

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 34 (2017)

**Artikel:** Visual and verbal vernacular translations of Bede's Prose Life of St Cuthbert in fifteenth-century Northern-England : the Carlisle panel paintings  
**Autor:** Whitehead, Christiania  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-737575>

### **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:** 02.01.2026

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

# Visual and Verbal Vernacular Translations of Bede's *Prose Life of St Cuthbert* in Fifteenth-Century Northern England: The Carlisle Panel Paintings

Christiania Whitehead

This essay offers a new reading of the late fifteenth-century sequence of wood panels depicting the Life of St Cuthbert painted on the back of the north choir stalls at Carlisle Cathedral. The panels display scenes taken from Bede's influential *Prose Life of Cuthbert* (c. 721), identified by vernacular couplets. The essay reads this visual and vernacular translation of the *Prose Life* in the light of other late medieval vernacular versions, notably those in the southern legendaries, and in the largescale metrical *Life of St Cuthbert*, produced in Durham Benedictine Priory in the early fifteenth century.

From the eleventh century, Cuthbert's cult had been centred at Durham Cathedral, administered by the bishop and Benedictine community there. What are we to make then of this manifestation of Cuthbertine veneration in a cathedral served by Augustinian canons in the Cumbrian diocese? This essay suggests that Cuthbert's inclusion at Carlisle may be designed to highlight its putative early association with Cuthbert's episcopal see. As a consequence, these panels can be interpreted as part of an assertive programme masterminded by Durham to reinvigorate and expand Cuthbertine veneration during the fifteenth century, extending his reach west and valorising him as the premier saint of the entire northern region.

In Carlisle Cathedral, in the final years of the fifteenth century, seventeen pictures depicting scenes from the life of the Northumbrian saint, St Cuthbert, were painted directly onto the wood panels on the back of

*What Is an Image in Medieval and Early Modern England?* SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 34. Ed. Antoinina Bevan Zlatar and Olga Timofeeva. Tübingen: Narr, 2017. 17-37.

one section of the north choir stalls (Colgrave; Park and Cather 214-20) (see Figure 1). St Cuthbert (c. 634-87), the most celebrated northern saint of Anglo-Saxon England, entered Melrose monastery as a young



Figure 1: Cycle of St Cuthbert panel paintings on back of north choir stalls at Carlisle Cathedral. © Historic England Archive. Reproduced by kind permission.



man, after experiencing a vision of the soul of St Aidan, the Irish missionary to Northumbria, ascending to heaven. After a short spell at Ripon monastery, he was sent to Aidan's foundational monastery on the island of Lindisfarne where he became prior. Around 676, wishing for a more contemplative life, he retreated to the island of Inner Farne where he built himself a hermitage. In the 680s he was reluctantly recalled from this seclusion to become bishop of Lindisfarne. Faced by the onset of ill-health, he returned to his hermitage in 686 and died there the following year. He was buried in Lindisfarne monastery, where his body quickly became the focus of a tomb cult. Within a few years of his death, an anonymous *Vita* was composed by one of the Lindisfarne monks to promote his cult, later superseded by the Metrical and Prose *vitae* of the Venerable Bede (respectively, c. 716 and c. 721).

The cycle of Cuthbert paintings at Carlisle Cathedral was one of four, unevenly divided between the north and south choir stalls, which all appear to have been commissioned and carried out during the priorate of Thomas Gondibour (1470s-1502), prior of the house of Augustinian canons which had served the cathedral since the early twelfth century.<sup>1</sup> The other three cycles comprise, on the south side, parallel with the Cuthbert cycle, a *Life* of St Augustine of Hippo in twenty-four panels, and on the north side, adjacent to the Cuthbert panels, a *Life* of St Antony of Egypt in eighteen panels, and a further cycle of non-narrative images of the twelve apostles (Harcourt).<sup>2</sup> While each of the twelve apostles is flanked by a matching Latin sentence from the Apostles Creed, the three cycles of saints' lives are all accompanied by rhyming couplets in the northern vernacular, one couplet above each panel image, identifying the subject matter of the scene below.

---

<sup>1</sup> The house of Augustinian canons at Carlisle was founded in 1122. In 1133, their church was raised to the status of a cathedral, forming a new see and detaching Cumberland from the diocese of York (Summerson 30-31). One of the panels in the St Augustine cycle contains the monogram of Prior Gondibour. Gondibour was also associated with other contemporary decorative programmes within the cathedral and priory.

<sup>2</sup> Harcourt's mid nineteenth-century monograph is devoted to the three hagiographical cycles depicting Cuthbert, Augustine and Anthony at Carlisle; Park and Cather note that while the single figures of Sts Augustine and Anthony occur commonly in late medieval art, these panel paintings represent the only surviving cycles of these saints in England (220).



