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Anchorites, Wise Folk and Magical Practitioners in Twelfth-Century England

Simeon of Trier was born in Syracuse to a Greek father and a Calabrian mother. He trained as a hermit in a tower on the banks of the River Jordan before moving to a cave in Egypt at the foot of Mount Sinai. Later he found employment as a pilgrim guide. With the languages he knew, Coptic, Syriac, Greek, Arabic, and Latin, he turned his tongue to each division of the sacred journey from the Frankish lands to Jerusalem. Archbishop Poppo of Trier (1016-47) employed him to lead a pilgrimage. Returning to Trier about the year 1030, Simeon sought his permission to live as a recluse inside the great Roman gate known as the *Porta Nigra*. Poppo consented and enclosed him with ceremony before the clergy and laity, in a cell high in the tower. Not long after he had settled there, Trier suffered a devastating flood, which locals attributed to his sorcery. And they threw stones up at his cell and broke the window.[1] Fears of sorcery were traditional among the Frankish and Germanic peoples. The ninth-century bishop, Agobard of Lyons (814-40), had condemned the persecution of those alleged to be storm makers, who were accused of destroying crops by calling up high winds. Agobard objected to the belief that people from a mysterious land called Magonia

[1] T. Licence, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society 950-1200* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 70-1.

could fly over fields, causing hail, thunder, and destruction of crops.[2] Simeon, in eleventh-century Trier, was a foreigner who spoke strange languages and lived up in a tower. It may have been partly to quell rumours that the archbishop had a sorcerer that Poppo applied for Simeon's canonisation when he died in 1035.

I want to use Simeon's case as a way in to the question, what was the difference between an anchorite and a worker of occult arts? If the answer seems obvious, we should pause for a moment. It was not so obvious to the citizens of Trier. Nor is it necessarily clearer to modern scholars. 'Anchorites' is a collective name given to hermits and recluses, who chose to live a religious life apart from other people. The defining characteristic of a recluse was the choice to inhabit a cell. In recent decades debate surrounding their role in the high Middle Ages has drawn inspiration from Peter Brown's research into the ascetic 'holy man' of Late Antiquity, a figure whom Brown initially modelled as a mediator between rival interests in a society in which old systems of order were breaking down, and, latterly, in Brown's more recent work, as a mediator between earth and heaven, whose status, as one set apart through a prolonged ascetic ritual of dissociation, qualified him or her to serve as a spiritual go-between, uniting God and sinful humanity.[3] The first model (1971) was constructed in socio-economic terms, but its later permutation (1995) incorporated a theological dimension. In 1975, Henry-Mayr Harting adapted the former to the case of the English recluse Wulfric of Haselbury (d. 1155), a hinge-man in post-Conquest England where traditional hierarchies had broken down; and in 2001 Susan Ridyard, advancing in step with Brown's new ideas, presented the hermit Godric

[2] *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. K. Jolly, C. Raudvere, and E. Peters, The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, ed. B. Ankarloo and S. Clarke, 6 vols, III (London, 2002), pp. 48, 201. See also R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 151-75.

[3] P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101; and idem, *Authority and the Sacred* (Cambridge, 1995).

of Finchale (d. 1170) as a mediator between heaven and earth, chiefly concerned with clients' spiritual welfare.[4] Their research shows how anchorites served small communities, attracting a broad clientele; yet the sanitizing effect of focusing on the socio-economic explanation and pastoral care, within the constraints of traditional historical debate, was the neglect of special abilities, assigned to anchorites, which seemed alien or incredible and therefore inadmissible. Mayr-Harting's aside comparing Wulfric to a Malayan spirit medium – his strongest gesture towards esoterica – was no blow against the wall of scholarly scepticism that blocked cross-cultural comparison.[5] It was striking enough in 1975 that Mayr-Harting compared medieval Somerset to oriental fringes of the Late Roman world. Ridyard implicitly challenged a tenet of anthropology and Annales scholarship, that religious phenomena, such as the rise of holy men, can be explained with reference to socio-economic development, by emphasizing their spiritual role. In her case, it was enough to convince modern rationalist scholars that clients of anchorites were genuinely concerned about sin. To go much beyond this was to head into alien terrain; yet magico-shamanistic practices cannot be ignored. One obstacle to taking an interdisciplinary cross-cultural approach is the complexity of the literature.[6] Another is our lack of any clear model of what a twelfth-century magico-religious practitioner looked like.

