



Apr-2018

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Recommended Citation

Sexton, John P. (2018). Unearthing the People of the Holy Man: A Week at St Cuthbert's Lindisfarne. *Bridgewater Review*, 37(1), 4-10.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol37/iss1/4

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Unearthing the People of the Holy Man: A Week at St Cuthbert's Lindisfarne

John P. Sexton

Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race [...] Behold, the church of St Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as prey to pagan peoples.

Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred, 793 CE

The Northumbrian scholar Alcuin wrote these words when the horror of the Viking raid on Lindisfarne was mere weeks old. His letter shows what many later accounts did not—Lindisfarne, a tidal island of the extreme northeast of England, was not an outpost on the edge of eighth-century Northumbrian life, but a thriving monastic and ecclesiastical center of the growing Anglo-Saxon church. Within a short distance of the secular power center of Bamborough and housing the remains of the sanctified Bishop Cuthbert (634–687 CE), the Lindisfarne community was the heart of Christendom for the northernmost of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The sandy, clayey soil of Lindisfarne supported the monastic center there, and when the monks of that community were caught unaware by the Viking attack in 793, the monks buried their dead and mourned their losses there as well. In the summer of 2017, I spent a week digging in that same soil, joining a group seeking answers to the many questions about the people who lived and died on the island in the years before the longships came.

The cult of St Cuthbert has been a subject of fascination for me since graduate school. My doctoral dissertation was on the role of Anglo-Saxon sanctuary law in the making of saints' cults and hagiographic literature, and it led me inevitably to study the powerful

northern cult. The remarkable authority and influence of the Lindisfarne community was built in large part on the presence of St Cuthbert's remains. In Northumbria, the northernmost of Anglo-Saxon England's seven kingdoms, power struggles between

Saxon, Scandinavian, Scots, and eventually Norman forces between the eighth and eleventh centuries left little stability and little faith in secular lordship. The region's people looked to the long-dead Cuthbert as a kind of holy landlord, with the bishops of Lindisfarne (and later Durham) as legal surrogates for the saint's secular responsibilities. As the cult's influence grew, its involvement in secular affairs increased apace. In the eleventh-century chronicle *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, this influence reached its ultimate expression as the saint's "history" became a framework for documenting (and justifying) the extensive land holdings held by the cult in Cuthbert's name. This connection was so powerful that residents of the cult's land identified themselves as *haliverfolc*, "the holy man's people." On a research trip to England a decade ago, I was able to examine a late-medieval copy of *Historia* and a series of other documents produced by the cult in the late-eleventh and early-twelfth centuries, collected in a manuscript known to modern scholars as the *Liber Ruber* (the Red Book of Durham). Taken together, the texts tell a remarkable story of a community determined, in defiance of Anglo-Saxon kings, Viking invaders, and eventually William the Conqueror's Norman rule, to retain its identity as Cuthbert's people first and foremost. The cult depicted, for example, the assassination in 1080 of Walcher, William's representative and appointee as Bishop of Durham, as an implicit rejection of external authority through Cuthbert's supernatural guidance. They even dared to argue that William himself had been stricken with an intestinal disease brought on by the saint's displeasure.

According to the Northumbrian monk Bede's biography (written c.705–716) of the saint, Cuthbert himself foresaw the sociopolitical consequences of his cult's rise in power. Bede produces a conversation between a terminally

ill Cuthbert (by then living alone on the nearby island of Inner Farne) and a group of Lindisfarne monks. The monks beg permission to bring Cuthbert's body back with them to their community on Lindisfarne, but Cuthbert warns:

I think that it will be more expedient for you that I should remain here, on account of the influx of fugitives and guilty men of every sort, who will perhaps flee to my body because, unworthy as I am, reports about me as a servant of God have nevertheless gone forth; and you will be compelled very frequently to intercede with the powers of this world on behalf of such men, and so will be put to much trouble on account of my body (*Vita Sancti Cuthberti* 27).

When the opportunity arose for me to return to Northumbria and take part in an archeological dig seeking the origins of this powerful cult on Lindisfarne, I leapt at the chance to become the latest in a long line of “fugitives and guilty men” to seek refuge on Lindisfarne.

The site I visited is unearthing some of the earliest evidence of monastic life on the island. The Lindisfarne dig is a project of DigVentures, a publicly funded field archeology team led by scholars from the University of Leicester, the University of Birmingham, and Durham University, among other institutions. DigVentures, and its Digital Dig Team, is as much a philosophy as a research enterprise. It is the first archeological work of its kind: a digital, accessible archeological recording system built to speed site information to the online world.



