
This volume offers insights into saints and their cults in north-eastern England from the early Middle Ages to beyond the Reformation. Although Cuthbert and Durham take centre stage, the volume ranges beyond the usual suspects to investigate a wider array of individuals and contexts. The volume emerged from a two-day conference in 2015 and consists of fourteen essays, plus an introduction. Each essay is accompanied by its own bibliography and five of the essays include greyscale or black and white illustrations. The contributors range from established academics to early career scholars, with the former tending to provide the more substantial pieces. Overall, this volume is a useful addition to the field, but the majority of its essays supplement our knowledge rather than open new pathways for scholarship.

The volume is structured, largely, chronologically. The first part brings together five essays relating to Anglo-Saxon Northumbria. The second part covers the long twelfth century and, again, consists of five essays. The third part examines visual and material culture through three contributions relating to banners, space, and stained glass, which take the discussion into the later Middle Ages. Finally, the volume ends with an interesting postscript on attitudes to the cult of saints in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Durham. While this structure allows the editors to group quite disparate material, the arrangement of essays within these groups indicate that the reader is expected to dip into this collection rather than read it cover to cover. In two instances, essays which include general introductions to a saint or a text follow essays that have already discussed this material. These essays work well separately, but the effect is slightly strange when read in sequence.
Most of the essays are succinct case studies of particular texts, individuals, and the like. In part one, Sarah Foot highlights Bede’s particular affection for northern saints in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Sarah McCann re-evaluates the ethnicity of Cuthbert’s mentor, Boisil, and supports the argument for his Irish identity, while Alice Hicklin emphasises the importance of exile in Stephen of Ripon’s *Vita S. Wilfridi*. In part two, Dominic Marner draws attention to temporal parallels in the translations of Cuthbert and, more speculatively, the spatial similarities between Durham and Lindisfarne. Durham and an unidentified cell of Lindisfarne are the subjects of two poems discussed by Helen Appleton, who re-reads this material in the context of a twelfth-century manuscript. Dominic Alexander examines the ascetic practices of Godric of Finchale alongside other texts and topoi to offer a wide-ranging and insightful study. This is followed by Margaret Coombe’s authoritative analysis of the contemporary meaning and performance of Godric’s songs. In part three, Allan Doig explores the spatial dimension of Cuthbert’s cult, with particular attention to the shrine and liturgical practices at Durham. This is complemented by Lynda Rollason’s re-examination of the stained-glass windows at the Cathedral. In contrast to previous scholarship, Rollason argues that this was a coherent scheme and likely designed by a single author, whom she identifies as Prior Wessington. Margaret Harvey’s postscript closes the collection with the perspectives of four late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century commentators on Durham’s saintly past. Despite their differing views, these writers demonstrate that the cult of northern saints ‘did not fade from memory’ (p. 358). All of these case studies are written fluently and make clear arguments supported by evidence. However, a few are limited in scope and significance, which makes them less satisfying than others for the general reader.
The remaining four essays explore broader historical questions and bring together a wider range of evidence – and tend to be among the richer ones in the collection. In part one, Alan Thacker discusses the physical setting of saints’ burials in northern Britain pre-850 and explores their Continental models. Alison Hudson also looks further afield when she examines the influence of St Cuthbert on reformers in southern England in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. In part two, David Rollason investigates why the cults of Hexham’s early medieval bishops were promoted with such vigour from the eleventh century onwards. He underlines Hexham’s atypical emphasis on bishop-saints, in comparison to the cults at Durham and York, and situates the promotion of these cults in the context of competing episcopal claims to the church. In part three, Richard Sharpe provides an extended discussion of the banners of northern saints. This is a detailed and learned piece, which has benefitted from the additional length allotted to it by the editors. It is also ground-breaking work and, of all the essays in the volume, it is likely to have the greatest legacy.

The editors describe the book as offering ‘a panoramic view of North-Eastern sanctity’ in the Middle Ages (p. 9) and there is truth in this. The volume covers a wide range of topics and it draws on an impressive variety of evidence. However, as with many volumes derived from conferences, it is also a mixed bag. We are given a selection of different insights into different topics at different times, and some of these insights are less exciting than others. Yet the volume also contains excellent work. A number of these essays will be essential reading for those studying particular saints, religious centres, or practices. For these scholars, the purchase of this volume or, indeed, electronic copies of relevant individual essays would be money well-spent.

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