*Textual and Visual Sources*

Many questions present themselves: what is Cuthbert doing at Carlisle given his Northumbrian and Durham associations? What are the implications of his veneration within a house of Augustinian canons? What should we make of his representation alongside Sts Augustine and Anthony? But before turning to these, it is first necessary to establish the *version* of Cuthbert's *Life* represented in this cycle, bearing in mind the variety of versions circulating by the fifteenth century, and to summarise the current scholarship regarding the probable source of this version. The seventeen panels that make up the Cuthbert cycle depict (1) a child's prediction of Cuthbert's episcopal destiny, (2) the healing of his knee by an angel, (3) his vision of St Aidan's soul ascending, (4) his horse finds bread for him during a journey, (5) he is received by Prior Boisil at Melrose, (6) he offers an angel hospitality at Ripon and is given bread in turn, (7) Boisil prophesies Cuthbert's episcopal future, (8) Cuthbert preaches to the people, (9) he prays in the sea and is dried by otters, (10) he is fed with fish by an eagle, (11) he builds a hermitage on Farne and drives away devils, (12) he miraculously finds a water spring on Inner Farne, (13) he reproves thieving crows on Inner Farne, (14) he is consecrated as bishop, (15) he heals a sick child during an episcopal journey, (16) he receives the sacrament on his deathbed, (17) his body is discovered to be incorrupt.<sup>3</sup>

These seventeen panels illustrate a number of chapters from Bede's highly influential *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*, written in Jarrow in the early eighth century and easily the single most important text at the heart of Cuthbert's cult up until the Reformation. As is well-known, this cult was centred at Durham Cathedral where Cuthbert's body was enshrined under the custodianship of a priory of Benedictine monks from the late eleventh century. Bede's *Prose Life* consists of forty-six chapters; however less than half of those chapters are illustrated at Carlisle, and it would seem that the Carlisle artist was also influenced by the chapters from Bede selected for use within the southern legendary tradition: the relatively terse legends of St Cuthbert in the *South English Legendary* (*SEL*) and the *Gilte Legende*. It is thus the case that the panel paintings favour certain early chapters from Bede's *Prose Life*, including a child's prophecy of Cuthbert's episcopal future, the healing of his knee by an angel, and his vision of Aidan's soul ascending to heaven, in the same

---

<sup>3</sup> I number the panels in accordance with the order given in Park and Cather 217, Figure 2. The transcription of the couplets follows Fowler, *Life of St Cuthbert* 10-11 throughout.





Figure 2. Cuthbert immerses himself in the sea to pray and has his feet dried by sea creatures (Bede, Prose Life, ch. 10).

A): British Library, Yates Thompson 26, fol. 24r. © The British Library Board. Reproduced by kind permission.





B): Carlisle Cathedral north choir stall paintings, panel 9. © Historic England Archive. Reproduced by kind permission.



manner as the *SEL*, while other chapters are omitted from both.<sup>4</sup> The artist of the Carlisle panel paintings makes the same selections from Bede's *Prose Life* as the compiler of the *SEL*; however, he also illustrates *additional* chapters from Bede, and unlike the compiler of the *SEL* shows an active interest in the ministry of animals to Cuthbert (panels 4, 9, 10, and 13),<sup>5</sup> and in Cuthbert's eremitic sojourn on Farne Island (panels 11, 12 and 13).<sup>6</sup> We shall return to the significance of these choices later.

The similarities to the narrative tradition represented by the *SEL* are particularly interesting because, thus far, scholarly attention has only focused upon the *iconographic* source of the Carlisle panels. This is commonly agreed to be the copy of Bede's *Prose Life* contained in the deluxe, late twelfth-century manuscript produced at Durham, now designated British Library, MS Yates Thompson 26, in which each Bedean chapter is accompanied by a strongly-coloured, full-page illumination.<sup>7</sup> The Cuthbert panels at Carlisle are unfortunately in a poor state of preservation, but a comparison of some of the better preserved panels with the corresponding illuminations in Yates Thompson demonstrates entirely convincing levels of compositional agreement (Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in MS Yates Thompson 26, the Latin rubric for each Bedean chapter is followed, first by the full-page illumination, and then by the text of the chapter in question, so that one might even discern some compositional correspondence between the panels and the *mise en page* of the manuscript: as though the vernacular couplet and panel painting aim to pre-

---

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 3 of Bede's *Prose Life* in which Cuthbert's prayers save monks at the mouth of the Tyne from drifting away on their rafts, provides one relevant example.

<sup>5</sup> Respectively, Cuthbert's horse pulls down bread from a thatched roof, otters dry his feet, an eagle brings a fish for him to eat, disobedient crows bring Cuthbert lard.

<sup>6</sup> Respectively, Cuthbert builds a hermitage on Farne with the assistance of angels, he digs a well there, he reproves the crows who steal his thatch.

<sup>7</sup> Marner focuses on the history of this manuscript and its production, and provides facsimiles of all the illuminations. Baker reminds us that twenty manuscripts of Bede's *Prose Life* survive from between 1083 and 1200, and that around half were produced at Durham (17).

<sup>8</sup> Colgrave, one of the great Bedean scholars of the mid twentieth century, was the first to notice this correspondence in 1938. His conclusions have recently been nuanced by Park and Cather, who suggest that a sketchbook may have acted as an intermediary between the manuscript and the wood panels, following typical medieval workshop practice (220), and by Baker, who places both MS Yates Thompson 26 and the Carlisle panels within a more extensive tradition of Cuthbertine pictorial cycles, including, from the fifteenth century, stained-glass cycles at York Minster and Durham Cathedral (c.1420-40). He concludes that there was a conscious revival of traditional Durham iconography in the second quarter of the fifteenth century (22-23, 42-44).

serve the rubric and illumination from each Bedean chapter, while the chapter itself has been dispensed with. Here, at the end of the fifteenth century, in a municipal setting, a sequence of simple couplets and panel paintings appears to stand as an adequate summary of the *Prose Life*.

