

THE LADIES OF ELY

Kimberley Steele, Aberystwyth University, Wales

The 'sisters' of Ely were among the most venerated saints of Anglo-Saxon England, regularly rivalling even the Canterbury cults in the number and value of donations received from supplicants¹, and Æthelthryth, the leading figure in this esteemed family, was the most celebrated native woman of the pre-Conquest era, with a cult that continued, seemingly uninterrupted, from the time of her death in 697 until the dissolution of the monasteries. During the centuries in which these cults flourished, the characters of the saints at their centre were to evolve from pious virginal ladies to strident, oftentimes violent, protectors of Ely lands and privileges, adapting to the needs of the community that venerated them.

The earliest surviving source for the events of Æthelthryth's life, and that of her sister, Seaxburh, is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, in which the author claims that his knowledge is based on the verbal accounts provided by Bishop Wilfrid, friend and confidant of the saint, and Cynifrid, who had acted as surgeon for Æthelthryth and been present, together with Wilfrid, at her first translation. It is immediately apparent from the text that the author greatly admired his subject, speaking with much more ardour than that which is devoted to other comparable figures, such as St. Hild of Whitby.²

The reason Bede gives for his fervent admiration of Æthelthryth is that 'even in our own time...' a saint of such calibre lived, a woman who piously preserved her virginity despite tremendous pressure to consummate her marriages, and who renounced the wealth and comfort of royal position in order to found a house of monks and nuns. She is likened to such women as Agatha and Cecilia, martyrs of the early church who had died in defence of their virginity, thus responding to a concern common during the medieval period. In the age of the Church Fathers saints were most often distinguished by the sacrifice of their lives for their faith; by the Anglo-

¹ For a discussion of the longevity of the cult of St. Æthelthryth see S. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: a Study of West Saxon and East Anglia Cults* (Cambridge, 1988).

² C. Fell, 'Saint Æthelþryð: a Historical Dichotomy Revisited' in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 38 (1994), pp 19-20.

Saxon period, however, paganism was less widespread, and the nationalisation of Christianity rendered such martyrdoms infrequent. Was sainthood therefore to be attainable only to those who perished during such events as the Viking invasions, or were there other paths to sanctification? Æthelthryth represented to her contemporaries and near-contemporaries the new and increasingly common breed of saint, distinguished by asceticism and piety, but not necessarily martyrdom.³

Of equal, if not greater importance and yet not *explicitly* referred to by Bede was the role Æthelthryth played in the debate on divorce. The advent of monasticism in medieval Christendom led to increased discussion among churchmen and lawmakers alike regarding the grounds upon which a lawful marriage could be dissolved. The debate surrounding divorce dates back to the original definition of Christian marriage by St. Paul, and throughout the ages, texts were produced stipulating the terms under which marriages could be dissolved. These texts varied between localities, and yet there appears to be a theme of divorce being permitted only in the case of consanguinity or adultery, often female adultery in particular.⁴ As monasticism began to flourish, however, it became necessary to re-evaluate accepted grounds for divorce in light of those who wished to divorce in order for one or both parties to enter a monastery. The church had long been an attractive prospect for the widowed, presenting an opportunity for 'retirement' without the necessity of re-marriage, but married men and women were also drawn to the church, and sought legitimisation of divorce for this purpose.

Bede's enthusiastic promotion of the cult of Æthelthryth should be viewed in the light of this debate; the saint was, regardless of any claims concerning her virginity, a divorcée. 'Æthelthryth, as a reigning queen who embarked on the monastic life, represented a polemical opportunity too good to miss.'⁵ Æthelthryth was a royal lady who submitted to the dynastic need for marriage, demonstrating her obedience, but remained virginal as a statement of piety and devotion; when she sought a divorce

³ There is an early tradition of ascetic 'desert saints' in the east, for example St. Simeon of Syria, but this was late arriving in the West.

⁴ S. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp 46-74. See also C. N. L. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford, 1989).

