

UC Santa Barbara

Volume 2, Issue 2 (Fall 2022)

Title

An Analysis of Saint Cuthbert and His Relics

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0nm483k5>

Journal

The UC Santa Barbara Undergraduate Journal of History, 2(2)

Author

Jensen, Eliciana

Publication Date

2022-10-01

Peer reviewed

FALL 2022

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF HISTORY

Vol. 2 | No. 2



© *The UCSB Undergraduate Journal of History*

The Department of History, Division of Humanities and Fine Arts
4329 Humanities and Social Sciences Building
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California
93106-9410

Website

<https://undergradjournal.history.ucsb.edu/>

Submissions

Papers can be submitted for publication anytime through our submission portal on our website. Manuscripts must be between 3000 and 7500 words in length and completed as part of a student's undergraduate coursework at an accredited degree-granting institution. Recent graduates may submit their work so long as it is within 12 months of receiving their degree. The *Journal* is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall. See the *Journal* website for more information.

Cover Image

UAW Strike, West Campus Picket, day one, UC Santa Barbara.
Credit: Jarett Henderson

Editorial Board

Madison Barton
Michael Broman
Serena Dominguez
Madeline Josa
Victoria Korotchenko
Zoë Lo
Albert Lopez

Sarah Margaron
Sujitha Polimera
Gagan Singh
Ava Thompson
Philip Tian
Keren Zou

Faculty Director

Jarett Henderson

An Analysis of Saint Cuthbert and His Relics

*Eliciana Jensen*¹

Saint Cuthbert is one of the most venerated English saints, whose relics and remains are currently housed at Durham Cathedral, a highly visited pilgrimage site for many believers and scholars. Some historians see Cuthbert as having two distinct individual lives. One was during his years when he was alive and a devout holy man in the seventh century CE, and the other in his afterlife. This analysis focuses on his second life as a saint and how his remains and relics were valuable to the monks of Lindisfarne. His relics were also reminiscent of the man behind the saint; many of his treasures were personal items he carried with him when he was alive. Relics were holy items that were commonly housed in reliquaries. They could be personal items, remains of a holy person, items with bodily fluids, or different personal gospels and books. Holy items could vary, but they had to be associated with a saint or other religious figures.² Lay people in the Medieval era often revered relics because of the holiness they represented. They saw them in close relation to talismans.³ However, relics were also highly valued by different cult leaders, cathedrals, and other church institutions. This was because it legitimized any shrine sites in patronage to a particular saint or religious figure.⁴ It is important to note that the community gave relics their meaning and importance. Many relics were ordinary objects assigned holiness because of their association with a godly figure.

Cuthbert died in 687, and eleven years later, his body was removed from its burial place in Lindisfarne to be examined by the monks for evidence of sainthood. His remains appeared to be undecayed, which they believed was a sign of godliness.⁵ The incorruptible remains of a saint were just as crucial as the tomb site and the relics of said saint. This was because all these elements displayed the embodiment of the saint in the afterlife and holiness.⁶ Cuthbert's incorruptible body demonstrated his divinity and showed the monks of Lindisfarne that he was still present in their community. His body then experienced centuries of historical conflict and accumulated many holy relics until the end of its journey at Durham cathedral. The monks of Lindisfarne preserved Cuthbert's relics because they influenced the local religious community. This impact involved many

¹ Eliciana Jensen has graduated from UCSB with a B.A. in History and a minor in American Indian and Indigenous studies. She is currently working for the Community Wellness program of American Indian Health & Services, a Santa Barbara community health clinic.

² Hahn, Cynthia. "What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?" *Numen* 57, no. 3/4 (2010): p. 286 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20789594>.

³ Vauchez, André. *Sainthood in The Later Middle Ages*, Great Britain, Cambridge University Press, 1997. p. 16.

⁴ Brown, Peter. *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 125.

⁵ Backhouse, Janet. *The Lindisfarne Gospels / Janet Backhouse*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1981. p. 10.

⁶ Woodward, Kenneth L. *Making Saints, How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint. Who Doesn't, and Why*. New York, N.Y: Simon and Schuster. p. 59.

different miracles, which resulted in the creation of a great new cathedral in Durham, which became a center for religious pilgrimage.

It is to be noted that the cult of saints changed over time and developed into one that resembles the modern-day process of canonization. This is also indicative of the globalization of saints and their control by the Catholic papal authority. For instance, specific rules were developed over time for the canonization of a saint. When regulated by the Church, the canonization process consisted of merits, reputation, and remains. The use of merits stood as a way to validate miracles performed by the saint in life and their remains in the afterlife.⁷ These remains were often physical remnants or objects classified as relics. The next necessary thing to the canonization process was this emphasis on the reputation of holiness.⁸ This was based on the personal history of the saint before their death; it analyzed if they were a devout member of the faith and purely embodied holiness. However, in the early Middle Ages, saintly cults were particular to the region and not controlled by a common religious institution. The regulation of saints by papal decree came later in the thirteenth century.⁹ This assertion of control by the Catholic Church came from a need to assert papal authority over Christendom.¹⁰ By incorporating the cult of saints, the Church managed to enhance its power in the communities developed around saintly figures. However, this aspect of religion was an essential part of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. The localized importance of saints spread the faith widely through the populace.¹¹ During the time of Cuthbert, he achieved saintliness through popular acclamation of the community around his tomb. It is to be noted that sainthood was usually declared through the authority of an acting bishop of the area.¹² The community and different religious figures, such as monks, recognized the signs of godliness, such as devotion to God, miracles, and in Cuthbert's case, the incorruptible remains. The community requested the local bishop to recognize someone as a saint.¹³ Based on his history of renowned godliness and the hope of creating a haven for pilgrims, the monks of Lindisfarne recognized him and brought his case forward to the local bishop after Cuthbert's death.