The *Prose Life* is distilled down to a series of elementary couplets and images on these north choir stalls – to the briefest of epitomes, one might say; however, this is not quite the whole story. Intriguingly, both the first and last couplets of the panel sequence make explicit references to Bede's text. In Panel 1, Cuthbert is rebuked for standing on his head as a child in the face of his illustrious vocation: "Her Cuthbert was forbid layks / and plays. *As S. bede i hys story says*" (my italics). And in Panel 17, his body is revealed to be incorrupt eleven years after its burial on Lindisfarne: "xi 3er after that beryd was he / thai fand hym hole *as red may 3e*" (my italics). The reference to reading here is plainly to reading about the exhumation in Bede. So, the visual sequence opens by signalling its narrative source and associating itself with the authority of Bede, and closes by referring its viewer back to further reading on the subject in Bede's *Prose Life*. In other words, these somewhat naïve panel paintings and vernacular captions need not necessarily comprise the end of the story for the viewer. They offer a minimal visual and vernacular skeleton of the *Prose Life* for those without the educational skills to delve further, but also channel the intellectually curious viewer toward the scholarly complexity of Bede's Latin text. In effect, they draw attention to a second, highly authoritative, Latinate text embedded *beneath* these vernacular couplets and images and perhaps designed for the canons, while the first addressed lay congregations within the cathedral.<sup>9</sup>

How could a twelfth-century Durham manuscript possibly have influenced a late fifteenth-century Carlisle painter? As it turns out, we know that Yates Thompson 26 moved around the north and acted as an iconographic model during the first decades of the fifteenth century. The manuscript is recorded in the Durham library catalogues of 1391 and 1416 (Colgrave 17), and the latter entry records that it had been on loan to Richard Scrope, Archbishop of York (d. 1405). As a result, it has been argued that its illuminations may have been intended as models for the gigantic St Cuthbert stained-glass window in York Minister, probably completed in around 1430, which consists of 105 scenes depicting the saint's life (Fowler; Baker 22-25). Emphasising Cuthbert's episcopal vocation and exemplarity, and incorporating images of contemporary northern bishops and archbishops, this window was commissioned and

---

<sup>9</sup> The issue of a mixed audience for these panels will be addressed later in this essay.

paid for by Bishop Walter Skirlaw of Durham (1388-1406) and Bishop Thomas Langley of Durham (1406-37), formerly Dean of York (1401-6), and clearly indicates the extension of Cuthbert's cult into the heart of the York archdiocese by the early fifteenth century. In addition to its similarities to the Yates Thompson illuminations, the great Cuthbert window at York Minster also seems to have borne a close relation to a number of Cuthbertine windows at Durham Cathedral in the north aisle of the choir, the Chapel of the Nine Altars, and the cloister garth, these last two commissioned by Bishop Langley in the 1430s (Lynda Rollason; Baker 42-43). Sadly, none of the Durham windows survived the iconoclasm of the Reformation; however they are recalled and described in the late sixteenth-century treatise, *The Rites of Durham*, which details the ornaments and rituals of Durham Cathedral in the first decades of the sixteenth century, from a viewpoint of pro-Catholic nostalgia. In both instances, the York and Durham windows precede the Carlisle wood panels by six or seven decades in transforming the narrative of Bede's *Prose Life* into a sequence of legible, self-explanatory visual compositions.<sup>10</sup>

As well as travelling down to York at the beginning of the fifteenth century, is it possible that Yates Thompson 26 could also have spent a later period in the north-west of the country? If so, it seems likely that the manuscript would have been brought by Richard Bell, who entered Durham Benedictine priory in 1426-7, served as Prior there from 1464-78, and was then appointed Bishop of Carlisle from 1478-94, before returning to Durham in the final years preceding his death (Dobson).<sup>11</sup> Having continued Prior John Wessington's successful programme of cultural and economic restoration at Durham, Bell may well have brought Cuthbertine interests and texts with him from Durham to his new diocese, and conveyed these interests to Gondibour and his canons.<sup>12</sup> Together, the known information from York diocese, and the strong probabilities from Carlisle, enable us to formulate two interim

---

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the York and Durham windows also include scenes taken from the twelfth-century "Irish" *Life of St Cuthbert*, attributing to Cuthbert an Irish birth and infancy.

<sup>11</sup> Colgrave notes that another twelfth-century manuscript of Bede's *Prose Life* (London, British Library, MS Harley 1924), contains elaborate annotations by Bell (17).