⁵ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women*, p. 67.

after twelve years of marriage to her second husband, she did so with the blessing, and indeed the assistance, of no less a figure than St. Wilfrid. This is a patent statement in support of divorce in order to allow entry into a monastery, though within prescribed parameters; the divorce is sought with the support of a bishop, and occurs only with the consent, however reluctant, of her husband, Ecgrith.

Bede's motives for venerating Æthelthryth are wide-ranging, incorporating her significance as a symbol of purity and asceticism, and of permissible divorce, as well as her role as foundress of the double monastery on the Isle of Ely. The members of Æthelthryth's family who were to form an integral part of the cults of Ely during later centuries were not portrayed with such importance in the *Ecclesiastical History*, however, and would only rise to prominence during later centuries. Seaxburh is discussed in the text in terms of her political position, but no claims are made for her sanctity, while her daughter, Eormenhild, is praised for her piety and devotion but Bede draws no connections between Eormenhild and the institution of Ely or her esteemed aunt.

The tradition of Æthelthryth was thus started by Bede, and it remained unchanged for more than two hundred years; the Old English translation of his *Ecclesiastical History* almost exactly replicated the original Latin in its representation of the ladies of Ely and there appear to have been no hagiographical works written in relation to them until after the Benedictine Reform movement, when the abbey was re-founded by St. Æthelwold.

St. Æthelwold, with permission from King Edgar, purchased the lands of Ely and re-founded the abbey in the form of a single house of Benedictine monks, purportedly offering the resident clerics the choice between banishment or conversion. The monastery, consecrated by St. Dunstan in 970, became the benefactor of Æthelwold's deliberate policy of enrichment, as he provided adequate territorial endowment to allow the monastery liberty, backed by King Edgar's 970 charter granting a number of privileges to the abbey, which has become known as the *Liberty of Ely*.⁶ The *Liberty*

⁶ For a full discussion of this charter see R. B. Pugh *et al.* (eds.), *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely* (Woodbridge, 2006, 2nd ed.), vol. 4, *City of Ely; Ely, N. and S. Witchford and*

granted the monastery extensive privileges and exemptions, ranging from tax-relief and the right to the fourth penny from Cambridge, to court-holding privileges. These were benefits that could only be bestowed by the Crown, and it is asserted in the text of *The Liberty* that Edgar was merely confirming existing benefits as provided for the monastery by its foundress. While the eighth century cult of Æthelthryth largely played down her status as a monarch, emphasising her desire to leave the secular world behind her and become like an early martyr, by the tenth century it was Æthelthryth as Queen that justified the abbey's position of considerable power. She remained a prominent figure in the choir of virgins as depicted in Æthelwold's *Benedictional*, but in addition she began to reclaim her royal status.



Image taken from Andrew Prescott, *The Benedictional of St. Æthelwold: A Masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon Art*. A Facsimile. The British Library, 2002.

It was during this period that Æthelthryth's 'sister' saints began to attain greater prominence, most notably through the translation of 974, when Æthelwold oversaw the translation of the relics of Æthelthryth, along with her sister, Seaxburh, and niece, Eormenhild, both of whom were said to have succeeded her as abbess. Further, Bryhtnoth, abbot of Ely, brought the relics of Wihtburg, claimed to be a further sister of Æthelthryth, to Ely under 'dubious circumstances'. As was typical, the physical translations of this family of saints was also accompanied by a literary translation, as

Wisbech Hundreds, pp 4-8 and 84-113, which convincingly asserts that the Old English translation of the charter was done by Ælfric.

Ælfric re-worked the *Life* of St. Æthelthryth in his *Lives of the Saints*.⁷ During the course of the Benedictine Reform, Æthelwold, together with his colleagues, endowed a number of churches with important relics and encouraged the development of a number of cults, however, ‘only at Ely did collection involve a program of replication...’⁸ This replication was highly significant for emphasising the ‘royal’ nature of the monastery, which was provided with a dynasty of saints to reinforce its status outside of the confines of secular royal control, a status reinforced by the four statues gifted by Bryhtnoth to the monastery and displayed on the altar, of the four ladies of Ely in queenly robes decorated with gold and precious jewels.

