chronology of a local pilgrimage so precisely, but the catchment areas of many other local pilgrimages can be charted geographically. Ronald Finucane has done so for the pilgrims recorded in the miracle collection from the shrine of St. Godric at Finchale, where 89% came from villages within 40 km of the shrine. In less detail, he ascertained that half the pilgrims to the shrine of St. Frideswide at Oxford lived 20 miles or less from the shrine and three-quarters less than 40 miles; 57% of pilgrims to the shrine of St. William in Norwich Cathedral came from less than 10 miles from the shrine; and three-quarters of the pilgrims to the relics of St. Wulfstan in Worcester Cathedral lived less than 40 miles from the shrine.⁵⁸ In all these cases, the pilgrimage was situated at a substantial religious institution which could both service the pilgrimage effectively and record the miracles associated with it. With less institutional support, many isolated rural shrines had far more circumscribed catchment areas. Among the local pilgrimages studied by Christine Martin in the southern part of the Ardennes region along the French-Belgian border, many rural shrines drew pilgrims from within a 15-20 km radius – in other words, about a day's walk.⁵⁹ Of course, occasionally a local shrine became better established and drew pilgrims from an entire region, but although statistics have never been compiled on this phenomenon, undoubtedly the vast majority of local pilgrimage shrines remained circumscribed within reasonable walking distance.

⁵⁷ Pierre-André Sigal, "Maladie, pèlerinage et guérison au XIIe siècle. Les miracles de saint Gibrin à Reims," *Annales E.S.C.*, vol. 24 (1969), 1522-39. See also Finucane (1995), p. 184.

⁵⁸ Finucane (1995), pp. 166-69.⁵⁹ Christine Martin, *Pèlerinages d'Ardenne méridionale* (Liège, 1991).

