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Weaving Sanctity: The Textile Relics of St Cuthbert

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Textile relics were always important to the cult of Cuthbert (c. 635 – 687). Over several centuries of royal and ecclesiastical gift-giving, and across numerous different locations where Cuthbert’s body was moved and re-enshrined, textiles were added to his tomb, thereby also becoming relics of the saint.¹ According to Bede (673 – 735), in the days leading up to his death, Cuthbert gave specific instructions to Abbot Herefrith of Lindisfarne (before 687 – circa 720) as to the treatment of his body after he has passed:

And when God has taken my spirit, bury me in this dwelling near my oratory towards the south, on the eastern side of the holy cross which I have erected there. Now there is on the north side of the same oratory a sarcophagus hidden under the turf, which the venerable abbot Cudda once gave me. Place my body in this wrapping it in a cloth which you will find there. I was unwilling to wear the cloth while alive, but out of affection for the abbess Verca, a woman beloved of God, who sent it to me, I have taken care to keep it to wrap my body in.²

¹ Notable among these pieces are the pectoral cross, a ninth-century copy of Bede’s Prose Life gifted by King Æthelstan, a chalice destroyed by Henry VIII’s commissioners, an ivory comb, a silver altar, and the numerous silks, including the Nature Goddess and the Rider Silks. For Symeon of Durham’s account of the belongings of Cuthbert listed in the collection of miracles and translations Capitula de miraculis et translationibus sancti Cuthberti, see Thomas Arnold’s Symeonis monachi opera omnia (London: Longman, 1882-85) vol. 2, p. 236-237. An early and extensive analysis of Cuthbert’s belongings is documented in C.F. Battiscombe’s study, The Relics of Saint Cuthbert (Oxford: Printed for the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral at the University Press, 1956).

² Bertram Colgrave, Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), pp. 271-281. Herefrith was an abbot of Lindisfarne at the time of
Eleven years after his death, his body was found incorrupt and his clothes “to be perfectly new and wondrously bright.” Soon after, three manuscripts recounting his life and miracles were created that included details of textiles and their important role. For example, they recall that in life Cuthbert enjoyed seclusion; echoing this, his body and its contact relics were shut inside of his coffin. The Charter of King Æthelstan (r. 924 – 939) records that when the king visited the tomb of St Cuthbert at Chester-le-street, he donated “two chasubles, and one alb, and one stole with maniple, and one belt, and three altar coverings […] and one royal headdress woven with gold,” all of which was listed in a signed testament and placed at the saint’s head. When his coffin was opened in 687, 793, 934, 945, and 1104, textiles were by far the most plentiful relic: they included vestments, burial wrappings, several tablet-woven braids, and various pieces of silk imported from Byzantium and Spanish Cordoba and Almeria. On each successive Cuthbert’s death and his accounts of the events leading up to and after Cuthbert’s passing at the monastery largely influenced Bede’s Prose Life, written around 721. While little is known about Herefrith, his contribution to Cuthbert’s legacy is credited by Bede, who states: “I frequently submitted [the text] for perusal and for correction to our reverend brother Herefrith the priest.”

3 Colgrave, 1969, p. 239.

4 An anonymous monk of Lindisfarne composed the first Life of Cuthbert immediately after his death and before the discovery of Cuthbert’s incorrupt body. The discovery inspired Bede, who composed a versed Life in 716 and a later, much-more detailed Prose Life in 721. Colgrave, Two Lives, pp. 131-133, & 291-297.

5 Colgrave, 1969, p. 215. Bede writes, “after he had completed many years in that same monastery [Lindisfarne], he joyfully entered into the remote solitudes which he has long desired, sought, and prayed for” finding a “certain place in the outer precincts” to practice solitary divine contemplation.


7 Cuthbert’s textiles, their date, origin, and production, have been the focus of much research since the first modern treatise on the state of Cuthbert’s body and belongings by Dr. James Raine on May 17, 1827. James Raine, Saint Cuthbert: with an account of the state in which his remains were found upon the opening of his tomb in Durham cathedral, in the year MDCCXXVII (Durham, G. Andrews 1828). Among the most notable studies are those by Battiscombe, 1956; Elizabeth Coatsworth, “Stiches of Time: Establishing a History of Anglo-Saxon Embroidery” Medieval Clothing and Textiles 1 (2005): 1-27; Hero Granger-Taylor, “The Earth and
opening, more textile relics were interred, reflected in the wide date range from the early ninth-century to the twelfth-century. They are among the few materials from the sarcophagus which can be dated conclusively.