Following the Benedictine Reformation, the Danish invasions of England resumed once more. Ely was fortunate to remain largely unscathed, and thus the cults of Æthelthryth and her sister saints continued until the eve of the Conquest; they were symbols of purity and asceticism, of royal proprietorship and patronage, and of the golden age of the Anglo-Saxon church. Their story ‘could be fitted into accepted Late Antiquity and Merovingian literary models of female sanctity and could be used to demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxon church could also produce examples of extreme devotion to God and spiritual strength in the face of adversity.’⁹ But more importantly for Ely, the saints provided a connection to the seventh century past, a claim to lands and rights, and an encouragement to patrons to further endow the monastery.¹⁰ Royal patronage of the monastery did not end with Edgar; the twelfth century *Liber Eliensis* records donations made by Æthelred, Cnut and Edward the Confessor, the latter of whom spent a large part of his childhood on the Isle of Ely.¹¹ While this text is indisputably propagandist in nature, a royal cult was nonetheless a status symbol for

⁷ Ælfric’s *Lives of the Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed in the English Church*, ed. and trans. W. W. Skeat (London, 1900).

⁸ C. E. Karkov, ‘The Body of St. Æthelthryth: Desire, Convention and Reform in Anglo-Saxon England’ in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD300-1300*, ed. M. Carver (York, 2003), p. 402.

⁹ S. Rosser, ‘Æthelthryth: A Conventional Saint?’ in *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 79 (3) (1991), p. 24.

¹⁰ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, pp 193-4.

¹¹ *Liber Eliensis*, ii, c. 91 (*Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely from the Seventh Century to the Twelfth, Compiled by a Monk of Ely in the Twelfth Century*, ed. and trans. J. Fairweather (Woodbridge, 2005), p. 191).

living royalty, and as such it would have attracted interest; 'a royal saint in heaven brought prestige to those who exercised the royal office on earth'.¹²

After the Conquest, however, the new Norman kings were to have a much more complex relationship with both the abbey and the cults of Ely. The immediate post-Conquest experiences of the community at Ely Abbey were not typical of that of other Anglo-Saxon monasteries, and this was to have a profound influence on the evolution of the cults of Æthelthryth and her sisters. In the aftermath of the Norman invasion, William gained the support of the English Church, which was largely ready to serve the Conqueror once it was apparent that the English aristocracy would not recover from its downfall. Ely, however, was to play an active role in a continuing resistance to Norman rule, serving as a safe-haven to those outlawed by the Conqueror, and a base of operations for a guerrilla war lead by Hereward the Wake against the occupying forces, aided by the difficulties of waging war in an area such as the fens. The monks not only provided shelter to the rebels, but also lived, ate and fought alongside them, becoming known as the *Knights of St. Æthelthryth*.

As the abbey became entangled in the events of the rebellion, so too did the cults it housed; Æthelthryth was the binding force that held her community together, and during the resistance of 1071 she was, according to Ely tradition, also instrumental in binding the rebels together. The *Liber Eliensis* tells of how central she had been to the rebel community; 'but they would not admit anyone into their company unless they previously pledged their loyalty by swearing an oath on the corpse of the most holy Virgin Æthelthryth [to act with them] in purpose of mind and strength of body'.¹³ The monastic chronicle is unique in its genre for its absolute condemnation of the Normans and support of Harold Godwinson, proclaiming 'Woe to you England.... You lost your native king and in war, with great shedding of your people's blood, became subject to a foreigner. Your sons were miserably slain within your bounds, and your councillors and leaders were overwhelmed, or put to death or deprived of their inheritance.'¹⁴

¹² Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, p. 195.

¹³ *Liber Eliensis*, ii, c. 102, p. 207.

¹⁴ *Liber Eliensis*, ii, c. 101, p. 203.

