

CLAYTON, Mary (1990): *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xiii + 299 pp. (£ 35.00).

The cult of the Virgin in Anglo-Saxon England is a topic which has never before been examined in any detail, but as Mary Clayton has proved, has significant bearing on the history of Church, liturgy, art, history and Old English poetry and prose. This book provides a wide-ranging exploration of the cult of the Virgin from the seventh century to the eleventh century, and a valuable study of the first artistic manifestations and literary examples in English language dealing with Mary. Dr. Clayton describes the development of Mary and devotion and doctrine from c. 700 to the Conquest, by discussing Anglo-Saxon feasts of the Virgin, liturgical texts, prayers, monastic dedications, art and Old English literature.

The volume falls into nine sections; in the first chapter, the author suggests that the cult of the Virgin Mary seems to have reached England largely from Rome as the early dedications to Mary are in imitation of Roman dedications, the feasts came from there, Mediterranean images provided models for English ones and liturgical texts, drawings and paintings were imported into England from Italy. It is worth mentioning that there was a period at the end of the seventh century and at the beginning of the eighth century when Eastern popes brought with them the more enthusiastic oriental devotion to Mary, all the popes from Sergius 687-701 to Zachary 741-752 were either Syrian or Greek except one. Moreover, we must take into account that quite probably some works on Mary were transmitted through Visigothic channels, perhaps along the Syria-Spain-Ireland route so well trodden by modern scholars. In any case, interest in and devotion to Mary flourished in Anglo-Saxon England in late seventh and eighth centuries; but chiefly in the tenth and eleventh centuries Mary was the most important saint of the Benedictine

Reform and she became the patron saint of almost all the reformed houses as Dr. Clayton suggests in the introduction of this volume.

In the second chapter the author surveys the development of the feasts of the Virgin and traces their introduction into Anglo-Saxon England. By means of this section we know that Anglo-Latin scholars, mainly Bede, were familiar with all four Roman feasts: Purification, Annunciation, Assumption and Nativity; moreover, some texts from c. 750-900 such as the *Old English Martyrology*, Alcuin's *Libellus precum* and Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus*, perpetuate the Roman pattern. Later, two new Eastern feasts were introduced into England c. 1030 at Winchester, the centre of Marian devotion: Conception and Presentation in the Temple; their adoption must be the result of a certain Eastern influence on Anglo-Saxon devotion. The development and study of these feasts proves the influence of the Virgin in Anglo-Saxon church, culture and society as Mary Clayton pointed out.

Chapter three, the cult of the Virgin in the liturgy, takes up the study of the English texts for the holy mass, Offices and liturgical prayers. Liturgical texts were imported by the first missionaries and later by Anglo-Saxon book-collectors such as Benedict Biscop. Most texts were centred on the introduction of the four principal feasts (Purification, Annunciation, Assumption and Nativity) chiefly in the seventh and eighth centuries. From the tenth century onwards two liturgical feasts (Conception and Presentation), and other liturgical prayers and devotional practices were developed.

Evidence for liturgical celebration on Mary comes mainly from the antiphons in Alcuin's *Florilegium De laude Dei*, which was compiled at York c. 790. Much more survives from the period of the Benedictine Reform. The *Regularis concordia* provides for a Saturday mass for the Virgin as well as daily suffrages after Lauds and Vespers. During the eleventh century texts and benedictions for the Marian feasts were also compiled especially at Winchester. Frequently, benedictions, prayers and other public religious manifestations show clearly that the author was drawing on the apocryphal narratives on the Virgin Mary.

The study of these liturgical texts shows a strong concern for the Virgin in Anglo-Saxon period, and as a conclusion Dr. Clayton says:

By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, the English church was celebrating not only the principal feasts of the Virgin, with the extra feasts of her Conception and Presentation in the Temple, and composing texts for all these occasions, but they had also adopted new optional devotional practices which testify to a strong interest in Mary (89).

In chapter four the author considers the development of private prayers to Mary written in Latin before the Conquest. The importance of private prayers for the Anglo-Saxons is easy to overlook and as we would expect, prayer was strongly emphasized in monastic communities, and there is ample evidence to suggest that prayer was important for other social groups as well.

Dr. Clayton studies the private prayers dealing with Mary beginning with a passage in Aldhelm's poem *In Basilica Beatae Mariae Semper Virginis* c. 685, and other texts in which scholars and writers appeal for Mary's intercession. Then the author considers the development of these prayers in some manuscripts mainly the English prayer books, the *Book of Nunnaminster*, British Library MS. Harley 2965, and the *Book of Cerne*, Cambridge University Library MS. ll. 1, 10 from the IX century. Mary is invoked in many other private prayers as we can appreciate in manuscripts coming from the early as well as the late Anglo-Saxon period, and from the North and West of England, and in the latter half of the tenth century and eleventh century from the South, chiefly from Glastonbury, Canterbury, Abingdon and Winchester where it is possible to find the most interesting group of Marian prayers of the eleventh century.

In chapter five Dr. Clayton considers the Marian dedications of the cathedrals and monastic churches of Anglo-Saxon England. It is known that the fullest enumeration of Anglo-Saxon church buildings is contained in the

*Domesday Book* of 1068, but, as Dr. Clayton suggests, this document is extremely uneven in its records for the different counties of England and this is why it is not of great help. The author departs from the dedications of the English cathedrals as they are well documented in almost every case as are the dates of their foundations; moreover, Dr. Clayton studies the history of the monastic houses following an outstanding work written by D. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *The Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales*. The author finally suggests that

... the overwhelming number of dedications or rededications to Mary associated with the Benedictine reform suggests that this dedication was regarded almost as a hallmark of the reform, an outward sign of a truly monastic, celibate community (135).