The Discovery of Cuthbert's Incorrupt Body, from a 12th-century illuminated manuscript of Bede's Vita Sancti Cuthberti (British Library MS 39943).

Everything found at the site is catalogued, photographed, evaluated, and made available online—often within 24 hours.

“We created Digital Dig Team to share our discoveries with the world,” says Lisa Westcott Wilkins, DigVentures’ co-founder and managing director. During a dig, three-dimensional renderings of the site are taken with camera arrays, allowing a daily update of all trenchwork done at the site and creating a record of all site activity. Those who participate in crowdfunding the team’s half-dozen or so active sites even have the option of attending a dig and taking full part in the work.

For a student of medieval literature, the historical context to be gained from examining a site like Lindisfarne is invaluable.



Lindisfarne Priory from above. (Photograph by Christopher Down - Own work, CC BY 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=59157537>).

As I learned, “taking full part” is not an idle threat.

From the first moment, I and the other two dozen or so volunteers were brought fully into the project. The project organizers began each day with a brief meeting, using the previous day’s documentation and computer renderings to orient us on the day’s goals. The team’s current project is the excavation of the buildings and graveyard of the pre-793 monastic community. (The first remains had been found the previous year, and the DigVentures

team told us the story of reporting those first finds. The island’s few residents had looked on in bemusement as the local police had raced with wailing sirens to the site. Eventually, forensics experts confirmed that the bodies were, in fact, probably more than 12 centuries old. Since then, the dig team had convinced the authorities that they themselves *were* forensics experts in this area, and so we were able to dig without being interrupted by investigation teams on a daily basis). The week before I arrived, the dig team had uncovered a large number

of bones and the outlines of several burial sites. We would be cleaning up the area of those finds and looking for further evidence of burials. The bones, thousands of which were excavated over the course of the dig, will be painstakingly catalogued, studied, and returned to the island ground in a few years’ time. Part of the briefing that morning was dedicated to a few early ideas for a memorial to be built on the site.

After the meeting and a short tour of the site, I found myself on hands and



knees in the trench, working with Ali, Bill, and Julie on an area about two yards square, which we were to reduce (i.e., by removing earth incrementally) by about 1-2 inches. We were looking particularly for signs of the bone deposits which had been appearing at irregular intervals. We anticipated a slow morning, and the hard-packed earth promised slow progress. But within the hour we were turning up animal remains, multiple teeth, and finally a small heap of what were unmistakably human bones.

My work on Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian literary history prepared me for the cultural context of what I was seeing, but not at all for the moment of confronting the mortal remains of those who gave that world its voice.



Two medieval burials on Lindisfarne (Author's photo used with permission from DigVentures).

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These jumbles of teeth and bones, a mix of human and animal, indicate that the graveyard was likely forgotten in the later Middle Ages. A later farmer

furrowed the field as part of a new planting, dragging up skull fragments and the long bones of human limbs as he plowed (early medieval graves

are shallower than modern burials). The farmer, no doubt surprised by his discovery, dug one or more pits in the ground to reinter the remains. A separate group of volunteers, closely supervised and assisted by the archeological team, were carefully excavating one such charnel pit less than 20 feet away from our patch of earth.

It's easy to imagine how a late-medieval farmer might plow into the old monastic graveyard unaware of its presence. The Viking attacks at Lindisfarne disrupted the monastic community there, eventually leading Cuthbert's cult to become itinerant for a time. When they finally settled down decades later, they chose a site more than 75 miles to the south in Durham (which had been revived as a political center). Later generations of settlers on Lindisfarne built new buildings and established new burial sites, obscuring the footprint of the pre-793 community.

For a student of medieval literature, the historical context to be gained from examining a site like Lindisfarne is invaluable. My trip was taken without a specific research agenda beyond spending time learning more about the archeological side of my discipline. A week troweling in a trench and cleaning finds, however, yielded much more than just disciplinary experience (and, inevitably, a sore back). From my first day on site, I saw a significant number of small white quartz stones in the find trays, and we found many more in our dig area. The stones were left at the site as mementoes of visits to the graves. They are water-worn, rounded, and quite beautiful. They can be found individually, in small groups, and in rows all over the site. Individually, they are a curiosity, enough to draw one's eye, even when in the dirt; gathered together, they are beautiful. More than 3,000 stones were found and catalogued in the trenches, with large bags of them sorted around the site (the team plans to return the stones to the site when the dig is

complete, and possibly to feature them as part of a memorial to the monastic community). I became fascinated with these stones and their meaning, eventually recording a short video for DigVentures on the subject (see <https://www.facebook.com/DigVentures/videos/1534999803224086/>).