Upon inspection, however, the unifying ideology that inspired monks to fight alongside warriors proves not to have been driven by the division between ‘English’ and ‘Norman’, it had a largely economic basis; Hereward and his men were dispossessed Anglo-Saxons, men who had lost, or were under threat of losing their birthrights for the crime of having fought, or having been related to those who fought on the side of Harold Godwinson, denounced by the Normans as a usurper. William had imposed his own kingship on the country, and all claims to autonomy were disregarded. Heavy taxes were imposed, including formerly exempt houses such as Ely, and lands which had been rented from the abbey by Anglo-Saxons who had fought at Hastings were seized nonetheless. The *Liber Eliensis* explicitly states that Ely’s involvement in the resistance was based upon the threats made to the *Liberty of Ely*, ‘...which the same consecrated woman, Æthelthryth, had taken possession of as a marriage-portion but now had assigned for the service of God – the liberty of the place should not be diminished or destroyed in future by either king or bishop’¹⁵, but the Normans *had* diminished the abbey’s liberty, the rights of Æthelthryth had come under threat. The tenth century attempts to cement Ely’s reputation as a royal foundation with royal privileges, dependent on the belief in the cult of royal saints housed therein, now led the monks inexorably to war, and its saints were called out to defend themselves; the community they served needed them to become a symbol of strength and resistance in order to act as the figureheads of the English Resistance.

The defeat of the rebels by the Norman army presented a dogmatic problem for the guardians of Æthelthryth’s cult. The *Liber Eliensis*, as well as being a historical record of the foundation of the abbey and her cults, was a statement of strength. It detailed the importance of the cults it housed, the extent of its lands, the power it exercised and, most importantly, the consequences for those who threatened it. To oppose the monastery was to oppose its saints, and the response was swift and effective. The author of the *Liber Eliensis* could not therefore openly admit that the abbey lands had been seized by the Normans, and that rather than being protected by its saints, Ely had been forced to surrender to its enemies. This would be akin to

¹⁵ *Liber Eliensis*, i, c. 15, p. 43.

admitting the loss of Æthelthryth's power. The end of the English Resistance was therefore represented as resulting from a conscious decision by the monks. It is claimed that they chose to withdraw their support from Hereward and his men, and switch allegiance to the Crown. Once Æthelthryth's support was withdrawn from the rebels, their failure was inevitable.

Despite this face-saving exercise, there is considerable evidence for the losses suffered by Ely as a result of the Conquest and its involvement in the resistance of Hereward. The guardians of the cults of Ely had much work to do in order to restore the image of a monastery protected by vibrant and active saints. This was achieved by way of an oft-quoted passage in the *Liber Eliensis* in which William I approaches the tomb of St. Æthelthryth after crushing the rebels who fought in her name.

He 'gave instructions to a large force to guard the doors and entrances of the church ... On his arrival at the monastery, eventually, standing a long way from the body of the holy virgin, he threw a gold mark on to the altar, not daring to approach closer: he was afraid of having judgement passed on him by God for the evils which his men perpetrated in the place.'¹⁶

The power of this passage is twofold; it asserts that despite the Norman victory in 1071, William was nonetheless aware that he had incurred the ill-will of the saint and afraid of the consequences of this, implying that had he approached the tomb, his audacity would have been punished. In addition it also suggests a financial exchange for the lands confiscated from the abbey.¹⁷ This concept of financial exchange was essential in preserving the inviolate image of Æthelthryth. Her lands had become so intertwined with the concept of her body and her being that the violation of one was akin to the violation of the other, and to admit to the loss of lands without due financial payment would be to admit to the deflowering of the saint; the lands are thus

¹⁶ *Liber Eliensis*, ii, c. 111, p. 229.

¹⁷ For further discussions of the importance of this passage see V. Blanton-Whetsell, 'Tota integra, tota incorrupta: the Shrine of St. Æthelthryth as a Sign of Monastic Identity' in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 32 (2002), pp 227-67; Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, pp 176-210.

not seized, but bought.¹⁸ That William was shown to be afraid of the power of the saint demonstrated that her strength and power to protect her community had not been undermined, and allowed those who venerated her to remain confident in her continued protection.