<sup>12</sup> We should note at this juncture that in addition to the Cuthbert wood panel paintings, there was also a contemporary wall painting, now destroyed, on the north-east pier of the crossing of Carlisle Cathedral depicting St Cuthbert's vision of St Aidan's soul ascending to heaven (Park and Cather 221-22). Cuthbertine iconography clearly played a strong role in the cathedral in the late fifteenth century.



conclusions. They demonstrate, first, that a twelfth-century illuminated manuscript might act as the key visual stimulus for fifteenth-century visual programmes in stained glass and panel paintings in various northern cathedral settings; and second, that the movement of ecclesiastical prelates and patrons during the fifteenth century – from York to Durham in Langley's case, and from Durham to Carlisle in Bell's case – could exercise a palpable influence on the movement and reproduction of saintly iconography in different media within the north.

### *Hagiographical and Geographical Contexts*

In addition to acknowledging the influence of the Yates Thompson illuminations upon the Carlisle wood panels, we also need to think further about the hagiographical context in which we find Cuthbert placed. Painted adjacent to scenes from the *Life* of Antony of Egypt, the prototypical desert hermit, in a sequence in which three out of seventeen panels are devoted to his eremitic life on Farne Island, it would seem that Cuthbert must have been particularly venerated for his eremiticism and desert spirituality by the Augustinian canons at Carlisle at the end of the fifteenth century. The link between the asceticism and miracle working of Antony of Egypt and of Cuthbert is explicitly made by Bede himself on at least one occasion (*Prose Life* ch. 19), and we know that Athanasius's *Life of St Antony* served as a significant model for the eremitic component of the *Prose Life*. As a consequence, the programmatic choice to portray the *Life* of Cuthbert alongside the *Life* of Antony in Carlisle Cathedral would seem to indicate a thoughtful and attentive engagement with Bede's Latin text. Three out of seventeen panels depict Cuthbert's eremitic lifestyle; however his preceding years as a monk on Lindisfarne (which are comprehensively illustrated in Yates Thompson) are completely omitted. The canons were clearly interested in the apostolic common life as represented by the images of the apostles and St Augustine of Hippo, and in the life of the desert, as represented by Antony and Cuthbert, but narratives of "Cuthbert as a monk" and the promotion of Lindisfarne as a secondary pilgrimage destination were apparently of less relevance to their canonical regime and Cumbrian sphere of ecclesiastical influence.

As well as omitting scenes of Cuthbert as a monk, the Carlisle panels severely truncate the later chapters of Bede's *Prose Life* (illustrated in full in Yates Thompson), reducing Cuthbert's many episcopal healings and prophecies to a single panel in which he is shown curing a sick child

during an episcopal journey.<sup>13</sup> This truncation replicates the approach taken by the *SEL* and *Gilte Legende*, which also jump over Cuthbert's healing ministry. Also omitted – and this is perhaps more surprising given the location – are those chapters from the second half of the *Prose Life* in which Cuthbert visits Carlisle on a couple of occasions, experiencing a vision of King Ecgfrith's death, and exchanging some final words with Hereberht, the hermit of Derwentwater (chs. 27, 28). One would have thought Prior Gondibour and his cathedral associates would have been keen to select passages from the authorised *Life* emphasising Cuthbert's physical association with the city. Clearly, the standard arc of biography established by the vernacular legends (*SEL* and *Gilte*) trumps the advantages of a customised narrative tailored to an individual location.

As well as visiting Carlisle at least twice during his lifetime, Cuthbert had a variety of later associations with Cumbria (Tudor 69-71). One of his earliest posthumous miracles, recorded in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, describes how a relic of his hair, housed in the monastery of Dacre, near Penrith, cures the eye tumour of a young monk from the monastery (Bk. 4, ch. 32). During the ravages of the Vikings, when Cuthbert's coffin was on the move around northern England, we know that it passed through Cumbria prior to embarking on a ship to Ireland, and that the Abbot of Carlisle played a part in that decision as one of the leaders of the peripatetic community. This story remains active in the fifteenth century, as does the list of Cuthbertine landholdings detailed in the eleventh-century *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, which includes a section describing King Ecgfrith's gifts of Carlisle and Cartmel to the community of the saint (chs. 5-6). Later still, in the twelfth century, Reginald of Durham's collection of contemporary miracles includes several which benefit the Cistercian abbey of Furness or involve Cumbrian churches dedicated to Cuthbert, suggesting active pockets of veneration within the region (chs. 55-56, 129).<sup>14</sup> These stories and associations must have played a significant part in the veneration of Cuthbert within Cumbria, yet once again, they lose out to the *auctoritas* of Bede when it comes to visual representation, and never succeed in gaining a foothold in Cuthbert's cathedral iconography.

However, even if Cuthbert's local associations with Cumbria do not succeed in winning a visual place within the cathedral, his presence in

<sup>13</sup> Panel 15, illustrating Bede, *Prose Life*, ch. 33. The panel caption reads "To thys chyld god grauntyd lyfe / throug hys prayers – to –s wyffe."

