

## **The Conversion of the North: Regional Antiquarianism and the Negotiation of Allegiances in Early Modern England**

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When I first started working on this project, debates about the Ten Commandments monument on the Capitol lawn in my home state of Oklahoma were topping both local and national news headlines. After years of cultural controversy and legal battles, the state Supreme Court had ordered that the monument be removed because it violates a constitutional ban against the use of public property to promote a religion. The responses to this controversy reveal a range of views regarding the dynamic relationships between national, local, and religious identity. In the ruling, the court noted that the Ten Commandments are “obviously religious,” while Christian lawmakers, wanting the monument to stand, argued that it was indeed not religious, but rather historical.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the sentiments expressed by the local people from both sides of the debate demonstrate the virtual impossibility of separating religious identity from state and national identity. Statements about representation, memory, and morality are common, as many have expressed the idea that the majority of people in Oklahoma identify as Christian, thus the monument represents “us”. Others continue to voice the familiar claim that America is a “Christian nation”. But perhaps more than anything, the popular discourse revolves around “the values we were founded upon” and “what our founding fathers intended”. These arguments about origins both reflect and are shaped by the complex and, for many, inseparable relationship between what it means to be Christian and American and Oklahoman. The struggle to lay claim over our founders is based on the idea that if we can articulate the ways in which this particular religion is part of our national past, we can justify certain actions in the present—actions that have implications for how communities deal with cultural difference and issues of inclusion and exclusion.

Evoking Foucault’s claim that identity is continuously created in discourse, these conflicts – between different Christian denominations, between Christians and non-Christians, between the church and the state – serve as sites where identities are negotiated. In this way, founding figures, symbols, and monuments are fundamental tools for constituting collective memory. The ways in which these figures can embody, resist, complicate, or transform drives my interrogation of the intersections between devotion, memory, and identity. This article examines one such case of founding figures, focusing on the arrival of Christianity in England (the North, in particular) and those who spread it. My analysis is focused on how early modern English Catholics and Protestants reinterpreted the lives of “native” saints – British, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon saints who were venerated locally – to form a historical base and to negotiate their various allegiances.

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<sup>1</sup> Abby Philip, “Oklahoma’s Ten Commandments Statue must be removed, state Supreme Court says”, *Washington Post*, June 30, 2015, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/06/30/oklahomas-ten-commandments-statue-must-be-removed-state-supreme-court-says/>>

When delving into the question of early modern uses of English Christian origins, focusing on widely-circulated printed histories puts the focus on the appropriation of history for the dominant national discourse at the expense of the local, confessional and personal. There were certainly polemical uses of history on a national and international scale, and the methodological progress brought by the critical scholarship of humanism and the spread of print were central to both the development of historical consciousness and, in some ways, the decline of popular folk tradition.<sup>2</sup> But, at the same time, there was a clear vitality to local memory, communicated through devotional material including the *vitae* of native saints, oral tradition, pilgrimage sites, and the liturgy.<sup>3</sup> Understandings of Christianity's beginnings were shaped by the spaces and the physical environment in which they occurred, and these visual and ritual reminders of Christian origins made local figures the dominant ones. Placing local antiquarians in dialogue with national histories reveals that the native English saints who brought and spread Christianity to the various regions of England were powerful tools of collective memory. The primary debates in national histories – an archipelagic British versus distinctly English identity, Celtic versus Roman Christianity, British versus Anglo-Saxon lineage – are not as hotly contested in devotional sources. While competing national histories told of a Protestant Christianity preserved by the Britons, cruelly repressed for centuries, versus the Roman tradition, the heir of their Angle ancestors, the foundation stories told through local historians were not interested in this debate. By and large, regional concerns reframed the narratives: by combining the tales of Briton, Welsh, Irish, and Anglo-Saxon saints, these antiquarians were able to embrace a more archipelagic identity while also celebrating their local heritage.

The spread of Christianity in the North of England, in what was the powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, is a particularly important episode that resulted in a variety of local saints and confessors who remained meaningful and useful figures both nationally and internationally. The saints were not only significant to the “superstitious masses,” but also crossed boundaries and played a dynamic part in the historical consciousness of early modern English men and women across the socioeconomic spectrum.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I focus on the ways in which a few early modern antiquarians interpret and reconstruct the lives of two popular regional saints, Oswald and Cuthbert, interacting with a complex dynamic of regional, national, confessional, and social identities. I show that these antiquarians framed the past with very different concerns than more widely-circulated national and ecclesiastical histories, highlighting the importance of regional identity in shaping early modern attitudes toward England's medieval past.

