

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 28 (2013)  
  
**Artikel:** Spiritual healing : healing miracles associated with the twelfth-century northern cult of St Cuthbert  
**Autor:** Whitehead, Christiania  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-390802>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 05.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Spiritual Healing: Healing Miracles Associated With the Twelfth-Century Northern Cult of St Cuthbert

Christiania Whitehead

This essay examines miracles of spiritual healing and illness in the Durham cult of St Cuthbert during the twelfth century, drawing upon a range of miracle collections, *vitae* and Cuthbertine historiographical writings. It explores the ways in which these miracles work to defend the autonomy of the region against threatening ethnic and institutional incursions, to compete with the south, and to create consensus between the cathedral and the city. Following this, it focuses on two kinds of healing/illness miracle which have a special and specific relation to the North East. First, it studies the folkloric miracles associated with the secondary cult centre on Inner Farne Island, and investigates the relation of Inner Farne to Durham. Second, it details the use of miracles of illness to police sacred architectural space and compel spatial segregation along gender lines. The essay closes with remarks on the complementary role played by the cult of St Godric at Finchale in relation to this gender segregation.

This essay, focused upon healing miracles within the northern cult of St Cuthbert during the twelfth century, works upon the premise that the *region* is the key social category for the study of religious textual production before the Reformation and needs to be given a dominant role in the analysis of such production. The region in question in this essay is the north-east of England. And the key places in relation to the cult are the Island of Lindisfarne at its northern tip, where Cuthbert was prior of the monastery in the 660s, and later bishop of the diocese, and the adjacent island of Inner Farne, where he retired in 676 to lead a life of er-

eremitic seclusion, and where he died in 687. Buried on Lindisfarne, Cuthbert's body quickly became the focus of a tomb cult. In the late ninth century, in order to avoid Danish raids, his coffin was taken to the mainland by the Lindisfarne community and moved around Northumbria, eventually coming to a standstill in Durham in 995, where a church was built to house it. After the Conquest, the married secular clergy tending Cuthbert's tomb were dismissed, a new Anglo-Norman Benedictine priory was founded at Durham, and the cathedral church was reconstructed to house his shrine. In 1104, Cuthbert's body was translated to its new and final home behind the high altar in a grand public ceremony, the coffin opened, and the body confirmed to be incorrupt and flexible. In addition to Lindisfarne, Farne and Durham, this essay will also refer to Finchale, just north of Durham, the home of the twelfth-century hermit, St Godric. After Godric's death at Finchale in 1170, his tomb began to generate miracles and quickly became the focus of a popular tomb cult. This cult was controlled and overseen by the Durham Benedictines, who set up a dependent priory there in 1196.<sup>1</sup>

Because not all that much remains by way of English hagiography pre-conquest, and virtually no miracle collections, it can sometimes be difficult to say much about the pre-conquest workings of a saint's cult. However, Cuthbert is an exceptional case. In this instance, we retain three early eighth-century *vitae*, two by Bede, together with the extensive account given in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (Colgrave; Jaeger; Colgrave and Mynors, Bk 4, chs 27-32). With all this material to draw upon, it is possible to extract a few threads about the way the discourse of illness and health works initially in these early *vitae* of Cuthbert, before turning to the twelfth century. First, during his active life as a prior and bishop, Cuthbert practices a miraculous healing ministry modelled on Christ's in the Gospels. So, the touch of his garments heals. He is able to heal from a distance, even before he has arrived at a sickbed, based on the faith of those who summon him. He frequently heals women (notable, because his tolerance of women changes markedly later on), sometimes intervening in cases where medical practitioners have declared the patient beyond help (Bede, chs 23, 15, 29, 30). Parallels for several of his miracles, including his healing miracles, are drawn with the continental saints of the Roman church – Augustine, Benedict, Anthony and Marcellinus, while all Celtic antecedents are suppressed (Bede, chs 38, 14, 19). As such, the discourse of spiritual healing is used to facilitate the construction of Cuthbert as a localised Christ-figure, and as a Romanised saint in the north of England, at an ecclesial frontier where Roman and Celtic models of Christianity are rubbing up against each other in antagonistic

---

<sup>1</sup> On monastic competition for the possession of Finchale hermitage, see Licence.