To properly know St. Cuthbert, we must understand his life as a hermit, monk, and bishop. In this article, I use a combination of archaeological sources from C. F. Battiscombe's work *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert* and a contextual source from the seventh century, the Venerable Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert*. Cuthbert was from the northern region of England known as Northumbria. He ventured down a religious path at an early age and moved through different religious ranks. He started as a monk, and toward the end of his life, he became the Bishop of Lindisfarne.¹⁴ In his early career as a holy man, Cuthbert traveled throughout Northumbria on missionary work and preached the word of

⁷ Vauchez. "The Process of Canonization (c.1200 tp c.1270)." p. 36.

⁸ Woodward. "Saints, Their Cults, and Canonization." p. 62.

⁹ Vauchez. "The Process of Canonization (c.1200 tp c.1270)." p. 36.

¹⁰ Woodward. "Saints, Their Cults, and Canonization." p. 66.

¹¹ USCCB. "Saints." 2021. <https://www.usccb.org/offices/public-affairs/saints>.

¹² USCCB. "Saints."

¹³ USCCB. "Saints."

¹⁴ Backhouse. "Lindisfarne and St. Cuthbert." p. 7.

God.¹⁵ This is where many of the relics I will discuss later in this article came into his possession. During his travels, there were reports of different miracles that he performed. The miracle work he conducted varied from healing people, witnessing angels, and banishing winds and animals. Many of St. Cuthbert's miracles were recorded in the Venerable Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert*. This is the main primary source I utilize to analyze the miracles of Cuthbert both in his life and afterlife. The Venerable Bede was a monk in the monastery of Jarrow in Northumbria.¹⁶ His work, *Life of St Cuthbert*, was written in approximately 721.¹⁷ He based his writings on an earlier collection of work written anonymously in the late seventh century. According to the prologue of *Life of St Cuthbert*, the monks of Lindisfarne had requested Bede to compose an account of Cuthbert's life and remark on his miracles.¹⁸ In Cuthbert's lifetime, the alluring nature of living as a hermit called to him, and he spent many years on Farne island alone, sometimes entertaining monks who would come and visit him.¹⁹ Cuthbert was a devout holy man who often performed miracles, saw visions, and predicted his death.

One of the miracles he performed while alive was called the "Uncooked Goose."²⁰ Described in Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*, it was supposed to explain the importance of obedience when following the word of God. Cuthbert told some visiting monks to cook and eat a goose to have a safe trip home by sea, but they disobeyed and did not eat it. They then suffered seven days of rough seas, only to come back and eat the goose, after which the sea calmed down enough for them to venture home.²¹ The nature of this miracle was unusual. We assume miracles were about healing different ailments, and while some of Cuthbert's earlier miracles had healing elements, this one did not. It is to be noted that what made the "Uncooked Goose" strange was the way it implied that Cuthbert's words were the will of God. The defiance of the monks caused them to waste time at sea. It taught them that they should not deny a well-intentioned gift of food, even when they did not feel they needed it. On the other hand, this miracle did reveal an important fact about Cuthbert: he emphasized the importance of following God's will, even in the most absurd circumstances.

Before his death, Cuthbert predicted that his body would become a beacon for religious pilgrims who would venerate him as a saint. Even before his death, the monks saw his importance and took his prediction to heart, knowing he would attract people to their cathedral. He requested a simple tomb on Farne Island, where he spent the last years of his life as a hermit; however, the monks convinced him to be buried at Lindisfarne.²² Lindisfarne was located on Holy Island, one of the many islands off the English Coast, and served as a monastery for many monks. The Farne

¹⁵ Mariner, Dominic. *St Cuthbert, His Life and Cult in Medieval Durham*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. p. 12.

¹⁶ DeGregorio, Scott. "The Venerable Bede on Prayer and Contemplation." *Traditio*, vol 54, 1999. p. 1.

¹⁷ Bede, and Marit Ronen. "The Pose Life of Cuthbert (ca.721)." *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, Punctuation Books, 2020. p. 190.

¹⁸ Bede. *Life of Saint Cuthbert* trans. Bertram Colgrave, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969. p. 143.

¹⁹ Backhouse. "Lindisfarne and St. Cuthbert." p. 10.

²⁰ Backhouse. "Lindisfarne and St. Cuthbert." p. 9.

²¹ Bede. "The Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne." p. 721. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/bede-cuthbert.asp> .

²² Backhouse. "Lindisfarne and St. Cuthbert." p. 10.

Island, where Cuthbert secluded himself as a hermit, was close to Lindisfarne.²³ Naturally, the monks wanted him buried at Lindisfarne to make a shrine dedicated to the holiness that he presented in life. Having Cuthbert's tomb in Lindisfarne would increase the number of pilgrims visiting the holy site. This would also keep Cuthbert and his treasures close and aid the monks in preserving him and his items from danger.

