

Saints and Mystics in Legend and Tradition

The Seventeenth Legendary Weekend of The Folklore Society

2-3 September 2023



The Chapter House, St Albans Cathedral, Sumpter Yard, St Albans, Herts AL1 1BY



PROGRAMME and ABSTRACTS

Friday 1 Sept 2023: meet at The Peahen, 14 London Road, St Albans AL1 1NG from 6.30ish (kitchen closes 9pm)

Saturday 2 Sept

10.30 Registration and coffee

11.00-12.00

First Session

11.00 Eric Huang: *The Agony and the Ecstasy*

During the Renaissance, what were once gruesome images of tortured saints were transformed into sensual works of art: bulging biceps, repentant sinners, barrelled chests, bare bottoms, and barely legal pin-ups replaced medieval depictions of horrific suffering and death. From the 1400s onwards, the faces and bodies of Catholic figures were often portraits of illicit lovers commissioned by wealthy bishops, bankers, kings: erotica that passed as devotional images secreted in secluded chapels and invitation-only drawing rooms for private delectation. Covering the legends of Saints Sebastian, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist, Catherine of Alexandria, and other Biblical figures from Judith to the Virgin Mary—and even Christ himself—‘The Agony and the Ecstasy’ explores the erotic in Catholic hagiography and art, and delves deeply into the sacred and carnal ecstasies elicited by ever-evolving religious legends since the Renaissance.

11.30 Robert McDowall: *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, or Protestant Porkies?*

Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, whose original and full title is *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church*, is a Protestant history of martyrs first published in 1563. The book includes controversial accounts of the sufferings of Protestants under the Catholic Church, particularly in England and Scotland where the book had enormous influence on long-lasting popular notions of Catholicism. Four editions appeared in Foxe's lifetime, followed by numerous later editions, as well as countless abridgments under the shorter title *Book of Martyrs*. John Foxe's survey of Christian martyrs throughout history laid strong emphasis on those who had died for their faith during the reign of Queen Mary (1553–58), and was widely read

during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was the most read book after the Bible in the UK up to the eighteenth century and would grace the bookshelves of the literate with pride of place next to the Bible. This paper will briefly set out the history of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and focus on some of the highly graphic stories of martyrdom in this polemical book.

12.00 Break and introductions

12.30-13.30 Second Session

12.30 Matt Champion: *The Wannabe Saints of the Middle Ages*

The later Middle Ages was a religious landscape dominated by the cult of the saints. Every church was a gallery of saintly imagery, and the annual calendar of the year a reinforcing catalogue of familiar saints' days and festivals. Yet, the later Middle Ages in particular was also a time of wannabe saints: there were the cults of individuals—be they monards, religious, or just plain commoners—who were generally recognised as being saints, but who never quite officially achieved such recognition; and others who didn't quite enjoy such widespread recognition, whose 'cult' may have been confined to a single region, or even parish. The saints that never were. This paper examines the surviving physical and documentary evidence for these 'saintly' cults, and shines a light on many long-forgotten religious loyalties.

13.00 Wayne Perkins: *John Schorn, Gentleman Born, Conjured the Devil into a Boot*

John Schorn is one of England's most enigmatic 'folk' saints. Medieval rood screen paintings show him carrying a boot containing a small devil which, apparently, he made appear/disappear as symbol of his power. 'Master,' 'Maister' or 'Sir' John Schorn(e), Rector of North Marston, Buckinghamshire, was reputed to have exhibited miraculous powers. Following his death in the 14th century, his shrine became the third most popular pilgrimage destination after Canterbury and Walsingham; yet, mysteriously, he remained uncanonised. A number of wayside inns held the name 'The Boot;' Schorn's 'Territory of Grace' is said to have encapsulated the whole of the south-east England and beyond. This talk sheds light upon the psychogeography of the pilgrims' mythic landscape at and around the Schorn shrine, and finally, it asks two questions: was his reputation based upon a misinterpretation of his cult object (the boot)? and 'where now lie the bones of John Schorn?'

13.30 Break for lunch

14.30-16.00 Third Session

14.30 Keith Shipton: *St Erkenwald*

St Erkenwald, founder of the abbeys at Barking and Chertsey, was Bishop of London 675-693 and his shrine was one of the chief glories of Old St Paul's Cathedral. It seems likely that the poem bearing his name, 'De Erkenwaldo,' and which has the character of a saint's legend, was composed to help maintain the cult of the saint at St Paul's. Although our only manuscript of the poem dates from the last quarter of the fifteenth century, on the evidence of its language, dialect and style it is thought to have been composed at least a century earlier, and is often associated with the work of the poet of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.' With a combination of synopsis, translation and quotation, I aim to show how this poem, through its compelling narrative and vivid description, can illuminate for us today the medieval sense of history and community,

the significance of ritual and, indeed, the idea of the saint as mediator between God and man.

15.00 Gail-Nina Anderson: *Picturing the Holy Uncanny, or Bearding the Saint in a Good Cause*

Christian themes in visual art often require the artist to picture something not usually seen in the material world, angels and demons being obvious examples. Much rarer are those images of female saints who, through divine intervention, have been enabled to grow beards. Most depictions of female saints picture them in the contemporary terms of ideal womanhood, but these unusual examples have to negotiate issues of the inappropriate 'unfeminine' to tell their stories. This talk examines the narratives and representation of these bearded ladies and considers their changing identity as virginal heroines, freaks or gender-defying icons on the spectrum of sexual identity.