Mary Clayton also examines very briefly in this chapter the possession of relics of Mary, and in her opinion by the tenth and eleventh centuries many English churches and monasteries must have been in possession of relics and she mentions three lists of relics from Winchester, Bath and Exeter.

In the last section of this chapter the author looks at the question of pilgrimage to Walsingham, the only Marian pilgrimage in England thought to date from the pre-Conquest period.

Chapter six deals with the Virgin in Anglo-Saxon art. The author provides, after a brief introduction on the artistic treatment of the Virgin Mary in the first centuries of our era, a survey of the paintings, drawings, carvings and other artistic manifestations in Anglo-Saxon England.

The first reference we have about Christian art in England is a description of the works brought from Rome by Benedict Biscop in Bede's *Historia abbatum* and it includes an "imaginem ... beatae Dei genetricis semperque virginis Mariae, simul et duodecim apostolorum" (146).

Dr. Clayton examines first the early representations from Northumbria and the Midlands, including the coffin of St. Cuthbert and the Franks Casket.

Then the author describes in five sections the illuminated manuscript: *Manuscript illumination of the early tenth century: the Æthelstan Psalter*, *Canterbury manuscripts of the late tenth and eleventh centuries*, *Manuscripts associated with the sacramentary of Robert of Jumièges*, and other manuscripts with Anglo-Saxon miniatures.

In this chapter Dr. Clayton also considers the ivories from the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the virgin in monumental art after the Benedictine reform, including eleventh century crosses with carvings of the Virgin. Apart from these manifestations which have survived there is some evidence that much more has clearly been lost, particularly wall paintings, wood carvings and embroideries. In any case, Anglo-Saxon art testifies to the Marian enthusiasm in England mainly after the Benedictine reform.

Chapter seven considers the Virgin in Old English poetry. Most of this section is based on the references to Mary in the Christian epic poem *Christ I* or the *Advent Lyrics*. The focus of *Advent*, which adheres strictly to biblical and patristic traditions rather than apocryphal legends “is on [Mary’s] role in the Incarnation and on the attempt to understand Christ’s divine and human parentage” (205). Dr. Clayton surveys the different interpretations proposed by scholars who have studied this text, mainly S. Rankin’s article, *The Liturgical Background of the Old English Advent Lyrics: A Reappraisal*, and J. J. Cambell’s edition *The Advent Lyrics of the Exeter Book*, and finally she suggests that

“In the poetic works in which she does figure, Mary’s role is entirely subordinated to her son’s and there is little or no trace of an apocryphal-type interest in her. In this the anonymous poetry differs greatly from the anonymous Old English prose” (209).

Mary Clayton mentions very briefly other references to the Virgin in Old English poetry such as in *The Dream of the Rood*, the versified *Creed*, and *Judgement Day II*, a very close translation of Bede’s poem *De die iudicii*. In

fact, Old English poetry contains very few references to Mary and a possible explanation, as Dr. Clayton suggests, is that the age of the Benedictine reform was largely an age of prose (209).

Chapter eight is devoted to exploring the references to the Virgin in Old English prose. From the beginning of the Benedictine reform we have numerous vernacular texts written in prose dealing with the Virgin Mary, chiefly in homilies. Before this period our only substantial evidence for the cult of the Virgin in Old English prose is that of the *Old English Martyrology*, a narrative martyrology composed sometime between the second half of the eighth century and the end of the ninth; as Dr. Clayton suggests “the Old English Martyrology, then, testifies to a developed interest in Marian legends and to the availability of such texts in ninth century England” (217).

There are ten homilies written in Old English for feasts of Mary and the author surveys the analogies and sources of these texts and she mentions Ambrosius Autpertus, Haymo, St. Augustine, Bede, Pseudo-Augustine *Sermo XX*, Jerome and Gregory.

Ælfric’s homilies with references to Mary are particularly discussed in this section and Dr. Clayton suggests that Ælfric’s orthodoxy is evident throughout his work: “In treating of the Virgin’s life on earth Ælfric almost always deliberately confines himself to the bible or biblical exegesis ... although its description of Mary’s spiritual assumption is obviously not based on the New Testament, it follows the liturgy for the feast in interpreting suitable passages from the Song of Songs as a description of her assumption” (261).

In the last chapter, Dr. Clayton sums up the previous sections and she emphasizes the fact that the cult of the Virgin is an unexpectedly important aspect of Anglo-Saxon spirituality, art and literature; finally she suggests that the earlier cult is chiefly an Anglian one based on Roman doctrine which begins with Aldhelm and Bede, whereas the latter cult is concentrated in the south and is a product of the Benedict reform.

*Reviews: Mary Clayton 1990*

Altogether, all students and scholars of Anglo-Saxon culture and old English literature will surely find an immense amount to interest them in this authoritative volume. But one would have liked Dr. Clayton to spend a few more pages on literary comments. Moreover, at least from a Spanish point of view, the reader would have liked a more accurate analysis on the possible Spanish influence, especially Ildefonsus of Toledo's views on Mary and Isidore of Seville, on the Virgin cult in Anglo-Saxon England, mainly in the first period; but this is a subject that suggests further paths of investigation.

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