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Medieval dental beliefs: saints and relics

Dental Science

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In all the religions and from time immemorial, there is a particular belief system. Therefore, of all periods of history, the Christian saints have been prayed. Healing virtues were attributed to them when the believers highly prayed them in the context of diseases. In this way, Saint Anthony and Saint Fermin of Amiens were often addressed in the case of scurvy. As for tongue diseases, people prayed Saint Catherine. In the case of dental problems, believers consulted Saint Christopher, Saint Engelmund, Saint Blaise, Saint Dalmace, Saint Rigobert, Saint Crescence, Saint Dizié, Saint Medardus, Saint Nicholas, Saint Céran, Saint Roch and Saint Apollinia. But the prayers also turned towards Saint Anne, Saint Anthony, Saint Christine, Saint Gildas, Saint Giles, Saint Joseph, Saint Laurent, Saint Maur, Saint Maurice, Saint Rategonde, Saint Simon, Saint Thomas and Saint Tugen. Even though Saint Apollinia later became the Holy Patroness of dentists and of those who suffer from their teeth, it seemed that at that time fervor in prayers concerning dental pain have increasingly moved to Saint Christopher. Philip Augustus the 2nd (1165-1223)'s subjects had already adopted those beliefs. But these practices also concerned relics of saints.

The saints

Saint Maur (512-584) celebrated on January 15th

Maur was born into an illustrious Roman family. He was left to Saint Benedict to further his education. Both of them evangelised the Montecassino area. In Languidic, a town of the Morbihan region, he was prayed for the healing of oral affections and especially thrush in new borns and mentally unfit old people. The fountain Saint Maur was known to have curative properties against thrush.

Saint Apollinia (? – 249) celebrated on February 9th

Apollinia, the patron saint of dentists and patients afflicted with toothaches, lived and died in Alexandria. She was born into a family of rich senior dignitaries. She was still pure and chaste when she was tortured during the seventh persecution of Alexandria in the year 249 A.D. Upon Decius's command, a ruthless Roman Emperor, her persecutors hit her in the face with a wooden stick. Then, they shattered and pulled her teeth out with a hammer and a chisel. They built a fire anf threatened to burn her at the stake if she did not refuse to recant her Christian faith. In response, she threw herself in the conflagration. The legend suggests that she recited a prayer to Jesus while her jaws had been deteriorated. "*I pray that all those who recall with devotion the severity of the pain that I suffer right now will never feel tooth pains or headaches*." An angel was said to appeared to her to tell her that her prayer had immediately been answered.

In Normandy, a worship is dedicated to her during infant teething. In the Manche area, in Sainte-Eugienne, the inhabitants insert pins into the legs and the skirt of the Saint's statue who wears a molar rosary around her left arm. In Pontmain, in the Mayenne area, the pilgrims insert the pins on the cheeks of the statue, precisely where they feel the pain.

In Agneaux, in the canton of Saint Lô, people address Saint Apollinia with a local prayer and the children regularly touch the statue. In the Calvados, in Notre-Dame-de-Livaye, they pray Saint Marguerite the same way other people pray Saint Apollinia. Some mothers who introduce their infants to the statue usually leave their bibs in its arms. In Ablon, near Honfleur, other mothers pray, lit a candle, have masses celebrated and often leave a cloth which the baby had worn. The same is done in Canapville, in the canton of Pont-L'Evêque. In the Orne area, in Couvains, mothers pray in front of the statue and leave their children's clothes in front of it.

In the Eure area, in Hameau du Plessis, mothers also pray. Around the wrists of the statue, they hang some ribbons that are the same colour as their children's clothes as a token of consideration and hope. The same thing is done in La Saussaye. In the Seine-Maritime area, in Saint-Mards, the Saint is epitomised with a pin on which ribbons are left before lighting a candle. In Ouville-la-Rivière, Saint Apollinia's cross is recovered with multicoloured ribbons and as many tokens of maternal gratefulness. The same is done on the headless statue of Saint Apollinia in Aubermesnil-Beaumais and in Quièvrecourt.



A sculpture of Saint Apollinia.