Why is there no obvious high-medieval equivalent of the wise woman or 'cunning man' familiar in later centuries? The conventional answer is that magic was practised in different forms by a variety of people, but this hardly explains why certain people were successful in

[4] H. Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse', *History* 60 (1975), 337-5; S. Ridyard, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse Revisited: the Case of Godric of Finchale', in R. Gameson and H. Leyser, ed., *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry-Mayr Harting* (Oxford, 2001), 236-50.

[5] Mayr-Harting, 'Functions', p. 346.

[6] Below, p. 000.

attracting clients.[7] What little has been written on sages and seers is dogged by problems of terminology. The term 'enchanter', from Latin *incantator*, conjures up the specific image of spell casting, which may not have been the defining activity of most magical practitioners if there was one. The word entered debate via the writings of authoritative bishops, principally Gregory of Tours and Isidore of Seville, who used it to evoke the caricature of an opponent, which they could then demonize.[8] Valerie Flint has shown that the latter appears in miracle collections as a foil to the figure of the saint. In the fiction of these narratives, sick folk who go to enchanters get worse as a result, but those who appeal to saints are cured.[9] The phrase 'cunning folk', from Old English *cunnan* 'to know', is reminiscent of more recent centuries and the trade of cunning folk in countering witchcraft.[10] 'Wise folk' is seldom used, and the terms 'wise women' and 'old wives' are overtly gendered, albeit contemporary, caricatures. To call someone a witch was to accuse them of a specific crime, *maleficium*. None of these terms adequately describes the varieties of help offered by practitioners, who healed people with herbs, incantations, amuletic stones, and inscriptions for charms; or who told fortunes, predicted the weather (and blighted crops: it was easy to link the two), induced love, aided with childbirth, identified thieves, cursed enemies, and found lost items or hidden treasure.[11]

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[7] Kieckhefer, *Magic*, p. 56: 'we find various types of people involved in diverse magical activities'.

[8] V. J. Flint, 'The Early Medieval 'Medicus', the Saint and the Enchanter', *Social History of Medicine* 2 (1989), 127-45, at pp. 137, 140.

[9] Ibid., pp. 137-45.

[10] W. de Blécourt, 'Witch Doctors, Soothsayers and Priests. On Cunning Folk in European Historiography and Tradition', *Social History* 19 (1994), 285-303, at p. 285.

[11] M. J. Hughes, *Women Healers in Medieval Life and Literature* (New York, 1943), p. 93; O. Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning-Folk in English History* (London, 2003), p. vii.

Nor is there agreement among historians as to why certain individuals were thought able to perform such functions.

Another reason apart from the diverse and confusing terminology for the absence of an obvious equivalent to later cunning folk is that historians of magic, despite their contention that magical and religious practices elide, retain a mental division between these categories which prevents them from re-imagining putatively religious figures as magical ones or even as magico-religious ones. It is telling of this doublethink that, whereas anthropologists have integrated the two categories, so that the phrase 'magico-religious practitioners' is standard, historians of magic still prefer the term 'magical practioners'.[12] Nor is it any wonder in this regard that attempts to identify the latter have found little besides the exotic, mostly mages and sorcerors, although Bill Griffiths, inspired by work on shamanism, has tried to identify seers as female magical specialists and included spirit battles of anchorites in the debate on Anglo-Saxon magic, as shamanistic initiation trials that marked them out as practitioners.[13] Indeed by accepting the fact that practitioners may have been magico-religious, historians attempting to find them can widen the search. In the cases examined by Mayr-Harting and Ridyard, it is already evident that the technical religious definition of the anchorite as 'one who battles the devil alone' did not encompass interacting with clients in the various ways anchorites did in twelfth-century England. Clients with their ills and concerns sought their help, and there were no rigid guidelines on how the one they sought might respond in any situation. The 'holy man', moulded by hagiographers into a paragon of religious propriety, and latterly moulded by historians as a hinge-man or a pastoral figure, appealed to clients

[12] E.g. Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 56-64; cf. C. Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England* (Chicago, 2012), pp. 11-12.

[13] B. Griffiths, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Norfolk, 1996), pp. 108-11 and 64.

principally because he was a source of power.[14] Could he be the sort of practitioner that is eluding us?