### *Local Historians and Regional Saints*

These native and founder saints continue to be remembered in some capacity throughout Britain, even now, because cities, towns, parishes, and landmarks bear their names and images. In the

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<sup>2</sup> D. Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past English Historical Culture 1500-1730* (Oxford, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See E. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven, 1992); K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1991). For a more recent assessment as it relates to the natural environment, see A. Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> For example, in *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England*, Alison Shell shows how oral tradition and local folklore was not merely known, used, and valued by the “unlettered” but was received by a much wider audience. See especially chapter 3.

sixteenth century, these material and visual depictions were often supplemented by the celebration of a feast, a trip to a chapel or holy well, and stories about the saint's exploits. Part of what ignited the antiquarian tradition in Britain was post-Reformation iconoclasm. The destruction of places was the impetus for many to record and collect what they could while it was still standing. These local historians from across the confessional divide expressed nostalgic loss; as Protestant William Dugdale put it, the destruction of monasteries, chantries, and shrines was "the greatest blow to Antiquities that ever England had, by the destruction and spoil of many rare manuscripts and no small number of famous monuments".<sup>5</sup> Protestant antiquarians were often torn between their appreciation for the medieval past and their religious beliefs, which told them that the past was full of Papist superstitions. Church and abbey ruins inspired a folk and print tradition of reverence for the old faith even among adherents of the new.<sup>6</sup> Protestant antiquarians negotiated faith and nostalgia in a few different ways. Some expressed reluctance to record certain superstitious customs, yet their explanation of why they were being left out lets us know they were still around, retaining them.<sup>7</sup> Others record local devotions in great detail in order to expose what they saw as the villainy of medieval Catholicism. For example, in his *Perambulation of Kent*, William Lambarde describes local legends about footprints left on a rock by St Mildreth, explaining that they were faked by "monkish counselors" trying to profit off of them; similarly, Robert Hegge criticizes the miracle traditions surrounding Cuthbert while Thomas Fuller mocks the healing tradition of St. Winefride's Well. Catholic antiquarians like William Claxton, on the other hand, record with sympathy everything they could find. Thus, while the retrospection inherent in antiquarian work tends to fit well with the religious motivations of Catholics or Protestants, each of these local historians included descriptions of these sites, regardless of the tone of the portrayal, preserving the landmarks, names, monuments, and customs surrounding founder saints across the countryside.

Fortunately, there is a rich British tradition of local history, which goes back to the topographies of the early modern period. Because this study focuses on the early reworking of origin narratives after the split with Rome, I examine sixteenth-century and very early seventeenth-century antiquarian sources. This was near the beginning of the antiquarian tradition in England, which exploded in the seventeenth century. These earlier antiquarians, what Jan Broadway loosely defines as "local historians" whose emphasis was "on the use of primary source materials," were also engaged in the chorographical work of mapping the landscape and describing local monuments.<sup>8</sup> The use of antiquarian sources could involve certain methodological issues: these records came from men embedded in context and motivated by a

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<sup>5</sup> W. Dugdale, 'Preface', *The Antiquities of Warwickshire Illustrated* (London, 1656), p. 147. See also O. Harris, "'The Greatest Blow to Antiquities that ever England Had': The Reformation and The Antiquarian Resistance", in *The Reformation Unsettled: British Literature and the Question of Religious Identity, 1560-1660*, ed. J. Frans van Dijkhuizen and R. Todd (Belgium, 2009), pp. 225-242, quote on p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> See Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past*, p. 187, and Shell, *Oral Culture*, especially chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> For specific examples of this, see Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, pp. 478-479.

<sup>8</sup> J. Broadway, *'No Historie So Meete': Gentry Culture and the Development of Local History in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Manchester, 2012), p. 4; Broadway uses "local historian" as synonymous with "antiquarian" throughout her work, as she believes that this term, though anachronistic in some ways, best represents their work. For more on the emergence of the English antiquarian tradition in the sixteenth century, especially its growth from the methods and practices of continental humanism, see A. Vine, *In Defiance of Time: Antiquarian Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2012).

combination of political, religious, and class differences.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, I pay particular attention to the ways in which antiquarians are portraying the saints and narratives represented in these sites, and they ways in which they reinterpret the arrival and spread of Christianity in the North.