This article will focus on the visual representation of St. Cuthbert’s textile relics illustrated in two manuscripts produced at Durham during the post-Conquest period. Although each contained the saint’s miracles, they were commissioned by patrons of different social status. Nonetheless, each favored textiles as part of the greater narrative. My purpose here is to explore how the depictions of these objects, apart from the surviving textiles in his tomb, reveal the attitude towards them held by the monastic authorities in Durham. In the illustrations, textiles are active agents of divine power (though they do not depict the actual likeness of the rich cloths adorning the physical body of the saint). Rather, their authority lay not in one-to-one relation to the cloths they represented, but by their connection to Cuthbert. The story of St. Cuthbert’s textile relics seen in carefully designed rewritings of the saint’s vita and hagiography, documents produced by the medieval churchmen of Durham, and even the embroidered inscriptions placed on the stole and maniple, played an essential role in the establishment of Durham’s post-Conquest identity. The late-eleventh and twelfth century monastic community of Durham promoted these to create an identity that tied together the divine legacy of Durham and the kingdoms surrounding the cathedral, projecting an image of continuity between the pre- and post-Norman Conquest communities. This was accomplished, in part, by manuscript images, produced at Durham, such as the scene of


8 The embroidered inscription reads “ÆLFFLÆD FIERI PRECEPIT PIO EPISCOPO FRIDESTANO”—“Ælfildaed had this made for the pious Bishop Frithestan.” Queen Ælfflaed (d. 919), second wife of Anglo-Saxon King Edward the Elder, was the stepmother of West Saxon King Æthelstan.
the discovery of Cuthbert’s incorrupt body, which emphasized the authority and lineage of Cuthbert’s textile relics (Fig.1).

Figure 1 Discovery of the Incorrupt Body, Bede’s prose *Life of Cuthbert*, British Library Yates Thompson 26, folio 77r. Photo: British Library.
Weaving Continuity Between pre- and post-Conquest Durham

Unlike monastic foundations in southern England, the bishopric of Durham maintained administrative and judicial autonomy during the transition from Anglo-Saxon rule to the new Norman domain in 1066. However, this does not mean that the community remained static in its tenth-century traditions, as the mid-to-late eleventh century was a time of immense change. The earlier church building, constructed by the early clerks of Cuthbert, was replaced by a large Romanesque cathedral. While Dominic Marner and David Rollason have associated the cathedral’s construction with the recognition of Cuthbert’s relics as a vital aspect to the community at Durham, John Crook explains that the cathedral’s original structural plan was largely monastic and the new emphasis on Cuthbert’s cult did not immediately correspond with the milieu of pilgrimage churches, such as Santiago de Compostela. Most significant was the missing apse and ambulatory formula, allowing visitors easier circulation around a major shrine behind the main altar. While the Norman bishops were not immediately motivated to promote Durham as a pilgrimage site, they were politically vigorous, and so at the laying of the first stones for the new Cathedral, it was ensured that the Scottish king Malcom III (1031–1093) and Durham’s prior Turgot (1050–1115), who became very close to the Scottish court, were present for the momentous ceremony. Nevertheless, while Durham’s post-Conquest architectural program did not initially stress Cuthbert’s cult, the saint’s visual representation flourished as early as the late eleventh century in the physical objects of the cult itself, the body and its surrounding relics, and in manuscript illumination. In addition to a new cathedral, the body and relics of Cuthbert were


translated into a new shrine in 1104. To celebrate this, two new accounts of Cuthbert’s life and miracles were compiled by the monks Symeon (d. after 1129) and Reginald (d. c. 1190);\(^\text{11}\) the Old English poem *Durham* was composed c. 1104 – 1109 and disseminated; Cuthbert’s vita was illustrated twice at Durham;\(^\text{12}\) and relics of Cuthbert’s first hagiographer, Bede, miraculously appeared within his shrine.\(^\text{13}\)

**Brief Life of Cuthbert**

Born around 634 during the reign of King Oswald of Northumbria (634 – 642), Cuthbert’s religious vocation began and ended in Lindisfarne. As a youth, he disavowed his aristocratic title after receiving a divine vision of the heavenly ascension of the soul of

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\(^\text{12}\) The Old English metrical verse poem *Durham* remains in a late twelfth-century manuscript collection of Durham histories at Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.i.27. The date of its creation is debated, but was most likely composed around 1104 to 1109 at Durham Cathedral Priory. Syemon of Durham includes the poem as evidence for monk Ælfred’s vision of Bede’s relics miraculously appearing in the coffin of St Cuthbert, (Rollason, 2000), pp.166-167.