In Brittany, she is often prayed for the healing of toothaches and especially during infants' painful teething. In the Côtes-d'Armor area, in Loudéac, her worship is still long-lived. It is the same in Merdrignac and even Plouguenast, in Saint Pierre's church. In Trémorel, in the Treize-Chênes chapel, her statue is always decorated with flowers and multicoloured ribbons. Candles are also often lit. In the Finistère, the statue of Saint-Pol-de-Léon's cathedral is often prayed for help. In Ille-et-Vilaine, in the church of Amanlis, in Chauvigné, she is regularly prayed. The same is done in Landavran, near Vitré. In Loire-Atlantique, in Couffé, people pray Apollinia in the Saint Symphorien chapel as well as in Saint-Père-en-Retz where her statue, dating from the 18th century, regularly receive flowers and prayers. Children often touch her statue made in wood. In Morbihan, in Lanouée, the saint's statue is exhibited in the Pomeleuc priory, in the Saint-Mélec chapel. In Languidic, in the Notre-Dame-des-Grâces chapel, the population pray Saint Apollinia for their dental problems. In Pontivy, the saint's martyr is depicted with a set of polychrome stones dating back to the 16th century which was arranged in the Notre-Dame-de-la-Houssaye chapel. There they often pray for the healing of tooth aches. In Quéven, it seems to be neglected. In Saint-Gérand, in Saint Drédeno's chapel, the saint is prayed with candles. In Tréfléan, her statue is located near the church, in Saint Apollinia street. There, a fountain still exists where anyone can rince his teeth.

The seed of henbane (latin : *dentaria*), or Saint Apollinia's herb, is often used against toothaches. In the medieval period, to prevent dental pain, people used to cook its root with vinegar until its size reduced to 2/3. They used to make a gargle out of it with nightshade and blackberry bush. To relieve the dental pain, they used to put henbane in a small wax crucible and to cover the tooth with this wax so that the plant could directly come into contact with the tooth. Still

during the medieval period, people used to approximately grind this herb and to place it between the teeth to relieve the pain.

Saint Apollinia, blessed by the priests, relieves toothache. Reciting 5 *Pater* and 5 *Ave Maria* and doing the sign of the cross on the cheek where the pain is with the finger heal the sick people in Champagne-Ardenne. People pray Saint Apollinia in France, but also in Italy, Spain, Belgium and in the West Indies. There are many other rituals and prayers devoted to the Saint, as turning with one leg around a tree, driving a nail in the statue or even practising fasting, etc.

Saint Bieuzy (6th century)
A disciple of Saint Gildas de Rhuys, he built himself a hermitage on the shores of the Blavet. One day he had to choose between treating his lord's pack of dogs infected with rabies and not celebrating the liturgy for his people. In other words, either he could celebrate his religious service or answering his brutal lord's orders. He prefered the believers to the dogs, which is why he got killed by his Breton lord with his sword. In the Morbihan area, in Bieuzy-les-Eaux, the water of the Saint Bieuzy fountain is said to have the power of healing toothaches.

Saint Gildas (end of the 5th century - 570) celebrated on January 29th
He was born in insular Brittany. When he turned 25 years old, he became priest in Wales. He travelled in Scotland, then Ireland. He decided to return to the "Armorique" and settled on the island of Houat. His sanctity was soon recognised and he received a plot of land in Rhuys. There, he built a monastery where he lived for ten years. Wishing to live alone, he settled in a cave near Blavet with his friend Bieuzy. This is when he intervened on behalf of Tréphine, whom her husband, king of the Northern "Armorique" had beheaded. Gildas gave him his life back. He died on the island of Houat.

In Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys, he is prayed for the healing of toothaches. The same is done in Magoar, in the Côtes d'Armor area, where a Saint-Gildas fountain can be found, and in Saint-Maudan, near Loudéac. In the Finistère area, in Cast, the saint is prayed in the chapel against toothaches. Before, the pilgrims used to pray by the fountain. Nowadays, the latter does not show adequate health guarantees.

Saint Maurice (? - 287) celebrated on September 22nd or October 5th
Maurice and his companions were martyrs in Agaune. Then he became Saint Maurice of Valais. As soon as Maximian became emperor of the West (286), he decided to exterminate the Christians. To achieve this, he had made a legion from Thebes come to Egypt. This decision could not have been worse for the six thousand soldiers composing this legion were all Christians. They logically all refused to execute the imperial orders. Hence, they all were massacred until the last one. Here is the legend about the Theban legion. What is true without a doubt is that the decurion Maurice and many legionaries categorically refused to take part in a heathen ceremony, which condamned them. This Saint is only prayed in Calorguen, near Dinan, in the Côtes-d'Armor. In the village of La Haute-Roussais, there are two granite crosses called Saint Maurice's crosses. In the smallest one, there is a small hole that was drilled in its base. It is said to have the power of healing toothaches. For that matter, the sick must go to the church Saint-Hubert, remove their shoes and walk barefoot twoards the small cross, which approximately correspond to two kilometers. Once there, they have to put a coin into the hole in the base of the cross.

Saint Tugen (6th century) celebrated on January 26th
Tugen became a monk and succeeded to Saint Jaoua as rector of Brasparts, before being chosen to become abbot of the Daoulas monastery.