<sup>14</sup> We know that there was an altar to St Cuthbert in the abbey church at Furness from the 1150s, presumably in response to the miracles that Reginald cites.

the choir stalls as the *single* native and northern saint, situated alongside St Antony, St Augustine and the apostles, is surely worthy of note, and encourages us to reflect conversely on the unexpected hagiographical *omissions* from this largescale iconographic programme. The Virgin Mary is notable by her absence, even though a longstanding cult in her honour existed at Carlisle Cathedral, drawing pilgrims from far afield.<sup>15</sup> The cathedral housed an important collection of relics, including both conventional universal items and those associated with British saints (the girdle of Bridget of Ireland, and the sword which martyred Thomas of Canterbury) (Summerson 36). None of these play any part in the hagiographical programmes of the panels, which effectively *superimpose* themselves on local traditions rather than developing out of the cathedral's existing material culture. Then, there is also the question of other early saints with closer associations with the north west: Kentigern, missionary to the British kingdom of Strathclyde, Ninian, putative bishop of the see of Whithorn in Galloway, and Bega, a legendary Irish princess who fled her homeland to live a life of piety in Cumbria in the eighth century. All are overlooked in favour of north-eastern Cuthbert in this iconographic scheme. Casting our net further afield, a similar imbalance can be seen with respect to church dedications to regional saints in the diocese of Carlisle. Ninian's and Bega's names are associated with one church each, Kentigern with seven, and Cuthbert with fifteen, more than half of which are recorded for the first time in the early fifteenth-century list of church dedications to St Cuthbert compiled by Prior Wessington of Durham (Tudor 71-72; Thompson).<sup>16</sup> What conclusions is it possible to draw from all this? We know that there was an ambitious resurgence in Cuthbert's cult at Durham Cathedral in the first half of the fifteenth century, engineered by Bishop Langley and Prior Wessington, which manifested itself through stained glass and public tabulae in addition to the production of new historiographical compilations. I would suggest that in addition to extending Cuthbert's reach down to York through that gigantic window in the Minster, commissioned and paid for by Durham bishops, the sudden spate of church dedications in Cumbria and wood panel paintings in Carlisle Cathedral demonstrate a deliberate attempt on the part of Durham to expand Cuthbertine veneration in the North West, brushing aside other Cumbrian cults and

---

<sup>15</sup> Summerson refers to a famous statue of the Virgin within the cathedral (33-34).

<sup>16</sup> The Cumbrian Cuthbertine churches first recorded in Wessington's list include Embleton, Brigham, Great Salkeld, Edenhall, Clifton, Cliburn, Hawkshead, Kirkby Ireleth, and Aldingham (Tudor 73-74).



effectively constructing him as the premier saint of the entire northern region, not simply Northumbria and Durham. As mentioned before, the most plausible actant of this expansionist agenda in the last decades of the fifteenth century is Richard Bell, elevated from Durham priory to the Carlisle episcopate, who presumably brought Durham's hagiographical interests and ambitions with him.

### *An Episcopal Emphasis*

The reading direction of the Cuthbert panels at Carlisle is vertical, moving from top to bottom in a series of adjacent columns. However, toward the end the narrative sequence becomes disordered because an image of Cuthbert's consecration as bishop has been inserted at the bottom of the fourth column (Panel 14), where it will be at eye level and easily visible, separating the saint's discovery of water on Farne, and his construction of a hermitage there (Park and Cather 219).<sup>17</sup> The accompanying caption reads: "Consecrate bysshop thai made hym her / off lyndisfarne both farr and ner." This is the only image from the entire panel sequence that has no corresponding illustration in MS Yates Thompson 26 or any of the other illustrated twelfth-century manuscripts of Bede's *Prose Life* (Baker 40-42). However, it does cross-refer competently to the earlier panel (7) in which Prior Boisil of Melrose predicts Cuthbert's episcopal future on his deathbed. In addition, a very similar image is included in the fifteenth-century York Minster window, and it is also worth noting that Cuthbert's episcopal ministry is cast as a central event in the *SEL* and *Gilte Legende*. Cuthbert's episcopal function is clearly a key component of his sanctity in many parts of the country in the fifteenth century. It may be possible to go even further. The choir at Carlisle Cathedral is not only a canonical space but also an episcopal space. It is where the bishop's throne is situated and where the cathedral's bishops (including Richard Bell) are interred before the high altar. As mentioned earlier, Carlisle became a diocese in its own right in 1133, detaching it from its earlier subordination to the diocese of York. However, the references in Bede's *Prose Life* to Cuthbert repeatedly visiting Carlisle, ordaining priests there, dedicating churches and touring its

---

<sup>17</sup> The other conspicuously disordered image is the one depicting the provision of the sacrament to Cuthbert on his deathbed (Panel 16). This is positioned immediately before Cuthbert's rebuke to the disobedient crows. Again, its disordered position makes it clearly visible; as a consequence it may be intended to reinforce the canons' sacramental ministry.

Roman remains, and in the *Historia* to his receiving Carlisle as a gift from King Ecgfrith, have led certain modern scholars to argue that, in the seventh century, Carlisle may well have formed part of the diocese of Lindisfarne before being later subsumed into York at an unspecified point during the Danish incursions (Tudor 67). Whether or not Carlisle was ever included in the Lindisfarne diocese, what is important is that the Durham monks clearly believed that it had been. The information from the *Historia* regarding Ecgfrith's gift of Carlisle was carried over into twelfth-century chronicles, and continued to reappear in late medieval historiographical compilations, including the fifteenth-century Middle English *Life of St Cuthbert*, a Durham production (Bk. 4, lines 8135-48).