\(^\text{13}\) In Symeon’s *Tract on the Origins of the Church of Durham* (Rollason, 2000, pp. 161-167) is the story of the Ælfred, a priest at Durham, who was fervently devoted to St Cuthbert and in charge of Cuthbert’s relics. He traveled north to search for venerable bones, so that he may deposit “them along with the body of the father Cuthbert.” Calvin B. Kendall, in “Dry Bones in a Cathedral: The Story of the Theft of Bede’s relics and the Translation of Cuthbert into the Cathedral of Durham in 1104” *Mediaevalia* 10 (1988): 1-26, argues that the story is shrouded in deviousness and mystery. Ælfred dug up the grave of Bede, removed his bones, and secretly placed them in Cuthbert’s coffin. When the body of is then translated in 1104, the bones of Bede are found wrapped in a “little linen bag” next to the incorrupt body. Kendall claims this event functioned to amplify the campaign of the ecclesiastical authorities at Durham in the early twelfth century to claim themselves as worthy processors of Cuthbert’s cult.
Aidan (d. 651), the first Bishop of Lindisfarne. Cuthbert would become a preaching hermit and then Prior at Melrose Abbey on the Scottish border, before he became Prior of Lindisfarne in 664 and later Bishop of its monastic community. In 793 Vikings raided the coastal monastic community of Lindisfarne, forcing the monks to flee for a short time. By the middle of the ninth century, the threat of continual hostilities from the Northmen spurred Bishop Eardwulf (d. 899) to move the relic body of Cuthbert, along with other treasures such as the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, and travel across Northumbria in the company of the surviving clerks of Cuthbert. For seven years they wandered the area, before settling at Chester-le-Street, in the county of Durham, where they remained from 883 to 995. Symeon of Durham’s *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie*, or the *Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham*, written between 1104 and 1115, describes the final relocation at Durham in 955 in the form of a miracle story. Once again under the threat of Viking attack, the Bishop Ealdhun at Chester-le-Street removed the body of the saint and took the community to Ripon for a short period. When peace resumed in the area, the community sought to take the saint back to his “former resting-place,” but when they reach a spot near Durham “the shrine containing the uncorrupted body continued where it was, as firmly fixed as if it were a mountain.” After three days of fasting and prayer, the holy body was translated at Durham, and a church was built to house the relics of the saint.

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Cuthbert’s incorruption, a crucial ideology of saints’ cults, is defended in both the body and the cloths wrapped and buried with it. Bede’s account of the Discovery published in 721 highlights the undecayed and the *undefiled*, writing, “[the monk’s at Lindisfarne] took away the outer garments to show the miracle of incorruption, for they did not dare to touch what was nearest to the skin.”

From this moment onward, cloths associated with Cuthbert held synonymous divine jurisdiction to the physical form of the saint.

The West Saxon king Æthelstan (r. 924 – 939) visited Cuthbert’s tomb during his second campaign against Scotland in 934. There, he invoked the Northumbrian saint’s help in his military endeavors and bestowed several lavish gifts to his coffin, including two manuscripts and several vestments, a stole, maniple and girdle. A little more than ten years later, in 945, Æthelstan’s brother, King Edmund (r. 939 – 946) visited the shrine.

According to the mid-eleventh century text *Historia de sancto Cuthberto*, in addition to gifts of precious gold arm-rings and vestments, king Edmund wrapped two *pallia Graeca*, or “Greek cloths,” around the body of the saint. This tradition of gifts to a saint’s shrine, or more largely part of the cult of saints, arrived in Anglo-Saxon England at the same time as Christian monasticism in the late sixth- to the early seventh-century.

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17 Colgrave, p. 293.


Cuthbert’s continuous movement during the early Middle Ages is significant not only to development of his cult, but also to the establishment of his worldly territory. Along with the new church at Durham, the saint’s permanent residence, St. Cuthbert and his community claimed legal rights to the land between the rivers Tyne and Tees, gifted to the saint by King Guthred of York (r.883 -895), as well as the saint’s original home at Lindisfarne. Unlike Thomas Becket, whose body remained inside Canterbury Cathedral, Cuthbert’s movement allowed the cult to gain geographic and spiritual influence across England. This was a unique situation. Other insular saints remained in one location, often a local church or holy institution connected to their martyrdom.

This meant that the movement of Cuthbert took advantage of the geography. While the boundary between the rivers Tyne and Tees was a recognized political unit for the early church, as Christian Liddy explains, “it was in the post-Conquest period that the Tyne become a significant jurisdictional border, where the bishop of Durham’s power ended and where the earl of Northumbria’s powers began.” It comes to no surprise that Durham, a major religious and civic center, would then become a pivotal point of conquest for the Normans after 1066.

Anglo-Norman Durham in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries was characterized by continuous upheavals and political instability. When the secular clerks of Cuthbert failed to reform under Bishop Walcher (r. 1071 – 80), his successor (upon his murder by

21 Arnold, p. 203.

22 Various sources, including Symeon and Reginald of Durham, emphasize the importance of Cuthbert’s holding between the Tyne and the Tees. This is most evident in Symeon’s account of King William’s investigation of the body of Cuthbert, in Symeon of Durham and Joseph Steveson, The Church Historians of England, vol. 3, part 2 (London: Seeley, 1855), p. 691. Cuthbert punishes William for his disgrace of holy power and threatening of Cuthbert’s people with decapitation. On the eve of execution of the nobility and elders, King William was struck by such an intense fever that he “hurriedly mounted his horse” and “did not draw bridle until he had reached the river Tees.”

