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Britton Elliott Brooks. *Restoring Creation: The Natural World in the Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac.* Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019. 323 pp. $120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84384-530-0.

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Noah Blan on Britton Brooks, _Restoring Creation: The Natural World in the Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac_

The underlying premise of Britton Elliott Brooks's *Restoring Creation: The Natural World in the Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac* is that "theological and philosophical views" defined "the relationship between humanity and the non-human world" for those in England who read and circulated saints' lives (*vitae*) (p. 3). On that basis, Brooks argues that some early English authors developed a sense that Creation could be temporarily restored to its uncorrupted state through the sanctity and actions of the holy men who were the subjects of the texts, and that these figures became "New Adam[s]," whose ability to redeem the postlapsarian world prefigured the eventual role of a returned Christ (p. 14). Moreover, as the hagiographical tradition for these saints developed, the authors increasingly connected their subjects to specific locales throughout England, linking the development of cults and important pilgrimage sites with the hagiography of restoring Creation.

Restoring Creation is organized around early *vitae* of saints Cuthbert and Guthlac, because they were eremitic (not living in a cloistered monastic community) holy men who had "direct and transformative interaction with Creation" (p. 15).

Brooks analyzes a single *vita* per chapter, with the exception of the final chapter, which looks at two interrelated texts. The introduction situates claims about saints' abilities to restore Creation within late antique and early medieval Latin Christian exegetical traditions on Genesis, specifically those of Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 CE) and Bede (d. 735 CE). Augustine's views on the Fall at first evinced a sense that Creation itself had been perverted and cursed on account of human sin (a view that Bede later subscribed to and disseminated), which explains why snakes bite and some plants have thorns—they are tangible consequences of original sin. But Augustine gradually developed the notion that organisms always had possessed characteristics that would be potentially harmful, but that after the Fall humans' ontological relationship to the rest of Creation had shifted. In either case, Brooks views the authors of the *vitae* as sharing certain views of Creation and the Fall, namely that the new and potentially inimical relationship between humans and other creatures was meant to urge people toward better conduct and salvation, and that saints, through sanctity and obedience, sometimes had the ability to undo the harm inflicted upon the world by Adam and all subsequent sinners.

Chapter 1 examines the anonymous *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*VCA*), or *Life of Saint Cuthbert* (c. 698-705), suggesting that the text should be considered not merely as the means through which Bede discovered Cuthbert's story, but rather as evidence of the saint's miracles "understood as functioning within a postlapsarian world delineated by Augustinian/Bedan exegesis" (p. 19) In other words, it underpinned the notion that Cuthbert developed the ability to temporarily restore elements of Creation through his obedience. This is evident in one of the most famous stories associated with the saint, when he walks to the sea to pray and two sea creatures emerge from the water to lick his feet before warming them with their fur and breath. Brooks sees this as a momentary restoration of the "divine order of the universe" first established under Adam's stewardship of all living creatures (p. 28).

Chapters 2 and 3 treat Bede's metrical *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*VCM*) and prose *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*VCP*)—both written during the early eighth century as paired texts that can be read independently but are meant to build on and inform one another (p. 69). The chapter argues that *VCM* demands new attention because it anticipated Bede's later reworking of Cuthbert into a "idealized Gregorian monk-pastor" through an emphasis on the saint's monastic obedience and fulfilling of the duties of his office (p. 67). In other words, how Bede reworked the materials of Cuthbert's *vita* was rooted in his exegetical interpretations of God's mastery over Creation, which were imbued by the saint, who could temporarily suspend the ontological effects of the Fall. Bede uses poetic devices, innovative lexical constructions, and embellishments of miracle stories to make explicit what was implicit in *VCA*: that through obedience Creation will serve the holy man, a restoration intended to encourage other Christians. Thus, in this version, Cuthbert's sea creatures end up participating in rituals that clearly demonstrate the path to sanctity is through obedient monastic service. Bede goes further in *VCP*, not just presenting an already holy saint whose presence temporarily initiates a prelapsarian environment, but a saint who actively re-creates one through deliberate pastoral action. Bede's reworking of materials from *VCA* and his own *VCM* situate Cuthbert within a framework in which he must "level up" to perform certain miracles, and miraculous abilities only unlock after he demonstrates his monastic obedience and pastoral skills. Bede did this through reordering chapters, adopting a "plainer style," and emphasizing human (rather than spiritual) agency in the miraculous stories (p. 129).

Chapter 4 examines the mid-eighth-century *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* (*VSG*), or *Life of St. Guthlac*, written by the East Anglian monk Felix. Brooks argues that *VSG* marks a shift in Anglo-Latin hagio-

graphy, especially in its depiction of fens, typically represented in Old English texts as "wildernesses." Instead, Felix shows firsthand knowledge of wetlands and their perils. Brooks proposes "enargeia," or a hyper-vivid depiction of the fenscapes, as the key to unlocking Felix's technique of mapping his trek through the fens onto Guthlac's spiritual progression (p. 174). The chapter capably demonstrates how Felix relied on ancient models like Virgil for structure and the third-century apocrypha *Apocalypse of Paul* (*Visio Pauli*) in his depiction of hell, as well as on *VCA*, but also how Felix fashioned them into a novel form.

Chapter 5 develops a fascinating "landscape lexis" in which the terminology used in the *Old English Prose Life of Guthlac* (*OEPG*) to depict the fenscape shares the vocabulary of contemporary mid-tenth-century boundary clauses. This contextual and descriptive terminology in charters would pull a reader along a path delineating the territory stipulated in the agreement with hyper-specific landmarks. In other words, the author of this text used "terms of topographical precision" to make the fens come alive—Brooks's "enargeia"—and this is the most important link to the earlier *vita*. This focus diverges somewhat in the central episode of the poem *Guthlac A*, which involves the saint's descent into hell at the hands of demons who drag him through rough and boggy terrain. Significantly, according to Brooks, Guthlac restores via his sanctity the actual environment that had been transformed after the Fall (Bedan view).

This book is ideally suited for scholars of early medieval England and especially experts in Old English literature and biblical exegesis, though it offers imaginative case studies to a broader audience that demonstrate what we might plausibly call "ecological thinking" in the early Middle Ages. Although ecology and environment are modern notions rooted in a secular scientific discourse that sees nature and culture as fundamentally separate spheres, medieval European Christians thought and wrote about the natural world in terms framed by certain religious and cultural assumptions about human beings and divine purpose. This is perhaps most evident in the famous biblical command (Genesis 9:7) for humans to multiply and fill the earth, which had been corrupted after humankind's first sin and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In *Restoring Creation,* these religious discourses that shaped medieval ideas about humans and environment are not impediments, but rather help situate the argument within the terms and ideas that circulated in early England from c. 700 to 1050 CE.

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