### *Christianity in England: An Origin Story*

Prior to the English Reformation, the Venerable Bede's well-known *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* answered crucial questions regarding Christianity's beginnings in England—when, where, how, and by whom. According to Bede, an eighth-century Northumbrian monk known as the “Father of English History”, Pope Gregory the Great sent a missionary named Augustine to convert King Ethelbert of Kent and the pagan Anglo-Saxons at the end of the sixth century. Augustine became the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Roman mission spread to the North of England, the most powerful region at the time, where the Northumbrian kings converted to the faith. From there, local missionary saints continued to spread the gospel across the island during the seventh century, establishing churches and monasteries throughout the countryside.<sup>10</sup> This story was known and accepted by virtually everyone until the sixteenth century, when Henrician evangelicals first began to seek a historical basis for ecclesiastical separation from Rome. There was plenty in Bede's narrative to ruffle the feathers of English reformers, starting with an abundance of monks, miracles, and saints. Nevertheless, the early reformers believed that the primary point of contention lay in the link it established between the English Church and Rome; indeed, the Gospel had been sent by none other than Pope Gregory the Great. Many Protestants attempted to rework this narrative by claiming that certain regions of Britain were early outposts of True Christianity, cruelly repressed for centuries by the Anglo-Saxons and their Roman Catholicism, and that the ancient Britons preserved the pure version of the faith. Catholic historians, on the other hand, reinforced the idea of the English Church as the proud heir of their Angle ancestors with a Christianity that came directly from Rome. By the time Elizabeth took the throne, this debate had developed into a fully-fledged quest for the origins of English Protestantism. At the same time, English Catholicism struggled to regain territory, both ideological and geographical, and reappropriating the Christian foundation narrative played a fundamental role in the effort to do so.

### *Antiquarianism and the Conversion of the North: Oswald and Cuthbert*

After its introduction by Augustine, Roman Christianity gradually spread to the powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria where Paulinus, a member of the mission launched by Pope Gregory, converted King Edwin to Christianity in 627. It was the next-generation king Oswald, however, who did the most to spread the religion in the North. According to Bede, after Edwin's death on the battlefield by the united armies of Penda, the Anglo-Saxon pagan ruler of Mercia, and Cadwallon, the British Christian ruler in the West, the region reverted to paganism. King Oswald

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<sup>9</sup> The works in this essay are analyzed with full understanding of the postmodern principle that these historical monuments, towns, shrines, and landmarks do not exist outside the texts in which they are described. The fact that antiquarians explicitly foregrounded documentary and physical sources does not mean, of course, that they are “objective.”

<sup>10</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Judith McClure and Roger Collins, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The Augustine narrative is recounted in Book I, chapters 23-34, and the rest of the book covers the spread of Christianity throughout England.

famously defeated Cadwallon at the Battle of Heavenfield, uniting the kingdom of Northumbria once again and restoring Christianity to the region. Already a Christian convert himself due to his childhood in Scotland, he invited an Irish missionary from Iona, Aidan, to help convert the people, and he gave the island of Lindisfarne to Aidan as his episcopal see. Tensions between the Roman Christianity brought by Paulinus and the Celtic Christianity spread by Irish and Scottish monks came to a head at the famous Synod of Whitby in 664, where Roman customs won out. Oswald eventually died in battle in Shropshire at the hands of the pagan King Penda. His head is buried at Durham Cathedral in the tomb of St. Cuthbert, the patron saint of Northern England, who is also associated with obedience to the Roman tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the conversion of the North is a central episode in the narrative of early English Christianity. Because Christianity spread in the North immediately after Ethelbert's conversion by Augustine in Kent, many of these local saints receive national attention, especially in regard to the Christian foundation narrative. Several published local histories and collections show that the legacy of the North was famous enough for dissemination, making it unique in that its local traditions were well known outside of the region.<sup>12</sup>

The local antiquaries who surveyed and recorded the topography of the North in the sixteenth century, preserving the local landscape, also constructed a narrative of the arrival of Christianity in their region. Unlike the debates raging in the national histories of polemicists, Anglo-Saxon versus British spiritual ancestry does not seem to be of much of a concern in this case. Protestant antiquaries did not seize the opportunity to play up the role to the British King Cadwallon nor to denigrate the Anglo-Saxon Oswald. Rather, the more radical Protestants took issue with the miracles and superstition involved in the contemporary cults of figures like Oswald rather than the saint's actual role in the historical narrative. In other words, their arguments were more inspired by reformed belief and identity rather than embedded in a debate about confessional lineage. In fact, I argue that Protestant antiquarians highlight Anglo-Saxon victories over British rulers in the service of regional pride, demonstrating the extent to which the county gentry and urban elites possessed a strong sense of local identity.