the Northumbrians at Goteshead). William of St. Calais (r. 1080 – 96), his successor, the second Norman bishop of Durham, expelled the secular canons in 1083 and installed a Benedictine community in their place. When Bishop William obtained the episcopal see of Durham, “he found that the land which belonged to it was nearly desolated, and he noticed that the locality which the presence of [Cuthbert’s] sacred body made illustrious, was in a condition so neglected as to be by no means consistent with his sanctity.” This shift in leadership is significant, for not only institutional body of the church, but also for the surrounding lay community. Most especially the loss of their positions as guardians of the body of Cuthbert for the lay brotherhood of Cuthbert meant the loss of hereditary estates. Cuthbert’s clerks, or Congregatio, consisting of a leadership of provost or dean and seven clerks, along with their families, held church lands at Durham since the establishment in 995. Various priests and clerks assisted them in servicing the shrine and performing church duties. This decision was a huge blow to the clerks of Cuthbert.

Still, the bishopric at Durham did not wish to present itself as foreign overlords preparing for complete dismemberment of the revered traditions established within its community. In his study of Anglo-Norman Durham, Willian Aird argues that the new ecclesiastical powers functioned with a “degree of continuity” with respect to political


26 Joseph Stevenson and Symeon of Durham, Ch. LXL, p. 700.

and social ambitions.\textsuperscript{28} I further Aird’s claim with consideration of the visual rhetoric, in which the textile relics of Cuthbert were used to tightly weave together the people of Cuthbert and the bishopric. The Benedictine bishops could not have asserted power over the region of Durham without the apparent approval of Cuthbert.

Therefore, the bishopric supported the recording of posthumous miracles of St. Cuthbert, intending to reflect the saint’s approval of events taking place by his sacred doings.\textsuperscript{29} These miracles bolstered the fervor of his cult through the continuous activity and it asserted Cuthbert’s authority over his domain. For example, a story recorded in the \textit{Historia de sancto Cuthberto} (tenth or eleventh century) and in the Clerks’ \textit{Chronicle} (between 1072 and 1083), tell of Cuthbert appearing in a nighttime vision to the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred (c. 849 – 899), prophesizing his victory in battle and promising to ensure Alfred an established lineage of kings if he remained faithful to Cuthbert and his people. In return, Alfred sent his heir Edward (r. 899 - 924) with gifts to Cuthbert’s shrine, setting the model for royal donations to the saint.\textsuperscript{30} Barbara Abou-El-Haj argued that these stories had a specific purpose: to help “set the stage for the monks’ larger project to confirm their possession of Cuthbert’s patrimony.”\textsuperscript{31} Bolstering this were the stories of miraculous punishment that portrayed the dangers of crossing the will of Cuthbert, even for king William the Conqueror (r. 1066 – 1087) who was punished for threatening the

\textsuperscript{28} William M. Aird, \textit{St Cuthbert and the Normans: The Church of Durham, 1071-1153} (Woodbrige: Boydell Press, 1998), pp. 5-6. The Benedictine community at Durham inherited much of the past and legacy of Cuthbert’s clerks. Rather than denouncing the cult’s past, the Benedictine’s text production and political campaigns drew from historical documents and narratives created by the monks at Lindisfarne and Cuthbert’s Congregatio.


\textsuperscript{31} Abou-El-Haj, p. 57.
people of Cuthbert and forced out of Durham by the saint. While the bishops, as Normans, could not outright voice their claims over the territory between the Tyne and Tees, Cuthbert could.

One of these punitive miracles is illustrated in Bede’s Life of Cuthbert at The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (Oxford, University College, MS 165, on folio 163r) (Fig. 2). Its production, textual, and stylistic evidence date the book between the very end of the eleventh-century and the beginning of the twelfth-century, but not before the 1104 translation of Cuthbert’s body and relics at Durham. The image depicts a miracle dated to 1080, wherein a Norman soldier is caught stealing the textile relics of St. Cuthbert. Attacked with a burning fever, he confesses his sins as he dies in torment. The significance of the thief being a Norman soldier may refer to the church of Durham’s

32 Symeon’s Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie first records these posthumous punishment stories in the early twelfth century, however it is in Reginald’s Libellus, written between 1166-1174, that Cuthbert really becomes a vengeful saintly figure, unafraid to use considerable force to protect his holdings and his people. In Reginald’s collection, 22 chapters are miracles of punishment. Most notable among scholars, such as Sally Crumplin and Victoria Tudor, are chapters 35, 56, 46, 60, 61, 65, 79, 90, 129, and 141, which record violations against the saint’s internal church, his lands outside the cathedral, and violations against his following. Chapters 68, 72, 83, 87, 88, 111, 133, and 139 record Cuthbert’s punishment for harming animals under his protection. Disputes of land ownership, most especially, required saintly intercession as seen in chapter 46, wherein Cuthbert intervenes when a male is falsely accused and imprisoned for his property: “cui quidam aemuli ipsius, objectis falso querelis, conanti sunt terram simul et armenta praeripere.” Certain rivals, the objects of false complaints, attempted to usurp the land and herds. Additionally, Reginald includes secular conflicts, such as in Chapter 50 and 93 in accusation of poaching and assault.