In life and death, Cuthbert was acknowledged as a saint by his followers, as evident through the care his relics received and the impact he had on the people in Northumbria. The monks opened his tomb approximately eleven years after his death to observe his body.²⁴ They opened his tomb to remove his bones and create an appropriate shrine for them in the monastery.²⁵ However, they found his body miraculously undecayed and with the appearance of one merely sleeping. An illustration from the Venerable Bede's *Life of Saint Cuthbert* depicted the monks opening his tomb for the first time to observe his body (Figure 1).²⁶ (It is important to remember that Bede's *Life of Saint Cuthbert* was produced in 721, approximately thirty-four years after the death of Cuthbert.)²⁷ The illustration showed the monks rehousing the miracle of an incorruptible body, which meant, as I stated earlier, that Cuthbert's presence of holiness stayed with his remains. Throughout history, Cuthbert's coffin was opened approximately three times. The first time was in 698, then in 1104, and then finally in 1827. His newly-found sainthood attracted pilgrims to his tomb soon after the miraculous finding. His prediction that his body would be a haven for the downtrodden and destitute became true, and his body was quickly reported to perform miracles for the sick. The miracles his body performed were different from the miracles he had done in his life. The post-mortem miracles centered around healing people of illnesses and curing cases of demonic possession. The importance of the miracles being centered around his tomb was that his shrine site and relics were the embodiment of his holiness after death. The Venerable Bede recorded these miracles; the handful of instances recorded in this work is centered around Cuthbert's original shrine and tomb at Lindisfarne before the monks fled from Viking raids.

The notable miracles at the tomb of Cuthbert centered around healing monks and young members of the community. One of the post-mortem miracles performed by Cuthbert involved a possessed child. Bede tells the story of the boy, who was "vexed by a most cruel demon, so that he had completely lost his reason, and cried out, howled and tried to tear in pieces with his teeth both his own limbs and whatever he could reach."²⁸ The child was showing violent signs of harm toward himself and others. Though the exact date of this event is unknown, it likely happened during the seventh century, near the time of Cuthbert's death, given how the boy was healed. Bede explained that the afflicted child was healed through the consumption of dirt soaked in the holy water used to

²³ Mariner. "Cuthbert and Lindisfarne." p. 13.

²⁴ Brown, Michelle. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe*. University of Toronto Press, 2003. p. 39.

²⁵ Mariner. "Cuthbert and Lindisfarne." p. 14.

²⁶ "Monks Observe St. Cuthbert", (721), p. 11.

²⁷ McMullen, A. Joseph. "Rewriting the Ecclesiastical Landscape of Early Medieval Northumbria in the Lives of Cuthbert." *Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge University Press, 2014. p. 57.

²⁸ Bede. *Life of Saint Cuthbert* trans. Bertram Colgrave. p. 289.

wash the corpse of Cuthbert.²⁹ In Bede's account, the priest spiritually instructed to take the water-soaked dirt to the boy to cure him. The presence of Cuthbert's holiness was in the water that was used to wash his corpse. Cuthbert's healing power was one of the attractive things about his relics that made him a venerated saint in that region. As recorded by Bede, in Cuthbert's life and afterlife, he cured the laity and people who devoted their lives to God. For instance, in Bede's account, there were eight accounts of him healing men, women, children, and other clergy members when he was alive.³⁰ In the afterlife, Bede reported three healing stories in his *Life of St Cuthbert*.³¹ The miracles provided evidence of faith and God's grace through his remains and brought community members and pilgrims to his cult sites.

In the late 700s and 800s, there was an unpredictable surge of Viking raids on Northumbria. The raids targeted different monasteries and cathedrals. On June 8th, 793, Viking invaders attacked the Lindisfarne monastery.³² These were the first events of the Viking Age and the catalyst for the monks of Lindisfarne's flight with Saint Cuthbert and his treasures. His relics were considered precious because of the miracles associated with them and the value the local community held of Cuthbert as a religious figure. The preservation of his relics and the gospels from this initial threat saved them for the future and inspired scholars from multiple disciplines to produce studies of them. These studies focused on the archaeological research published about his relics, including his reliquary, the pectoral cross, and other relics collected in the nineteenth century. The care taken by these monks in protecting the relics of Cuthbert aided them in ensuring that these treasures withstood the test of time.

The monks' hard work and travels ended when they found a suitable place to stop. The community surrounding Cuthbert took refuge in an old Roman camp located a couple of miles north of present-day Durham.³³ They resided there until 995, when they left due to Viking activity nearby. After traveling for a couple of months, they arrived at Durham to lay Cuthbert to rest and create an altar for pilgrims to honor the saint.³⁴ Cuthbert and his miraculous treasures stayed at Durham Cathedral and are still there today. During the rise of William the Conqueror in the eleventh century, the saint's relics were moved briefly, illustrated by Bede's work displaying how Cuthbert's relics were transported (Figure 2).³⁵ During the Norman conquest of England, the Normans saw the city of Durham as a stronghold to take over the region of Northumbria.³⁶ Due to the air of conflict between the Normans and the Northumbrians, the community of St. Cuthbert and Bishop Ethelwine thought they needed to flee from the cathedral and seek refuge in Lindisfarne. By leaving Durham at this time, the community sought to show neutrality in the conflict between the

²⁹ Bede. *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, trans. Bertram Colgrave. p. 41.

³⁰ Bede. *Life of Saint Cuthbert* trans. Bertram Colgrave. pp. 149-154.

³¹ Bede. *Life of Saint Cuthbert* trans. Bertram Colgrave. pp. 149-154.

³² Backhouse. "The Later History of the Manuscript." p. 87.

³³ Backhouse. "The Later History..." p. 87.

³⁴ Backhouse. "The Later History..." p. 87.

³⁵ "Relics of Saint Cuthbert being carried back across." (1069), p.88.

³⁶ Arid, M. William. *St Cuthbert and The Normans, The Church of Durham, 1071-1153*, Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1998. p. 67.