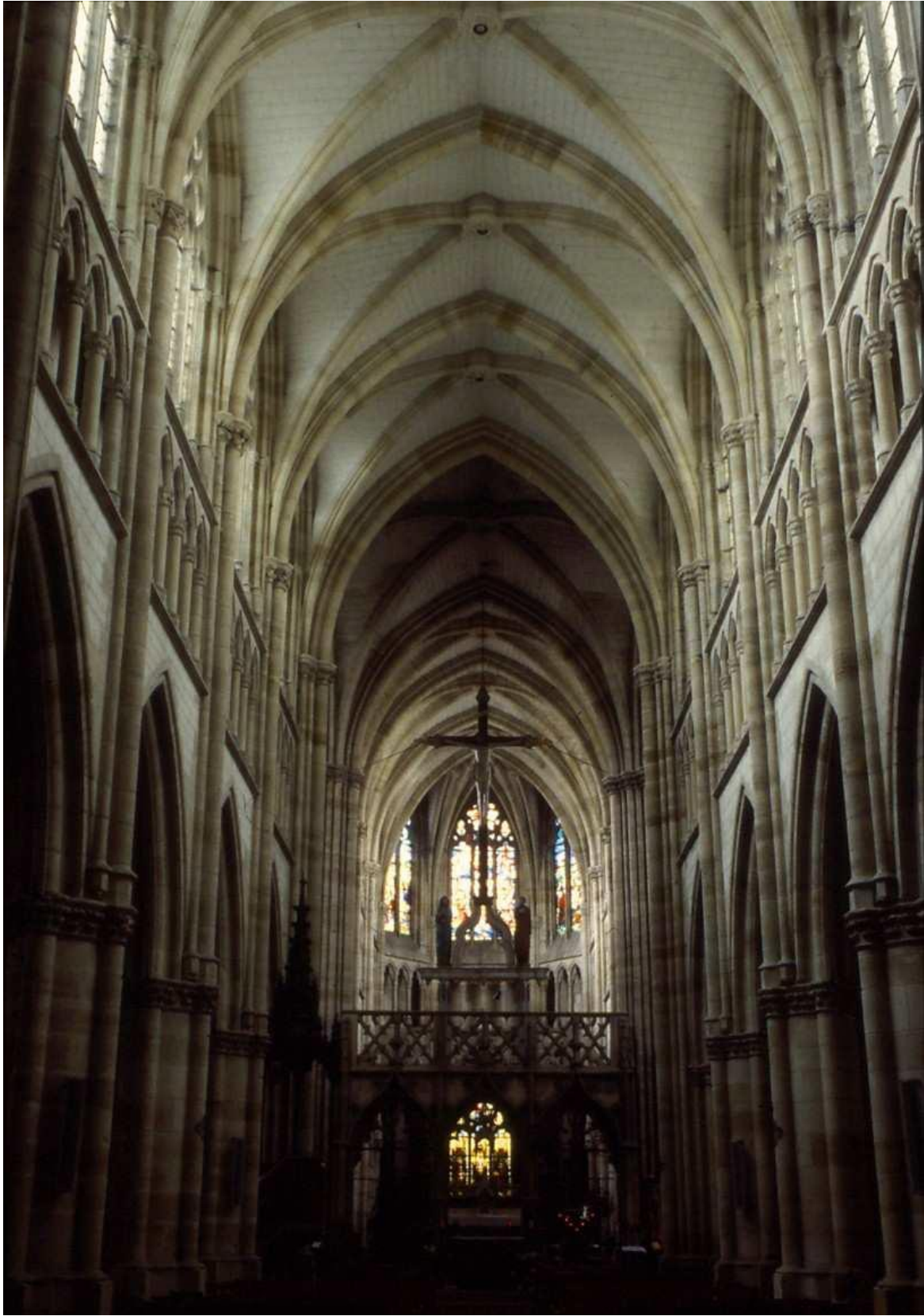


Figure 4. Interior of the 14th- and 15th-century church of Notre-Dame, Avioth (Photo: author).



Figure 5. The statue of Notre-Dame at Avioth, displayed on the litter used for its processions. The heavily restored wooden statue, probably dating back to the 13th century, is elaborately dressed, as is typical of miraculous images of the Virgin and Child. Photo: author.

The physical setting of local pilgrimage shrines varied according to their “success.” The greater the influx of pilgrims to a shrine, the more oblations it would attract. This was directly reflected in the architectural and artistic elaboration of the shrine. When a pilgrimage shrine began to attract more than just a local clientele, it could easily mushroom into a church of major architectural splendour. A spectacular example is the splendid late-medieval church of Notre-Dame at Avioth in northern France, anomalously located in an isolated mountainous forest site outside of any habitation. (**fig. 4**) According to its legends, the statue of the Virgin here (**fig. 5**) was originally located at the nearby hamlet of Saint-Brice, but during the 12th or 13th century it miraculously “fled” to its present site, where it was found under a flowering hawthorn tree. After unsuccessful attempts to move it, a chapel was built here. A spring runs under the church which is sought by women to aid in their fertility, and the shrine also functioned as a *sanctuaire à répit*, reviving still-born babies for momentary baptism. A substantial pilgrimage had developed by c. 1350, and shortly thereafter, the present church was begun on a magnificent scale.⁶⁰

In most cases, however, attention remained local, and only a modest shrine resulted. As often as not, mediocre construction necessitated constant refurbishment, enlargement and/or rebuilding. (**fig. 1**) This situation makes it difficult to arrive back at the medieval state of most local pilgrimage shrines, even in those cases where they were not intentionally destroyed at the Reformation or during the French Revolution. The continued interest in local pilgrimage shrines throughout the early-modern period transformed many shrines that are known with certainty to have had a medieval past. This creates an archaeological problem in the study of local pilgrimage shrines that has not yet been sufficiently recognized for adequate solutions to have been conceived. In general, the lack of architectural magnificence of local shrines has, in fact, resulted in indifference to them on the part of architectural and art historians. It is to be hoped that the growing social dimension of our discipline will eventually result in increased attention.

Besides the strictly architectural character of these modest shrines, which certainly deserves more attention than it has yet attracted, another pertinent factor that deserves more systematic attention is their siting, both in relation to such symbolic landscape features as trees, rocks and springs, and in relation to the network of urban spaces, arable fields, pasture land, and undomesticated forest lands in which they were inscribed. More systematic attention is needed, as well, to the exact manner in which local pilgrimage shrines functioned, in order to appreciate fully the forms that they took.

⁶⁰ E. Saillens, *Nos Vierges noires. Leurs origines* (Paris, 1945), pp. 173-74; I. Couturier de Chefdu Bois, *Mille pèlerinages de Notre-Dame, Région B: Champagne, Lorraine, Alsace, Franche-Comte, Bourgogne, Nivernais, Berry, Bourbonnais, Auvergne, Limousin, Guyenne, Gascogne, Bearn* (Paris, 1953), pp. 38-39; Vloberg (1960), pp. 22-23; Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London, 1985), pp. 171-72. For an account of the pilgrimage written by the curate in 1668, see Jean Delhotel, “*Bref recueil ” de l’état de l’église Notre-Dame d’Avioth* (Colmar, 1981). On the architecture, see Paul Frankl, revised by Paul Crossley, *Gothic Architecture* (New Haven and London, 2000), pp. 218-19.