33 Oxford, University College, MS 165, because of its content and iconography, has had several dates attributed to its production. However, Malcom Baker in “Medieval Illustrations of Bede’s Life of St. Cuthbert,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 41 (1978), and Barbara Abou-El-Haj in The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) argue convincingly that the manuscript cannot have been made before 1104, but also not much before 1100. This positions the book in a very specific moment in Durham’s post-Conquest history.

political battle with William the Conqueror and his army for power and autonomy at the time.

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2** A Norman soldier steals treasures of St. Cuthbert; death of thief, *Bede’s Life of St. Cuthbert, Oxford, Uni. College MS 165, folio 163r. Photo: Oxford, University College.*

In the text placed directly below the miniature, retribution against the Norman solider is built up gradually for the reader. Conversely, as Otto Pächt explains, the pictures within the Oxford *Vita* combine two separate instances of the story, often depicting actions immediately before and after a miraculous event in bold, color-outline drawing.35

On the left, the story begins with the thief in the act of removing the relics from Cuthbert’s sanctuary. He is dressed in a knee-length, long-sleeved tunic with narrow pointed shoes. His tunic flows out around his legs, suggestive of movement, as he bends

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at the waist to reach into the saint’s tomb. He pulls out a long, ornamented textile, bunching the fabric firmly in his grip. The thief’s attention is rapt on the opened coffin, his face portrayed in profile, while his torso is turned toward the viewer. That action of stealing the relics occurs within the cathedral. This is suggested by the thief’s placement within an open arcade, which includes an upper clerestory, bell tower, and a cross set atop the pitched roof.

Then, on the right, the thief is struck dead, his body is brutally contorted, suggestive of his torture, with one arm bent over his head while the other lays at an odd angle at his side. Floating in space, no architectural structure encases the body: he lays apart from both the shrine and the church, as if cast out. Although Cuthbert’s physical presence in the illumination is absent, as the enforcer of the punishment, his presence is signified by the coffin reliquary, the shrine nearby, and textile relic. Thus, in the absence of body, visually, these objects channel the power to punish those who violate the saint and his holdings. The text suggests that Cuthbert is omnipresent even when invisible to mortals, and so can deliver punishment via his representative objects.\textsuperscript{36}

The cloth in the MS 165 illumination has no real distinguishing feature to signal whether the thief has stolen a piece of Cuthbert’s vestments or any of the treasures brought to the coffin-reliquary by West Saxon kings. Specifics are not important here: the textiles stand as indexical signifiers of the physical contact relics known to be placed by the incorrupt body. In late eleventh- and twelfth-century Durham, the individual textiles surrounding and covering the body formed a synonymous group with no stated hierarchy between silk, body wrapping, or vestments of Cuthbert: each of these held an equal ability to draw from and enforce Cuthbert’s divine power. These objects, placed in the tomb by monastic guardians and royal patrons, functioned as tertiary relics or \textit{brandea},

\textsuperscript{36} This idea is most obvious in his posthumous miracles, especially of a sick man cured at Cuthbert’s tomb and a paralytic healed by Cuthbert’s shoes. See Colgrave, 1969, pp. 297-301.
objects that have been in contact with a relic (the body of Cuthbert), and now carried the power of that relic.\textsuperscript{37}

This emphasis on textiles effectively transforms Cuthbert’s physical space into a material space. At this point in in the narrative, the viewer understands that relic textiles of the saint are empowered by his holy body. For the cloths buried with Cuthbert’s body at his death and later reflect and contain the power of his incorrupt body. Often in saints’ cults, incorruptibility is claimed to reveal sanctity or virginity of the individual. This state of the body paralleled Christian theological narratives on notion of resurrection. In the twelfth-century, English historian William of Malmesbury created a list of incorruptible saints, including Cuthbert, King Edmund the Martyr (841 – 869), Æthelthryth (c. 635 – 679) and Wihtburh of Ely (d. 743), and Archbishop Ælfheah (953 – 1012), “all with skin and flesh inviolate and joints yet supple” exhibiting their divine favor.\textsuperscript{38}

The earliest surviving image of the discovery of Cuthbert’s incorrupt body—found by the monks at Lindisfarne in 698, eleven years after his death—is Oxford, University College MS 165, folio 118r, which aids in understanding how these objects assumed a legitimizing status, indicating the presence of the saint. The half-page miniature of the discovery of the incorrupt body shows five brothers of the Lindisfarne monastery who stand in an undesignated space, their bodies floating above the text (Fig. 3). In the scene, two monks on stand on the left and right sides with their bodies rendered in profile and their hands held upward, a gesture of wonder or surprise at the miracle they witness. Before them, two more brothers stand at the head and foot of the coffin, raising the lid to


give the last brother access inside the tomb. What is remarkable about this image of the discovery is its focus on the incorrupt textiles within his coffin, rather than the body. The monk at the center stands fully facing the viewer, holding in his palms the incorrupt fabrics found within the casket. Both his body and his gaze are directed at the viewer, including the reader in the select group of individuals worthy of witnessing the unblemished materials and creating a dialogue between textile relic and follower of the cult.

