

How Were Miracles Understood in The Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages the most predominant way in which miracles were understood were through Saint's, Shrines and relics. People would flock to shrines and pray for help, guidance, healing and whatever else that was weighing heavy on their minds, they would leave offerings in the form of candles, fruit, jewellery in the hope that their prayers would be heard and answered. Saints, although seen as a connection directly to God, were also only human beings and were also subject to flaws and struggles. In the chapters of Benedicta Wards book, you can decipher that, if you were to discuss miracles in the Middle Ages it would show above all else, acknowledgement of them as a fundamental part of life. The limits of truth include the hidden. Needs of every kind were emphasized on the saints in their shrines. The remains of Martyrs from maltreatment were honoured in many places. There would be feast days for the Saints, normally held on the anniversaries of their deaths. Miracle shrines belonged in a way to the people who lived near them, not that they were the only people who could visit, anyone could, but their closeness to the shrine basically gave them claim to it. When people came to the shrine, they would pray, some would say a quick prayer and leave, while others came and stayed through the night, some even came and stayed for several days. They offered coins, candles and other offerings praying that the saint would hear their prayer and intervene and give answers. On occasions their prayers may have been answered before they arrived at the shrine, then they would pray to give thanks for their blessings. There were quite a lot of miracle works that went unrecorded, but for those that were recorded and there was a vast amount, it was tradition for the writer to praise the saint. They would write and highlight the social, religious and the mutual reliance of the saint and his people. The adoration for the saint and the abundance of contributions to him indicated how honourable and significant he was to his people and what they then attributed to the priority of the supernatural. In the book 'Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?' (see Bartlett, 2013, p.17), he wrote that St Augustine was one of the most important Christian thinkers of his time. He thought about the miracles that were worked by the saints. Out of all the religions, Christianity is the one that is most concerned about deceased bodies. Many religions have the idea of a holy person with extraordinary abilities, obtained from a special connection with God. Medieval Christianity took an individual approach to this idea. The notion that the dead bodies of these holy people should be treasured as lasting sources of supernatural power.¹ People came to these shrines from near and far, they admired those whose immortal remains lay encased there. Prayers were asked for favours, healing, guidance, and by the people's account, were cured of their ills. (I will discuss this more in detail further on). The protectors who guarded these shrines wrote of the lives of the bodies they served; they recorded the miracles that were performed after death and gave them dignified ceremonial honouring in the churches the frequently bore their names.² There were thousands of shrines scattered across medieval Europe that held the bones, dust, and in some cases the intact bodies of the holy deceased (see O'Brien's, 2016 p. 236-248)³ Although St Augustine did not dispute that there was only one miracle, he did however keep the view that creation of the Universe is the most paramount of all miracles.⁴

1. Robert, Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 17. <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=5542059>>

2. ibid p.17.

¹ Robert, Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=5542059>>

² Robert, Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=5542059>>

³ Conor, O'Brien, 'Attitudes to St Cuthbert's Body during the Nineteenth Century', *Northern History*, 53 (2016), 236–248, in *Academic Search Premier*; EBSCOhost <<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=0208fb7a-29bb-3722-9105-ed82160ea78f>>

⁴ John A. Hardon, 'The Concept of Miracle from St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics', *Theological Studies*, 15 (1954), p. 229–257.

Let us now look at the Saint's and shrines of the Middle Ages, it will be impossible to name every single one of them as there are so many, so I will focus on one of the Saints mentioned in Benedicta Wards chapters, focussing on the miracles they performed and how they were perceived.

