



A Fresh Look at Reginald of Durham's *Life and Miracles of Saint Godric, Hermit of Finchale*

Lauren Colwell, The Ohio State University English Department

Lauren is a Ph.D. Candidate in the English Department at Ohio State. She is currently working on her dissertation which investigates textual references to food production in early medieval English writings ca. 600 - 1200. Her work argues that food production was both physically and spiritual defined by early medieval English writers, and her chapters unpack these connections in the Life of Godric of Finchale, various early medieval English homilies on fasting, and the charters and chronicles of Peterborough Abbey.

The eleventh century northern English saint Godric of Finchale is best known for his miraculous fish episode. When visited on the feast of St. John the Baptist by guests at his small hermitage in the woods north of Durham, Godric asks a young assistant to walk to the River Wear and procure some fresh salmon for dinner. Godric's assistant questions the saint, reminding him that many of the fishponds and the river have dried up in the excessive heat that season. Godric tells the young man that a fish, just now, swam up the stream of the river and has landed in their nets. When the assistant travels down to the river, a large and healthy salmon sits in the sand. The saint's foresight and Godly knowledge is known to all, and Godric reminds his assistant and his guest of St. John the Baptist's kindness and trust in those he loved.

Until recently, this episode was one of the only chapters of Reginald of Durham's lengthy life of Godric translated into modern English. However, Margaret Coombe's 2022 translation, *The Life and Miracles of Saint Godric, Hermit of Finchale* published by Oxford Medieval Texts now offers us a complete translation of the narrative of Godric's life by Reginald of Durham, all five hundred plus printed pages of it.¹ This full translation offers scholars a complete view of the saint, one much different from the kindly figure of the miraculous fish episode. Most importantly, Coombe's complete translation showcases a saint embedded in his local context of northern England, both geographically and culturally.

When scholars of English native saints look to the geographical landscape of northern England, the lives of Cuthbert are the most often cited. Descriptions of the island of Farne in Cuthbert's various lives depict the island as a rocky, barren space void of natural growth or irrigation. Conversely, Godric's her-



mitage at Finchale is described as an unnavigable and densely wooded valley. The barrenness of Cuthbert's Island and the dense woods of Godric's Finacle showcases the vast diversity of northern English landscapes. Scholars have argued that writers of hagiography place their saints in such inhospitable landscapes to showcase how the saints' supernatural abilities allow them to harmonize with the natural world.² However, in the cases of Cuthbert and Godric, these depictions of the natural landscapes of Farne and Finchale are more than just symbolic. Both Farne and Finchale are localized spaces in the Northumbrian landscape. Geographical and archeological evidence suggests that the anonymous Lindisfarne writer of the *Life of Cuthbert*, Bede, in his prose and verse lives of Cuthbert, and Reginald included realistic descriptions of the local environments.³ Particularly in Reginald's *Life of Godric*, the descriptions of Godric's hermitage at Finchale, its location north of Durham, and its placement in a bend of the River Wear are all true to life, and Coombe has commented that many of Reginald's descriptions of the landscape can still be seen today.⁴

One of most interesting episodes that reveals Godric's embeddedness in the culture of northern England occurs early on in the *Life*. In Chapter 26 of Reginald's text, Godric encounters the farming community of Finchale, the location north of Durham where he wishes to establish his hermitage. The land on which Godric begins occupying, unfortunately, was common pastureland, where the local shepherds and cowherds would bring their livestock to graze. However, Godric abuses the privileges of the pastureland, planting permeant crops and establishing a homestead. Enraged by Godric's encroachment on their common land, the local farming community takes revenge, guiding their livestock to feed on his crops and destroying his agricultural work. Because Godric's hermitage and mission is blessed by God, the crops miraculously grow back after the farming community's destruction.



However, this episode reveals to us many of the local and environmental concerns of eleventh century northern England. The resistance of the farming population at Finchale against Godric's use of the common land stands as one of the earliest narratives of land resistance. Notable legal resistance to the privatization of land by local peasants and farmers in the medieval period is not documented in the legal record until the thirteenth century. One notable Norman sheriff appointed to Cambridgeshire from 1070-1090, Picot of Cambridge, was said to have appropriated common pasturage for himself, building three mills on the land after tearing down several houses to build Cambridge Castle.⁵ The local popula-



tion resisted Picot's commandeering of common land for his own purposes; however, the locals held no legal means to resist Picot's incursion. By relying on extralegal resistance – the local people are said to have torn down some of the houses and structures built by Picot on the land and continued to exercise their commoners' rights – the local population subverted the rule of the Norman-appointed earl and his efforts to reorganize the land's use. In general, farming populations held little legal support in fighting the diminishing access to commonly held land. With little to no legal support, the farming population at Finchale took matters into their own hands and sought to resist Godric's efforts to use common pasture to build a homestead.

Moreover, the farming population might have seen Godric as an extension of the massive ecclesiastical powerhouse of Durham, a force that could deny the farming community the common use of the land for the priory's or bishop's own purposes. As the right to common land to graze animals stood at the center of life for the farming population of Finchale where livestock production was the main source of food, an encroachment on their rights constituted the means for resistance to ensure that their livelihoods could be maintained. In the landscape of northern England, these farming people experienced the distress that comes from seeking to use and order an everchanging and diverse landscape. As Reginald writes of Godric's crops miraculously reproducing after being eaten by the local population's livestock, the positioning of Reginald is also revealed. As a monk of Durham Priory, Reginald's writing is meant to highlight the sanctity of Godric and his closeness to God to the detriment of the rights of the local population.

Ultimately, a narrow view of the *Life of Godric* that focuses solely on his famous miraculous fish episode is no longer viable. Due to Coombe's complete translation, we have the opportunity to refresh our understanding of Godric, Reginald of Durham, and the landscape of northern England in the eleventh century.

Notes

¹Margaret Coombe, ed. and trans., *The Life and Miracles of Saint Godric, Hermit of Finchale* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2022).

²Brooks, "Restoring Creation;" Margaret Tedford, "Dominion and Stewardship: Unpacking Environmental Consciousness in Some Old English Saints Lives," *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 1 no. 2, (2020): 47–61; Judith Adler, "Cultivating Wilderness: Environmentalism and Legacies of Early Christian Asceticism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48 (2006).

³For the most recent archeological studies of Lindisfarne, see Chris Casswell et al., "Lindisfarne: The Holy Island Archaeology Project," *DigVentures Limited* (2019): 1–112.

⁴Coombe, 120n230.

⁵Richard Abels, "'The Crimes by Which Wulfbald Ruined Himself with His Lord: The Limits of State Action in Late Anglo-Saxon England,'" *Reading Medieval Studies* 40 (2014): 50.