

## Saints and their Communities: Miracle Stories in Twelfth-century England

**Review Number:**

539

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 July, 2006

**Author:**

Simon Yarrow

**ISBN:**

019928363X

**Date of Publication:**

2006

**Price:**

£50.00

**Publisher:**

Clarendon Press

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

Robert Bartlett

The core of this book, which, like all in this series, is a revised version of an Oxford doctoral dissertation, comprises a good empirical study of six twelfth-century miracle collections. It also contains some more general or theoretical analysis about which one might have some reservations.

The miracle collections chosen for investigation are the Miracles of St Edmund at Bury, a text which originated c.1100 and was then repeatedly augmented over the course of the twelfth century; the accounts of the relic tour undertaken in 1113 by the canons of St Mary of Laon, who traveled from Dover to Bodmin with threads from the chemise and hair from the head of the Virgin Mary; the small collection of nineteen miracles of the obscure St Ithamar of Rochester, put together around the middle of the twelfth century; the miracles of William of Norwich, the boy supposedly martyred by the Jews in 1144; the miracles of St Frideswide of Oxford written in the 1180s by Philip, prior of the Augustinian house where the saint's shrine was located; and the miracles attributed to the hand of St James at Reading and recorded in a compilation of the 1190s.

There is thus a full chronological range over the whole century and some variety in the nature of the saints, with two biblical, three actually or putatively Anglo-Saxon and one contemporary. Becket is explicitly excluded, on sensible practical grounds, nor does the book address some other big collections of twelfth-century miracle accounts, such as those of Cuthbert or Godric of Finchale, consequently giving the study a pronounced southern English focus. Two of the collections studied - those of William of Norwich and Frideswide - have also been the subject of analysis in the two standard works in this field, Ronald Finucane's *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (1977), and Benedicta Ward's *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215* (Aldershot and Philadelphia, 1982).

A strength of the book is the author's awareness of the individual circumstances in which the collections arose, for, while it is true that works in well established hagiographic genres such as collections of miracle accounts do exhibit common features, they are always created by an individual or individuals within particular communities at a specific moment in their histories. The initial collection of miracles of Edmund, for instance, was recorded at a time when the saint's community, the monks of Bury, faced the double danger of encroachments on their property by the local Norman lords and a threat to their autonomy from the diocesan bishop. Abbot Baldwin (1065-97/8) responded with a 'campaign to enhance, consolidate, and protect the power and prestige of his abbey' of which the miracle collection formed 'the keystone' (p. 52). It fulfilled this function by stressing the continuity of the community of St Edmund (despite the changes in ecclesiastical status it had undergone), the royal and regional identity of the saint himself and his active role in punishing interlopers and intruders.

Dr Yarrow does not adopt the statistical approach to the sociology of cults that was employed in Finucane's book or in the huge study of Pierre-André Sigal, *L'homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale: XIe.-XIIIe. siècles* (Paris, 1985) (not mentioned here) but he is interested in the question of exactly who is recorded as seeking out saintly help and he provides densely textured analyses addressed to that issue. He draws a picture of the cult of Frideswide, for instance, in which the 'economic vitality of Oxford' (p. 182) is the chief context. Interweaving evidence from local cartularies with that of Prior Philip's miracle stories, he produces a miniature prosopographical study of the urban elite of this thriving commercial centre, whose members traded, occupied local office and had continuous relations with the community of St Frideswide on their doorstep. This is epitomised by the fact that the climax of the collection is the cure of a boy, Lawrence Kepherim, who went on to become the first mayor of Oxford.

Chapter 3, 'The canons of Laon and their tour of England', is particularly successful. After the destruction of much of their cathedral by fire during the insurrection of the commune of 1112, the canons of Laon took their relics on fund-raising tours that, unusually, extended throughout northern France and southern England. Dr Yarrow describes the political background to the Laon rising, the history of the practice of taking relics on tour, the nature, limits and value of the two main written sources (Guibert of Nogent and Hermann of Tournai), the place of Marian devotion in England and (a recurring theme in his analysis) 'The Wealth of Southern England'. An extremely full English context is created through use of *Domesday Book*, charters, numismatic evidence and other material, although, rather austere, the author chooses not to mention one of the most well-known passages in Hermann's account, the quarrel between one of the canons' servants and a Cornishman over whether King Arthur was still alive (probably the earliest evidence for a belief in 'the once and future king').

Some aspects of the general analysis are less convincing. The portrayal of the cult of St William of Norwich, which was premised on ritual murder by the Jews and eventually won the support of the local bishop, culminates in the conclusion

...the cult articulated and exploited the social anxieties of Norfolk's commercial establishment, by encouraging them to negotiate a sense of their religious identity and derive practical support from the diocesan centre. Regrettably, the elaboration of a new kind of pollution rhetoric was a

price Bishop William was willing to pay ... (p. 167)

The idea that the author of the *Life and Miracles*, the Norwich monk Thomas of Monmouth, used 'pollution rhetoric' is actually very hard to substantiate from his text. Nor, as Dr Yarrow recognises, is there anything noticeably anti-semitic in the record of the miracles themselves. In order to establish that William was a saint, Thomas had to demonstrate that he had died for his faith, being 'martyred' by the Jews. Once this had been established to his satisfaction, the miracles he records are scarcely different in kind from those of any other saint. And, just as it is difficult to find 'pollution rhetoric' in Thomas's text, so there is little evidence for the 'social anxieties' attributed to the Norfolk traders. Both have the air of concepts imported into the material and the book does show a slight propensity to bring in such ready-made analytical tools: 'cult impresario', 'moral economy', 'imagined communities', etc.

Occasionally the prose becomes clotted: 'the miracle is a cultural phenomenon that existed in a medieval society as a possibility for social practice' (p. 14). Dr Yarrow writes that his research 'was inspired by the work of Peter Brown' (p. vi) and no one can doubt the brilliance of Professor Brown's writings on the holy man and the cult of the saints and its invigorating influence on subsequent study, but his intricate and idiosyncratic style of thinking and writing may be a dangerous model to follow.

As far as one can tell, this book is free of factual errors, although it does contain two significant misinterpretations of the Latin text of the *Miracles of St Mary of Laon*. Hermann, the author of this text, states that he has written of the miracles not under his own name but rather attributing the account to the canons of Laon ('sub nomine canonicorum eius ecclesiae ea praetitulavi'); mistaken division of this last word here into 'praetitu lavi' explains the strikingly odd translation 'I have washed these miracles by a pretext' (p. 76). And the ships coming to Bristol 'de Ibernia insula' must surely, as has always been presumed, be coming from Ireland, not 'the Iberian coast' (p. 93).

Otherwise, the book is a solid and substantial piece of work. To generalise and theorise about the meaning and function of miracles and cults is difficult and a variety of opinions will always exist on how best to do so. Such attempts at generalisation and theorisation will always, however, have to be based on careful and scholarly studies such as this one.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/539#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2960>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>