Figure 6. The well in the transept of the 15th-century pilgrimage church of Notre-Dame de l'Epine, built in the countryside, 12 km from the city of Châlons-sur-Marne. Photo: author.

This is equally true of the furnishings of local pilgrimage shrines. It would appear that relics and miraculous images were normally accorded the place of honour on, above or behind the principal altar. Occasionally, they were accorded their own chapel. Wherever they were in the church, their presence was often enhanced by enclosing them within a tabernacle or reredos.⁶¹ Narrative images in the church, as well, sometimes at the aesthetic level of what is often referred to as “folk art,” sometimes commemorated the miraculous events surrounding the inception of the shrine. It is difficult to be very precise about details, however, because, in general, the interior arrangements of pilgrimage shrines suffered considerable disruption and alteration during the early-modern period, when Church authorities were attempting to purge them of practices they by then saw as superstitious. A whole range of devotional and votive practices were banned, and the material evidence for them was, to varying degrees, removed from their shrines. These practices included kissing or touching images, drinking from or bathing in springs or wells, **(fig. 6)** incubation, novenas, the lighting of candles, and the offering of *ex votos* – even singing, dancing, and the acting out of shrine legends.⁶²

Many of these practices had material components that would have powerfully affected the appearance and experience of local shrines. Shrines, at least on occasion, would have been ablaze with candles, sending a warm, flickering light scintillating over a reliquary or image, creating an intimate concentration on the sacral focus of the shrine. **(fig. 7)** Miraculous images were richly dressed and decorated, often with the very garments and/or jewelry of devotees. **(fig. 5)** And perhaps most impressive would have been the many votive offerings that accumulated in the shrine. These took varied forms. In Greece, particularly, embossed silver plaques depicted cures by means of a representation of the appropriate body part: eyes, arms, breasts, livers, etc. In western Europe, comparable three-dimensional representations modelled in wax were more common. Crutches no longer needed or the chains of prisoners freed after invoking the shrine saint might be hung about the sanctuary, **(fig. 8)** as occasionally, were more bizarre reminders of cures, such as tapeworms expelled through the intervention of the shrine saint. Some devotees offered their garments, rings or other precious metalwork as votive offerings.⁶³ **(fig. 9)** These *ex votos* both gave evidence of miraculous interventions worked by the shrine saint, and created an appropriate environment for the working of further miracles.

There are local pilgrimage shrines in some areas of Europe (and even outside of Europe) which are still filled with such votive offerings, but the vast majority of surviving local shrines have long been deprived of these central material elements of devotion and otherwise denatured of their former sacral character. Particularly in the 17th and 18th century, such instrumental elements of local pilgrimage were purged radically from their shrines.⁶⁴ This made it all the easier for pious churchmen in the 19th century to “restore” local pilgrimage shrines in a way that reflected, not the thaumaturgical particularity of the local, as it had existed for thousands of years, but the hegemonic devotional homogeneity of the universal church. The “age of miracles” is, for the most part, past, yet if one seeks it out, medieval and early-modern local pilgrimage and the shrines with which it was associated can still, with difficulty, be discerned, and their historical reality recovered.

⁶¹ Marks (2004), pp. 240-43. ⁶² For a fascinating first-hand account of the acting out of shrine legends in contemporary Agres, Spain, see Marlène Albert-Llorca, *Les Vierges miraculeuses. Légendes et rituels* (Paris, 2002). This study also elucidates many gendered aspects of local pilgrimage; see also Christian (1972). ⁶³ On *ex votos*, see note 21. ⁶⁴ Beginning in the late 15th century, small votive panel paintings began to appear at pilgrimage shrines, and they became and remained popular throughout the early-modern period. Since the 19th century, discreet marble plaques giving thanks for prayers answered have become the most common form of *ex voto*, at least in France **(fig. 7)**; see Martin (1991), p. 58.