The absence of manifest medieval equivalents of the wise women and cunning folk of later centuries has allowed historians to settle into a habit of interpreting anchorites through the lens of hagiography and clerical advice literature, our main sources for their lives.[15] But these genres with their interest in sanctifying the anchoretic vocation try to separate it from the murkier regions of magico-religious practice. In the twelfth century when their role was taking shape, anchorites were vulnerable to literary reconstruction: for whereas clients may have viewed them as sources of power, hagiographers were keen to ensure that all dealings with anchorites adhered to religious propriety, and that heavenly powers alone were tapped. Despite this editorial filtering, there are intimations that anchorites did not always know the origins of their mysterious abilities. Reginald, one such hagiographer, reports that Godric of Finchale had a dream of buried treasure. Uncertain of what to do, being wary of the evils of money, the hermit resolved to dig where the dream had shown and spend the treasure on the poor. He dug deeper and deeper, until finally a miniature devil rose from the hole and threw tiny black smoking pills of temptation at him.[16] Reginald's account of Godric has a number of stories like this in which the hermit sharpens his powers of discernment, learning that not every insight derives from heaven. The ability to find treasure was credited to sorcerers and cunning folk. This particular tale rescues Godric from sliding into their ranks. The devil he

[14] J. Howe, 'The Awesome Hermit: the Symbolic Significance of the Hermit as a Possible Research Perspective', *Numen* 30 (1983), 106-19.

[15] Licence, *Hermits*, pp. 1-21.

[16] *Libellus de vita et miraculis s. Godrici, heremitae de Finchale, auctore Reginaldo monacho Dunelmensi*, ed. J. Stevenson, *Surtees Society* 20 (London, 1847 for 1845), pp. 275-6.

had unearthed and the falsehood of the prophecy confirm that his dream had come from an evil spirit. Yet the question remains, given that the hermit had dreamt of treasure and taken up his spade, whether Godric, or his lay clientele, was as discerning as Reginald implies.

To interpret anchorites as magico-religious practitioners is not, of course, to place them in an indivisible category with other practitioners whose attributes are obscure to us but who were distinguishable to clients. Take a wealthy couple from Huntingdon, in the 1110s, Autti and Beatrix. Every so often, they travelled out of town to visit the hermit Edwin, for private reasons; but when they wanted love philtres, to melt their stubborn daughter into embracing her betrothed, they sought old crones who muttered charms and administered potions. None of this worked, according to a disapproving monk who recorded it all. A Jewess, who was a seer, eventually warned them off, for she discerned two spirits accompanying their daughter and protecting her from assaults.[17] Much has been written about hermits such as Edwin, but practitioners such as the Jewish lady remain obscure. What may have separated them in the minds of their clients were the range of services they were willing to perform or to condone, whether they had taken religious vows (and might be seen, therefore, as a holy person), and whether, by extension, it was sure that their power came from God. The monk of St Albans who heard this story from Autti and Beatrix's daughter Christina, herself a religious recluse, expected such discernment from his audience. The Jewess, they were mean to infer, did not tap divine power and was willing to resort to coercive measures. Although she had a gift of second sight, its origins were doubtful. To us, nevertheless, she is a rare instance of the sort of practitioner who performed different services and had acquired her status by right of her special ability.

[17] *The Life of Christina of Markyate: a Twelfth-Century Recluse*, ed. C. H. Talbot, OMT (Oxford, 1959; repr. 2002), p. 74: 'annosas uetulas'.

When monks wrote about crones, the latter mostly had been enlisted either to effect some wicked design, as in the case just mentioned, or to remedy a complaint, but in way that would have competed with the prerogative of a saint to mediate a cure from heaven. A few instances seem to present a different picture, showing crones, or wise women, collaborating with saints, and we shall turn to these now, partly because they have not been noticed, and partly because they provide insights into the activities of Anglo-Norman cunning folk which do not resort to the caricatures familiar to scholars.[18] Moreover, a wide range of practitioners can begin to be distinguished in these occasional snapshots. One appears among the miracles compiled by an old archdeacon, Herman, a monk of Bury St Edmunds, writing in the 1090s. A servant of the abbot, he tells us, a knight called Norman, had just landed at the port of Barfleur when a thief stole his travelling bag. On leaving the church, having prayed to God and St Edmund for help in recovering the stolen goods, he encountered a little old woman (*uetule…muliercule*), who asked why he appeared so downcast. When he asked her why it was her business, she replied that she might be able to help, so he explained his misfortune.[19] The woman then pointed him towards a small house. He entered silently, found his bag in a corner, and crept out, delighted. What is curious about this story is that although Norman had prayed to St Edmund, the crone is made to say that perhaps *she* might help him (*fortassis per me solari poteras*), and after he finds his bag there is no statement affirming that heavenly powers were responsible. Herman leaves his readers to draw their own conclusions. When his miracle collection was re-written, shortly after his death, the monk responsible omitted this story, among others, quite probably

[18] Flint, in 'The Early Medieval 'Medicus'', and A. L. Meaney, 'Women, Witchcraft and Magic in Anglo-Saxon England', in D. G. Scragg, ed., *Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1989), 9-40, examine common depictions of the enchanter and witch in our period.