Northumbrians and the Normans.³⁷ This image illustrated how the relics were carried to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne during the flight from William the Conqueror.³⁸ In roughly 1069, the last Saxon Bishop Ethelwine moved Cuthbert back to Lindisfarne due to fear of the Norman ruler.³⁹ The story of Cuthbert's community's voyage to escape foreign aggression spread throughout Northumbria. The map shows that their travels between Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island, and Durham covered a centralized region in Northumbria (Map 1). The journey of his relics started at the Lindisfarne monastery and ended at the Durham Cathedral. During the late eleventh century, Cuthbert's relics were considered important and valuable to the Durham community. It was deemed necessary to build St. Cuthbert a Cathedral. By having the saint's relics and shrine in Durham, he represented an ancient figure to connect the community to their roots; his patronage provided spiritual protection for both his cult and the people of Durham.⁴⁰ The Durham Cathedral was built in the saint's honor and became his final resting place where pilgrims could venerate Cuthbert.

The saintly remains of Cuthbert attracted people because of his miracles and perceived holiness. However, Cuthbert's bodily remains were not the only treasures associated with his sainthood. Many relics were buried with Cuthbert at his death, and some were added throughout the centuries. Some objects were not identified with the body during 698 when he was discovered undecayed. Unfortunately, there is no documentation of the items placed in Cuthbert's tomb in 698. However, through the dating of materials the items were made of and scholarly assumption, we can safely assume these relics were with him in the original burial.⁴¹ Some prominent relics were the coffin reliquary, his pectoral cross, a comb, and portable altars.

The reliquary or vessel that carried Cuthbert's remains and his treasures is one of the most fascinating pieces associated with the saint. The wooden artifact has inscriptions of angels, apostles, and the Virgin and child.⁴² The outer measurements of the innermost coffin are about sixty-six and a half inches long, roughly thirty-three inches wide, and about eighteen inches in height.⁴³ The wooden sarcophagus was discovered in pieces due to deterioration over time. In the nineteenth century, the tomb of Cuthbert was opened, and many of the treasures within were documented and compared to other historical objects to date the items and calculate when they were placed with Cuthbert's bodily relics. The archaeological analysis in 1827 discovered that the sarcophagus was contained in two additional coffins, all created at different dates in the saint's post-mortem life. The outermost layer dates back to the sixteenth century; it was made for the reburial of Cuthbert at Durham in 1542.⁴⁴ There was not much description of this layer provided by the scholars who observed the tomb at the time. The second layer dated back to 1104 and had been created to house the original wooden coffin

³⁷ Arid. "The Foundations of Power: The Church of St. Cuthbert 635-1065." pp. 77-78.

³⁸ Backhouse. "The Later History..." p. 88.

³⁹ Backhouse. "The Later History..." p. 87.

⁴⁰ Mariner. "Cuthbert and Durham." p. 20.

⁴¹ Battiscombe, C. F. *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert; Studies by Various Authors / Collected and Edited with an Historical Introd.* Oxford: Printed for the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral at the University Press, 1956. p. 18.

⁴² Battiscombe et al. "The Coffin-Reliquary." p. 203.

⁴³ Battiscombe et al. "The Coffin-Reliquary." p. 215.

⁴⁴ Battiscombe et al. "The Coffin Reliquary." p. 203.

because of its advanced age.⁴⁵ The dates of the outer layers of the coffin show a clear line of care for Cuthbert's relics. This effort from the monks and community aided in preserving the inner layer of the original coffin and the treasures. The innermost coffin was the original vessel of Cuthbert's remains, dating back to 698.⁴⁶ Cuthbert died in 687 and was laid to rest in a different coffin than the one that is shown reconstructed at Durham Cathedral today. As seen in the illustration of the innermost coffin, many different images of angels and apostles adorn the outside of the coffin (Figure 3).⁴⁷ His body and relics were laid in the innermost coffin after the proclamation of his sainthood in 698, which coincided with the monks discovering his undecayed body. The carvings combine Celtic artistic style and biblical imagery.⁴⁸ It is an important archaeological piece that not only holds the saintly remains of Cuthbert but also demonstrates the mindset of Christians in Northumbria at the time and their connection with their roots.⁴⁹

The pectoral cross is one of the oldest relics in the collection, alongside the saint, because it was one of his personal items while he was alive. The cross was a much loved and used item of Cuthbert's, as evident by repairs to the cross before it was buried with him in 687.⁵⁰ The Cross is a unique piece of Celtic goldsmithing compared to other crosses from the time.⁵¹ The small personal relic of the saint stayed with him throughout the centuries. When his tomb was opened in the nineteenth century, the cross was found deep in the chest area covered by fabrics, indicating it was set on his original funerary cloth when he was buried.⁵² As seen in the photo, the cross is adorned with garnet stones and is a magnificent gold work (Figure 4).⁵³ The damage on the cross predates Cuthbert's death, suggesting it was a well-worn object.⁵⁴ This piece is significant because of the history it tells through its repairs. The repairs on the Cross are visible from the back side: the cross was repaired in antiquity when the lower arm of it was snapped off. A metal sheet was used to repair it that matched the color of the original metal (Figure 5).

Analyzing the material relics, such as the cross, further paints a personal picture of the Saint when he was alive and a revered holy man. The personal objects ground Cuthbert as an actual historical figure and not just a mythological holy man who could wield miracles at will. The preservation of his relics and the devotion of his community after his death to venerate him aided in the survival of the relics into the modern day. If people of Cuthbert's cult and community truly believed in his miracles and that he was present in his relics and tomb, it would show how devoted they were to Cuthbert by preserving and honoring him. The power of belief drove his community to continue to revere him and influenced others around the saint to save him from external threats and

⁴⁵ Battiscombe et al. "The Coffin Reliquary." p. 203.

⁴⁶ Battiscombe et al. "The Coffin Reliquary." p. 204.

⁴⁷ Battiscombe et al. "The Seventh- Century Coffin Sides", (1956), p. 204.

⁴⁸ Battiscombe et al. "The Coffin Reliquary." p. 227.

⁴⁹ Keck, Andrew S. *American Journal of Archaeology* no. 4 (1951). p.446. <https://doi.org/10.2307/500283>. p. 55.