There were many aspects shaping their identity that obviously contributed to the way they viewed these things: their own family line/pride. While Jan Broadway argues that these local historians were motivated by societal concerns, linking their interest in local history to their obsession with genealogy driven by the "patriarchal concept of descent", Daniel Woolf and others categorize them according to confessional affiliations, questioning the role that religion played in their histories. Patrick Collinson argues for a more pluralistic community that included local historians working together from across the confessional divide.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Oliver Harris

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<sup>11</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Judith McClure and Roger Collins, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The Augustine narrative is recounted in Book I, chapters 23-34, and the rest of the book covers the spread of Christianity throughout England.

<sup>12</sup> For example, *The Rites of Durham*, ed. J.T. Fowler, No. 107 (Surtees Society, 1903) and *The Origin and Succession of the Bishops of Durham*, ed. T.R. George Allan (Durham, 1779), both circulated widely in manuscript and were published in multiple editions in the seventeenth century.

<sup>13</sup> Broadway, 'No History so Meete', p. 154. Woolf, *Social Circulation*, pp. 185-187; P. Collinson, 'John Stow and Nostalgic Antiquarianism', in *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598-1720*, ed. J.F. Merritt (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 27-51. For more on the correlation between Catholicism and Antiquarianism in England, see R. Cust, 'Catholicism, Antiquarianism and Gentry Honour: The Writings of Sir Thomas Shirley', *Midland History*, 23 (1998), pp. 40-70. For a survey of the religious loyalties of sixteenth and seventeenth-century antiquarians see Harris, "'The Greatest Blow'", pp. 226-228.

downplays the sectarian nature of antiquarianism and argues that they were driven by class, national identity, and “simple fascination with the past” rather than religious agenda.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these concerns, I argue that a central motivation that should be considered is that of regional affinity and the persistence of local identity in the sixteenth century. In the works by moderate Protestant Robert Hegge and radical Protestant Christopher Watson, we can see how the narrative surrounding converter saints in a region known for Catholic resistance plays out locally, in contrast to national historians trying to present a neater, more comprehensive narrative.

### *Oswald's Popularity and Commemoration*

Oswald became a hugely popular saint in the North of England in the Middle Ages, but his commemorative landmarks existed beyond the North. For example, the church near his healing spring on the Welsh border (where he died during the Battle of Maserfield) was named White Church of Oswester, or “the town of Oswald”. His bones were scattered across Britain and the Continent, giving him a unique connection with many localities. As the story goes, Oswald's brother and successor, King Oswiu, had retrieved his head and arms from Penda's army and had a special church built for his arms at Bamburgh. This village on the east coast became the center of a dynastic cult that continued throughout the Middle Ages and even after the Reformation.<sup>15</sup> Originally buried on the battlefield, the rest of his body was quickly translated to Bardney Abbey in Lincolnshire, and then moved again in the tenth century to St. Peter's Priory in Gloucester, which was thenceforth known as St. Oswald's. His shrine in Gloucester was a popular local pilgrimage destination even into the sixteenth century. Three bones have apparently remained at Bardney, and monasteries across Britain claim to have other bones, including those in Bath, Glastonbury, Reading, St. Albans, Tynemouth, and York. Oswald's head has a messier history. According to Nicholas Harpsfield, Oswiu originally hid it at Lindisfarne, but it was later translated to Durham. Harpsfield and the local antiquaries report that it remains in Durham in the tomb of St. Cuthbert, the other major saint of the region, with whom Oswald had become associated.<sup>16</sup> However, rival head-shrines throughout Europe claim to have this relic, including Schaffhausen & Zug in Switzerland, Utrecht in the Netherlands, and Hildesheim in Germany.<sup>17</sup> St. Winnoc's monastery in Flanders also claims to have been given Oswald's body during the Danish invasions. All this is to say that the sites dedicated to Oswald enjoyed not only widespread domestic but also Continental fame.<sup>18</sup>

Oswald's *vita* appears in virtually all extant medieval and early modern English martyrologies as well as the Roman Martyrology. Although he was not included in the Elizabethan Calendar as part of official customs and festivals, he was discussed at length in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, where Foxe praises his bravery as a king, his virtuous life, and his dedication to

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<sup>14</sup> Harris, “The Greatest Blow,” p. 241.