[19] Herman the Archdeacon and Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *Miracles of St Edmund*, ed. T. Licence, OMT (Oxford, 2014), p. 92.

for that reason. He inserted into another of Herman's stories the typical caricature of a crone, muttering spells, who functions as a foil to the saint.[20] Returning to Norman, we can surmise that he had attracted the attention of a cunning woman, plying her trade in Barfleur, and able to locate lost items; he accepted her offer of help (perhaps for payment), and she pointed him towards the stolen bag. Herman took an interest because it would have seemed as though the saint had intervened. According to Herman, St Edmund had rescued Norman from a storm in the Channel, and the hagiographer, or his source, was therefore likely to have interpreted any subsequent good fortune as the saint's favour. Norman had simply wanted his bag back. And it may not have mattered to him whether his helper was the saint or a wise woman.

Another case is even more instructive, for it concerns a hermit, Godric of Throckenholt. Godric had worn a mail vest as a penitential garment. After his death, in the 1130s or 1140s, his hermitage fell to ruin. Years went by until travellers passing near the place stopped there on account of his holy reputation, and hunting among the ruined walls, found iron rings that had fallen from his disintegrated hauberk, some of which came into the possession of a lady. On a later occasion, people sick with fever were led to her for healing, 'but she', we are told, 'trusting in the Lord Jesus and the merits of Godric, put these rings… in water and gave it to the feverish folk to drink'; and thus they were cured 'through Godric's merits'.[21] This at any rate was the view of the monk who later included the report among Godric's miracles. But is his interpretation convincing? Audrey Meaney has shown that iron rings, and linked rings of iron and other metals, typically occur in amuletic collections, found in female burials among virtually all pagan Germanic tribes, in Anglo-Saxon England before the late seventh century

[20] Ibid., p. 225.

[21] T. Licence, 'The Life and Miracles of Godric of Throckenholt', *Analecta Bollandiana* 124 (2006), 15-43, at p. 39.

when grave goods cease, and on the Continent. These special burials - not more than one per generation in any cemetery – contain recurring items, including something old or something found (an *objet trouvé*), discovered by the left leg, as if carried in a bag hung from a girdle.[22] Scholars have ventured to identify such burials as the graves of cunning women.[23] The lady (*domina*) described by Godric's hagiographer is shown as using iron rings (or to be specific, linked rings from the mail vest) as a curing stone.[24] Rather than trusting to other powers, the hagiographer notes, she trusted in Christ and Godric, yet there is reason to question his view because nowhere else in the hagiography either before this event or afterwards is the hermit presented as a healer. Other hermits were recognised as healers. Godric, as far as we can tell, was not, and we would expect his hagiographer to notice it if he was. Iron rings, on the other hand, and *objets trouvés*, evidently did have potent properties, which would be transferred to water and imbibed by the sick. Did it matter to our cunning woman that the rings came from a hermit? We should not assume so. Sick people went not to Godric but to her, and she used what had long been thought useful.

Examining these two cases, we find that hagiographers expressed an interest in cunning folk not only with a view to eroding their credibility as rival loci of power, but also with the intention of snatching successes that might be credited to them and casting these as miracles

[22] A. L. Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 96 (Oxford, 1981), pp. 174-8 and 250; and 'Women, Witchcraft and Magic', p. 10.

[23] E.g. T. M. Dickinson, 'An Anglo-Saxon 'Cunning Woman' from Bidford-on-Avon', in M. Carver, ed., *In Search of Cult: Archaeological Investigations in Honour of Philip Rahtz* (Woodbridge, 1993), 45-54; also J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 169-78.

[24] 'Closely allied to an amulet is a curing stone, which is kept and used by a cunning man or woman in a curing ritual: for example, dipping it into water which is then given to the patient to drink': Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets*, p. 4.

wrought by the saints the hagiographers were extolling. Thus the old woman in Barfleur and the lady near Throckenholt were cast as agents of the saints, even if they were nothing of the sort. Normally, interactions of cunning folk and their clients were of little interest and would not have been reported, yet in these rare glimpses we see wise women offering their services to the laity as healers, seers, and recoverers of lost goods. The Jewess, brought in to make up love philtres, also had the power to see spirits. In these gifted individuals, we see a reflection of the women called witches by the homilist Ælfric about the year 1000, who appear to have been clairvoyants and healers.[25] For Ælfric, a witch was not defined by special activities but by the source of her power; and this may explain how cunning folk who might be thought to have tapped *saintly* power could appear in hagiography in a favourable light.[26] So how does this call into question our understanding of anchorites, i.e. hermits and recluses? Anchorites differed from cunning folk in ways that would have mattered chiefly to the religious: that is, they took religious vows and pursued a religious vocation. The hagiographer Reginald liked to think that when lay clients came to Godric of Finchale, seeking his power, the hermit told them that it did not come from him but from heaven, mediated by saints.[27] The ministry of a hermit emanated from his calling to battle demons and eradicate sins, as argued elsewhere.[28] Nevertheless, all sorts of people visited anchorites, not all of whom were very well informed.