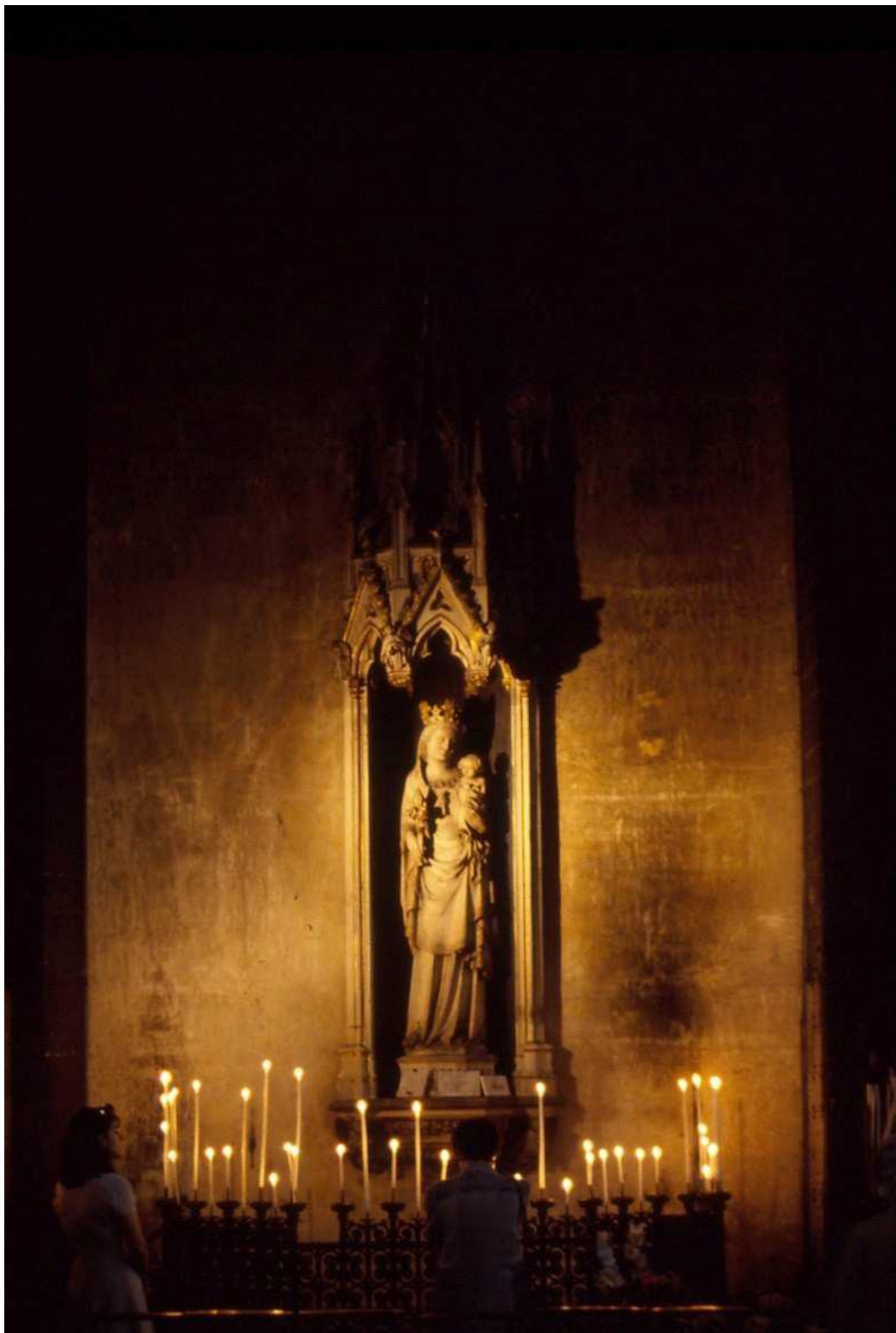


Figure 7. A 14th-century statue of the Virgin and Child in the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris, with devotees burning candles before it. Note the marble votive plaques surrounding the image. Photo: author.



Figure 8. *Votive chains hanging on the wall around the portal of the church of Notre-Dame at Orcival in the Auvergne. Photo: Claire Labrecque.*



Figure 9. The tomb of St. Erkemboode (d. 742) in the Cathedral of Saint-Omer. Formerly, pilgrims would leave their worn-out shoes as votive offerings to St. Erkemboode; now mothers leave the shoes of their infants who have had difficulty walking, in thanks for his aid. Photo: Claire Labrecque.