

The Development of the Legend of St. Cuthbert

by

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Lindesfarne Monastery Ruins, about two miles off the Northumberland coast, nine and a half miles southeast of Berwick

When viewed in chronological order, the four major *Lives* about the Anglican monk St. Cuthbert (634-687), who spent his adult life at the Lindesfarne Monastery in Northumbria, illustrate the typical steps in the evolution of a saint's legend -- the *Vita Sancti Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*¹ (usually referred to as the *Anonymous Life*), written by an unknown monk at Lindesfarne shortly after St. Cuthbert's death; the Venerable Bede's *Prose Life of St. Cuthbert* (early eighth century); the Irish *Libellus de ortu (vel nativitate) Sancti Cuthberti*² (twelfth century); and *The Life of St. Cuthbert in English Verse*,³ usually called the *Northern Metrical Life* (about 1540). These four *Lives*, which have not received much critical attention in this century, are unified by their basic assumption that St. Cuthbert was a divinely endowed leader in the cause of righteousness and was worthy of glorification as the epitome of spirituality and integrity in the human soul. Together, they reveal a great deal about the ways in which oral and literary traditions combine and evolve to produce a saint's legend. The differences among the four versions lie chiefly in the relative weight given to these two formative elements.

Oral tradition, as is usual in all saints legends, provides the initial impulse for the formalization of a number of episodes that the popular imagination chooses to connect with a given saint. The hagiographer imaginatively ascribes to the saint all the virtues and capabilities that the saint might conceivably possess, provides vivid examples of the saint's powers, and consolidates episodes and anecdotes traditionally associated with earlier saints. The formalized inscription of this oral history initiates a literary tradition, with a structured narrative and imposed theme. The hagiographer places the popularly accepted saint in a doctrinal and theological structure as formulated by earlier writers of saints' lives. The process does not end

with the first authoritative version but perpetuates itself in a cycle that involves additional oral contributions and more recorded anecdotes associated with the saint. These additions, encouraged by the continuing popularity of the saint, find their way into the written accounts of the saint's life by later historians. Such interpolation of supplementary matter makes the saint even more important in the eyes of later readers and reaffirms his position as a center of attention. The cycle maintains itself as long as the writing of saints' lives enjoys a prominent place among the authors of a given culture. The progression from oral to written to oral tradition is self-perpetuating until one form of composition disappears from the process. In most cases, this disappearance occurs when the writing of saints' lives declines in popularity. When the saint is no longer being eulogized in an accepted literary form, the popular imagination is no longer stimulated to generate supplementary material to be assimilated into the legend, and the legend is slowly drained of its vitality.

This process by which a saint's legend usually develops can be seen quite clearly in the history of the legend of St. Cuthbert. As a living link between the Celtic and the Roman forms of Church discipline following a period of controversy and disagreement in Northumbria, St. Cuthbert, the man, quite naturally received considerable attention. In seventh-century Northumbria, the Celtic Church had established the first successful mission and had formed the attitudes of both religious and lay toward the values of the religion it preached. The Celtic emphasis on asceticism and mysticism, as well as the tendency of Celtic authors to emphasize the fruits of acquired virtue rather than the discipline necessary to the full Christian life, had a direct influence on the earliest *Life of St. Cuthbert*.

This *Anonymous Life*, written between 698 and 705, embodies the approach of the Celtic Church to the determination of sainthood as it is contained in the Celtic saints' lives, but it stems directly from the oral traditions associated with St. Cuthbert by the people with whom he came in contact. He is healed of an illness, at the age of

eight, by an angelic visitor. He was a humble shepherd before his decision to enter the monastery, a decision in which there is no mention of struggle. Clearly, he is not a man striving to achieve sainthood but rather a predestined saint from the beginning of his life. His asceticism is noted, but there is no mention of self-discipline or effort to acquire sanctity. He easily “defeats” devils, and exhibits virtue constantly, without development. He warns his hearers of the devil’s visual distractions, but is usually prophetic rather than instructive. He has a natural affection for birds, and prefers solitude in nature, On two occasions, he sees an angel taking a soul to heaven. He once received an angel and was fed angelic food. Angels assist him in building his hermitage at Inner Fern, and they minister to him during his last days. After his death his body remains incorrupt.