[25] As Meaney points out, Ælfric included under the term *wiccan* soothsayers and healers: Meaney, 'Women, Witchcraft and Magic', pp. 18 and 19.

[26] On the definition of a witch by the source of her power, see A. Harper, 'The Image of the Female Healer in Western Vernacular Literature of the Middle Ages', *Social History of Medicine* 24 (2011), 108-24, at p. 112. For second sight as a blessing, see T. Licence, 'The Gift of Seeing Demons in Early Cistercian Spirituality', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 39 (2004), 49-65.

[27] *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, p. 274; Licence, *Hermits*, p. 171.

[28] Licence, *Hermits*, pp. 131-49.

A woman went to Godric, bringing him a bull, with the wrongful impression that he charged for consultations. Godric had to sit her down and correct her error. She went home rejoicing and avoided the danger on which she had sought his advice.[29] Reginald offers no details. As in the vast majority of cases, mostly unrecorded, we are left wondering why the client came. What is clear enough is the considerable overlap between the operations of an anchorite and the stock and trade of cunning folk. Godric was a seer and a healer; he predicted the weather. He detected thieves, recovered lost property, and prospected for treasure.[30] Reginald takes a story about him prospecting for treasure and manages to turn it into a moral not to do so! In the light of our two stories about cunning women, where the hagiographers misrepresent the source of their power, we might wonder similarly whether anchorites have been sanitized.

The exceptional detail of hagiographies of twelfth-century anchorites such as Godric of Finchale, Wulfric, and Christina reveals a pool of attributes in common with the stock figure of the village magical specialist, whose characteristics are increasingly familiar from English, German, Austrian, Flemish, French, and Hungarian studies by scholars of history, linguistics, and anthropology. Éva Pócs, in her work on Early Modern Hungary, remarks that, 'the most important roles of these magical specialists were healing, fortune-telling, finding lost objects and animals, exposing thieves, "seeing" buried treasure or money, and communicating messages from the dead'.[31] The attraction of the specialists in premodern societies was their

[29] *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 239-40: 'Tunc mulier cum gaudio rediit, et pro quo aduenerat periculum euasit.'

[30] Ibid., e.g. p. 131 (seer), pp. 183-4 (healer), p. 216 (predicting famine), p. 230 (detects a thief), p. 260 (traces a lost item), p. 275 (prospects for treasure).

[31] É. Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead* (Budapest, 1999), p. 8; see also B. Szeghyová, ed., *The Role of Magic in the Past: Learned and Popular Magic, Popular Beliefs and Diversity of Attitudes* (Bratislava, 2005), and for influences on Anglo-Saxon England, H. E. Davidson, ed., *The Seer in Celtic and Other Traditions* (Edinburgh, 1989), and S. O. Glosecki, *Shamanism and Old English Poetry* (New York and London, 1989).

ability to resolve anxieties derived from their clients' inability to control the vicissitudes of cycles of life, death, survival, and the harvest. Clerical authorities in Western Europe in the Middle Ages could approve certain of their practices where they wished, by regarding them as prophetic powers within the Christian tradition, and by casting their practitioners as holy men or holy women. Prophecy in its Biblical sense was not solely the ability to see into the future, though this is commonly its most striking aspect, but empowerment to speak hidden knowledge on behalf of the deity. In medieval texts, most forms of second sight, including the ability to see things far-off or hidden, are attributed either to God's power or to devilry. Anchorites possessing such a gift could be viewed as holy men if the source of their power was thought to be divine. Thus the idea of prophecy, because of its adaptability, supplied a theological formula for refining any number of raw mysteries, including all the magic of a seer, such as seeing spirits, detecting thieves, foretelling famine, and finding lost animals.