ways. Second, consequent to Cuthbert's healing ministry and, one might say, at odds with it, in old age he is burdened with the prolonged agonising illness which will lead to his death. This illness is constructed in a very different way. Bede writes of it as a means to purgation and purification, and as a period of spiritual temptation (ch. 37). Effectively, this illness is Cuthbert's *passio* – his martyrdom. His heroic stoicism in the face of extreme bodily illness is equivalent to the heroism of the early Christian martyrs in the face of torture and execution, and gives him the right to be numbered amongst them. In fact, it is even more competitive than that as his first posthumous healing miracle makes clear. A boy possessed by a brutal spirit, and beyond the help of the normal monastic exorcist, is prayed for at an altar containing relics of the Christian martyrs in Lindisfarne monastery. But the martyrs do nothing. And the reason they do nothing and refuse to grant a cure, we are told, is specifically to defer to Cuthbert, to show how high a place he holds amongst them. It is not until the boy drinks soil mixed with the water used to wash Cuthbert's corpse, that he recovers from his madness (Bede, ch. 41).<sup>2</sup>

So far we have identified three ways of utilising the discourse of spiritual healing: to compete with and supersede conventional doctors and exorcists, to construct Cuthbert along Romanised lines, and to give him pre-eminence amongst the Christian martyrs. As such, in these *vitae*, we perceive Northumbria jostling for position and elbow-room within the field of Romanised Christianity. However, spiritual healing works very differently once we turn to the twelfth century. The most important preliminary point to make here is that after the Conquest, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the major Benedictine monastic foundations and cathedral chapters are extremely anxious to sort out questions of territory and boundary, and to assert their customary land rights in the face of the new Anglo-Norman landownership. I would argue that the scores of hagiographies and miracle collections generated during this period play a key role in staging this assertion. These miracle collections centralise miracles of illness and healing. As such I contend that, during the twelfth century, the miraculously diseased or renewed body becomes a key means by which to establish territorial possession and express idealised relationships between social groups, both within the region and beyond. We will explore a number of different examples of these strategies in practice, using material drawn from the main ecclesiastical histories and Cuthbertine miracle collections of the twelfth century: the *Libellus de exordio* of Symeon of Durham, a history of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Bede relates how Abbot Benedict of Wearmouth brought relics of the apostles and martyrs back from a visit to Rome in c. 671 (*Historiam abbatum*, ch. 4).

church at Durham up until the twelfth century (c. 1104-7), the anonymous *Capitula de miraculis et translationibus sancti Cuthberti* (mid twelfth century), the anonymous *De mirabilibus Dei modernis temporibus in Farne insula declaratis* (late twelfth century), Reginald of Durham's *Libellus de admirandis virtutibus beati Cuthberti* (1160s-70s) and *Libellus de vita et miraculis S Godrici* (1170s), and the "Irish" *Libellus de ortu S Cuthberti* (1190s).

First, serious illness miraculously imposed by St Cuthbert is used to "warn off" racial groups that pose a threat to the region: the Danes, the Scots, and the Normans. The opening chapters of the *Capitula de miraculis* include a series of anecdotes to this effect. In the early tenth century, Reginald, a Norwegian Viking, occupies Cuthbert's lands,<sup>3</sup> and gives them to two retainers. Onalafbald, the more oppressive of the retainers, scorns Cuthbert's corpse at the door to his church and swears upon his own Nordic gods. He is immediately struck with paralysis, and subsequently dies in agony (ch. 3). In the late ninth century, a Scottish army crosses the Tweed and enters Cuthbert's lands, pillaging and burning as it advances. Guthred, the beleaguered king of Northumbria, heading a much smaller army, experiences a vision of Cuthbert assuring him of God's help and his own. The next morning as the armies begin to fight, the ground opens and swallows the Scottish army up (ch. 4).<sup>4</sup> After the conquest, William I sends a Norman tax collector to the region to try to extract taxes from the citizens of Durham. The tax collector is cursed with supernatural illness by Cuthbert, sent about the county publicly acknowledging his sin, and only restored to health once he has crossed the diocesan boundary (Symeon, Bk. 3, ch. 20).<sup>5</sup> In addition to safeguarding the boundaries of "Cuthbert's lands" against hostile ethnic incursions, miraculously-imposed illness is also used to resist smaller-scale threats to monastic land-holdings from ecclesial institutions outside the region. The *Capitula de miraculis* tells how abbot Paul of St Albans makes the foolish mistake of accepting the gift of the church at Tynemouth (formerly a part of Cuthbert's patrimony) from Robert Mowbray, Earl of Northumberland.<sup>6</sup> Upon arriving at Tynemouth to visit his new possession, the abbot is promptly taken ill (an imposition from St Cuthbert) and dies, while the hapless earl is subsequently cap-

<sup>3</sup> The lands allegedly donated to Cuthbert's tomb guardians by earlier Anglo-Saxon kings and magnates. This patrimony subsequently forms the diocese of Durham.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. 9 recounts a further "anti-Scottish" miracle in which Cuthbert breaks the Scottish ensiegement of Durham in 1091.

