

Dominic Marner, *St Cuthbert: His Life and Cult in Medieval Durham*. Toronto and Buffalo, University of Toronto Press, 2000, 112 pp., 15 black-and-white illus. and 46 in colour, ISBN 0-8020-3518-3.

Dr Marner provides us with an exemplary study of the twelfth-century illuminated *Life of St Cuthbert* (British Library, Yates Thompson MS 26, also known as Add. MS 39943). Such a focused study may not immediately strike the non-specialist as essential reading. However, it should be emphasized that Marner's methodological approaches are fundamental for any art historian who is interested in undertaking an in-depth investigation of a work of art in its historical context.

The text is short and easily digested. All forty-six extant miniatures are reproduced in the excellent colour plates, and they are accompanied by captions that explain the specific scene from the life of the saint. The first chapter, entitled "Cuthbert and Lindisfarne", examines Cuthbert's life as hermit, prior and then bishop at Lindisfarne. He died in 687, and eleven years later his body was found incorrupt in his coffin. Three *Lives* were written soon after this event, aspects of which Marner later compares and contrasts with the British Library *Life*. In light of continuing Viking attacks on Northumbrian monasteries, in 875 Bishop Eardwulf took the relics of St Cuthbert and other treasures from Lindisfarne and, after seven years of wandering, finally settled at Chester-le-Street in 883. Here they stayed until 995 when the relics of St Cuthbert were moved to Durham Cathedral. Marner meticulously presents the case for the importance of the cult of St Cuthbert for Durham and the north of England.

Chapter 2, "Cuthbert and Durham", outlines the building of the new cathedral at Durham between 1093 and 1133 as the new home for Cuthbert's relics. Marner carefully musters evidence to indicate that the forceful promotion of St Cuthbert in the 1170s and 1180s was in response to the growing popularity of the cult of Thomas Becket. This notion of rivalry with the southern saint is entirely compelling and may be allied to earlier, post-Conquest rivalries in the construction of "shrine churches". Thus, the 1093 home for St Cuthbert at Durham was to rival, indeed surpass, those of St Alban at St Albans Abbey (1077), St Swithun at Winchester Cathedral (1079), St Edmund at Bury St Edmunds Abbey (1083), St Etheldreda at Ely Cathedral (1083), and St Erkenwald at St Paul's Cathedral in London (1087). Marner deals not just with the manuscript but with architecture and specifically the Galilee chapel built at the west end of Durham Cathedral by Bishop Puiset (1153–95), possibly by 1175 and definitely before 1189. This is seen as symptomatic of a softening of the hard-line attitude against women at Durham that was prevalent from early Norman

times, in that it provided an elaborately articulated space that they could enter at the west end of the church. This is plausible, and although it is unlikely that "they could, with some luck, catch a glimpse of Cuthbert's shrine" (p. 33), at least it afforded them entry to the annex of the architectural shrine of St Cuthbert. Marner compiles many aspects of the promotion of St Cuthbert at the time, two of which serve to illustrate what he aptly labels an "aggressive 'advertising campaign'" (p. 33). One is the tale of a Norwegian boy who chose to visit the shrine of St Cuthbert rather than that of Becket at Canterbury and was, of course, miraculously cured. A second claims royal lineage for Cuthbert as the son of an Irish king. How much better that was than the ancestry of Becket, son of a London merchant. Such accounts bring the manuscript, and the people associated with it, to life.

Chapter 3 deals with the British Library *Life* in detail. Attribution to the patronage of Bishop Puiset is brilliantly deduced through analysis of the imagery. Nuances of meaning are explored in interpreting the role-playing of Bishop Puiset in connection with the imagery of St Cuthbert as bishop, and further of St Cuthbert as Christ. My only quibble is with Marner's idea that "the manuscript does seem to fit most comfortably in the 1180s" (p. 39). A broader bracket of 1170–85, as discussed by Marner in the Conclusion, seems to make better sense, historically speaking, in connection with all the other pro-Cuthbert activities of this time, and not least to counter instantly the pro-Becket "advertising" that emanated from Canterbury in the 1170s. Convincing stylistic comparisons are made between the miniatures in the British Library *Life* and those manuscripts from York and other northern English scriptoria, as well as with wall painting in the Galilee at Durham Cathedral. These should be extended to the stained glass and sculpture commissioned for York Minster by Archbishop Roger of Pont l'Évêque.<sup>1</sup> In this connection, it is worth noting that glass for the apse of Durham Cathedral was given by Bishop Puiset.<sup>2</sup> Two panels reused in the east windows of the parish church at Easby (North Yorkshire) are also relevant here, as is the sculpture of Christ in Majesty at St Mary the Less, Durham.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, for those interested in following up aspects of Bishop Puiset's architectural patronage introduced by Marner, Jane Cunningham, "Buildings and patrons – early Gothic architecture in the diocese of Durham, c.1150–c.1300," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London (1995), is to be highly recommended.

