

Britton Elliott Brooks, *Restoring Creation. The Natural World in the Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac*, Nature and Environment in the Middle Ages, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2019, 315 pp., ISBN: 9781843845300. Cloth: £70

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In this monograph, Britton Elliott Brooks joins a growing number of scholars who seek to challenge the misconception that medieval people had a predominantly negative perception of the natural world. Such works seek to «bring medieval literature into dialogue with [ecocritical] issues, analysing medieval constructions and interpretations of the non-human world as expressed in literature, by considering them in their historical context» (p. 1). Brooks' study aims to elucidate the theological underpinnings of saints' relationship with the physical world, as well as demonstrate that «Anglo-Saxons actively considered humanity's relationship with the non-human world, and represented it in their literary endeavours» (p. 18). Underlying Brooks' argument is the idea that Creation—which Brooks defines as the physical world created by God in Genesis—can be restored to its prelapsarian state through sanctity. The effect of the Fall on Creation is explored in many exegetical texts, the most important to this study being those of Augustine and Bede. Brooks explains that in Augustinian exegesis, «it is [humanity's] relational orientation that has been distorted by the Fall, not Creation itself» (p. 11). Bede, however, understands Creation's postlapsarian state as a result of Adam's sin and argues that «the relationship can be restored to a prelapsarian state by way of saints, whose sanctity is great enough that the relational effects of the Fall are taken away» (p. 13). Brooks limits this study to three versions each of the lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac, selecting these saints and their *vitae* «because of their direct and transformative interaction with Creation» (p. 15). The result is a focused, detailed analysis that lays out a clear argument and methodology for understanding the relationship between sanctity and Creation in Anglo-Saxon texts.

In Chapter One («Monastic Obedience and Prelapsarian Cosmography: The Anonymous *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*»), Brooks uses Augustinian exegesis to explicate Cuthbert's relationship with the postlapsarian world in the anonymous *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (VCA). Brooks rejects previous interpretations of the role of Creation in this *vita*, arguing instead that the physical miracles performed by Cuthbert demonstrate restoration of the physical, postlapsarian world through «perfect saintly obedience» (p. 19). His acts of obedience restore proper hierarchy, and this restoration allows Creation to function as it would have in its prelapsarian state. In the miracle of the sea animals, for example, Cuthbert demonstrates monastic obedience by offering hospitality to a disguised angel. Later, after bathing in the cold sea, two sea animals

mirror this act of hospitality when they dry and warm Cuthbert's feet. Brooks interprets this pair of scenes as evidence that «the imitative nature of monastic ordering participates in the restored divine order of the universe» (p. 28). Cuthbert's sanctity, as demonstrated through his obedience to the angels, restores the hierarchy of obedience in prelapsarian Creation, which results in the sea animals' service.

In Chapter Two («Ruminative Poetry and the Divine Office: Bede's Metrical *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*»), Brooks analyzes the roles of obedience and sanctity in Bede's metrical *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*VCM*). For Bede, this obedience is specifically monastic and linked to following the hours of the Divine Office. When Cuthbert demonstrates «obedience to the ordering of the hours in the Divine Office», he is miraculously provided for in such a way as to indicate the restoration of prelapsarian Creation (p. 82). Brooks also suggests that Bede, through his organization and chapter headings, presents Cuthbert as «an idealised Gregorian monk-pastor, who unifies the active and contemplative lives» (p. 107).

In Chapter Three («Bede's Exegesis and Developmental Sanctity: The Prose *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*»), Brooks continues to explore the role of obedience in sanctity in Bede's prose *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*VCP*). This text was written about twenty years after the *VCM*, and although Bede presents a slightly different path for Cuthbert to attain the sanctity necessary to restore Creation, the end result is the same. Whereas the *VCA* and *VCM* demonstrated a «model of static sanctity», the *VCP* emphasizes a «developmental sanctity that ultimately leads to the restoration of select portions of Creation» (p. 124). In developmental sanctity, «the saint must progress to a certain point in the saintly life before certain kinds of miracles can be performed», and Brooks argues that under this model it is only once a saint has reached spiritual majority that his sanctity is enough to restore Creation (p. 125). Once Cuthbert has progressed in his sanctity in a monastic setting, he settles on Farne «where after his victory over the inhabiting demons he is able to reach spiritual majority, and thus bring about moments of Creation's restoration» (p. 148).