⁵⁰ Battiscombe et al. "The Date and Origin of the Cross." p. 316.

⁵¹ Battiscombe et al. "The Pectoral Cross." p. 325.

⁵² Battiscombe et al. "Cross Introduction." p. 308.

⁵³ Battiscombe et al. "The Pectoral Cross/ *Actual Size*.", (1956), P.309.

⁵⁴ Battiscombe et al. "The Pectoral Cross Repairs.", (1956), p. 310.

build a Cathedral in his honor at Durham. When comparing the textual and the archeological sources, the common theme that links them is devotion to faith and the word of God. There is power in the stories of his miracles, much like there is power and presence in his physical relics.

The comb of Cuthbert was found within the coffin near the upper part of the remains alongside the portable altar during the examination of the tomb in 1827.⁵⁵ Cuthbert's comb is relatively small in size and is made out of ivory. After it was extracted from the tomb in 1827, it was restored from a state of disintegration (Figure 6).⁵⁶ There were historical disputes among scholars as to whether the comb was added to his treasures over the centuries or was one of Cuthbert's possessions buried with him. Peter Lasko, in *The Comb of St. Cuthbert*, goes through the origins of different styles of combs and the probability of the comb being an original possession. It is difficult to find the actual date of the comb due to unreliable sources from the twelfth century.⁵⁷ Lasko remarks, "The anonymous author of the life of Saint Cuthbert makes no mention of the comb when he is buried in 687. It may be that the comb, together with other relics, was laid beside the saint when his body was raised and transferred to the new coffin in 698 A.D."⁵⁸ Looking back at the sources from the different times, his tomb was opened and the documentation of the relics, it is probable that it had been undocumented in the seventh century. The comb was first documented in 1104 when the monks clothed Cuthbert in magnificent vestments, returned relics to his person, and then situated his altar at the newly built Durham Cathedral.⁵⁹ Frequently tombs were opened for veneration purposes such as dressing and honoring the saint. In the case of Cuthbert, his tomb was opened at Durham to redress him in vestments that honored his embodiment of holiness.⁶⁰ Lasko hypothesizes that the comb was a personal object that had not been recorded during his reburial in 698. This conclusion provides answers to the debated origin of Cuthbert's comb. It is difficult to date such an object when working on the historical narrative because documentation is missing, and scholars must rely on other sources, such as the basic origins of comb styles.

Like many other relics, the portable altars were discovered in 1827 when Cuthbert's tomb was opened.⁶¹ The grave was opened in 1827 for historic preservation and to corroborate that this was the tomb of St Cuthbert. The grave was opened in the presence of Dr. James Rine, the Librarian of Durham Cathedral, and Dr. Gilly and Dr. Darnell, Prebendaries of Durham. After the Reformation, his grave was situated below the stone floor of Durham Cathedral, and the opening in 1827 was meant to document if it was the grave of St. Cuthbert.⁶² The silver and portable wooden altar was located near the comb in the saint's coffin. It was discovered when removing the piece from Cuthbert's coffin that it would be best to separate the silver and wooden parts of the altar into

⁵⁵ Battiscombe et al. "The Comb of St. Cuthbert." p. 336.

⁵⁶ Battiscombe et al. "The Comb of St. Cuthbert/ Black and White", (1956), p. 336.

⁵⁷ Battiscombe et al. "The Comb..." p. 342.

⁵⁸ Battiscombe et al. "The Comb..." p. 349.

⁵⁹ Battiscombe et al. "The Comb..." p. 339.

⁶⁰ Owen-Crocker, Gale R. "Old Rags, New Responses: Medieval Dress and Textiles." *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, Boydell & Brewer, 2019. p. 6. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb4bvnq.7>.

⁶¹ Battiscombe et al. "The Portable Altar of Saint Cuthbert." p. 326.

⁶² Battiscombe et al. "Introduction: Opening of St. Cuthbert's Grave." p. 2.

two separate objects.⁶³ The silver element to the altar was mounted on a new piece of wood to allow it to be displayed correctly. Unfortunately, the wooden part of the altar was so badly decayed that it was determined that it would not survive any handling to try to fix the relic. In *The Portable Altar of Saint Cuthbert* by C. A. Raleigh Radford, there is an illustration of the wooden altar with suggested lines filling in the gaps where pieces were missing (Figure 7).⁶⁴ Radford analyzed the style of the letters on this piece and dated it back to 651. The material used for the altar was an oak base. Radford concluded that the altar would have been made for Cuthbert during his priesthood and aided him in missionary activities.⁶⁵ These objects that are venerated as relics are personal items of Cuthbert's. To reiterate what I stated above about relics, they embody the Saint's holiness. The material objects emphasize his holiness and make for perfect relics to be venerated and represent him in the afterlife. The wooden altar was a part of his personal history from before he became bishop of Lindisfarne. It places Cuthbert as a common religious man spreading the word of God with his altar at his side. This was yet another personal relic protected from the ravages of conflict throughout the centuries.

The silver plating of the altar is two-sided, depicting detailed, stylistic holy imagery. The front piece of the silver plating depicts a priest in robes holding a scroll with Greek carvings around him.⁶⁶ Radford noted that this part of the altar included the only six main pieces that survived.⁶⁷ As we see in the figure provided in C. F. Battiscombe's work *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*, there is an image of the priest holding a scroll with a heavenly ring around his head (Figure 8).⁶⁸ The backplate of the altar features Northumbrian stylistic vine work, pearly edges, and a central focal point of a medallion (Figure 9).⁶⁹ There are no suggestive details in the illustration due to the lack of work found on the object and because a few focal pieces are missing due to age. However, even though the silver plates are missing multiple pieces, restoration efforts were made by creating illustrations that suggested what the plates would have looked like. Radford dated the creation of the silver plates to the early eighth century, with some repair work in the ninth century.⁷⁰ This means that time and care were put into improving some of Cuthbert's relics. Forming the silver plates and adding them to the original wooden altar are signs of the creation of a reliquary and housing and venerating the original piece. The evidence of improvements to the portable altar suggests a need to preserve the original wooden relic. The improvements act as a reliquary to further add to the longevity of the altar's lifespan. Preventing further deterioration adds to the devotional objects that illustrate Durham's importance as a holy site.