<sup>5</sup> The same fate befalls King William himself in the previous chapter: scorning Cuthbert and menacing the county, he is cursed by an immense heat that only subsides once he has crossed the River Tees.

<sup>6</sup> In these miracle collections, various earls of Northumberland are repeatedly a thorn in the side of Cuthbert's people (the *halinerfolc*).



tured and imprisoned at Tynemouth by the king's army, an ironic reversal of fortune which is not lost upon the miracle compiler (ch. 12).

Second, healing miracles are used to negotiate the north/south divide, and to assert the spiritual *potentia* and autonomy of the northern region. Reginald of Durham, himself very possibly a medical practitioner, repeatedly records miracles noting how Cuthbert heals sick pilgrims who have previously made fruitless visits to the major southern shrines of St Edmund at Bury and St Thomas Becket at Canterbury (*De admirandis*, chs 116, 126).<sup>7</sup> Some of these stories omit the journeys and simply describe the pilgrim casting lots between northern and southern saints (chs 112, 115). In one case, an indecisive pilgrim lights three candles representing St Cuthbert, St Edmund, and St Etheldreda at Ely in an attempt to determine which will be most efficacious for them. St Cuthbert's candle significantly burns out first (ch. 19). Sometimes, the saints of the south are shown explicitly to co-operate in promoting the north as a region of healing *potentia*. In one miracle story from Reginald's *Libellus de vita et miraculis S Godrici*, Becket appears in a vision to a Northumbrian pilgrim who has journeyed to Canterbury and tells him to search out healing within his own region – to apply to Cuthbert in Durham and Godric at Finchale instead: “Quare vos de Northymbria ad me huc venitis, cum sanctum Cuthbertum multo me pretiosorem, et sanctum Godricum mei consortem, in finibus vestris habeatis?”<sup>8</sup> (459–60) In another, from the same collection, Godric appears in a vision to a Durham scholar and says he will soon be joined by Thomas à Becket his brother, and Cuthbert his father, in working healing miracles at his shrine (366–67). These examples demonstrate a range of ways of negotiating the north/south divide: explicit rivalry resolved in favour of the north; a show of co-operation, through which the south acknowledges and defers to the north's spiritual *potentia* and autonomy; and the construction of a saintly *familia* in which Becket is drawn into the orbit of the north, and Cuthbert presides over both Becket and Godric as spiritual father. In all these instances, spiritual healing is the *vehicle* enabling the expression of these inter-regional relationships.

Third, the activity of spiritual healing works to demonstrate and extend social consensus between the cathedral priory and its tomb-cult,

<sup>7</sup> See also, Webb 52–6; Tudor, “Reginald” 65–6. Tudor cites Reginald's knowledge of the technical names of ailments and the increased medical detail he brings to his descriptions of Cuthbert's cures. If Reginald was indeed the monastic *infirmarer* and a trained *medicus*, his additional role as the compositor of Cuthbert's miracles illustrates the complex engagement which took place between conventional and spiritual healing practices within monastical shrines.

<sup>8</sup> Why have you come to me from Northumbria, when you have St Cuthbert, much more precious to me, and St Godric my companion, in your neighbourhood?

and the city. The *Capitula de miraculis* tells how, less than a year ago, a great beam intended for use in the fabric of the cathedral, fell from a wagon entering the city gates of Durham, and crushed a child. Nonetheless, through the miraculous intervention of Cuthbert, when the beam was lifted the child was found to be unhurt (ch. 16).<sup>9</sup> The majority of the miracles in the *Capitula de miraculis* and other twelfth-century collections benefit people associated with the church in Durham: monks, priors, ecclesial servants and their families, pilgrims visiting the shrine. Here, by contrast, the miracle story appears to foreground *urban* labour (the construction trade, epitomised by the beam) and *urban* space (the city gates). The child has no explicit connection with the cathedral, s/he is simply a city member. Despite this difference, we are told that Cuthbert would not allow any object connected in any way with his church to cause either injury or harm. His spiritual *potentia* intervenes at a moment where church and city might potentially be at odds, and heals that rift, restoring the child's body to wholeness at an urban boundary (the city gates) that suggests the possibility of correlating the child's restored body with the health or wholeness of the bounded civic body. Policing a healing shrine located at the heart of the city, the cathedral priory demonstrates consensus with the city by constructing a spiritual patron flatteringly committed to the health of its members and civic boundaries.