In 1082 the first Norman abbot, Simeon, was appointed to Ely; Susan Ridyard states that Abbot Simeon and his Norman successors 'took over the cult of St Æthelthryth, [and] adapted that cult to the changing purposes of the new'.¹⁹ I would like, finally, to identify the adaptations made and what they tell us about what changes were wrought by the coming of a new age.

The period following the arrival of the Normans precipitated a great deal of positive change for the abbey of Ely; Abbot Simeon won the respect of the monks, in part due to the building project he began, renewing the monastic buildings, and replacing the existing wooden church dedicated to St. Æthelthryth with one of stone in the Romanesque style. In addition, it was Simeon who invited the renowned hagiographer, Goscelin, to Ely, where he subsequently produced a series of *vitae* and *miracula* devoted to Æthelthryth and her sister saints. Simeon's building project was continued by his successor, Abbot Richard, who then presided over the grandiose translations of SS. Æthelthryth, Seaxburh, Eormenhild and Wihtburh in 1106. Abbot Richard is also credited with the first suggestion that Ely should be promoted to a bishopric, an idea pursued by Abbot Hervey, and enacted in the autumn of 1109. Abbot Hervey, later Bishop Hervey, went on to oversee a blossoming of literary activity in Ely, and it was during his tenure that work began on the *Liber Eliensis*, which incorporated the hagiographical work that had been commissioned by the monks of Ely during the previous two generations, placing it within the context of a more historical and rhetorical narrative.

One of the key changes made by the post-Conquest revisionists of the *Vitae Sancte Æthelthryth* was in relation to Æthelthryth's relationship with her second husband,

¹⁸ For the awareness of physicality in the cult of St. Æthelthryth see in particular Karkov, *The Body of St. Æthelthryth*, pp 397-411; M. Otter, 'The Temptation of St. Æthelthryth' in *Exemplaria*, 9 (1997), pp 139-63.

¹⁹ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, p. 209.

Ecgrith. When writing the first treatment of Æthelthryth's life, Bede had established the precedent of juxtaposing the saint with the tradition of the virgin martyrs, but despite the best efforts of the Venerable Bede, Æthelthryth did not fit the standard *topos* of the virgin martyr, and he was writing too soon after the events he described to have been free to misrepresent the people and events to an extent that would have allowed her to fully assume that mantle. She had been born to Christian parents, who throughout the *Ecclesiastical History* are the subject of great praise, her father being described as 'a very devout man, noble in mind and deed'²⁰, and she could not therefore claim to have been subject to the grave cruelty experienced by many of the virgin martyrs. Æthelthryth's husbands were both Christian men who were not possessed of the cruelty of the traditional suitors, for example the Roman prefect, for example, who ordered that Agatha be so cruelly tortured when she refused his advances. The only physical ordeals endured by the saint were those she inflicted on herself by limiting her intake of food and denying herself hot baths, and the tumour which lead to her death.

By twelfth century, however, authors revising the *Life* of Æthelthryth were distant enough from the events they described not to be bound by concerns of character assassination upon people whose true nature was still remembered. They were therefore at greater liberty to embellish the tale of Æthelthryth's separation from her second husband in order to cast her more closely in the model of the virgin martyrs she been compared to by Bede. Hagiographical tradition dictated that a virgin's purity should be tested, and while Bede was content to express this period of testing merely through determination in the face of Ecgrith's attempts to bribe her to consummate their marriage before he reluctantly consented to their separation, the *Liber Eliensis* magnifies this into a series of scenes of sexualised violence.