These relics were essential to Cuthbert's shrines in Durham and Lindisfarne, even if they were not visible to the pilgrims visiting the saint. They are now correctly displayed at Durham after

⁶³ Battiscombe et al. "The Portable..." p. 327.

⁶⁴ Battiscombe et al. "The Wooden Altar", (1956), p. 328.

⁶⁵ Battiscombe et al. "The Portable..." p. 328.

⁶⁶ Battiscombe et al. "The Portable..." p. 331.

⁶⁷ Battiscombe et al. "The Portable..." p. 330.

⁶⁸ Battiscombe et al. "Suggested Restoration of Front of Silver Shrine" (1956), p.331." p. 330

⁶⁹ Battiscombe et al. "Back of Silver Shrine", (1956), p. 332.

⁷⁰ Battiscombe et al. "The Portable..." p. 334.

the nineteenth century. In Bede's account, many of the relics' and tomb's miraculous working powers were invoked through prayer.⁷¹ This feeds into the notion of Cuthbert's holy presence residing in the relics and his shrine site at his tomb. However, the preservation of Cuthbert and his objects demonstrates the dedication of the monks and the community caring for and venerating him during times of hardship.

The magnificent Durham Cathedral is the present-day resting place for Saint Cuthbert and his treasures. Many people flock to him on pilgrimage to venerate his relics and altar. The creation of Durham Cathedral is entirely thanks to the devotion of Cuthbert's community and a miraculous vision of him instructing his attending monks that his shrine should be erected in Durham.⁷² The Cathedral itself started as a wooden structure and built up over time into what it is today. Janet Backhouse in *The Lindisfarne Gospels* dates the stone foundation of Durham Cathedral to 1093. The shrine of Cuthbert was then used as the main focal point of the Cathedral to provide a suitable area to house his relics and a place for pilgrims to venerate the saint.⁷³ The second opening of Cuthbert's coffin was performed at Durham, and he was moved to behind the high altar in the cathedral. In 1104, the monks of the cathedral opened his coffin. They reported that he was still miraculously undecayed and had a smell described as "the odor of sanctity."⁷⁴ Many of his relics were documented in 1104, and Cuthbert was dressed in new vestments. Cuthbert's shrine at Durham is described as a "sumptuous marble shrine, splendidly painted, carved and bejeweled, on a low platform behind the high altar...."⁷⁵ The shrine stands to this day unchanged with the original marble work. Still, the relics were removed from the coffin and displayed for all to see. Cuthbert remained a frequently visited site for many pilgrims.

Overall, the post-mortem life of St. Cuthbert and the preservation of his relics provides insight into the different styles of craftsmanship, the community's devotion, and the Durham Cathedral's creation. Many still go to venerate the seventh-century saint of Northumbria and visit his relics. On display at the cathedral is the original 698 coffin of Cuthbert, the ivory comb, and his pectoral cross, as discussed above. The nineteenth-century scholars who documented and analyzed the relics of Cuthbert during the third opening of his tomb aided in uncovering information from different scholarly sources regarding the saint. The case of Saint Cuthbert has fascinated many historians due to the preservation of his relics. Sainly figures are often overlooked as people and are not relatable to the human experience. However, when viewing Cuthbert's relics and the care given to them, we can see that there is a narrative of a man beyond the miracles.

⁷¹ Bede. *Life of Saint Cuthbert* trans. Bertram Colgrave. p. 153.

⁷² Brown, Michelle. "The Lindisfarne Gospels: Bibliography of The Book." p. 87.

⁷³ Brown, M. "The Lindisfarne Gospels..." p. 87.

⁷⁴ Cavendish, R. "St Cuthbert Reburied in Durham Cathedral - September 4th, 1104." *History today*, no. 9 (2004). p. 54.

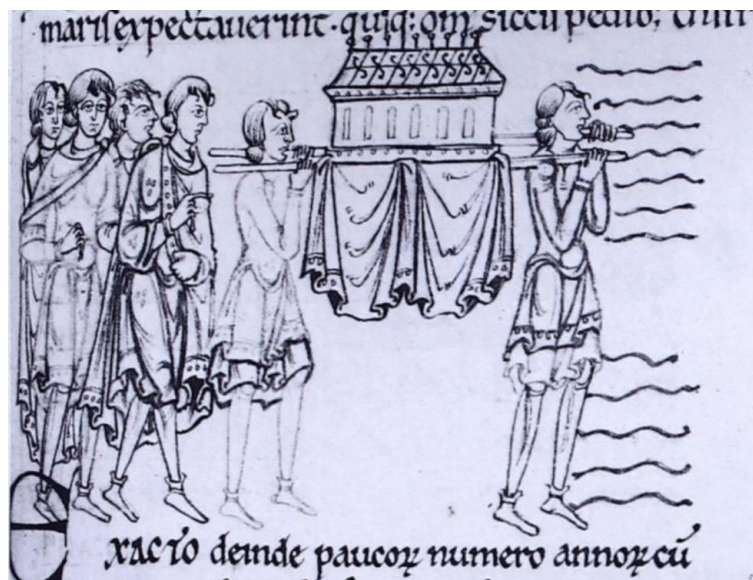
⁷⁵ Cavendish. "St Cuthbert..." p. 54.