At this point, Brooks turns away from the *vitae* of Cuthbert to explore three versions of the life of Guthlac. In Chapter Four («Enargaic Landscapes and Spiritual Progression: Felix's *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*»), Brooks explores the role of enargaic description in Felix's *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* (*VSG*) and how this relates to spiritual majority as a path for restoring prelapsarian Creation. The *VSG* is set in the fens of East Anglia, which is also where the author and his patron, King Ælfwald, lived. Felix's descriptions of this setting «depict[] the physical world in a vivid and realistic manner for the purpose of allowing the reader to experience it as an 'eyewitness'» (p. 174). Brooks suggests that this realistic description of the landscape is integral to Felix's «interest[] in the active role of Creation in the spiritual development of the saint» (p. 175). After achieving spiritual majority, Guthlac faces off against a bestial horde of demons, and, having driven them away, he is able to move on to the restoration of Creation.

In the fifth and final chapter of the book («Landscape Lexis and Creation Restored: The *Old English Prose Life of Guthlac and Guthlac A*»), Brooks explores Guthlac's relationship with the physical landscape in two vernacular texts—the *Old English Prose Life of Guthlac (OEPG)* and *Guthlac A*. The *OEPG* is based on the *VSG*, but the author has simplified Felix's work with an aim toward «wider appeal and deeper focus than the Latin text» (p. 230). In order to achieve this effect, the author uses a broad (and possibly newly coined) vocabulary and borrows heavily from the language of boundary clauses. Brooks also argues that the «consistent tightening of Felix's depiction... provide[s] a more unified central focus on the restoration of Creation» (p. 257). In *Guthlac A*, the restoration of Creation is coupled with restoration of humanity's heavenly home. Brooks argues that «Guthlac emerges as the New Adam in two interrelated ways, repairing the Fall between humanity and Creation, and restoring the eschatological trajectory for humanity so that it might fill the glorious dwellings made vacant in heaven» (p. 233). Unlike the realistic depictions of the fens in the *VSG* and the *OEPG*, the action of *Guthlac A* takes place in woodland. Brooks argues that this location is meant to suggest «a potential landscape, one that is inherently desirable but existing in a kind of stasis [...] defined by its hiddenness and fundamental lack of a rightful guardian» (p. 261). This space invites Guthlac to *steward* the land, «as Adam formerly was meant to do for prelapsarian Creation» (p. 268).

In the Conclusion («Afterlives of Cuthbert and Guthlac»), Brooks touches briefly on later versions and adaptations of the lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac. Although the popularity of these saints continued, the emphasis on the restoration of Creation lessened, perhaps because «the demand for pastoral clarity overruled the complex exegesis of the earlier tradition» (p. 290). Texts like *Durham* retain an «echo[] of prelapsarian harmony», but it is «founded not on containment but on the balanced relationship with the monastic city and wild Creation» (pp. 288-289). Ælfric's version of Cuthbert's miracles in Homily II.X, for example, retains the emphasis on animal miracles but gives God credit for their occurrence, avoiding «the more complicated ability of sanctity to bring about prelapsarian relationships» (p. 289). Whereas the restoration of Creation is simplified in the Cuthbert tradition, it is often omitted in the later Guthlac tradition, sometimes because of truncation, sometimes in favor of highlighting other aspects of Guthlac's life.

Restoring Creation will be of interest to scholars of hagiography, ecocriticism, and Anglo-Saxon England, as it provides not only a strong argument for understanding Creation in the various *vitae* of Cuthbert and Guthlac but also a useful methodology that emphasizes reliance upon Anglo-Saxon theology over modern theory. Brooks makes a strong argument that «Creation as understood through Augustinian/Bedan exegesis was the frame by which these early Anglo-Saxon hagiographers constructed the relationship between Creation and the saints Cuthbert and Guthlac» (p. 292). The book is well-structured, points are clearly articulated, and ample close readings of key passages are provided. Brooks also leaves open many avenues for further exploration of the restoration of Creation in other saints' lives. *Restoring Creation* focuses on

Cuthbert and Guthlac because they are both eremitic saints whose miracles are often closely intertwined with Creation, but this emphasis naturally leaves us questioning the implications of this study on other *vitae*. Brooks notes briefly the kind of miracles that involve earth upon which saints' blood has been spilled, but there is not sufficient space in this monograph to fully explore the relationship between the saint's body and Creation. Likewise, one could also consider the extent of the influence of the restoration of Creation on Anglo-Saxon texts—did this concept permeate other genres, like elegiac poetry? Finally, it is also important to note that although the text is primarily interested in Cuthbert and Guthlac, many other saints' lives are discussed over the course of the book, including several lives of Saint Martin and Evagrius' *Vita Antonii*, making this book relevant not only to scholars of Anglo-Saxon hagiography, but those of hagiography more generally.