\*\*\*

Some of the ways in which healing miracles operate at Durham – to order racial, regional and civic relationships – are also relevant to the miracle output of other cathedral shrines around England, with obvious variations in local emphasis (Yarrow; Nilson). Canterbury may feel less need to assert itself quite so defiantly against the north! In the second part of this essay, we will review some functions assigned to spiritual healing that bear a more specific relation to Cuthbert's cult and to the north-east region, commencing with a discussion of healing miracles on Inner Farne, the island where Cuthbert pursued his seventh-century vocation of eremitic asceticism. Some healing miracles are initially recorded on Inner Farne during the earliest years of Cuthbert's posthumous cult: a piece of calf-skin pinned up in the oratory to stop the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ch. 21 records a very similar miracle in which a young man, who has stopped to give assistance, is crushed by a sled bearing a great bell destined for the cathedral at Durham. The monk accompanying the sled reproaches St Cuthbert for not caring for his servants, and the young man emerges unscathed.

draught, heals Cuthbert's second eremitic successor, Felgild, from an inflamed face (Bede, ch. 46).<sup>10</sup> They cease completely during the centuries of Danish incursion, and pick up again from the twelfth century, at the point at which Benedictine hermits from Durham priory begin to inhabit the island hermitage.<sup>11</sup> Now, the first observation to be made in relation to this, of course, is that there is no body, no relic on the island. Rather, it is the geographical space of asceticism paired with a living tradition of asceticism which seems to give rise to manifestations of healing power. In other words, a bounded ascetic space, inhabited by a hermit re-enacting the original vocation of that space, creates spiritual *potentia*. This is very removed from the way in which most tomb cults operate, offering as it does a completely different conceptualisation of the ongoing liveliness of the saint's body.

In the light of this unusual modelling of the presence of the saint, it seems worth exploring whether the kinds of miracles performed on Farne yield any insight into the character of the relationship between the eremitic cell and the cathedral shrine at Durham. On the one hand, there are important and predictable signs of conformity between the two sites: several of the healings which take place on the island are explicitly held over until the feast day of Cuthbert's Translation at Durham (4 September), when most miracles are also recorded at the shrine, nudging the island into a kind of temporal and kalendrical synchronicity with the cathedral, and reminding local participants of the absent, translated body which effects the cure (*De mirabilibus Dei*, chs 4, 13). In addition, there are several miracles in Reginald's *Libellus de admirandis* that seem designed to express *liturgical* conformity, together with the cathedral's episcopal domination and possession of its dependencies. In these miracles, a monk, sleeping respectively in the churches of Inner Farne, Lindisfarne, and Durham Cathedral, is given a midnight vision of a liturgical procession of torchbearers and deacons, and of a bishop cele-

---

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that at this early stage in the cult, Bede is uncertain whether to attribute the miracle to Cuthbert, to Aethilwald, Cuthbert's first eremitic successor on the island, or to both.

<sup>11</sup> The earliest Durham hermit, Aelric, seems to have lived on Inner Farne alone before 1150. He was succeeded by Aelwin, who was in residence when Bartholomew (St Bartholomew of Farne) arrived in 1150. The two quarrelled and Aelwin left the island. Bartholomew was joined by Thomas, a former prior, in 1163, and later, by a Brother William. After Bartholomew's death in 1193, the island remained continuously occupied by Durham hermits until the Reformation. It was formalised as a dependent cell of Durham priory in the early thirteenth century (Tudor, "Durham Priory"). Miracles upon Farne are recorded in the anonymous *De mirabilibus Dei . . . in Farne insula* (late twelfth century), probably written by one of the monks on the island, in Geoffrey of Coldingham's *Vita Bartholomaei Farnensis* (late twelfth century), and in Reginald's *De admirandis*.