Appendix

Figure 1: The Lindisfarne Gospels (721)

Credit: *The Lindisfarne Gospels* / Janet Backhouse

Figure 2: Relics of Saint Cuthbert being carried back across... (1069)

Credit: *The Lindisfarne Gospels* / Janet Backhouse

Map 1. Credit: Rosier, Charles C. "Map" in *Writing History in the Community of St Cuthbert, c. 600-1130: From Bede to Simeon of Durham* Boydell & Brewer, 2020. p. Xiii.

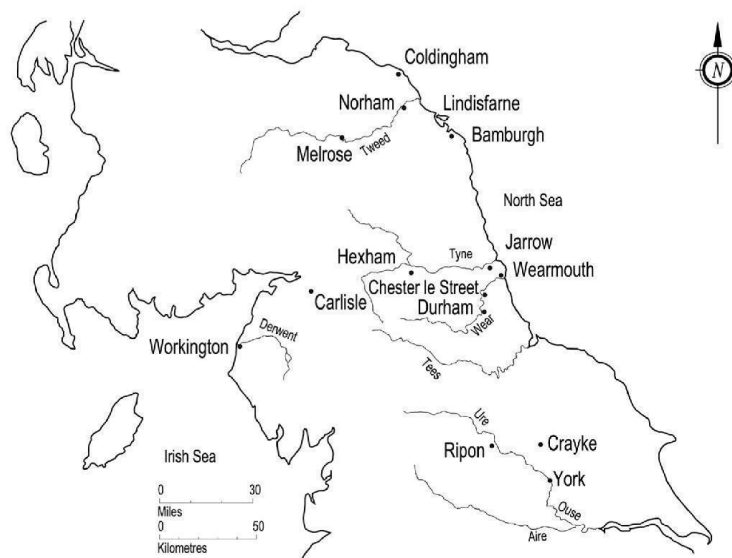


Figure 3: Seventh- Century Coffin Sides (1956)

Credit: *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert: Studies by Various Authors / Collected and Edited with an Historical Introduction*

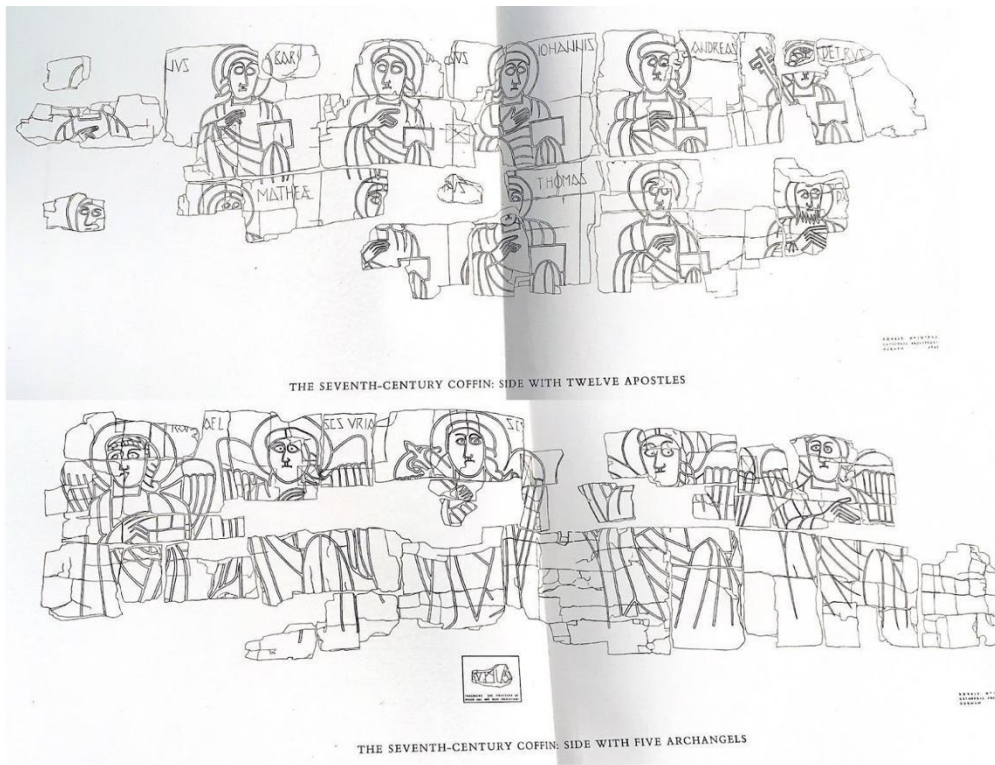


Figure 4: The Pectoral Cross (1956)

Credit: *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*



Figure 5: The Pectoral Cross Repairs (1956)