Christianity also contained, within its proselytizing tradition, a range of apparatus for incorporating shamanistic elements of magico-religious practice, including the two which Michael Winkelman has identified as the essential characteristics of the shaman: that is, an ecstatic state of communication with the spirit world on behalf of the community, achieved through trance or an altered state of consciousness (ASC); and, involved with this, at least occasionally, the experience of soul flight, where the soul or spirit is thought to depart the body and travel to a spirit world.[32] Though there is still disagreement about the use of the word 'shamanism' (used by Winkelman only in relation to nomadic hunting and gathering societies), even to the extent that it has been labelled 'a conceptual morass', there is near

[32] M. J. Winkelman, 'Shamans and Other "Magico-Religious" Healers: a Cross-Cultural Study of their Origins, Nature, and Social Transformations', *Ethos* 18 (1990), 308-52, at p. 318.

universal and diachronic incidence of shamanistic phenomena.[33] Medieval interpretations placing spiritual value upon ecstasy and spirit journeys are mirrored by modern scientific theories of the therapeutic benefits of shamanistic practice, which in some countries have sought to integrate it into western medicine and have, in turn, suffered a small measure of criticism for an interest in sanitizing it.[34] The work of Francois Blanc for example came together from research he conducted in missions in Peru around the Sacred Valley in the Andes, 'to integrate the traditional healers and shamans into the public health service as official policy'.[35] The hagiographer Reginald, a monk of Durham cathedral priory, spent years visiting and interviewing the hermit at Finchale, and Christina's biographer made a point of asking the recluse, repeatedly it seems, how she attained the ecstatic state.[36] It is clear that both monks were attempting to assimilate and rationalize mystical phenomena, which were alien to them, within the tradition they knew. Given that these mystical (and shamanistic) phenomena have received little attention, the rest of this article will present them in outline before opening the topic for discussion.

Sometimes wilfully, sometimes randomly, anchorites were rapt to heaven. In the course of prolonged prayerful devotion their spirits became detached from their bodies so as to soar

[33] Winkelman, 'Shamans', pp. 310, 319, 325; J. McClernon, 'Shamanic Healing, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 (1997), 345-54; and cf. H. Sidky, 'On the Antiquity of Shamanism and its Role in Human Religiosity', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010), 68-92, at p. 86.

[34] J. M. Ogembo, 'The Persisting Conflict of Interpretations of Shamanism', *Reviews in Anthropology* 34 (2005), 197-210, at pp. 204-5.

[35] F. Blanc, 'Trance and Shamanic Cure on the South American Continent: Psychopharmacological and Neurobiological Interpretations', *Anthropology of Consciousness* 21 (2010), 83-105, at p. 84.

[36] Below, 000.

aloft and glimpse mysteries, which the percipients might later reveal to others. Traditionally, monastic authors understood flights of the spirit as a grace through which an ascetic attained prophetic knowledge.[37] In anchoretic hagiographies they appear in a similar guise. Reginald speaks of Godric of Finchale on such occasions 'in that suspension of his spirit'; and of 'the tranquillity of his spirit in departing his mind'; of the hermit 'rapt in ecstasy'.[38] On occasion the recipients of the anchorite's prayers materialised to impart a blessing. When Godric had been praying assiduously at the altar of the blessed Virgin, 'alert in contemplation and for a long time lifting his spirit to spiritual things', he at last looked up and saw her standing there with Mary Magdalene.[39] The recluse Wulfric of Haselbury often left his cell at night to pray at the altar of St Michael in the adjoining church. One night as he was praying the archangel suddenly appeared before him. Snatching his spirit from his body, 'as it seemed to Wulfric', he whisked him up to the heavens and showed him God's glory and all that was the hope of the saints. When Wulfric returned he found his body as though vacant before the altar. Ever after, he guarded the memory of those blissful moments.[40] The anchorite Roger of Markyate taught his pupil Christina 'things about heavenly secrets which are hardly credible' and may have taught her how to attain ecstasy. Once 'when she was at prayer and was shedding tears through her longing for heaven, she was suddenly rapt above the clouds', where she saw the Virgin enthroned in brilliant light. On a separate occasion: 'Whilst her prayer was as usual

[37] F. N. M. Diekstra, 'The Flight of the Exile's Soul to its Fatherland', *Neophilologus* 55 (1971), 433-46, at pp. 442-3. Witnessing involuntary visions is an element of selection in shamanic vocations: Winkelman, 'Shamans', p. 335. On soul flight, see p. 325.

[38] *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 286-7, 287n.

[39] Ibid., p. 117.