St. Cuthbert was both an anchorite and an evangelizing bishop, the two occupations that were most important in the Celtic Church’s approach to the evaluation of quality in the monastic manner of life. As a result of his embracing both ways of life, St. Cuthbert’s acceptance as a saint was secure soon after his death. The events attributed to him were offered as proof of his wonder-working abilities, and were probably recorded in the annals of Lindesfarne so that the priests there could speak of their saint’s life during the annual commemoration of his death. The monk eventually chosen to compose the authoritative version of St. Cuthbert’s life for local consumption took much of his material from the notes made by successive archivists. As the saint’s stature in the eyes of the people grew larger, more and more stories that had been told of other saints became attached to his name. The growth of a local cult created the necessity for an official life that would justify St. Cuthbert’s inclusion in the community of saints. That the *Anonymous Life* was written within 11 to 18 years after St. Cuthbert’s death indicates the speed with which the cult was created.

As a result of this relatively short time span, the author could draw upon the testimony of witnesses who had known the saint during his lifetime and whose statements, therefore, had a high degree of authority. He had no difficulty in garnering sufficient material to compose a full biography. The inclusion of a number of miracles that had been earlier attributed to other saints and described in the lives of those saints does not negate the importance of oral tradition as the primary source for the *Anonymous Life*. The popular imagination could easily transfer such miracles to St. Cuthbert, with the circumstances altered to fit the local conditions; the presence of these miracles in other lives simply encouraged the assumption that if an earlier saint, such as St. Benedict, had performed such a miracle, then it was likely that St. Cuthbert had performed it, too. The interrelationship of oral and written tradition in the composition of the *Anonymous Life* obviously indicates this approach by the hagiographer. He includes miracles that parallel the marvels in other saints' lives along with episodes that clearly were reinforced by witnesses still alive at the time of the writing. In this connection, it is important to remember that the historical authenticity of external details does not alter the conventional nature of the miracles. The people, having heard the miracles related of other saints repeatedly, could easily make the adaptations necessary to attach a story to their local favorite. The higher historical truth, the ethical meaning of the miracles, is the principle by which the composer of the formal biography would make his choice of stories. In St. Cuthbert's case, the contemporary oral sources attributed miracles to him, and the hagiographer shaped these sources into a biography that above all conveyed the higher truths he wished to portray.

In the *Anonymous Life*, the higher truths begin with the assumption that St. Cuthbert was predestined for sainthood and that the powers he exhibited are a result of this election to the community of saints. The author stresses the divine favor shown to St. Cuthbert through the provision of food and the visitation of angels to

the saint begun during his childhood. In his maturity, St. Cuthbert is presented as the epitome of the conventional saint, in that his abilities to heal and to prophesy come as natural concomitants to his state of grace rather than as the fruits of his commitment to a religious way of life. We can see the influence of oral tradition in this emphasis, since we may assume that the theological implications of discipline and asceticism would be largely subordinated by the popular imagination in favor of the more exciting visual demonstrations of the power a saint should possess.

The written tradition that emphasizes these visual aspects of predestination and wonder-working power is Irish in origin. This influence of the Irish tradition on the choices made by the monk of Lindesfarne is a natural outgrowth of the predominance of the Celtic Church in seventh-century Northumbria and may have led to some of the later speculation that St. Cuthbert was Irish in nationality. This author demonstrates his familiarity with the local environment and the marvelous oral folklore in the process of accentuating the theological and ethical aspects of the literary tradition from which they derive.