Further, the body of Cuthbert, visible within the coffin, is faceless. Likely, the artist here has depicted the saint’s face wrapped in the traditional burial shroud, but the effect is more than just a naturalistic detail. The first Anonymous Life, thought to have been written at least one year after the discovery and translation of Cuthbert’s body at

Figure 3 The Discovery of Cuthbert’s Incorrupt Body, Life of St. Cuthbert, Oxford, University College MS 165, folio 118r. Photo: Oxford, University College.
Lindfarne in 698, describes a headcloth wrapped around the saint, of which the monks unwound and discovered “that it kept all the beauty of its first whiteness.” Here, Cuthbert’s earthly identity has been erased, and replaced with a generic, blank oval. (This position is not to be mistaken for the back of his head, as his upturned feet are visible at the bottom of the casket.) Effectively, the textiles have now not only assumed the authority to argue for the incorruptible state of the body, but they have also replaced the identity of the saint himself. Anatomically, Cuthbert is real and present in the event taking place. Yet his lack of expression and the rigidity of his body laying within the coffin denotes a sense of thingness to his role in the image. Although Cuthbert can no longer speak directly to his earthly following, as he is instated within his new place inside the Court of Heaven, his undamaged textiles shielding the incorrupt body now have the ability to enforce his will.

Here, I want to consider why the manuscript would focus on the miraculous fabrics of Cuthbert in the promotion of his cult. Certainly, the artist is influenced by their importance in historical text. Yet, contemporaneous events at Durham suggest a stronger impact by the present. As one of two surviving illustrated Lives of Cuthbert produced at Durham priory during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, I believe that the represented textiles took on particular authority in their relation to Cuthbert and to the custodians of his cult. Cuthbert, being revered properly, approved of the newer overseers of his cult, and through the use of actual textiles and their being contextualized in manuscripts, they helped navigate the transition between authorities, from Anglo-Saxon to Norman, from the Clerks of Cuthbert to the Benedictines.

39 Colgrave, 1969, p. 133.

40 Cynthia Hahn, argues that the Court of Heaven was understood to be a divine space where saints held “sacred union” with Christ, as well as a meditative space where the faithful could reach the saintly intercessors. See Cynthia Hahn, “Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints’ Shrines,” Speculum 72.4 (1997): 1079–1106.
While Oxford MS 165 was likely made for a private patron at the end of the eleventh century, the late twelfth-century manuscript of Bede’s Life of Cuthbert, British Library Yates Thompson MS 26 (Fig. 1), was produced at Durham nearly a century later, probably for Prior Bertram (r. 1189 – 1212). Its essential function, like the Oxford Vita, was to promote the cult of Cuthbert and the Benedictine powers at Durham. Lavishly decorated, forty-six of its original fifty-five full images survive. Numerous scenes reveal a strong concern for textiles, often highlighting them in the narrative. For example, the miniature of The Abbess Aelfflaed and one of her nuns being healed by Cuthbert’s girdle, which she wraps around her head (BL Yates Thompson MS 26, folio 48v), (Fig. 4), reveals the importance of Cuthbert’s physical connection to textiles of divine power. Bede writes that Abbess Aelfflaed (654 – 714) was suddenly struck with a life-threatening illness, and in her darkest hour, she visualized the priest Cuthbert, praying that she had an object belonging to “my Cuthbert.” Soon after, a linen girdle was brought to her, having been sent by Cuthbert, as if he had heard her prayers. The cloth then healed her, as well as another member of the convent suffering from a terminal illness of the head. Interestingly, Cuthbert never appears to physically place the girdle on the sick nuns. Rather, it is Aelfflaed herself that takes the cloth around the convent to heal the sisters. According to


42 Baker, p. 21. Yates Thompson MS 26 contains Bede’s Vita prosaica followed by the Historia ecclesiastica, containing twenty-five later miracles, the Brevis relatio and an account of the early provosts of Hexam.

43 Though there is little doubt that the manuscript was made and kept at Durham, substantial evidence of the text’s location can only be found in later records. The Yates Thompson MS 26 manuscript has been identified in the 1391 and 1416 catalogues inventories of Durham Cathedral. Dominic Marner, explains that the 1416 entry indicates that the book was borrowed by Richard le Scrope (d. 1405), the Archbishop of York, on the behalf of Thomas Langley (dean of York 1401-5, and Bishop of Durham 1406-1437). At Carlisle Cathedral too, an artist may have copied scenes from the manuscript to place on the back of choir stalls later in the fifteenth century. Marner, pp. 37-38. Thus, while the book was made at and housed at Durham, it circulated throughout northern England.