brating solemn mass before the altar of the church in question (*De admirandis*, chs 38, 58, 59).<sup>12</sup>

These examples demonstrate the long arm of the cathedral shaping the miraculous expression of the island cell. Nonetheless, there are also several healing miracles recorded about Inner Farne that are a world *away* from the miraculous narratives of a cathedral shrine. These are miracles based on the premise that Inner Farne represents a very particular category of sacred space: that it lies on the brink of the otherworld, as it were: on a supernatural frontier from which one expels devils and builds an altar with the assistance of angels.<sup>13</sup> It is this otherworldly understanding of ascetic space which explains the fairytale content of one of Farne's most extended healing miracles, described in the anonymous *De mirabilibus Dei . . . in Farne insula*. A young labourer from Sunderland is kidnapped by three youths dressed in green riding green horses. They bring him to a courtly company in a valley representing the land of faerie, tempt him with food and drink, and offer him rest from his worldly toils. When he resists, they agree to bring him home but punish his intransigence with dumbness. Back with his parents, the labourer indicates that he wishes to be taken to Farne Island. Sprinkled with holy water there by St Bartholomew of Farne, he is cured from his dumbness, crying out "St Cuthbert, St Cuthbert" (ch. 6). Once again, the disabled and restored human body becomes the locus for testing power relations between different social units. But on this occasion and in this ascetic context, these units are nothing less than contending spiritual infrastructures. The Christian otherworld of Farne Island with its angels and demons is set in opposition to the Celtic or folkloric land of faerie, and effectively overturns it. The false seclusion proffered by faerie land (a respite from worldly toil), symbolised by the sensual impairment of the human body, is trumped by an oppositional figure of otherworldly seclusion – the Christian seclusion of the ascete, which has the power triumphantly to return the human body to full reverential Christian speech and praise.

The folkloric miracles of Farne represent one distinctively northern way of utilising spiritual healing. The other distinctively northern feature is much less fanciful and concerns the use of healing miracles in relation

<sup>12</sup> Similar visionary masses are also found, in a very different generic setting, in the French Vulgate Grail romances. Both kinds of vision bear witness to a twelfth-century climate of liturgical mystification in which the supernaturalism of the mass was emphasised.

<sup>13</sup> Bede describes Cuthbert undertaking both of these activities on Inner Farne (ch. 17). In general, hermits' *vitae* contain much more supernatural interaction in the form of visions and spiritual battles than other kinds of saints' lives. See Reginald's *vita* of St Godric, and John of Ford's *vita* of Wulfric of Haselbury (Tudor, "Reginald" 125-30).

to gender segregation and misogyny. From the early twelfth century onward, St Cuthbert becomes a palpably, uniquely, misogynistic saint.<sup>14</sup> As so often, this is mediated physically through the rhetoric of space and illness. Any woman who sets foot in Cuthbert's cathedral or cemetery at Durham, Cuthbert's churches and cemeteries on Lindisfarne and Inner Farne island, other churches around the land dedicated to St Cuthbert, or into any of his hermitages, is going to rue the day they ever transgressed. Symeon of Durham's *Libellus de exordio*, the earliest narrative in this misogynist tradition, relates the story of Judith, wife of Earl Tostig of Northumberland, who, apparently aware of this ban, sends her maid-servant on to forbidden soil to test the water. Entering the churchyard of Durham cathedral, the girl is repelled by a violent force, stricken ill, and eventually dies (Bk. 3, ch. 11). Another tale from Symeon: a Durham woman whose husband's social position fills her with pride, walks through the cathedral cemetery in defiance of the ban, becomes insane and later cuts her own throat (Bk. 2, ch. 9). A little girl who strays into the cathedral by mistake is similarly rendered insane (Reginald, *De vita* 403). A Flemish woman who visits Inner Farne island and complains that women are treated like dogs there, tries to enter the island church but is repulsed by a strong wind (Geoffrey 309). A Scottish count foolish enough to bring his wife and daughters to a Scottish hermitage allegedly formerly inhabited by Cuthbert, is punished by breaking his hip and leg (*Libellus de ortu*, ch. 26).<sup>15</sup> In all these instances, in a wide range of twelfth-century Cuthbertine writings, divinely-imposed illness is made key to the contruction and maintenance of gender-specific boundaries, barring access to the saint's sacred terrain.