[40] *Wulfric of Haselbury by John, abbot of Ford*, ed. M. Bell, Somerset Record Society 47 (Frome, 1933), pp. 35-6.

prolonged, she was rapt in ecstasy and saw herself in the presence of her saviour'. Christina not infrequently entered a trance in mid conversation. 'Often, whilst she was speaking, she was rapt in ecstasy and saw things that the Holy Spirit showed her. At such times she felt and knew nothing of what went on about her or what was spoken'.[41] Bishop Hugh of Lincoln (d. 1200) had formerly lived the life of a hermit as a Carthusian; 'passing his time in meditation …he believed that like Paul he had found himself in paradise, and was often on the wings of contemplation borne up [*rapiebatur*] to the third heaven'. His biographer reports that 'he had learned to fly in spirit to the house of his heavenly father…and to roam in thought and desire round the heavenly tabernacles of the Lord of hosts'.[42] This theme is found in the thirteenth-century *Life* of the hermit-nun St Bega in Cumbria, who is described as 'lifting herself above herself' in an act of solitary contemplation like the prophet Jeremiah in Lamentations (Thren 3.28).[43]

Although these reports imply that contemplation created suitable conditions for ecstasy to occur, the event itself is generally depicted as unpredictable. A meditating hermit was like a kite on a mildly breezy day, waiting for that sudden strong gust of wind to whisk him aloft. Hugh and Christina were familiar with being rapt, Wulfric apparently less so, but neither of the latter is represented as having anticipated it, and twice the event is described as 'sudden'. Visitations by spirit beings certainly took Godric of Finchale by surprise but not, apparently,

[41] *Christina*, ed. Talbot, pp. 105 (Phil 3.20), 108-10, 169, 171. Winkelman associates training by an individual teacher, and susceptibility to visions and dreams, with the universal shaman: 'Shamans', p. 335.

[42] Adam of Eynsham: *Magna vita sancti Hugonis = The Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. D. L. Douie and D. H. Farmer, 2 vols., OMT (Oxford, 1985), I, pp. 38, 41.

[43] *The register of the priory of St. Bees*, ed. J. Wilson, *Surtees Society* 126 (1915), p. 503.

the shamanistic experience of journeying beyond himself.[44] There is no report of him being rapt above the clouds; on the other hand, there are stories of his visits to faraway lands and oceans in the spirit. On one occasion he told Reginald that shortly before the hagiographer's arrival he had been in Jerusalem (the earthly city) where he had seen many wondrous things, including new building work in progress. His vivid account of the construction work proved that his vision was that of a genuine seer, as opposed to a daydreamer, recalling past travels. Usually Godric only mentioned such experiences in the more secret dialogues he shared with his confessors.[45] Christina was reticent not so much about the content of her visions as about the trance techniques that precipitated them, or the manner in which she saw them, possibly because her mentor had imparted these mysteries in confidence. Her hagiographer, a monk, who might have wished to learn the art for himself, pressed her on this matter but without success: 'How she saw this vision (though she well knew)', he wrote, 'we have in no way been able to elicit from her up to now'.[46] His lack of knowledge reflects our own limited understanding of the practices Christian seers employed to send out their spirits. While a stereotypical shaman employs drums, dance, and hallucinogens, other techniques such as fasting, sensory deprivation, chant, prayer, repetitive movements, and prolonged postures have been shown to induce ASC and are compatible with known practices of anchorites.[47]

If journeying to faraway places in the spirit differed from being caught up to heaven in ecstasy it was with respect to wilful agency. The poem, *The seafarer*, paints a picture of the

[44] '[E]cce, uidit…ille obstupefactus'; 'Vidit igitur subito'; 'uidit subito' etc: *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 117, 126, 157.

[45] Ibid., pp. 129-31.

[46] *Christina*, ed. Talbot, p. 150 (amending Talbot's translation).

[47] Blanc, 'Trance', p. 94.

shamanic bird-spirit roaming freely over land and sea - without waiting for a gust of divine wind.[48] Godric's disembodied spirit is shown traversing far-flung places in much the way in which Hugh of Lincoln roamed 'in thought and desire round the heavenly tabernacles': that is, by acquired ability. According to Reginald, the hermit of Finchale could send his spirit wherever he wished. 'Take comfort', he told a mother grieving for two absent sons, after he had hung his head for a while in silent prayer, 'for truly I tell you, I was in Norway just now where I saw them both safe and well with the eyes of my spirit'. When, on another occasion, a father arrived, mourning his missing son, the all-seeing hermit 'bowed his head in lengthy contemplation' before announcing, 'rejoice!' He had seen his son, in the spirit, crossing the Humber on his way home.[49] In both these instances the hermit entered a trance not to attain ecstatic initiation into heavenly mysteries, but to fly in the spirit; and, given that there is no mention of Godric 'lifting his spirit to spiritual things' or being taken by surprise, as he is at the visitation of heavenly beings in Reginald's hagiography, it would appear that a different process was inferred. Unlike visitations or ecstasy, journeying in the spirit did not require a heavenly intervention, that metaphorical 'gust of wind'. Probably for this reason, Reginald interpreted it as a divine gift (*diuinum munus*), even as a power permanently bestowed. So freely had this power been imparted to Godric that for the last ten years of his life he could see everything that occurred within a ten-mile radius of his hermitage. His spiritual vision was so perfect that he could see ships sailing upon the distant level ocean, 'as clearly as he saw men walk upon the earth with the pellucid rays of his eyes'.[50] Godric used his second-sight to comfort those who missed lost relatives, to watch over those in need of prayer, and