Our insight into this diocesan context brings additional dimensions to this extraneous panel painting of Cuthbert's consecration as bishop. Positioned close to the throne and tombs of the bishops of Carlisle, it could suggest that the architect of the Cuthbert panel programme was keen to link the late fifteenth-century Carlisle bishopric to the genealogy of Lindisfarne and Durham bishops that succeeded Cuthbert's seventh-century episcopate, ignoring the intermediate oversight of York. Again, this would tally well with the aims of Richard Bell's episcopate – coming from Durham priory and party to its ecclesio-historical readings of the north, he may well have seen the Cuthbertine panel sequence as an opportunity to advance the Durham narrative about Carlisle's episcopal subordination to the Lindisfarne / Durham genealogy of Cuthbertine bishops.

The panel of Cuthbert's consecration as bishop may be an instance of imported Durham hawkishness. Alternatively, it is possible to background the bishop in favour of the canons, and to read this panel as evidence of a broader "historiographical turn" by northern Augustinian canons. Here, in the last decades of the fifteenth century, the Carlisle house of canons appears to experience the urge to anchor its communal spiritual identity and that of its bishop, by turning back to the pre-eminent Anglo-Saxon saint of the northern region. Should this be interpreted as a desire for historical stabilisation at a time of violent dynastic change? I enquire whether this may comprise part of a broader canonical urge, because very similar visual materials seem to have been commissioned, at exactly the same time, in another Augustinian priory in the north. At Hexham Augustinian abbey, midway between the mouth of the Tyne and Carlisle, in around 1500, Prior Thomas Smithson (1499-c.1520) commissioned a series of wood panel paintings for the pulpitum screen, for a reredos (now preserved in the chancel), and for a screen in

the south transept, which depict the ancient seventh- and eighth-century saint-bishops of Hexham: Eata, Wilfrid, Acca, and others, long shrouded in obscurity.<sup>18</sup> As at Carlisle, the sudden decision to resuscitate these Anglo-Saxon cults may well have been dictated by contemporary episcopal agendas. Up until the early ninth century, Hexham was a diocese in its own right. It was then absorbed by the diocese of Lindisfarne / Durham for a couple of centuries, before being eventually ceded to the archbishopric of York in the late eleventh century. Shortly afterwards, in 1113, the archbishop instated a house of Augustinian canons there. Despite this secession, the episcopal ownership of Hexham seems to have remained a source of contention between York and Durham during the twelfth century, and Rollason describes how the initial translation of its saint-bishops' relics in the second quarter of the eleventh century, while under Durham's influence, and again by the Augustinian canons in 1154, served respectively to support opposing narratives of control (David Rollason).<sup>19</sup> In the twelfth century, the ancient Hexham saint-bishops were restored to visibility through their translation to reinforce York's archiepiscopal oversight of the former see. While work remains to be done on the precise implications of the paintings of these same saint-bishops at the close of the fifteenth century, it is very possible that they were commissioned to serve a similar purpose. It is surely also significant that the Hexham canons resuscitate their Anglo-Saxon episcopal heritage iconographically in exactly the same decade that the Carlisle canons opt to commemorate the Lindisfarne episcopate of St Cuthbert. There was, of course, administrative contact between the two Augustinian houses, and we know that Thomas Gondibour made a visit to Hexham abbey in 1476, when already Prior at Carlisle, to preside over an election there (Greatrex). While the thought that he might have conferred with the Hexham canons on this visit about the ways in which the Anglo-Saxon bishops of the north might be made to work in the present time remains pure if appealing speculation, nonetheless, we are surely justified in drawing the more general conclusion: that in the last decades of the fifteenth century, there is a clear wish on the part of both Augustinian houses to influence or consolidate the contemporary dioce-

---

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to David Rollason's discerning essay for much of the analysis which follows on this subject.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Durham fifteenth-century, vernacular *Life of St Cuthbert* expresses considerable interest in the ancient Hexham see. Book 4 pauses to list the bishops of Hexham in the course of its digest of Bede's *Prose Life* (lines 6509-50), and the closing section on regnal donations details how Kings Guthred and Alfred: "The bischop landes of hexham, / Thai gaf thaim all' to durham" (lines 8231-32).



san loyalties of their churches by reviewing them in the light of a seventh-century episcopal past.<sup>20</sup>