That this gendered ban upon ingress was still a current topic for debate in the fifteenth century is demonstrated by a lengthy interpolation towards the end of the fifteenth-century Middle English metrical *Life of St Cuthbert*, probably written by one of the Durham monks (*Life*; Whitehead, "Regional"). The bulk of this poem closely translates the "Irish" *Libellus de ortu*, Bede's *Prose vita*, and other twelfth-century sources. However, in the passage in question, immediately following on from his translation of Symeon's misogynist miracles (Earl Tostig's wife, the proud Durham matron), the translator interpolates 40 or so lines of his own, responding to the arguments of those who say that since women were allowed around Cuthbert's coffin while he lay at Chester-le-Street, there is no reason why they should be barred from his shrine at Durham. The translator replies:

<sup>14</sup> The following discussion is indebted to Tudor, "Misogyny."

<sup>15</sup> This maverick late twelfth-century "Irish" life gives Cuthbert a royal Irish birth, and a Scottish sphere of saintly activity.

And gif þai did, it semes on chanunce  
 Þai knew no3t þe saint ordenaunce,  
 Þar fore þai were excused þan, for why  
 Þai did wrange unwitandly.  
 Or ellis say he gaue fredome  
 Þare women to his toumbe to come,  
 In takyn full to men discryd  
 Þat he sulde no3t þare abyde . . .  
 . . . women he forbare  
 Whils he and monkys togydir ware,  
 Restand in a mynster . . .  
 Þarfore whare his cors rest,  
 He will na woman byde ne gest. (lines 7303-18)

The translator's use of the present tense suggests that the ban remained current in the fifteenth century, and the arguments he amasses show that he was clearly in favour of its enforcement. Nonetheless, the fact that he feels the need to step aside from his narrative at all to argue this position implies that Durham's conservative adherence to the exclusion of women had become subject to question in certain quarters.

Even though one might expect some restrictions upon female access in cathedral shrines manned by Benedictine monks, the sheer number and rhetorical intricacy of these miracle stories punishing disobedient women with illness or death, and the institutional misogyny which ensued,<sup>16</sup> is unique among English cathedral shrine cults. There are a number of mythic stories of causation which explain how this ban arose – in the “Irish” *Libellus de ortu*, an unmarried Scottish princess falsely accuses Cuthbert of causing her pregnancy (the ground promptly swallows her up!). A beautiful woman distracts Cuthbert's monks when they should have been listening to him preaching (chs 27, 29). However, it is important to emphasise that none of these stories emerge earlier than the twelfth century – the original Cuthbert depicted by Bede seems to have had perfectly friendly relationships with women.<sup>17</sup> One reading of the misogyny initiated in this period is to see it as a disapproving Benedictine reaction to the expelled community of married secular clergy and their families that grew up around the saint's body in the late Saxon pe-

<sup>16</sup> Tudor describes the public punishment and humiliation of two women servants from Newcastle who broke the ban in 1417, and draws attention to a passage in the late sixteenth-century anonymous *Rites of Durham* mentioning a blue marble line in the floor near the west end of the cathedral, which women would be punished if they crossed (“Misogyny” 164-5).

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in one episode (Bede, ch. 37), Cuthbert asks to be shrouded after his death in a length of linen given to him by abbess Verca from South Shields, which he has kept out of love for her.

riod (Symeon lxxxi-lxxxv; Foster; Tudor, "Misogyny" 159). Certainly, while Symeon initially presents a broadly tolerant account of this community, mid-twelfth-century additions to the *Libellus de exordio* and papal pronouncements are much more vituperative, lambasting their "depraved and incorrigible way of life" (Foster 61), so as to justify their expulsion and replacement by the southern monks of the Norman Benedictine reform.