<sup>15</sup> J. Wilson, *The English martyrologe conteynyng a summary of the lives of the glorious and renowned saintes of the three kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland* (St Omer, 1608), p. 165; Camden, *Britannia; or A Chorographical Description of Great Britain and Ireland, Together with the Adjacent Islands*, ed. Edmund Gibson (London, 1722), p. 853; D. Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo Saxon England* (Chichester, 1989), pp. 101-103.

<sup>16</sup>N. Harpsfield, *Historia Ecclesiastica Anglicana* (Douai, 1622), ‘Septimum Saeculum’, Caput XXVI, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> R. Bailey, ‘St Oswald's Heads’, in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (Stanford, 1995), pp. 195-209.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, *The English Martyrologe*, pp. 214.

charity for the poor in addition to crediting him with the conversion of Northumbria and influencing the conversion of the ruler of the West Saxons. Foxe even mentions Oswald's miraculously uncorrupted hand, though he expresses uncertainty regarding its authenticity.<sup>19</sup>

Alongside his continued popularity in the world of saintly devotion and pilgrimage, Oswald retained importance in the national historical narratives of the sixteenth century. The early medieval history of the North was central to competing versions of the national narrative, as the Synod of Whitby was a very important episode in the more polemical national histories. Northumbria was also the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom during the spread of Christianity in the seventh century, thus many of the missionaries that converted the rest of the island came from the North. Oswald, in particular, had the potential to be very useful in early modern confessional polemic. On the Protestant side, he was a king who utilized Celtic Christian missionaries, a possible anti-Roman thread, and his death had been portrayed as the martyrdom of Holy Saint Oswald at the hands of a pagan king. On the other hand, he defeated the last British Christian King to hold significant territory outside the West until the rise of the Tudors. Despite this potential, most Protestant antiquarians of the North did not use this particular episode of history to frame their confessional polemic. Celebration of regional heroes, on the other hand, was a central part of their narrative.

This can best be seen in the moderate Protestant Robert Hegge's treatment of St. Oswald.<sup>20</sup> Hegge, born in Durham, was very interested in the history of his native country. He wrote this treatise on the churches at Lindisfarne, Cuncastre, and Dunholme, and while he focuses much attention on Cuthbert, Oswald features prominently in his narrative. This manuscript is dated 1626, and it was published as *The Legend of St Cuthbert* first by Richard Baddeley, secretary to Bishop Thomas Morton of Durham, in 1663 and eventually by J. B. Taylor in 1816.

While Hegge certainly bemoans the corrupting influence of Rome upon the English Church, his other, more pressing goal is to celebrate local heroes and demonstrate the importance of the region in England's history.<sup>21</sup> Hegge credits Oswald with the conversion of the region to Christianity, noting that he "made conquest of religion as well as men". Indeed, he writes of Oswald's military exploits in terms of religious significance, explaining that the purpose of his defeat of the King of the Britons, Cadwallon, was so that "he might conquer likewise his people to Christianity".<sup>22</sup> Cadwallon, as the last powerful Briton ruler, was thereafter remembered as a national hero by the Britons. Indeed, many Protestants writing national histories at this time were

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<sup>19</sup> J. Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable, Happenyng in the Church with an Universall History of the Same* (London, 1583), Vol 1, Book 2, 175. The version of the Oswald legend in *Actes and Monuments* is taken from the life of St Oswald attributed to Byrhtferth of Ramsey, BL, Cotton MS Nero E. i/1 (fos. 3r-23v). Cf. 'Vita sancti Oswaldi autore anonymo' in *The Historians of the Church of York and its Archbishops*, ed. J. Raine, 3 vols., Rolls Series 71 (1879), I, pp. 403-4.

<sup>20</sup> I focus on BL Sloane MS 1322, R. Hegge, 'The Legend of St Cuthbert with the Antiquities of the Church of Durham', in which he talks at length about Oswald. A copy of this manuscript can also be found in Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MSS 40, 430, 28. For the many manuscript and printed editions, see P. Pattenden, 'Robert Hegge of Durham and his St. Cuthbert', *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland*, ns v (1980), pp. 107-123. The following quotes from Hegge's work come from *The Legend of St. Cuthbert*, ed. J.B. Taylor (Sunderland, 1816), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>21</sup> S. Scutts makes a similar argument in "'Truth Never Needed the Protection of Forgery:" Sainthood and Miracles in Robert Hegge's 'History of St. Cuthbert's "Churches at Lindisfarne, Cuncacestre, and Dunholme" (1625)', in *Saints and Sanctity*, Studies in Church History 47, eds. P. Clarke and T. Clayton (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 270-283.