44 Colgrave, pp. 231-235.
Figure 4 Abbess Aelfflaed and one of her nuns being healed by Cuthbert’s girdle, which she wraps around her head, Bede’s prose *Life of St Cuthbert*, British Library Yates Thompson MS 26, folio 48v. Photo: British Library Board.
thirteenth-century theologian Durandus, the girdle was an important element of sacred vestments, and signifying chastity and temperance: a faithfulness in spiritual power rather than bodily desires. Posthumous miracles also reveal the incredible powers of Cuthbert’s attire, such as the story of a man being healed by shoes belonging to St Cuthbert in Chapter 45, folio 80r. The importance of the girdle and shoes in the narrative are their confirmation that textiles in association with the body of Cuthbert are capable of performing miraculous events apart from the presence of the holy body.

Like in Oxford, University College, MS 165, the most significant story in which textiles bolster the divine power of Cuthbert is the opening of the tomb after Cuthbert’s death at Lindisfarne. In the full-page miniature of the discovery of the incorrupt body (BL Yates Thompson MS 26, folio 77r), the entombed figure of Cuthbert is inspected by three monks of the Lindisfarne monastery (Fig.1). He is dressed in equally un-decayed vestments: the full episcopal pontificalia is shown, mitre, dalmatic, and tunicle. Bending forward, a monk at the foot of the coffin lifts away the lid at an angle to reveal both the upper portion of Cuthbert’s body and his feet. At the center, another brother clutches a gathering of the nearest vestments in both hands while lifting his left fingers in a gesture of blessing. His attention is directed to the monk at his left, pulling at the cloth to reveal their perfect condition. These materials are emphasized by a shimmering ray of gold placed in the background, of which further suggests their connection to both the saintly body and the divine. Standing at the head of the casket, the last brother leans forward in surprise at the discovery. His body is fully turned toward the textiles at the center as he raises his arms out before the unblemished garments, signaling their importance to the viewer.

The illumination is rendered in a complex play of angles and lines: the thick curves of quatrefoil band that encloses the scene and provides a sense of intimate interior spacing,

the background functioning to divide the image using three vertical segments of color, and the upward motion of the folds of drapery lifted out of the coffin and into the hands of the monk. This highly constructed use of line guides the viewer’s eye to the main focus of the picture: the incorrupt textiles. Not only do the monks use their hands to indicate the miraculous textiles, but even Cuthbert seems to raise his right hand toward the cloth. This right hand of Cuthbert suggests an act of transference, as if the saint himself is bequeathing power to the textiles.

The period in which Yates Thompson 26 was produced coincides with a feverish promotion of the cult by the Bishop Hugh de Puiset (1153 – 1195). While Puiset was unanimously elected as the head of the Benedictine foundation at Durham, most likely for his beneficial upper-class connections, his personal regal disposition soon created frictions within the Chapter. Twelfth-century English chronicler Roger of Hovedon describes Puiset’s arrogance as familial: “Hugh de Puiset was a man whose ancestors had been accustomed to deal on an equality with kings, and to give them no small trouble. He was, in all probability, the son of the Hugh de Puiset, viscount of Chartres, who had for many years defied the power of Louis VI.”

Puiset’s drive to establish a legacy at Durham may have prompted his intense development of Durham’s patron saint. His commission of the famous Galilee Chapel, most significantly, garnered praise and criticism. With the introduction of the Chapel, women, who were previously denied access by Bishop William, were once again able to venerate Cuthbert at his shrine.

In fact, the unique addition of Cuthbert’s bishop’s attire in the scene of the discovery may have been a deliberate inclusion ordered by Puiset. Though fellow insular episcopal saints, such as Thomas Becket, were often shown in bishop attire. Cuthbert was more often promoted in the image of a monk, recalling to viewers his many earthly miracles performed before he took the rank of bishop. Cuthbert is rarely shown in a full bishop’s

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attire, apart from images of his appointment to the position of bishop of Durham. Though he was later praised for the commission of both the elegant Galilee Chapel and Reginald of Durham’s *Libellus de admirandis beati Cuthberti virtuibus*, an extensive collection of Cuthbert’s miracles compiled between the 1160’s and 1170s, Puiset’s tyrannical control of the monastic community and the bishop’s ruling authority later resulted in his dismissal. Several scholars, including Marner and Baker, have commented on the manuscript’s emphasis of Cuthbert’s episcopal status as influential to his sainthood and to the authority of the Benedictines. Neither author points to the episcopal clothing’s further significance as relics of the saint. I suggest that Yates Thompson 26 places Cuthbert’s saintly status as directly linked to the bishop. Moreover, that his textiles and their divine authority would work only at the command of the Bishop of Durham, namely Puiset.