There are a number of sociological ways of responding to this exclusion. First, it seems clear that English saints' cults generally engage with the notion of inviolability in some way. In *female* saints' cults – those of Werburge at Chester, Frideswide in Oxford, and Etheldreda at Ely, are good cases in point – hagiographic writing emphasises these women's heroically maintained virginity and immunity to desire, and contemporary theorists of this literature link the intact character of these saintly bodies to the inviolability of the cities and regions they protect (Sanok). It seems to me that Cuthbert is accompanied by a rhetoric of inviolability as zealously promulgated as that of any female saint. But whereas *female* hagiography stresses the inviolability of the body, and makes that metonymic of wider social units, *male* hagiography substitutes the sacred building for the body, and constructs that building as a carefully bounded, filtered and purified space, free from the contamination of the opposite sex. Second, it is valuable to think about this exclusion in terms of its reading of bodiliness. We have established that the saint's body and the cathedral shrine which houses it can usefully be viewed as a symbolic representation of regional social cohesion and wholeness. People from every social class and occupation, and from all the reaches of the region, bring their brokenness there and come away restored. It is a very bodily dense place – full up with the sick bodies of the pilgrims; the invisible but incorrupt body of the saint; hundred upon hundred of wax body parts symbolic of previous healing suspended above the shrine and crammed in around it;<sup>18</sup> wax candles, also symbolically representative of the bodies of sick pilgrims and supplicants.<sup>19</sup> At Durham, women are not a welcome part of this complex three-dimensional emblem of regional social unity and transformation. The bodiliness so frequently attributed to the medieval feminine would seem to be different in kind to the expectant, regenerated, and symbolic bodies heaped

<sup>18</sup> The contemporary inventory of votive offerings at the shrine of Thomas Cantilupe in Hereford from 1307, lists, amongst other things, 1,424 images of men or their body parts in wax, and 129 in silver (Nilson 101; Finucane 97-99).

<sup>19</sup> The bodies of sufferers were measured and a wick of that same measurement incorporated into a candle which was burnt at the shrine. As such, these candles seem to have "stood for" the bodies of invalids in some way (Nilson 102-4). Nilson also discusses the central role of wax within the cathedral economy (105, 136-37).

around the shrine. Illness drops like a portcullis to prevent women accessing a hub-point that emanates health.

Unsurprisingly, the region came up with a solution; impractical in the extreme entirely to halt female pilgrimage north and lose the accompanying shrine revenue. Godric was that solution! Constructed as a saint and miracle-worker in *vitae* written by the Durham Benedictines,<sup>20</sup> Godric's life is made to sound unusually full of women for a hermit – he travelled to Rome with his mother, encouraged his sister to establish her own cell next to his, and is described learning songs in visions from the Virgin Mary.<sup>21</sup> In his 240 recorded posthumous miracles – one of the largest collections to survive from twelfth and thirteenth-century England – his tomb at Finchale is given a compelling association with female healing. It seems to have worked. Women came. Two thirds of the pilgrims to Finchale were women, a far higher percentage than to any other male saint's shrine.<sup>22</sup> The complementary relation to Cuthbert is made even more explicit, in that some of the women whom Cuthbert renders insane, Godric obligingly heals. This I think is the reason that Godric's bones don't get transferred to Durham cathedral unlike the bones of most other saintly north-eastern bishops, abbots and anchorites.<sup>23</sup> Finchale is developed by Durham as a secondary north-eastern tomb cult to mop up the woman issue.

\*\*\*

To conclude: acts of spiritual healing and illness within shrine cults always need to be viewed in relation to local and institutional agendas. In the Anglo-Saxon period, Cuthbert's relation to disease is used to construct him as a Romanised saint and a Christian martyr. Post-conquest, a

---

<sup>20</sup> Godric seems to have attracted 4 Benedictine biographers: Reginald, Walter, Geoffrey (poss. of Coldingham), and a lost *vita* by Prior Germanus. The fullest account is given by Coombe.

<sup>21</sup> The single extant illustration of St Godric in the copy of *The Desert of Religion* in Cotton MS Faustina B.vi.Pt.ii, shows him praying to or receiving a vision of the Virgin (Coombe 111).

<sup>22</sup> 68% of the people cured at Godric's shrine are women; the only other twelfth/thirteenth century English shrines with comparably high percentages for female healing are those of two woman saints: Aebbe (62%) and Frideswide (68%) (Coombe 51-2; Finucane 127).