<sup>22</sup> Hegge, *The Legend of St. Cuthbert*, p. 3.

claiming to be heirs of the Britons, having received their Christian heritage from them, not from the Anglo-Saxons who had been corrupted by Rome.<sup>23</sup> But Hegge does not paint a sympathetic picture of Cadwallon, emphasizing that Oswald's victory was "by virtue of the cross" and even proven righteous by "illustrious" miracles.<sup>24</sup> Thus the defeat of the Britons by Oswald in the name of Christianity is certainly not in service to the national narrative being constructed by the likes of John Bale and John Foxe; for Hegge, this episode was about local patriotism. Indeed, he finishes his Oswald section by commemorating "this great monarch, the pious founder of that church to whose womb all the churches of the North owe their birth".<sup>25</sup> Hegge then draws attention to the many places where Oswald's relics are still venerated, without any judgment of the veneration itself. He celebrates Oswald as a converter and martyr, finding in Oswald a perfect example of the region's glory and antiquity. Regional pride, then, must be taken into account alongside familial, confessional, and national polemic.

The celebration of St. Oswald's victories, miracles, and righteousness in local histories is one clear example, but the ways in which these antiquaries deal with the more controversial figure of St. Cuthbert is even more telling.

### *Cuthbert and Antiquarian Polemics*

As popular as Oswald was throughout the Middle Ages and into the sixteenth century, regional identity in Northumbria rested significantly on St. Cuthbert, a seventh-century monk and bishop of Lindisfarne. He became one of the most important medieval English saints due to the many miracles associated with intercessory prayer at his shrine.<sup>26</sup> The monks of Lindisfarne removed his purportedly uncorrupt body during the Danish invasions of the eleventh century, and it eventually ended up in Durham, where it remains today. This discovery of Cuthbert's uncorrupted body by the monks had given a new impetus to the cult, and his shrine, which includes the head of Oswald and the remains of Bede, helped his cult penetrate local identity. The shrine was dismantled in 1538, but Cuthbert was reburied in the same spot during the reign of Mary, and pilgrims continued to visit the desecrated shrine into the 1570s and 80s.<sup>27</sup> Like St. Oswald, Cuthbert was known as a fierce protector of the Northern lands, particularly Durham; the notion of the *Haliwerfolc*, "the people of the saint" or the community of the Liberty of St. Cuthbert, continued into the sixteenth century.<sup>28</sup> When talking of Durham, William Camden notes that it is still called "the Land or Patrimony of Saint Cuthbert because of his great fame", and

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, J. Bale, *Image of Both Churches* (Antwerp, 1545) and J. Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1583).

<sup>24</sup> Hegge, *The Legend of St. Cuthbert*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the popularity of Cuthbert's medieval cult, see the works of D. Rollason, especially *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North* (Stamford, 1998); *Northumbria, 500-1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 244-249; and *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Chichester, 1989). See also C. Liddy, *The Bishopric of Durham in the Late Middle Ages: Lordship, Community and the Cult of St Cuthbert* (Woodbridge, 2008), and J. Crook, *English Medieval Shrines* (Woodbridge, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> *Dobsons Drie Bobbes: A Story of Sixteenth Century Durham*, ed. EA Horsman (Oxford, 1955), p. 83; M. Harvey, "The Northern Saints After the Reformation in the Writings of Christopher Watson," *Saints and Sanctity*, pp. 258-269.

<sup>28</sup> Liddy, *The Bishopric of Durham*, p. 205; J. Scammell, "The Origin and Limitations of the Liberty of Durham," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 320 (Jul., 1966), pp. 449-473.



devotes several chapters to the history of his cult and description of his shrine.<sup>29</sup> There were also countless parish churches dedicated to Cuthbert beyond the North, and his life was included in virtually every medieval and early modern English martyrology. He appears in the 1584 Roman Martyrology, celebrated specifically for “peacefully reconciling the austerities of the Celts and their way of living with Roman customs”, and thus was associated by both Catholics and Protestants with obedience to the Roman tradition.<sup>30</sup>