### *Vernacular Visuality*

Moving on from the question of Cuthbert's episcopal emphasis at Carlisle, it is appropriate, finally, to return to the coalescence of vernacular verbal and visual media on the panels themselves. Setting aside the severely abbreviated Lives in the southern legendaries, there are only two northern instances where Bede's *Prose Life* of Cuthbert enters the vernacular before the Reformation. One is the northern couplets atop these panel paintings. The other, compiled some seventy or eighty years before at Durham Benedictine priory in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, is a largescale metrical *Life of St Cuthbert*, translating the entirety of Bede's *Prose Life* into Middle English, together with further twelfth-century Cuthbertine materials, in order to celebrate Benedictine sanctity at a time when the Order felt itself under attack (Clark 26-27). Reading through the Carlisle couplets, one is immediately struck by how closely they correlate with the vernacular rubrics that preface each chapter of the translation of Bede's *Prose Life* in the metrical *Life*, distilling each chapter down to a simple, factual summary. Thus, where the Carlisle couplets explain the image of Cuthbert's hospitality toward an angel visitor at Ripon (Panel 6) by noting: "The angel he did as gest refreshe / Wt met and drynk & hys fete weshe," the metrical *Life* adopts a very similar voice in its seventh chapter rubric: "In this seuent chapter / And 3e will' loke, 3e may lere / how cuthbert hade an aungel gest / And him to serue he was prest, / With erdely brede and common store, / he left him heuenly brede tharfore" (lines 1385-90). Similarly, the visual scene on Panel 7 in which Prior Boisil predicts Cuthbert's episcopal future is captioned: "Her bos le told hym that he must de / and after that he (bisho)p suld be," while the relevant chapter rubric in the metrical *Life* provides a comparable summary: "In this chapter the aught / Take tent, to 3e sall' be taught / how cuthbert [. . .] all his werdes be prophecy, / Boisil telde, liggande to dy" (lines 1483-88). Later, in the body of the chapter, the content of Boisil's prophecy is clarified: "Also to

---

<sup>20</sup> Charles Tracy detects a general enthusiasm by Augustinian canonical houses for saints of the Anglo-Saxon period in the twelfth century, citing examples of houses at Dorchester-on-Thames and Oxfordshire where cults were reinvigorated. However, the particular case of the resuscitation of northern Anglo-Saxon bishops in the late fifteenth century falls outside his main area of investigation (164).

cuthbert telled he / 'That a bischope he suld be" (lines 1569-70). While there is insufficient evidence to argue for any direct influence between the metrical *Life* and the Carlisle couplets, nonetheless, the approach taken to epitomising Bede is very similar: in both instances, the chapter content is summarised in a few utilitarian lines, the jingle of couplet rhymes serving to fix the scene in the memory.

The Carlisle couplets explain the visual compositions depicted immediately below them on the wood panels. However there is also a remarkably visual sensibility to many of the chapter rubrics in the metrical *Life*, as though the content that they summarise is pictorial as much as verbal: "In this seuent chapter / And *3e will loke, 3e may lere*" (my italics). "In this chapter the aught / *Take tent, to 3e sall be taught*" (my italics). Very similar phrases recur throughout the metrical *Life*. For example, the Prologue to Book 4, which preserves a second, abridged digest of Bede's *Prose Life*, opens: "In this last boke of thir foure, / Wha so lykes to *loke it oure*, / The fruyte of cuthbert leuyng / *he sall' se . . .*" (lines 6389-92, my italics). There is an emphasis on *learning* from Bede's chapters, in keeping with fifteenth-century expectations of hagiographical didacticism, but specifically on learning through *seeing*. It is the *visuality* of Bede's narrative within the metrical *Life* that will render it effective as moral instruction. One may therefore argue that the Carlisle panels and the translation of Bede's *Prose Life* in the Durham metrical *Life* share even more equivalence than initially anticipated. Both communicate Bede visually, the Carlisle panels simply making literal what the *Metrical Life* paints in the mind's eye, so to speak, and both instruct by what they show. Effectively, the two share the common purpose of teaching a vernacular audience about their premier regional saint by translating Cuthbert's authoritative life as a sequence of visual compositions.

### *Vernacular Audiences*

What of these vernacular audiences? The Durham metrical *Life* addresses unspecified aristocratic readers: "Tharfore be bysy on this buke, / Lord and lady, for to luke" (lines 9-10), and may well have been initially intended for the Durham Neville family, keen patrons of Cuthbert's cult, or the Northumbrian Percys. While the only extant manuscript of the poem, British Library, MS Egerton 3309, seems to have remained in Durham recusant circles until the late sixteenth century, we know that it travelled to Cumberland soon after, entering the Naworth Castle library of Lord William Howard (1563-1640), the well-

known recusant antiquary (Bernard, II, pt. 1, 14-15). Howard was a descendent through marriage of Sir Thomas Dacre (1467-1525), also based at Naworth Castle, and warden general of the north western marches, who led the English army to victory over Scotland at Flodden in 1513, accompanied by the banner of St Cuthbert.<sup>21</sup> Thomas Dacre's badges are painted, along with those of the Greystoke, Stanley and Percy families, and the prior himself, on the ceiling of the early sixteenth-century Prior's Tower in the cathedral close at Carlisle, advertising his secular patronage of the cathedral priory (Park and Cather 222-23).<sup>22</sup> While the metrical *Life*, a Durham production, presumably targets a north-eastern aristocratic audience capable of protecting the monastery's endangered northern dependencies and providing military leadership against the Scots, comparable aristocratic audiences were also being brought into contact with Cuthbertine veneration in the North West, through the wood panel sequence at Carlisle, at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Thomas Dacre's associations with the Augustinian priory in particular conceivably provide an anterior context that helps explain William Howard's interest in Cuthbert many decades later.