15.30 Pamela Thom-Rowe: *Sanctity and Sanctuary: The Enduring Story of St Melangell*

When a hare sought sanctuary under Melangell's robe a hunter, a local prince, was so impressed by her piety and devotion he rewarded her with a gift of land where Melangell established a sanctuary and place of healing for all. It is written that hares kept her company for the rest of her life. Local folklore and land features still retain the imprint of Melangell's story and her association with the hare persists today. Despite its location in a remote Welsh valley her shrine continues to attract many visitors. This presentation considers the background to her story and how, in this time of environmental decay and destruction, her story remains relevant continuing to inspire artists, writers and modern-day pilgrims.

16:00 Break

16.30-18.00 Fourth Session

16.30 David Rotman: *The Cult of Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem*

The paper is part of an ongoing research project dealing with the various ways in which religious rites and folktales involving Rachel the Matriarch have changed since the Oslo Accords. Folktales about the biblical matriarch date back to the Rabbinic era. Moreover, a unique Jewish cult at Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem significantly intensified from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. These rites, which were mostly female-led, were analysed in a series of previous studies, most of which traced their development from their inception up to the 1990s. My research project explores the cult and its main folktales from the 1990s to the present day. My research shows the degree to which the political sphere impacts modern day Israeli-Jewish folk traditions, including bringing about the establishment of new traditions. Specifically, I argue that the increasingly political significance of the cult has led to its masculinization.

17.00 Sofia Evemalm Graham: *Eilean nam Ban, The Island of the Women*

This paper will discuss Eilean nam Ban ('Island of the women'), an island located in the Sound of Iona. One of the most enduring stories associated with it relates how Eilean nam Ban was thus named because St Columba banished all women to the island, refusing to suffer their presence on Iona. Through an examination of early modern and later accounts I will consider questions relating to who has the authority to create and transmit etymological narratives in an Iona context. For whom and what purpose are they created? How do authors in different time-periods provide a sense of authenticity?

ty in their accounts? Detailed analysis of these accounts is particularly valuable in demonstrating the richness of early modern sources for the place-names of Iona.

17.30 Mark Lewis: *Seiriol and Cybi*

The sixth century was the golden age for Celtic Christianity in Wales and the saints were often men and women from noble families, including kings and princes, who chose to renounce privilege and lead an ascetic life. This talk will examine the lives and traditions of two influential saints of this period who established monastic communities on the Isle of Anglesey, North Wales. According to tradition, St Seiriol and St Cybi were close friends who met weekly to walk prayerfully together and both are regarded by many as the patron saints of Anglesey. They are both still venerated in the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and St Seiriol is still celebrated with a devotional annual pilgrimage to Penmon Priory on February 1st which is led by the Orthodox Church.

Sunday 3 Sept

10.30 Coffee

11.00-12.30 First Session

11.00 Diana Coles: *The Solitude and Silence of the Wilderness? Or Maybe Not.*

The sixth century is known as the Age of Saints when missionaries from Ireland brought Christianity to the pagan tribes of northern and western post-Roman Britain. The Isle of Bute was the birthplace of two of the missionary saints, Chattan and his nephew Blane. This paper looks at what is known about these two saints and about the wider political context of sixth-century northern Britain in general and Dalriada in particular. It will also look at them in reference to the phenomenon of the Christian missionaries, mainly originating from Ireland, who established what came to be known as the Celtic church in the years immediately before Pope Gregory sent Saint Augustine on a mission to convert the pagan nations of southern Britain to Christianity. The sources that we have for this time are scanty but between the slender written resources and the archaeological record it is possible to build up a picture of the world of Chattan and Blane.

11.30 David Hopkin: *Lacemakers*

Lacemakers in many European countries sang while they worked, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors have assembled several thousand songs that formed part of their work culture. In Catholic countries, lacemakers' training was often overseen by nuns or lay sisters, or was otherwise under the auspices of the Church. In later life too, lacemakers retained strong clerical connections. The imprint of the Church was evident on their repertoires, which included many religious ballads celebrating saints. Popular saints among lacemakers include the Virgin, regional patrons of the lace industry such as Saint Anne, Saint Nicholas, Saint Catherine, and a variety of other well-known saints such as Saint Barbara, Saint Margaret of Hungary, Saint Alexis, the Magdalen, Saint Mary of Egypt, and so on. However, they also sang about more local and unfamiliar saints, in some cases saints completely unknown to the Bollandists or other hagiographers. These include Saints Matthea, Denise, Maruut, Katonia, and others. These uncanonical saints sometimes got up to questionable activities too. In this paper, I'll try and explain their presence in lacemakers' songs and working lives.

12.00 Lucy Hornberger: *Saints, Bells and Bell Ringing*

Bells are thought to have been introduced into Christian worship around 400 CE by Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, but over the centuries, bells, bell founding and bell ringing have also been associated with a number of other saints—most notably Dunstan, Agatha and Barbara—for both reasonable and rather bizarre reasons. This presentation will explore why each of these saints has an association with bell ringing, the tradition of naming and in some cases baptising bells with the names of saints, and how contemporary bell ringers are still, on occasion, moved to celebrate these saints' days with peals, 'firing', and even cake!

12.30 Lunch

13.30-14.30 Tour of Cathedral