Legend has it that Tugen was unable to prevent his sister, whom he had to care of, to meet her lover. Hence, he was said to be outraged at women in general. He is said to have declared: "It is better to command a pack of rabies-stricken dogs than to look after a woman." Therefore, his gift was to preserve others from rabies-stricken dogs. This Saint, who had been worshipped for centuries, was prayed for all forms of rage: toothaches, rage of anger... A chapel and a fountain were dedicated to him in Primelin in the Finistère and in the village of Saint Tugen. People devote a true worship to this Breton Saint which is always going through the same rituals. Therefore, in case of toothaches, one is supposed to put one of Saint-Tugen's keys under his pillow and to sleep on the aching side. "Key breads" (breads without yeast) are blessed. When the pain starts, one simply needs to eat from that bread to soothe the pain. In Cast, near Châteaulin, this Saint is frequently prayed to soothe toothaches.

The stone of the Fondelienne chapel
In Carentoir, near La Gacilly en Ille-et-Vilaine, in the hamlet of Fondelienne, the Notre-Dame-des Vertus chapel has a tender stone made with a mixture of schist and slate. Put in a jut of the wall, it is at one meter fifty from the ground. This stone has the property to cure toothaches. It would be sufficient to bite into it.

Relics

The legend of Saint Rieul
The first Bishop of Senlis is renowned for his miracles. His ministry lasted forty years to go through the neighbouring forests and to accomplish all sorts of extraordinary things. He died on March 30th 260. Clovis (465-511) had a church built which got its name. On this occasion, the bishop Levangius was said to have given him a tooth extracted from Saint Rieul's. Clovis was not able to keep it and had to put it back in the Saint's burial place.

The blood from Saint Grat's tooth
Grat was a saint bishop from Aoste in the Nice area, who was born in the 8th century. Saint agrarian, protector of the crops from bad weather and pests, he was also in charge of the translation of Saint John Baptist's head. Bonne of Bourbon, the mother of Amadeus VII, devoted him a true worship. As she was consulting his relics in Aoste, she demanded to bring one home. She was given a tooth. She had barely left Aoste when the tooth started bleeding severely. Right after, a violent storm broke out and obliged the Countess of Savoy to go back to Aoste to return the saint dental organ.

Dental journeys
In 1205, Beaudouin, Emperor of Constantinople, sold to Philippe-Auguste (1165-1223) religious relics among which was one of Saint Philip's teeth which was returned to the Saint Denis abbey. (...) Did the young Charlemagne (747-814) have Saint John Baptist's tooth in the pommel of his sword? Roland's song stated that Durandal, the knight's sword had in its pommel, one of Saint Pierre's teeth. (...) In an inventory dated 4th May 1792, it was written that a milk tooth belonging to Jesus Christ was kept in a reliquary of the chapel of the Château of Vincennes. Similarly, a milk tooth belonging to Virgin Mary was said to be embedded in one of Saint Sebastian's paintings.

Saint Gerald of Aurillac
Saint Gerald of Aurillac (855-909), founder of the Aurillac abbey, had a collection of relics. He had obtained one of Saint Martial's teeth. This tooth, no one was able to get it from the Saint's jaw. Gerald, after a short prayer, was immediately able to extract it. Then, he placed it on the right of his altar.

A tooth concerned about justice
Bishop of Myre en Lycie, Saint Nicolas (270-345) is the patron saint of the Lorrains, people from Fribourg and the Russians. He is the forerunner of Santa Claus as we know him. He did many miracles. In Heisterbach, in the diocese of Cologne, there is one of his teeth. Some monks used to wear it as they were crossing villages to get money from the believers. Then they used to mock those they had fooled. It was said that the saint tooth did not appreciate those profanations and by the greatest miracle of all, the glass which contained the relic fell and broke so that no one had ever dared to wear it again, thus sparing the poor.

A luminous tooth

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Saint Quentin was a Christian Roman who was martyred in *Augusta*, a town which was built on a location according to a ford on the Somme. Saint Quentin is an important monastery which took the name of the saint during the medieval time and later, a town who grew thanks to the pilgrimages done on the saint grave. There is a relic with a big tooth extracted from Saint Quentin (3rd century) by Eloi, bishop of Noyon in 641. During the dental avulsion, the jaw threw fresh and vermilion blood, and the tooth started to shine. The tooth enlightened the whole church even though this was undertaken in the middle of the night. The legend has it that the whole town was enlightened.

Saint Domnin, healer of rabies

One of Maximilian's former soldiers, he was beheaded by the latter in 304. Holding his head under his arm, he was said to have crossed the Stirone river. In Bergame, rabies was cured by drinking blessed wine from the chalice whose foot contained Saint Domnin de Fidencia's tooth.

The vipers of Saint Amable

Saint Amable was a priest from Riom in Auvergne, in the 5th Century. During the end of his life, the church man only had one tooth that he kept for this town. This dental organ protected people from snake bites. When such an incident occurred, the ceremony took place during the mass. People prayed and the tooth was applied on the bite which instantly healed.

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