Credit: *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*

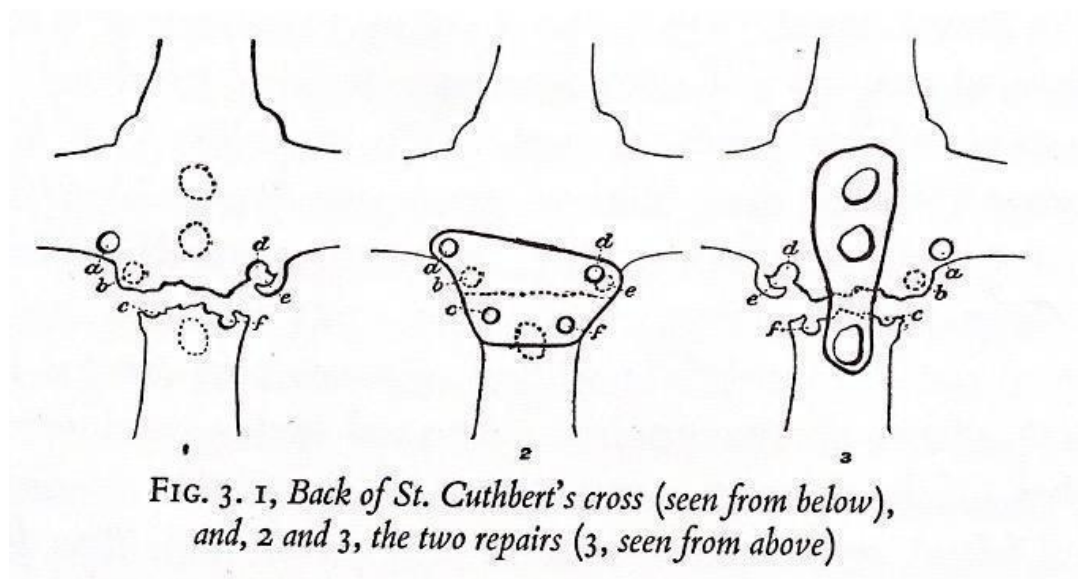


FIG. 3. 1, Back of St. Cuthbert's cross (seen from below),
and, 2 and 3, the two repairs (3, seen from above)

Figure 6: The Comb of Saint Cuthbert (1956)
Credit: *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*

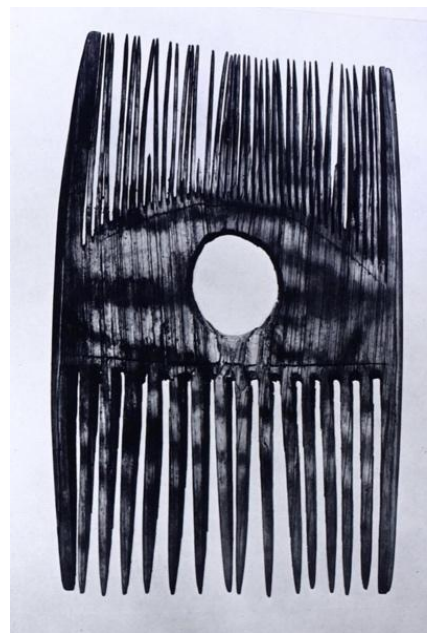


Figure 7: The Wooden Altar (1956)
Credit: *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*

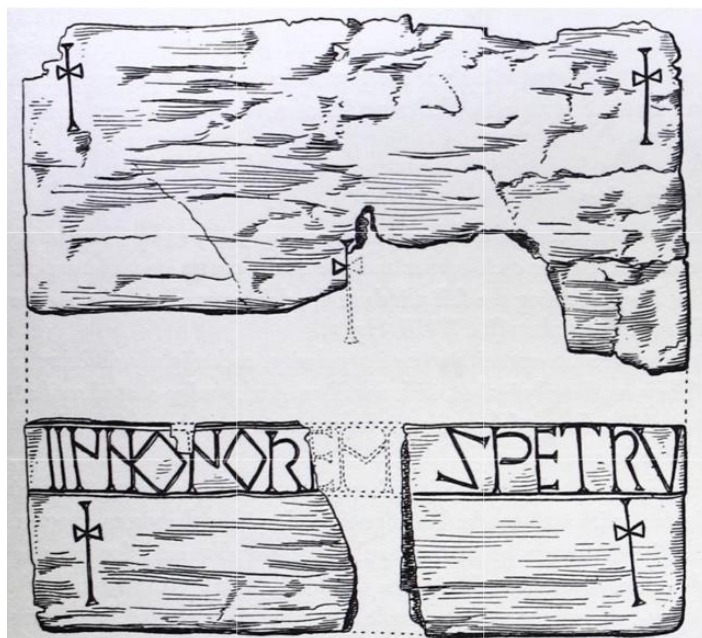


Figure 8: Suggested Restoration of Front of Silver Shrine (1956)
 Credit: The Relics of Saint Cuthbert

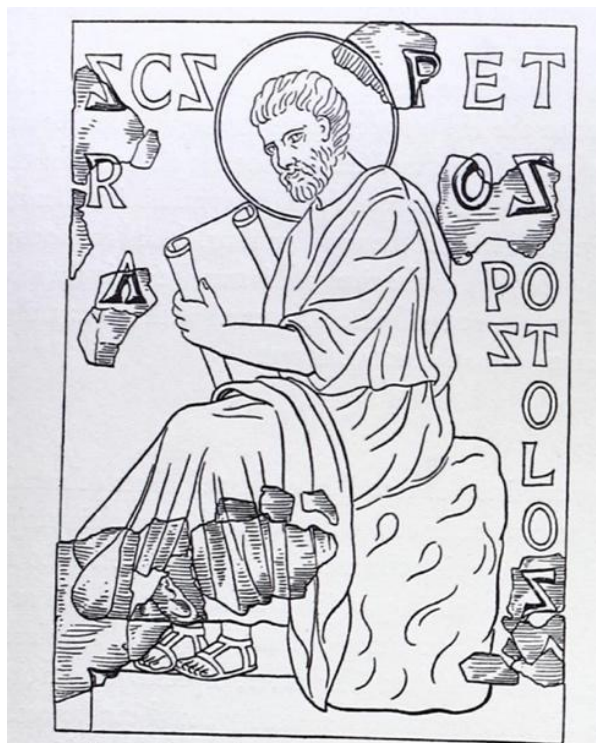


Figure 9: Back of Silver Shrine (1956)
 Credit: The Relics of Saint Cuthbert