<sup>23</sup> The bones of Godric's eremitic friend Aelric were collected for interment at Durham. Likewise, in a mythic narrative, Symeon tells us how Cuthbert's sacrist, Elfred, was instructed in a vision to gather the bones of two local anchorites, the bishops of Hexham, Acca and Alchmund, abbesses Aebbe and Aethelgitha, abbot Boisil, and Bede, and bring them to the Durham shrine (Bk. 3, ch. 7). These collections were probably carried out to prevent other monastic orders from developing competing tomb cults (Licence).



much more vengeful manifestation of the same figure imposes illness to punish individuals, racial groups and institutions who pose a threat to the region and to his patrimony. Simultaneously, spiritual healing becomes the locus for staging competition with other shrines and other regions of the country, and for competing with other more medical models of healing. Some modes of manipulating the trope of spiritual healing seem distinct to the north-eastern region. A particularly folkloric type of healing miracle arises from sacred eremitic space. And healing and illness are used to police sacred space in relation to gender, and to compel spatial segregation along gender lines – male pilgrims to Durham, female pilgrims to Finchale – up until the end of the Middle Ages, to a degree unparalleled in English hagiographical culture.

## References

- Bede. *Prose vita*. In Colgrave. 141-307.
- . *Historiam abbatum*. In Charles Plummer, ed. *Venerabilis Baedae Historiam ecclesiasticam gentis Anglorum; Historiam abbatum; Epistolam ad Egbertum; una cum Historia abbatum auctore anonymo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896.
- Capitula de miraculis et translationibus sancti Cuthberti*. In Thomas Arnold, ed. *Symeonis monachi Opera Omnia*. Rolls Series. London: Longman, 1882-85. I: 229-61, II: 333-62.
- Colgrave, Bertram, ed. and trans. *Two Lives of St Cuthbert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940.
- and R. A. B. Mynors, eds. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Coombe, Margaret. "Reginald of Durham's Latin *Life of St Godric of Finchale*: a study." PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 2011.
- De mirabilibus Dei modernis temporibus in Farne insula declaratis*. Ed. H. H. E. Craster. "The Miracles of St Cuthbert at Farne." *Analecta bollandiana* 70 (1952): 5-19.
- Finucane, Ronald C. *Miracles and Pilgrims: popular beliefs in medieval England*. London: J. M. Dent, 1977.
- Foster, Meryl. "Custodians of St Cuthbert: the Durham Monks' Views of their Predecessors 1083-c.1200." *Anglo-Norman Durham 1093-1193*. Ed. David Rollason, Margaret Harvey and Michael Prestwich. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994. 53-66.
- Geoffrey of Coldingham. *Vita Bartholomaei Farnensis*. In Thomas Arnold, ed. *Symeon monachi Opera Omnia*. Rolls Series. London: Longman, 1882-85. I: 295-325.
- Jaager, Werner, ed. *Bedas metrische Vita sancti Cuthberti*. Leipzig: Mayer and Müller, 1935.
- Libellus de ortu S Cuthberti*. In James Raine, ed. *Miscellanea biographica*. Surtees Society 8. London: J. B. Nichols and son, 1838. 61-87.
- Licence, Tom. "The Benedictines, the Cistercians, and the acquisition of a hermitage in twelfth-century Durham." *Journal of Medieval History* 29 (2003): 315-29.
- The Life of St Cuthbert in English Verse*. Ed. J. T. Fowler. Surtees Society 87. Durham: Andrews and Co., 1891.
- Nilson, Benjamin J. *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998.
- Reginald of Durham. *Libellus de admirandis Beati Cuthberti virtutibus quae novellis patrate sunt temporibus*. Ed. James Raine. Surtees Society 1. London: J. B. Nichols and son, 1835.

- . *Libellus de vita et miraculis S Godrici, heremita de Finchale*. Ed. Joseph Stevenson. Surtees Society 20. London: J. B. Nichols and son, 1847.
- Sanok, Catherine. *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2007.
- Symeon of Durham. *Libellus de exordio*. Ed. and trans. David W. Rollason. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.
- Tudor, Victoria. "Reginald of Durham and St Godric of Finchale." PhD dissertation, University of Reading, 1979.
- . "The Misogyny of St Cuthbert." *Archaeologia Aeliana*. 5th series 12 (1984): 157-67.
- . "Durham Priory and its Hermits in the Twelfth Century." *Anglo-Norman Durham 1093-1193*. Ed. David Rollason, Margaret Harvey and Michael Prestwich. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994. 67-78.
- Webb, Diana. *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*. London: Hambledon, 2000.
- Whitehead, Christiana. "Regional, and with Attitude: the Middle English Metrical *Life of St Cuthbert*." *Festschrift for Roger Ellis*. Ed. Catherine Batt and René Tixier. Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming 2013.
- Yarrow, Simon. *Saints and their Communities: Miracle Stories in Twelfth-Century England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.

