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Review of Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Aethelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615, by V. Blanton

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

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Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695–1615. By Virginia Blanton. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2007. xviii+350 pp. \$65.00 cloth.

Late Medieval Monasteries and their Patrons: England and Wales, c. 1300–1540. By Karen Stöber. Studies in the History of Medieval Religion. Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 2007. xii+285. \$80.00 cloth.

St. David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation. Edited by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding. Studies in Celtic History. Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 2007. xiv+395 pp. \$115.00 cloth.

Virginia Blanton's fine study traces English devotion to St. Æthelthryth, a seventh-century nun and foundress, from the period after her death until the seventeenth century. The latter date may surprise some readers since the English Reformation was presumably well along by that time, but, as Blanton correctly points out, what was decreed in London did not always play well in the provinces. A major factor in the preservation of Æthelthryth's cult was the constant reworking of it by devotees, so that the virgin of the eighth century became the monastic reformer of the tenth century and even metamorphosed into an aristocratic patron of monasteries and nunneries by the late Middle Ages. The changing image of the saint took on more than literary forms. Blanton includes some prominent visual images of Æthelthryth, and she also provides a detailed list of images with their type, such as glass, sculptures in both stone and metal, and paintings on manuscripts, roodscreens, and textiles. She even found a few on pilgrims' badges.

Blanton introduces the topic by explaining that in the Middle Ages the perceptions and the cult of the saint counted for more than historical information. She focuses particularly on Æthelthryth's body in all its manifestations: the body as physical object, the virgin body, the healing of the body, the body as metaphor, and others. In many ways, this book provides a fine introduction to medieval devotional piety since Blanton demonstrates that different medieval groups employed various modes of piety and the groups morphed their image of Æthelthryth to meet their

devotional needs. Even the destruction of the saint's shrine in the Reformation proves the author's point.

Æthelthryth was an Anglo-Saxon princess who had an arranged marriage during which she retained her virginity. Upon her husband's death she withdrew to the Isle of Ely to live a life of prayer and continence but, five years later, her relatives convinced her to leave Ely and marry Ecgrith, king of Northumbria and patron of the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow, which, of course, brought Æthelthryth to the attention of the Venerable Bede. Throughout the twelve years of this second marriage she again preserved her virginity; her husband finally agreed to let her become a nun, receiving the veil from no less than Wilfrid (she was a queen). She returned to Ely where she founded a double monastery over which she served as abbess until her death in 679.

Bede gave two accounts of her, once in prose, once as a hymn, stressing her strength in preserving her virginity through two marriages. He also used a familiar *topos* about saintly virgins, namely, the preservation of her body after death, in this case, sixteen years later and with Wilfrid among the witnesses at the disinterment of the body. Like Jerome, Bede spoke glowingly of aristocratic women who abandoned marriage for virginity, and he naturally accepted the medieval scale of female goodness: virginity, widowhood, marriage. Additionally, women who preferred the nunnery to the court provided fine examples of humility. Bede alludes to the testimony of a *medicus* named Cynefrith who lanced a tumor in the saint's jaw, leaving a scar still visible on the body. The scar became a standard element in pictorial images of the saint.

Late in the Anglo-Saxon period, monastic reformers headed the church. The reforming bishop Æthelwold chose Ely as a house to reform and to support financially, which caused him to learn of Æthelthryth. Unlike Bede, the bishop did not look to a larger world but focused on monasteries. It did not take long for Æthelthryth the virgin to become Æthelthryth the monastic foundress. Æthelwold did not see her body as a proof of virginity but as a center for a cult that included a feast for the saint and a new liturgy prepared for her.

Later generations of monks at Ely would use the saint's residence at their monastery to proclaim themselves custodians of her body. This custody gave the English monks and to them only a sacred task that could not be denied to them by the ever-rapacious Norman bishops. But the monastery soon had Norman monks, who created their own Æthelthryth, a virago who protected her property against exploitation. When a Norman tried to appropriate Ely's property, Æthelthryth, in a vision, frightened him into abandoning his efforts. Blanton insightfully observes, "Instead of focusing on the shrine as a material body that keeps the corpse from view, the

narrative [of the vision] now imagines the saint's corporeality as viable, active matter" (168).

Development of the cult could even reverse earlier practices. Bede the monk thrilled to the idea of a queen abandoning her proud crown to lead the humble life of a nun. But by the late Middle Ages many English monasteries depended heavily on aristocratic and royal patronage. Such patrons emphatically did not abandon their lives, and they did not need to be told of the spiritual superiority of someone who did. The "facts" of Æthelthryth's life as told by Bede could not be altered, but they could be reinterpreted. An Anglo-Norman woman known only as Marie created a poem in honor of the saint, *La Vie Seinte Audrée* (French shortening of Æthelthryth) that stresses how the saint founded three houses. "In effect, Marie demonstrates how a patron can build upon the success of previous donations and expand her ecclesiastical authority by linking the various institutions that she sponsors" (186), Blanton writes. Marie also illustrated "how the queen lived her daily life, how she exercised her responsibilities as a noblewoman, how she used her talents well" (189).