Cuthbert, unlike Oswald, became a sticking point in the narratives crafted by the early modern antiquaries of the North, and in fact we can use the way Cuthbert and his cult were treated in these local histories as a litmus test to see where a particular antiquary fell on the confessional spectrum. The Catholic version, for example, celebrates Cuthbert’s miracles, his medieval cult, and the healings that had occurred at his shrine. However, there is a clear emphasis on the regional over the universal aspect of the saint. For example, writing in the 1590s, Catholic antiquary William Claxton’s treatment of Cuthbert reflects the attitude of many conservatives and recusants in the North, who had at their heart the cult of St. Cuthbert.<sup>31</sup> A native of Durham, Claxton laments the stripping of Durham Cathedral by Henry’s agents in 1539, especially the shrine to Cuthbert, calling it “one of the most sumptuous monuments in all England”, and praising Cuthbert for his intercession for the people of the North.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the purpose of the work is to record as much as possible of the decorations and rituals of the monastic church in Durham itself.

The Protestant antiquaries Hegge and Watson are both dubious of Cuthbert’s miracles, explaining that the monks had probably lied and deceived people into devotion. Hegge’s *Legend of St Cuthbert*, written early in the seventeenth century, attracted attention, circulating in manuscript form before it was published in three printed editions.<sup>33</sup> Hegge certainly denigrates the “superstition” and stories of miraculous healing that were said to have taken place at the shrine, but although he is skeptical of the cult, he, like the Catholic Claxton, is explicitly grateful for the role of Cuthbert’s celebrity in England’s consciousness.<sup>34</sup> He celebrates Cuthbert primarily as a protector of the region who always had the welfare of Durham in mind. Hegge specifically plays up episodes in which Cuthbert had guarded Durham against invasion and attack. For example, he recounts how Cuthbert protected Durham against the Scotts after King Edmund’s visit to his shrine before battle, making Cuthbert the official “Tutelary Deity”.<sup>35</sup> By highlighting Cuthbert’s provisions for the welfare and security of the North, Hegge attempts to reclaim Cuthbert from the universal Catholic “superstition” of healing and miracle working by emphasizing instead his role as patron and protector, demonstrating the crucial role Cuthbert and his cult still played in the consciousness of the people of the region.

Reworking local saintly devotion to fall more in line with Protestant identity while retaining regional loyalty was certainly a dominant trend among Northern antiquarians, but there

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<sup>29</sup> Camden, *Britannia*, pp. 771-774.

<sup>30</sup> For more on Cuthbert and regional identity in the North in particular, see D. Newton, *North-East England, 1569-1625: Governance, Culture and Identity* (Woodbridge, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Newton, *North-East England*, p. 143.

<sup>32</sup> *Rites of Durham*, p. 4. Evidence from some of the contents and the handwriting of the earliest dated copy, 1593, suggest that William Claxton was the author and compiler. See also A.I. Doyle, 'William Claxton and the Durham Chronicles', in *Books and Collectors 1200-1700. Essays presented to Andrew Watson*, ed. J. P. Carley and C. G. Colin (London, 1997), pp. 335-355, see especially pp. 347-8.

<sup>33</sup> For the many manuscript and printed editions, see Pattenden, 'Robert Hegge of Durham and his St. Cuthbert', pp. 107-23.

<sup>34</sup> Hegge, *Legend of St. Cuthbert*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

