

## St. Cuthbert, Lives of (Latin and OE)

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Cuthbert was a prominent Anglo-Saxon saint whose cult was patronized by the West Saxon royal house. A number of medieval treatments of Cuthbert's life survive in Latin and English, including Bede's *Prose Life of Cuthbert*, one of the most widely circulated ~~saint's~~ lives of the period (Lapidge and Love 2001).

Cuthbert was born c. 635 in Northumbria. He became a monk at Melrose in 651, and spent time at Ripon before moving to Lindisfarne. Cuthbert's desire for the eremitic life led him to retreat to the island of Farne where he performed miracles and garnered considerable renown. In 685 he reluctantly agreed to become bishop of Lindisfarne. In 687, sensing death's approach, he returned to his ascetic life on Farne. Cuthbert died on March 20, and was buried on Lindisfarne. Cuthbert's community later fled Lindisfarne to escape Viking raids, taking Cuthbert's incorrupt body with them. Cuthbert rested at Chester-le-Street from 883, moving to Durham in 995.

The earliest account of Cuthbert's life and miracles is a Latin prose work composed c. 699–705 by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne on the instructions of his bishop, Eadfrith (Colgrave 1940). The *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert* draws heavily on established hagiographic models. The text may have been intended for use within the Lindisfarne community as it contains a great deal of local detail.

Bede composed three versions of Cuthbert's life. Bede's *Metrical Life of Cuthbert* was produced in Latin hexameters c. 705, but revised at a later date (Lapidge 1989). The majority of surviving manuscripts commence with a dedication to a priest traveling to Rome. The preface depicts Cuthbert as a spiritual light to Britain, but does not indicate that the work was commissioned. The *Metrical Life* is a sizeable, challenging text, probably intended for individual contemplation; it depicts key events from Cuthbert's life without contextualization. Bede's *Prose Life of Cuthbert* was commissioned by Bishop Eadfrith of Lindisfarne and composed c. 720–22 (Stancliffe 2012). The *Prose Life* is influenced by the life of Benedict in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* (Stancliffe 1989). Bede drew on the earlier lives, but the tone of the *Prose Life* is more homiletic. Bede added new information when he returned to Cuthbert in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed c. 731. He devotes considerable space to Cuthbert, demonstrating his perception of Cuthbert's importance to the national narrative (Godden 1996).

Two Old English accounts of Cuthbert's life survive. The oldest is contained within the ninth-century *Old English Martyrology* (Rauer 2013). The entry for Cuthbert's feast on March 20 succinctly describes him as a holy bishop visited by angels, before recounting his transformation of water into wine. Ælfric of Eynsham included an Old English life of Cuthbert as Homily X in the second series of his Catholic Homilies, written within the period 990–95. Bede's *Metrical Life* was Ælfric's favored source, but he also employed the other early Latin lives (Godden 2000). The style of Ælfric's work reflects its homiletic

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purpose; miracle episodes are presented with little linking narrative and localizing detail is absent. The influence of the Benedictine Reform is evident; Cuthbert's time as a hermit is deemphasized, and greater prominence given to his role within the community.

A number of other histories, poems, and miracle collections concerning Cuthbert were produced in Latin and the vernacular during the medieval period (Bollandists 1898–1901; Hardy 1862–71). The best known of these later works are the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* (*History of St. Cuthbert*) and Symeon of Durham's *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est dunhelmensis, ecclesie* (Tract on the origins and progress of this the church of Durham). The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* was produced in the later Anglo-Saxon period and includes episodes not found in earlier lives (Johnson South 2002). The text transforms Cuthbert into a political force whose miracles affirm property rights. Symeon of Durham's early twelfth-century work includes Cuthbert's life and miracles as part of the history of his community (Rollason 2000). Symeon draws, often verbatim, on Bede's *Prose Life*, the *Ecclesiastical History*, and the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*.

SEE ALSO: Ælfric of Eynsham; Bede; Hagiography; Lindisfarne; Martyrology, Old English

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## ABSTRACT

St. Cuthbert was a seventh-century bishop of Lindisfarne who spent time living as a hermit on the island of Farne. The cult of Cuthbert was very prominent in the Anglo-Saxon church and he was a popular subject for hagiography. Several lives of Cuthbert were written between the seventh and tenth centuries, in both Latin and Old English, including works by Bede and Ælfric of Eynsham. Texts concerned with Cuthbert continued to be produced throughout the medieval period, including verse lives, histories of his community, and accounts of post-mortem miracles.

## KEYWORDS

500–999 CE; 1000–1099; 1100–1199; hagiography; Latin literature; medieval literature