Saint Cuthbert

According to the book Bede: The Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne (721), the vision occurred on a night in 651 AD. "While St Cuthbert was watching his sheep in the hills near the River Leader, the sky suddenly lit up with a stream of light. He saw a heavenly host of angels descend to earth, gather a "shining soul," and escort it back to the heavens." At the time of this vision, he was around 16 years of age, he later learnt that at the time of seeing the angels it was at that exact moment that Aiden, Bishop of Lindisfarne (holy Island) had died. Cuthbert took this a sign from God and decided there and then to become a monk.⁵ In Bede's 'Life of Cuthbert' he writes that the "relationship Cuthbert had with animals provides proof of his holiness – showing that a man in perfect harmony with God could reclaim the Eden-like-dominion over the natural world."⁶

Saints were seen as important figures in the Middle Ages. They were spiritual mentors for their people who performed miracles and healing. The saints helped to form harmony and togetherness to regional and national populations. The saints provided motivation and strength. St Cuthbert is a touching example. His life/lives (before and after death) were changed quietly over time to consider the concerns of people who were interested in developing his cult. Saint Cuthbert lived on the Island of Lindisfarne. At high tide, Lindisfarne would be totally cut off from the world, but St Cuthbert wanted further Isolation, so in 676 he moved to Farne island which is further cut off from everything and everyone, there he built a small sanctuary where he lived in quiet prayer. Even in this remote place, his reputation as a holy man grew. Because of this reputation the monks of Lindisfarne sought him out to be their bishop, hence they voted him in unanimously. At this time Cuthbert had adapted himself to the isolated life on Farne island and was unwilling to leave to become bishop. It took a substantial retinue, which included Ecgrith, king of the Northumbrians (672-685) himself to travel to the island to try and coax Cuthbert to accept the election. Cuthbert shed many tears to leave his hermitage, but by the time he arrived at the council, he was overcome by the united will of his brothers that he decided to comply to be bishop, he was officially blessed in 685. After only two years of duties as a bishop, he gave it up due to his failing health, where he then returned to his beloved Farne island where he continued his seclusion until his death on 20th March 687. All through his life Cuthbert chose a path of simple life and seclusion from the world, yet his cult from the start was characterized by lavish grandeur. Eleven years after his death his coffin was opened, (which was custom in the Middle Ages) to gather the bones which were then placed in a shrine above ground, the method of that time equal to glorification. Upon opening his coffin, it was found to be undecayed and intact which further provided proof of his saintly standing.⁷

5. Bede, *Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert*, in a volume entitled *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, trans. J.A. Giles, Everyman's Library 479, (London: J.M. Dent; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1910), p.286-349.

6. J. T. Rosenthal, (1982). Bede's "Life of Cuthbert:" Preparatory to "The Ecclesiastical History". *The Catholic Historical Review*, 68(4), p. 599-611.

7. D. Marner, (2000). *St. Cuthbert: His life and cult in medieval Durham*. University of Toronto Press.

⁵Bede, *Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert*, in a volume entitled *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, trans. J.A. Giles, Everyman's Library 479, (London: J.M. Dent; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1910), p.286-349.

⁶ J. T. Rosenthal, (1982). Bede's "Life of Cuthbert:" Preparatory to "The Ecclesiastical History". *The Catholic Historical Review*, 68(4), p. 599-611.

Conclusion

From reading the two chapters of Benedicta Ward's book and the various author's who's input I have researched, for me, it clearly shows that all the saints, shrines and relics all come down to one simple matter – that is FAITH IN GOD. Yes, people flocked to the shrines of these saints and while they were alive asked the saints for prayers or they touched the saints clothing in the hope for healing, much like how the people of biblical times perceived and followed Jesus.

Did these saints really have the divine powers to perform miracles? was it God working through them? Who is to know, it is liken to a placebo effect, if you believe it will work, then it will. I believe God does work in mysterious ways and all things are possible in his sight.

Bartlett, R. (2013). *Why can the dead do such great things?: Saints and worshippers from the martyrs to the reformation*. Princeton University Press.

Bede, *life and miracles of st. cuthbert, in a volume entitled ecclesiastical history of the English nation*, trans. J.A. Giles, *everyman's library* 479,(london: J.M. dent; new york: E.P. Dutton, 1910), 286-349.

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