is one notable exception. Christopher Watson, another Durham native but a more radical Protestant, not only denigrated Cuthbert's life and miracles but also his historical association with the Synod of Whitby and the Roman Church. Though he praises the Celtic tradition over the Roman, he still shows disdain for Cuthbert's origins, calling him "an Irish man and bastard borne" who was called in from the monastery in Scotland to bring "that devilish doctrine" to England.<sup>36</sup> Though it seems contradictory, Watson then portrays the Celtic Cuthbert as representative of Roman Christianity, highlighting his obedience to Rome after Whitby. However, Watson spends very little time on the actual historical figure of Cuthbert, and all of his examples of Roman abuses come from the legacy of his cult, referring mostly to "idolatry" and Cuthbert's retributive miracles, which, according to Watson, is not the way a true saint would behave.<sup>37</sup> Thus, while in practice Watson merely denigrates medieval superstition, it is clear that his goal is to argue for the independence of the Protestant Church, which is much more in line with the comprehensive histories of Bale and Foxe than with the regional histories of the North. There are several reasons for this: Watson was associated with Matthew Parker and the historians who were collecting manuscripts for an ecclesiastical history, specifically in order to reappropriate the history of English Christianity for the Elizabethan Church. Watson also explicitly notes that he is relying on Foxe, Bale, and Jewell for the outline of his narrative.<sup>38</sup> His structure, then, was similar to those writing more comprehensive histories, and his goal was to produce his work in three volumes: pre-Augustine Christianity, Augustine to Whitby, and Whitby to the present. Furthermore, Watson was writing in 1574, in the wake of the 1569 Northern Rebellion, which also contributes to his loyalty to the Crown over his rebellious hometown.<sup>39</sup> In this way Watson's work has more in common with national histories rather than a local antiquarian work, even though he focuses on the history of Northeast England.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Watson's attack on Cuthbert, though drawing on the widely circulated works of Bale, Foxe, and Jewel, shows how some aspects of these larger narratives were indeed playing out locally. In other words, in contrast to the notion that antiquarian work is the collection of miscellaneous facts and local/familial minutiae, Watson's work shows that many local historians did apply analysis, placing local figures and events in a wider context. Although an important part of the work of local historians was to celebrate their regional identity, they were not unaware of their region's role in national narratives. There were a variety of ways to negotiate the competing and complementary narratives of national, confessional, and local allegiances. Ultimately, the different treatments of Cuthbert show there was no one way to deal with him; while many Protestants described these areas as the "dark corners of the land", viewing them as economically, socially, and religiously backwards in comparison with sophisticated urban centers, the complex and multi-faceted reconstructions across the confessional divide flies in the face of stereotypes of the Northeast as isolated and unlearned.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> BL MS Cotton Vitellius C IX, fol. 68r.

<sup>37</sup> Vitellius, fol. 84r. See also Harvey, 'The Northern Saints', pp. 258-269.

<sup>38</sup> Vitellius, fol. 66r, 86r, 94r.

<sup>39</sup> Harvey, 'Northern Saints', p. 269.

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of the various local phenomena comprised by antiquarian and apocalyptic history contributed to the development of English national consciousness in the sixteenth century, see Andrew Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (Ithaca, 2004), pp. 45-80.

<sup>41</sup> C. Hill, 'Puritans and "The Dark Corners of the Land,"' *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 3-47.

### Conclusions

These two saints had the potential to be very useful in early modern polemics. Oswald was a king who utilized Celtic Christian missionaries and killed the last major Briton ruler while Cuthbert was a miracle-working, celibacy-advocating monk, the epitome of medieval Catholic identity. As we saw from his entry in the Roman Martyrology, Cuthbert was known for his adherence to Roman tradition after the Synod of Whitby. In some ways, then, the history of Durham was ill-suited for sixteenth-century Elizabethan Protestantism. In fact, the role of Durham, and Cuthbert in particular, in the Northern Rebellion in 1569 shows the endurance of Roman Catholic commitment in the North in direct opposition to Elizabeth's Protestant regime. However, regional affinity for their heroes, as well as the different concerns of local histories as opposed to national ones, made these figures palatable and even beloved by many Protestants. Protestant antiquarians did not surge on the opportunity to play up Oswald's Celtic imports over Edwin's Roman conversion, and instead celebrated Oswald as a local war hero. They did not, as national historians did, claim any confessional lineage from the native Britons over the Anglo-Saxon king-converters; indeed, they highlighted the piety and holiness of Oswald in contrast to paganism. Similarly, Cuthbert's medieval cult, while called out for its crude medieval superstition, still retained great importance to the community. Reworking Cuthbert to fit in a Protestant world was certainly possible, as Hegge, Camden, and others showed. Thus, regional historians framed the past with very different concerns than more widely-circulated polemicists like Thomas Stapleton and John Jewel—social standing, familial lineage, confessional concerns, and, most potently, regional identity all played a dynamic role in the narratives they constructed.

Narrative lives of saints, along with their images, relics, and sacred spaces, not only shed light on devotional practices, but also reveal the ways in which collective memory of the past was constructed. They can be read as historical material, providing alternative histories that disrupt more univocal national narratives. Indeed, the power of saints in shaping the historical imagination of English people comes from the fact that they not only relayed certain versions of the past, but also legitimized them. The confidence in human history to inform matters of religious belief and practice made them potent tools in shaping and reshaping spatial identities. These sources were used by Catholics to negotiate between tradition and Trent as well as between Catholic communities and Protestant authorities. Protestants, either through destruction, criticism, or nostalgic remembrance, used these saints to deal with historical rupture and express cultural and political change. Looking more closely, then, at the sacred historical imagination of local communities reveals a more nuanced English historical culture – one that highlights the continuing importance of county and community history in shaping collective identities.

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