The compatibility of the Irish literary tradition with the primarily oral sources involved in the composition of the *Anonymous Life* help to explain the departures from the continental tradition, as typified in the *Life of St. Antony*.⁴ The continental version of a saint's life stresses more the struggle toward sainthood: it conventionally illustrates youthful problems, the need for extensive seclusion, and the efforts at self-discipline. These struggles require solitude, sleeplessness, continual prayer, meditation, fasting, conquest of lust, poverty, pious rivalry in humility, and freedom from anger. St. Antony and his continental comrades must continually defeat the fiends that assail them before they can attain saintly insight and work miracles. Constant battles with devils emphasize the difficulties of sustaining sainthood. Finally, the death and winning of eternal life necessitate an extended death scene. Little of this appears in the *Anonymous Life*. St. Cuthbert does

not struggle to achieve sainthood: he is, as his biographer presents him, a saint from the beginning of his life, in all his glory, power, joy, and spiritual strength. Thus both the tone and theme of the *Anonymous Life* differ from those of the continental tradition. This is not to say that there is nothing conventional in the *Anonymous Life*. Almost every incident has its parallels in other saints' legends, and the life frequently echoes the Antonian form. It is, however, a much more informal and joyful account than is found in those continental lives influenced by the *Life of St. Antony*.

The predominantly oral materials of the *Anonymous Life* were deliberately reshaped and rearranged by the Venerable Bede when he came to write his *Prose Life of St. Cuthbert* about twenty years after the composition of the *Anonymous Life*. As a classicist and scholar, as well as a product of the Roman form of monasticism, he turned to the continental tradition for the literary models he followed in his work. While he could not greatly alter the content of St. Cuthbert's life as he received it from the *Anonymous Life*, he could change the emphasis and purpose of the biography to conform to the literary tradition he considered more authoritative. Bede rearranged the the episodes to emphasize the struggle toward spiritual powers rather than the constant saintly abilities of St. Cuthbert.

Within the individual episodes, Bede also altered the significance by supplying his own scholarly comments on the moral to be drawn and by adding scriptural allusions to indicate the direction in which he wanted the narrative to move. Though the monk of Lindesfarne had set St. Cuthbert among the elect from the beginning of his life, Bede chose to interpret the early prophecies of greatness as pointers toward the saint he would become, thus placing St. Cuthbert more in the Roman tradition of sainthood. Bede makes no radical departures from the facts of the narrative as he found it, but he does add some matter derived from newer oral sources.

In the progression between the two earliest *Lives* of St. Cuthbert, then, we can see the effects of a deliberate use of literary convention upon a narrative primarily oral in origin. The shift from the Irish to the Roman tradition reflects the different training and backgrounds of the two authors, and it illustrates the result of a greater emphasis on literary than oral tradition. St. Cuthbert becomes in the process more of a conventional figure rather than a local favorite. The removal of place names and local detail, along with the adaptation to a different tradition, exemplifies the second step in the development of the legend. By the assimilation of oral and literary traditions, by the evolution from specific detail to generalization, by the conversion from local specificity to general convention, the life of St. Cuthbert becomes a legend rather than a biography.

Bede's influential and more traditional *Prose Life* does not signal an end to development, however, for the imagination of the people were still at work. His version of St. Cuthbert's life remained the authoritative account for the next five centuries, with few alterations. But in the twelfth century, the additions of oral tradition, which had gone ignored since the composition of Bede's *Prose Life*, found expression in the anonymous Irish *Libellus de ortu (vel nativitate) Sancti Cuthberti*. Embodying an unusual number of motifs taken from folklore, the *Libellus* exemplifies the the continuing influence of the popular imagination on the development of a legend. It maintains an oral tradition that St. Cuthbert was Irish and concerns itself primarily with a list of fairy-tale-like marvels associated with his birth and youth, including particularly a flight across Ireland with his mother. These accounts were taken over almost verbatim from those of other Irish saints, but they were attached to St. Cuthbert because they filled a gap in the earlier *Lives* and provided appealing new proofs of his sanctity.

The *Libellus* obviously shares its themes with the medieval metrical romance, with many of the incidents paralleling the episodes of romance and indicating either

a mutual influence of the two types of literature or a common storehouse of folklore available to the authors of both saints' lives and romance. The wonder-child pattern, the exile theme, the visit to the Other-World, the fosterage of the distinctive child, all are common to both this saint's life and the romances. That the full implications of the various motifs are not realized in the *Libellus* is the result of the genre to which it belongs, but the presence of the motifs in a saint's life points to the influence of folklore on the genre and the importance of the popular imagination in its continuing development.