According to the twelfth century chronicle, Ecgrith is initially persuaded to release Æthelthryth from their marriage, but later regrets that decision and attempts to abduct his wife and force her to return to their marriage home and consummate their

²⁰ *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation: With the Life and Miracles and St. Cuthbert and the Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Book by St Bede the Venerable*, ed. and trans. J. Stevens (London, 1951), IV, c. 19.

relationship. Æthelthryth's departure from Coldingham and foundation of the monastery at Ely is, in the later text, coloured to be a forced midnight flight from the clutches of a man intent on pursuing his conjugal rights, followed by the besiegement of Æthelthryth and her companions, ended only by the intervention of God.²¹

Bede's traditionally deferential saint, retiring to a monastery only with permission from her husband, is made more strident and firm, bringing her tale in line with those of the early virgin martyrs, and more significantly, this new representation 'is designed to highlight Æthelthryth's resistance to a royal imperative; the anecdote establishes Æthelthryth's break from royal authority and her allegiance with God...' ²² and thus provides further precedent for the abbey's resistance to royal control.

This new Æthelthryth, more active and warrior-like than her eighth century incarnation, is in evidence throughout her post-Conquest revisions. The *Miracula S. Ætheldrethe* produced, possibly by Gregory of Ely²³, soon after the translations of 1106, presents a subject far removed from the humble and peaceful nun of the *Ecclesiastical History*. This source recounts how, following the re-foundation of the abbey by Æthelwold, a former cleric turned monk, Ælfhelm, reported that he had witnessed the power of Æthelthryth at work prior to the banishment of the clerics. According to his tale, a fellow cleric had been seized by the desire to open the coffin of the saint in order to see if her body did indeed remain incorrupt, doubting that she could have been as pure and undefiled as had been reported. He violated the sarcophagus of the saint, pushing sticks and knives through an opening created during the Danish attacks, and finding her body was intact, pulled part of her grave clothes back through the opening, attempting to cut a piece for himself. The saint's displeasure was shown when the grave clothes were wrenched with a great force back inside the coffin, and,

After these things had been done soon afterward there followed a terrible plague, which entered the wretched priest's house, and cut down the wife he had illicitly taken

²¹ *Liber Eliensis*, i, c. 11, p. 33.

²² Blanton-Whetsell, 'Tota integra, tota incorrupta', p. 243.

²³ For a discussion of the authorship of this text see R. C. Love (ed. and trans.), *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin: The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely* (Oxford, 2004), pp lxi-lxii.

*to himself, as well as his sons, and then spreading totally wiped out his entire family, after just a few days killed him as well, in the place he had sought out in an attempt to escape the raging of impending destruction.*²⁴

This passage is deeply polemical against the married clerics who were deemed to have been poor guardians for the remains of Æthelthryth, Seaxburh and Eormenhild, but it is also striking in its characterisation of Æthelthryth as a vengeful saint, willing to kill not only those unworthy men who had offended her, but entire families. Furthermore, once the transition from meek and feminine to warrior-like and vengeful was made, it was permanent – ‘Nor once brandished in vengeance did the celestial sword cease to smite’.²⁵ A new hagiographical *topos* was adopted, that of the *milites Christi*.

This re-casting of the characters of the Ely sacred tradition extended to the whole family of saints. In response to the crises of the eleventh and twelfth centuries the female saints were drawn further together to create a united opposition to any who sought to threaten the monastery. Earlier representations of the ‘secondary characters’ in the Ely tradition, Seaxburh, Eormenhild, and Wihtburh, were of women whose primary role was to reinforce the sanctity of the family. They were revered more for their relationship to the central Æthelthryth and their continuation of her work than for their own individual qualities, and though they performed miracles in their own right, these were largely confined to powers of healing and premonition as proof of their sanctity. However, as the character of Æthelthryth was intensified to render her warrior-like, so too the language devoted to her sister-saints reflected this transformation; and they are transformed from wives, mothers and virginal nuns, to re-embodiments of Judith, slaying Holofernes for the good of their people.

While such an evolution from passive to strident is not unusual in hagiography, the extent to which it takes place in the case of the Ladies of Ely is noteworthy. The new-found violence of the lady saints is nowhere more evident than in the miracle reported in the *Liber Eliensis* as having occurred in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest and

²⁴ *Miracula Sancte Ætheldrethe*, c.8 (Love, *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin*, pp 128-9).