The Dacre family was perhaps a prestigious vernacular audience for the Carlisle wood panel sequence, its visual narrative providing them with insight into a northern saint who endorsed their military campaigns against the Scots. The sequence must also have been viewed regularly by the canons and bishop, who would have appreciated Cuthbert's sacramental and episcopal modelling and have had the Latin training to refer back to the full Bedean narrative, and by a mixed municipal audience, who would have taken the paintings and their couplets more at face value. Like the early fifteenth-century stained-glass programmes depicting Cuthbert at Durham, this singular response to Bede's *Prose Life* reaches out to a potentially vast, northern devotional clientele, translating Bede into visual and vernacular media that ensure widespread intelligibility, while retaining explicit links to his authorised text. Yet, unlike Durham, it is conceived and orchestrated, for the first time, within a *canonical* milieu, suggesting that, by the close of the fifteenth century, Cuthbert's supernatural utility for the north had overflowed Benedictine perimeters and entered the devotional orbit of other rules. Whereas the

---

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that St Cuthbert's banner had been carried, along with the banner of St John of Beverley, in English military campaigns against the Scots since the late twelfth century (Sharpe).

<sup>22</sup> These painted ceilings in the Prior's Tower bear some similarity to the elaborately painted, early sixteenth-century ceilings at Naworth Castle which also prominently display Thomas Dacre's crest.



Durham compiler of the early fifteenth-century metrical *Life* creates his vast poem to *promote* the Benedictine way of life and extol Benedictine sanctity in keeping with contemporary programmes of monastic reform, by the end of the century, visual and vernacular epitomes of Cuthbert's life were being created at Carlisle Cathedral to very different ends: to display the relevance of Cuthbert's sanctity to a *diversity* of religious orders throughout the late medieval north.

## References

- Baker, Malcolm. "Medieval Illustrations of Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert*." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978): 16-49.
- Bede. *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*. In Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans. *Two Lives of St Cuthbert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940. 141-307.
- . *Historia ecclesiastica*. Ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Bernard, E. *Catalogi Librorum Manuscriptorum Angliae et Hiberniae*. Oxford, 1697.
- Catalogi veteres librorum Ecclesiae Cathedralis Dunelm*. Surtees Society 7. London: J. B. Nichols, 1838.
- Clark, James G. "Selling the Holy Places: Monastic Efforts to Win Back the People in Fifteenth-Century England." *Social Attitudes and Political Structures in the Fifteenth Century*. Ed. Tim Thornton. Stroud: Sutton, 2000. 13-32.
- Colgrave, Bertram. "The St Cuthbert Paintings on the Carlisle Cathedral Stalls." *The Burlington Magazine* 73, no. 424 (1938): 17-21.
- Dobson, R. Barrie. "Richard Bell." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online*.
- Fowler, J. T. "On the St Cuthbert Window in York Minster." *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal* 4 (1875-76): 249-376.
- Greatrex, Joan. "Thomas Gondibour." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online*.
- Harcourt, Charles G. V. *Legends of St Augustine, St Anthony, and St Cuthbert, Painted on the Back of the Stalls in Carlisle Cathedral*. Carlisle, 1868.
- Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*. Ed. and trans. Ted Johnson South. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002.
- The Life of St Cuthbert in English Verse*. Ed. J. T. Fowler. Surtees Society 87. Durham: Andrews and Co., 1891.
- Marner, Dominic. *St Cuthbert: His Life and Cult in Medieval Durham*. London: British Library, 2000.
- Park, David and Sharon Cather. "Late Medieval Paintings at Carlisle." *Carlisle and Cumbria: Roman and Medieval Architecture, Art and Archaeology*. Ed. Mike McCarthy and David Weston. British Archaeological Conference Transactions 27. Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2004. 214-31.

- 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.
- Rollason, David. "The Hexham Bishop-Saints: Cults, History, and Power." *Saints of North-East England, 600-1500*. Ed. Margaret Coombe, Anne Mouron and Christiania Whitehead. Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming 2017.
- Rollason, Lynda. "Northern Saints and the Painted Glass of Durham Cathedral in the Later Middle Ages." *Saints of North-East England, 600-1500*. Ed. Margaret Coombe, Anne Mouron and Christiania Whitehead. Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming 2017.
- Sharpe, Richard. "Banners of the Northern Saints." *Saints of North-East England, 600-1500*. Ed. Margaret Coombe, Anne Mouron and Christiania Whitehead. Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming 2017.
- Summerson, Henry. "Medieval Carlisle: Cathedral and City from Foundation to Dissolution." *Carlisle and Cumbria: Roman and Medieval Architecture, Art and Archaeology*. Ed. Mike McCarthy and David Weston. British Archaeological Conference Transactions 27. Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2004. 29-38.
- Thompson, A. H. "The Manuscript List of Churches dedicated to St Cuthbert attributed to Prior Wessyngton." *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland* 1. Series 7 (1934-36): 151-77.
- Tracy, Charles. "The Pulpitum at Hexham Priory." *Newcastle and Northumberland: Roman and Medieval Architecture and Art*. Ed. Jeremy Ashbee and Julian Luxford. British Archaeological Conference Transactions 36. Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2013. 152-70.
- Tudor, Victoria. "St Cuthbert and Cumbria." *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* 84 (1984): 67-78.