Why and to what purpose do these illustrated manuscripts focus so heavily on textiles? As Karen Overbey has argued, physical proximity to holy clothing was an impossibility for laymen and lower-ranking religious officials. For the most part, these items were only witnessed during procession or at the translation of relics. This practice in Cuthbert’s cult can be seen in the account of the Bishop Ælfwold of Sherborne in Dorset (r. 1045 – 1058), who “tore away the cover of the tomb” in order to witness and speak

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47 Cuthbert’s image in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 183 on folio IV, for example, shows the saint dressed only in *alba* and *casual* without a *stola* or *dalmatica*. The attire of Cuthbert in CCCC MS 183 and other examples can be found in Sarah Larratt Keefer, “A matter of style: clerical vestments in the Anglo-Saxon Church,” *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 3 (2007), pp. 13–39.


with the saint he held reverently in his heart. The power of what can be seen and what cannot be seen was an integral aspect of Cuthbert’s cult during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Shut away within Cuthbert’s coffin-reliquary, the textiles could only be brought into the human space of the material world — without punishment — by the jurisdiction of the monks who served as guardians of the shrine. The Oxford Vita and Yates Thompson MS 26 promoted the legitimate right of the Norman monastic leaders at Durham Cathedral to carry on the mantle of the Cuthbert’s cult from their Anglo-Saxon predecessors.

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Though I have focused on the promotion of the textile relics of Cuthbert as used to weave hereditary ties between the Norman and the Anglo-Saxon community at Durham, these materials were also used to cement political and religious ties to other holy institutions and Scotland. Unlike other insular and European saints, Cuthbert’s body was not disarticulated and widely distributed. Only one account by Bede, in which he records a lock hair used for a miraculous cure in the eighth century, suggests dissemination. Yet, while Cuthbert’s incorrupt extremities remained, for the most part, at his shrine in Durham, his textile relics did not. In the mid-twelfth century, these wonderworking pieces of cloth were taken out by a monk named Alan, who was sent by Bishop Hugh de Puiset on a tour of southern Scotland. Reginald of Durham’s Libellus features Alan’s perambulations. In the text, a piece of cloth used for the wrapping of the body of Cuthbert performs several miraculous cures. In Perth, the cloth healed a merchant suffering from

51 Foot, p. 9. It is unclear as to why Ælfwold was allowed to open the tomb and may have done so secretly. He is later made an English saint.

52 Colgrave, 1969, p. 236. Even James Raine, in 1827, records that the bones, though detached are “perfectly whole, and in their proper places” in the coffin. Raine, p. 213.

headaches, and during the feast of St Margaret at Dunfermline, the cloth was availed by a local suffering from demonic possession. The Countess Ada (c. 1123 – 1178), mother of William the Lion (1143 – 1214) and Malcom IV (1141 – 1165), was healed twice by the textiles and, in return, gifted the Cathedral the land where she was cured. These stories, as Sally Crumplin highlights, reveal the diversity of Cuthbert’s patronage — from merchant to Countess — while also emphasizing his royal veneration.54

Between the late eleventh and into the thirteenth century, the textile relics of St Cuthbert were featured in collections of abbeys and cathedrals across England, including cloth used for wrapping the saint’s incorrupt body as well as pieces of his vestments.55 An early thirteenth-century account at Twynham Augustinian Prior, for example, notes that, in 1214 the altars of Saints Augustine and Gregory were dedicated with “the cloth in which the body of Saint Cuthbert was wrapped.”56 Glastonbury had some of the “vestments” of Cuthbert, and at Saint Martin-le-Grand in London, Bishop Hugh de Puiset of Durham gave a piece of Cuthbert’s burial wrapping between 1171 and 1189.57 Many of the religious institutions that received pieces of textile relic were connected to the bishopric of Durham, specific bishops there, or were in locations which competed with Durham cathedral for fame, suggesting that Cuthbert’s textiles continued to create or


reinforce territorial relationships, even beyond the saint’s own foundations. Gifts of relic cloth bestowed at Waltham Abbey come to no surprise, for William I (1028 – 1087) gave the church and estate to the see of Durham. At Canterbury, in the end of the twelfth century, Cuthbert’s position for leading saint in England was challenged by the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. By the mid-thirteenth century, major English devotional centers became geographically divided between Cuthbert in the North and Becket in the South. Therefore, Cuthbert’s brandea at Canterbury may have served as a reminder of Cuthbert’s importance to the newly devoted public of Becket’s.

The textiles’ trips across the Scottish border and dissemination into English religious institutions during the twelfth century reveals the complexity of the project undertaken at Durham to direct the focus of the cult of Cuthbert on his clothing relics. Manuscript illustrations at Oxford University and the British library play an important role in conjunction with the redevelopment of Cuthbert’s Post-Conquest cult. My purpose in this brief article is to raise new issues on the visualization of these textile relics, as they became an integral element in establishing continuity between Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Durham.


59 Thomas, p. 384.