As an example of folklore's influence on hagiography, the *Libellus* represents a third stage in the development of the legend of St. Cuthbert. In his *Prose Life*, Bede had transformed the initially oral material of the *Anonymous Life* to conform to the demands of literary convention. Most significantly, he omitted the account of the childhood of the saint; instead, he supplied one from folklore. Subsequently, in the *Libellus*, the testimony and prefatory citation of the Irish ecclesiastics who provided the details for the author of the *Libellus* indicate quite clearly that oral tradition has provided their source. Thus, the *Libellus*, appearing at a late stage in the history of the legend of St. Cuthbert, shows the vitality of both the legend itself and the oral tradition from which it took its being.

In about 1450, the Durham author of *The Life of St. Cuthbert in English Verse* (or the *Northern Metrical Life*) gave the *Libellus* material legitimacy and currency by incorporating most of it along with Bede's *Prose Life* into rather monotonous Middle English iambic tetrameter. Otherwise, the *Northern Metrical Life* draws upon other sources⁵ to add a number of miracles attributed to St. Cuthbert after his physical death and to provide additional details about the Lindesfarne area. The factuality of the *Libellus* additions obviously was not an issue for this fifteenth-century hagiographer. His compilation of tradition, no matter what its source, provides the logical outcome of the creative process involved in the formulation of a

saint's legend. His work completes the cycle (and lays the foundation for more new material, had the process continued): the initial oral impulse by St. Cuthbert's anonymous near-contemporary led to the formal composition by the Venerable Bede of St. Cuthbert's biography. The first formalization served as a source for the second, more conventional, more scholarly account. Bede's authoritative biography furthered the account of the saint, and this continued emphasis produced more oral tradition. The later oral tradition was embodied in a formal written narrative (the *Libellus*), which in its turn provided an impetus for the creation of additional miracle stories.

The development of the legend of St. Cuthbert, with its constant trend away from the specific and toward the conventional, and its assimilation of interpolated material into a comprehensive and coherent narrative, epitomizes the manner of development of many saints' legends. As long as a cult remains viable, new traditions will form and assimilate themselves into the written lives that perpetuate the cult. The conventionality of the miracles associated with a given saint by no means militates against the process, for in all the biographies of the saints, the central message is the ethical truth involved. Any and all examples of that truth which can be attached to an individual saint merely emphasize the higher truth his legend contains. The legend of St. Cuthbert, illustrating as it does the process by which the lives of the saints are formed and perpetuated, stands as a valuable example of the relative influence of oral and literary tradition in the evolution of saints' legends.

Notes

¹Bertram Colgrave's edition of *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert*, published in 1940, is the only major work devoted to the first two *Lives* in this century. The Latin title of the first, cited in this article as the *Anonymous Life*, is *Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo*. The second, cited as *Bede's Prose Life of St. Cuthbert* (he also wrote a metrical version) is *Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore Bede*.

Colgrave's introduction and notes provide the basis for any consideration of the legend as a whole, especially because the critical apparatus he includes represents the sole attempt to explore the relationship between the work of the monk of Lindesfarne and that of Bede. Colgrave's other articles constitute a significant body of material concerned with the historical and textual backgrounds of the St. Cuthbert legend as it developed, but his interest is confined to the individual *Lives* and does not attempt any overview of the legend itself.

Other significant studies of the individual texts and their backgrounds have been done by Sir Edmund Craster, Paul Grosjean, S. J., M. Hope Dodd, Irene P. McKeehan, and C. Grant Loomis, but these studies, with the exception of McKeehan's discussion of the *Libellus*, are limited to the textual and historical aspects of the particular *Life* under consideration.

²See James Raine, ed, *Libellus de ortu (vel nativitate) Santi Cuthberti*, in *Miscellanea Biographica*, Surtees Society Publications, VIII (1838), pp. 63-87.

³See J.T. Fowler, ed. *The Life of St. Cuthbert in English Verse*, Surtees Society Publications, LXXXVII (1889).

⁴See Benjamin Kurtz's *From St. Antony to St. Guthlac*, pp. 103-46, for a detailed comparison of the *Life of St. Antony* with the *Life of St. Cuthbert*.

⁵These sources include Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the *Auctarium de Miraculis*, and Symeon of Durham's *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae*.

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