Since returning to Bridgewater, I've been using my experience with finding the stones to talk to my students about the interdisciplinary nature of medieval studies. The stones are evidence of a tradition of commemoration that predates Christianity in England, and appear at sites from the Bronze Age through to these and other Anglo-Saxon monastic graves. At Lindisfarne, they may have been sourced locally, but they are also found inland and away from obvious sources. The tradition, which echoes stone-placement in Jewish and other cultures, serves to

memorialize both the dead and the act of visitation by the living. The survival of the practice well into the Christian period in Northumbria is not, in itself, surprising. It's a mistake to take at face value later (mostly ecclesiastic) views of the Christian conversion as a seismic shift in the history of English culture—converts are no more likely than anyone else to leave off the unconscious habits of a lifetime simply because of a change in any one aspect of life. The tradition, and the stones, continued to carry meaning for those who left them. But curiously, no documentary evidence of the practice has been found. This is often the case for those who study early Anglo-Saxon life: we are reliant on the archeological record to supply the deficiencies of the surviving written record. This is particularly true when the knowledge gained is of a small thing, no bigger than a marble, but so much a part of everyday living in an



A quartz stone marking a long-ago gravesite visit (Author's photo used with permission from DigVentures).

eighth-century monastery that no one ever thought to write it down.

While I was busy thinking about little white rocks, the rest of the dig was uncovering varied finds—some mundane, some remarkable. Hundreds of shells, fossilized coral, coins, fishing hooks, building materials, ubiquitous clay pipes, ships' nails, and other refuse of later ages all turned up under our trowels. A particular favorite of the team was a strangely shaped bone, smooth and wave-shaped and almost, but not quite, human-looking. The team's experts eventually identified this as the left femur of a seal—one of the many animals used by the monks of the island to supplement their diet.

A frustration of the site was the seeming illogic of stone placement in the earth. Monastic graves of the mid-Anglo-Saxon period in this region often used a kist burial configuration. A kist, a stone-lined, coffin-shaped resting place, was used in place of a sarcophagus for interments. A hollow was dug in the earth and lined with local stone. The remains of the dead were then placed in the hollow, which was covered with flat stones to form a rough coffin housing. The team's frustration was that kist burial evidence was abundant in the graveyard, but the spaces within held no organized remains. The archeologists eventually determined that the kist walls had collapsed over



Finds Trays: some of the yield from a week of digging at Lindisfarne (Author's photo used with permission from DigVentures).

the centuries, so that the placement of walls and covers had fooled us into digging the wrong lines.

Here I witnessed both the genius of and the humility in this sort of field work. The experienced hands' ability to see in a chaotic (to my eyes) jumble of earth and rock the clear lines of intent and human handiwork from a millennium past was remarkable. But

the abnormalities of the site had fooled even them for a time, and their collective cheerfulness, even enthusiasm, for a site that challenged their knowledge and defeated their first attempts at interpretation was infectious. And, of course, as I learned from my guides for the week, there's always the archeologist's fallback explanation for inexplicable things: when in doubt, "it's ritual."

Once the site resolved itself, discoveries were made almost at once. On my third and fourth days on site, the dig team uncovered a pair of fully-intact burials. The pair had been buried slightly more deeply in the earth, possibly just under the later farmers' plows. Their discovery was the triumph of the week, and made for some contemplative moments as we all worked to preserve the remains as quickly and respectfully as possible.

On my last day on site, I found myself struck silent by the thought that I was momentarily disrupting the resting place of an Anglo-Saxon monk—a now-anonymous man whose life's story ended here at Lindisfarne, when the Viking raids that would disrupt the world of his religious community were still in the future. My work on Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian literary history prepared me for the cultural context of what I was seeing, but not at all for the moment of confronting the mortal remains of those who gave that world its voice. From that moment, I've thought of that man often, and when I do, the reported words of his saint seem closer than before: Cuthbert, asked late in his life when he would return to Lindisfarne, responded, "when you bring my body back here" (*Vita Sancti Cuthberti* 27), even as he knew that the fame of his cult would bring great trouble to his monastic home. The hagiographic literature of Cuthbert's cult, the historical story of Northumbrian socio-politics, and the archeological story being recorded by the DigVentures team all play their part in the work of recovering the world Cuthbert and his adherents knew. While we learned and will learn a great deal from the silent monks of Lindisfarne, the team's work will be complete only when those brothers have been returned to their island home.

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A band of diggers at Lindisfarne. The author (front); in back (left to right): Julie Kolehmainen, Michael Eden, Stephanie Stanley, and Tobias Busemann (Author's photo used with permission from DigVentures).