Blanton finishes with Æthelthryth's final manifestation as a patron of lay women but also "the persuasive voice of spiritual authority regarding marriage and purity" (252). The virgin-reformer-virago-donor became the most popular English female saint, and images of her multiplied. Only with difficulty could the Reformers dislodge her.

Blanton has produced a thorough, valuable study of interest not only to specialists in medieval English church history but also to scholars interested in the reception of saintly cults in general and of female saints in particular. Scholars of women in religion will find Blanton's treatment of the role Æthelthryth's body played in her cult particularly important. Just one oddity sticks out: the citation of Bede as *EH*, followed by the page number of the edition used rather than by book and chapter, the more common and helpful method.

Karen Stöber's book, by contrast, has a very limited historical focus and thus is of interest primarily to scholars of medieval English ecclesiastical history. She expresses her concern "to improve the reputation of late medieval monastic lay patrons" (3). The reviewer includes that information for the benefit of *Church History* readers who may not have known that the reputation of late medieval monastic lay patrons needed improvement.

Stöber has organized the material well into five chapters in which she explains the process of patronage, characterizes the late medieval aspects of the process, deals with specifics of burial preferences of the patrons, traces the patronage carried on by five noble families, and finishes with the state of patronage at the Dissolution of the sixteenth century. She demonstrates that

patronage played a great role in the religious life of noble families, whose patronage was recognized in canon law. If possible, noble families maintained patronage of a particular house for generations; only when they no longer had the requisite funds to support the house did they abandon the project.

Patronage began well before the period under discussion. Most houses acquiring patrons were Benedictine, and their patrons were either important nobles or members of the royal family, including monarchs. When lesser nobility and financially comfortable commoners wished to become patrons, Benedictine houses were not, so to speak, "available," and so these patrons-to-be turned to the newer orders, especially the Augustinian canons. Often the patronage preceded the founding of the house; the "majority of England's nine Carthusian monasteries . . . were lay foundations" (42). Although the majority of houses patronized were those of men, women's houses also had patrons with "female foundresses and co-foundresses among (the patrons') ranks. One important category of founders of nunneries was that of aristocratic widows, who often entered their foundations as abbesses or prioresses" (54). The number of female founders may be even higher because very often a nunnery will list a husband and wife as founders and then patrons, but scholars cannot determine whether the wife played a greater role in the foundation than her husband.

Because being a patron had social status, in the late Middle Ages patrons increasingly insisted that new foundations be on their own land. Nobles also often insisted that their heraldic devices be displayed prominently in the monastery or nunnery, a request that was usually met. In return for their patronage, the laity received a number of spiritual benefits, such as many prayers on their behalf, although the prayers of the more austere orders, such as the Carthusians, were thought to be the most effective. Patrons could also request hospitality at a religious house. Since they rarely arrived alone, the monks or nuns had to feed and house a sizeable number of guests. At times patrons, especially older ones, would retire to the house, taking part in the community activities and occasionally joining the community.

But people who pay expect to have some control, and patrons demanded to assent to the election of an abbot or prior. Rarely did this cause a problem, probably because both parties knew one another well and spoke about matters in advance. Conflicts arose occasionally, at which point the house would appeal to the pope while the patron might appeal to force. But Stöber emphasizes that continuity and harmony characterized most relationships, especially since the patrons hoped to be buried in the monastery's cemetery, and the graves of past noble patrons offered visual proof of the monastery's importance.

Although Stöber focuses on the late Middle Ages, her chapter on the Dissolution makes fascinating reading on a little-known aspect of the English Reformation. This thorough, well-detailed book closes with a chart of houses and their patrons from the founding dates to the Dissolution.

J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding's volume is a collection of essays about the cult of Saint David of Wales. It focuses not on the saint but rather on his role in Welsh Christianity. Inevitably in a collection, the contributions are very diverse, including a new edition of the standard hagiography of the sixth-century David by Rhygyfarch, an eleventh-century bishop, by Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies. There is also an essay on a ringed pin of the tenth century.

Only one essay deals with the *realia* of David, but *realia* of a debatable variety, David's relics, specifically a body that might have been his (it disappeared in the Reformation). Authenticated by a vision, the body was divided up, and various pieces had a peripatetic afterlife in England and Wales.

Of interest to the non-specialist would be Jane Cartwright's account of "The Cult of St. Non," the mythical mother of David who, according to tradition, was raped and impregnated by a Welsh king. Cartwright well demonstrates the importance of Non as a female saint who was not a virgin and who was a rape victim in an era when women were assumed to have had some if not much responsibility for the attacks on them. Rather strangely, Cartwright twice uses the redundant phrase "raped against her will" (200, 203).

The late Glanmore Williams provides a brief but fact-filled description of David and his cult in the Dissolution, while W. N. Yates offers a clear account of the role of David's image in the nineteenth-century struggles between the established church and Calvinism throughout the diocese named after the saint.

Because written records about David himself are few and late, many authors must resort to information of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries to reconstruct the cult. These include church windows, poems, monuments of debatable date, and even a play. This makes fascinating reading for scholars accustomed to working with sources contemporary with their subjects.

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