Marner tells us that "[m]edieval pictures were never simply copies. Although the expressions 'innovation' and 'creativity' are not perhaps associated with medieval art, the inventive and creative are there, embedded in the 'traditional', for those who care to look" (emphasis mine). He cared to look, analyse and

reason very closely. His well-written text is a model for the medieval art historian and yet is entirely accessible for the non-specialist.

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## Notes

1 Malcolm Thurlby, "Roger of Pont l'Évêque, Archbishop of York (1154–81), and French Sources for the beginnings of Gothic architecture in Northern Britain," *England and the Continent in the*

*Middle Ages: Studies in Memory of Andrew Martindale*, ed. John Mitchell (Stamford, 2000), 35–47, with further bibliography.

2 J. Haselock and D.E. O'Connor, "The Medieval Stained Glass of Durham Cathedral," in Nicola Coldstream and Peter Draper, eds, *Medieval Art and Architecture at Durham Cathedral: The British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions*, III (Leeds, 1980), 105–29 at 105.

3 For Easby, see Richard Marks, *Stained Glass in England during the Middle Ages* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1993), 46, 140, pl. VIII(b); for the Christ in Majesty at St Mary the Less, Durham, see George Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture 1140–1210* (London, 1953), ill. 131.

Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages*. Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001, 208 pp., 22 colour, 4 black-and-white illus., \$45.00 Cdn, ISBN 0-88920-365-2.

The focus of Ilse Friesen's interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study is the images associated with the cult of Saint Wilgefortis also known as Liberata, Ontcommer, Uncumber, or Kümmeris. This is the saint referred to in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* as a "curious specimen".<sup>1</sup> Indeed she is, for Wilgefortis grew a man's beard in order to save her virginity, a miracle which prevented her marriage and so enraged her father that he had her crucified. Despite the potentially sensational nature of the subject matter, Friesen adopts a matter-of-fact tone in her praiseworthy attempt to chart the long and rather confusing history of an unusual cult that is for the most part today consigned to oblivion.

Broadly speaking, the first three chapters of *The Female Crucifix* are devoted to a "misunderstanding" seen at the origin of the Wilgefortis cult of images. The type of the bearded, virgin martyr on the cross is "triumphal" and derives from a large, reliquary crucifix, the Romanesque *Volto Santo* or Holy Face in Lucca. This miracle-working, almost life-sized, wooden crucifix depicts a robed, live Christ, with open glass eyes. In its original form – the extant crucifix is a medieval copy – the *Volto Santo* can be dated to the early years of the twelfth century. The display of the statue dressed and ornamented on only a few feast days each year and its symbolic purple robe would, we are told, have "contributed to the growing misunderstanding that the statue was, in fact, that of a woman rather than of Christ. Specifically, this misunderstanding was linked to the growth of a fourteenth-century legend concerning a crucified princess who had miraculously grown a beard in order to preserve her chastity and to more closely resemble Christ in her suffering on the cross" (p. 15).

Relying on the research of Caroline Walker Bynum, Barbara Newman and others, Friesen interprets the cult of the saint in her second chapter as an essentially feminine phenomenon fed by late medieval mysticism. *Minnemystik*, "crucifixion piety", and the *Imitatio Christi*, especially eucharistic union with the sacred body of Christ, are invoked to explain the advent of a bearded, but frankly female, figure to the cross.

The third chapter introduces the legend of the poor fiddler that was to have combined with the image of the crucified saint to produce her late medieval, Renaissance and Baroque iconography. "During the later Middle Ages, and once the robed crucifix had come to be understood – or rather, misunderstood – to represent a female martyr, the fiddler became an increasingly integral part of the iconography of this saint" (p. 35–36). The fact that fourteenth-century depictions of the robed crucifix show the crucified looking at a small second figure, a musician kneeling lovingly at the foot of the cross, is taken as evidence of the mutation of the more hieratic, male *Volto Santo* into the more sympathetic and courtly Saint Wilgefortis. However, the story of the fiddler given a precious shoe by the Lucca image "was apparently already widely popular during the twelfth century" (p. 36). Various versions of the tale of the fiddler are traced in text and image from the Romanesque period to "Der Geiger zu Gmünd", the famous 1816 poem of Justinus Kerner, where the benefactress of the musician is Saint Cecilia, rather than Wilgefortis.

Chapters four through seven deal with manifestations of the cult of the saint in Northern Europe. According to the text of Hans Burgkmair's woodcut of 1502–07, the saint lies buried in a church in "Stouberg", probably Steenberg in North Brabant. Friesen speculates "that the church of Steenberg once housed a medieval statue of a robed crucifix, which may have been a copy of the *Volto Santo*. Apparently, this image came to be venerated as a female bearded saint around 1400" (p. 48). The earliest of the surviving documents indicates that an altar