²⁵ *Miracula Sancte Ætheldrethe*, c.9 (Love, *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin*, pp 128-9).

settlement, when the monastery and its lands were most under threat. At that time the Norman sheriff, Gervase, attempted to appropriate abbey lands for himself, an act deemed by the author of the *Liber Eliensis* as a personal attack on the saint. The text states that '[t]his man was extremely hostile to St Æthelthryth's people and, as if he had undertaken a special campaign against her, assailed the whole of her property with oppression, wherever he could.'²⁶ His punishment for this is swift and harsh at the hands of the family of protectors of Ely;

St Æthelthryth appeared in the form of an abbess with a pastoral staff, along with her two sisters, and stood before him, just like an angry woman, and reviled him in a terrifying manner as follows: 'Are you the man who has been so often harassing my people – the people whose patroness I am – holding me in contempt? And have you not yet desisted from disturbing the peace of my church? What you shall have then, as your reward, is this: that others shall learn through you not to harass the household of Christ.' And she lifted the staff which she was carrying and implanted its point heavily in the region of his heart, as if to pierce him through. Then her sisters, St Wihthburh and St Seaxburh, [who had come along with her], wounded him with the sharp points of their staves. Gervase, to be sure, with his terrible groaning and horrible screaming, disturbed the whole of his household as they flocked around him: in the hearing of them all he said, 'Lady, have mercy! Lady, have mercy!' On hearing this, the servants came running and enquired the reason for his distress. There was noise round about Gervase as he lay there and he said to them, 'Do you not see St Æthelthryth going away. How she pierced my chest with the sharp end of her staff, while her saintly sisters did likewise? And look, a second time she is returning to impale me, and now I shall die, since finally she has impaled me.' And with these words he breathed his last.²⁷

These women have become active, walking, talking and individuals capable of violent killing, eager to demonstrate that though the abbey's patrons are women, they will adopt the position of knights for the protection of that abbey, and they will deliver a quick death to all who interfere with its rights.

²⁶ *Liber Eliensis*, ii, c. 132, p. 252.

²⁷ *Liber Eliensis*, ii, c. 132, pp 252-3.

By studying the veneration of the Ladies of Ely it is possible to gain a valuable insight into the adaptability of the role saints played in their communities, and how different aspects of their characters could be emphasised or suppressed in accordance with the needs of the institutions they represented.

Bibliography:

BLANTON-WHETSELL, V., 'Tota integra, tota incorrupta: the Shrine of St. Æthelthryth as a Sign of Monastic Identity' in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 32 (2002), pp 227-67.

BROOKE, C. N. L., *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford, 1989).

FAIRWEATHER, J., (ed. and trans.), *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely from the Seventh Century to the Twelfth, Compiled by a Monk of Ely in the Twelfth Century* (Woodbridge, 2005).

FELL, C., 'Saint Æthelþryð: a Historical Dichotomy Revisited' in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 38 (1994), pp 19-20.

HOLLIS, S., *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, 1992).

KARKOV, C. E., 'The Body of St. Æthelthryth: Desire, Convention and Reform in Anglo-Saxon England' in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD300-1300*, ed. M. Carver (York, 2003).

LOVE, R. C. (ed. and trans.), *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin: The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely* (Oxford, 2004).

OTTER, M., 'The Temptation of St. Æthelthryth' in *Exemplaria*, 9 (1997), pp 139-63.

PUGH, R. B. *et al.* (eds.), *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, iv, *City of Ely; Ely, N. and S. Witchford and Wisbech Hundreds* (Woodbridge, 2006, 2nd ed.).

RIDYARD, S., *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: a Study of West Saxon and East Anglia Cults* (Cambridge, 1988).

ROSSER, S., 'Æthelthryth: A Conventional Saint?' in *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 79 (3) (1991), pp 15-24.

SKEAT W. W. (ed. and trans.), *Ælfric's Lives of the Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints' Days Formerly Observed in the English Church, edited from Manuscript Julius E. VII In the Cottonian Collections, with Various Readings From Other Manuscripts* (London, 1900).