[48] Glosecki, *Shamanism*, pp. 78-91, explores the imagery of the spirit bird in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

[49] *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 349, 268.

[50] Ibid., pp. 130-1. Vision was attributed to the emission of rays by the eyes.

over affairs in his beloved Jerusalem, to see whether salmon were trapped in his nets, and in one instance to direct a would-be hermit to a suitable hermitage in nearby Yearhaugh. When the bedridden Godric told him 'I passed through those parts today', the man was astonished. But when he inquired whether Godric had been carried there, the latter replied with a riddle: 'In truth, I have seen it all, but neither boat nor horse bore me thither'.[51] On discovery, the tranquil spot was exactly as he had described it.

Just as it is unclear how anchorites attained ecstasy, so it is unclear how they imagined the soul in flight, but the shamanic belief that it might take on animal form was compatible with Christian depictions of the Holy Spirit appearing in the form of a dove, as the Spirit of God once appeared to Christina in a dream.[52] Contemplative souls are compared to birds in *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, and disembodied spirits sometimes appear in similar guise in hagiography.[53] The hermit Godric of Throckenholt (d. c. 1140) was 'praying hard' in his oratory in the woods, when suddenly it filled with brilliant light and a white dove appeared over the altar. It was the soul of one of his brother hermits, who had died recently. Leaving his body, he had passed through purgations with the help of angels, and he had returned, to promise eternal joy to Godric, should he persevere to the end.[54] If this vision enacted ideas from Godric's imagination, it could suggest that he and other anchorites conceived of their spirits in bird form while soul flight was underway, or to precipitate it. The departed spirit, journeying to the otherworld, had encountered spirits of light (angels) who had guided and sped his flight through dark realms (purgations) and perhaps protected him from beings of

[51] Ibid., p. 193.

[52] *Christina*, ed. Talbot, p. 157.

[53] Glosecki, *Shamanism*, pp. 78-91; e. g. *Miracles of St Edmund*, ed. Licence, p. 106.

[54] Licence, 'Godric of Throckenholt', pp. 35-7.

darkness en route. In The Fens west of East Anglia, where Godric lived and where hermits were relatively numerous, the tradition of aerial trials involving spirit beings went back, at least, to the prototype St Guthlac.

Reports of hermits engaging in spiritual battle against evil spirits that were believed to inhabit the air begin in the fourth century. The eighth-century monk Felix, who reports the warfare between the anchorite Guthlac (d. 714) and a troop of air-borne demons, had been inspired by similar battles in the *Life* of St Antony, but in the thinly Christianized world of eighth-century East Anglia we might regard the hostile spirits as ghosts of the enemy dead whom the saint had displaced by settling in their burial ground. (He took up residence in a chamber tomb.) When they seize Guthlac and drag him into the air, threatening to cast him into hell, his helper St Bartholomew appears in radiant splendour and orders the demons to restore the hermit to his hermitage; and they weep because their strength has been broken.[55] Griffiths suggests an anthropological reading of the tale as a record of Guthlac's initiation and victory in aerial spirit battles (and, we could add, an introduction to spirits of light and darkness who would be his friends and foes).[56] Since Guthlac remained popular during the twelfth century, such notions had plenty of time to live on and evolve. The hermit Henry of Coquet (d. 1127), on his remote island on the Northumbrian coast, sent his spirit out to sea, where he beheld, and perhaps battled against, monstrous creatures that caused shipwreck.[57]

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[55] On colonizing the otherworld, see H. Williams, 'Monuments of the Past in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *World Archaeology* 30 (1998), 90-108; B. Yorke, 'The Burial of Kings in Anglo-Saxon England', in G. R. Owen-Crocker and B. W. Schneider, ed., *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2013), 237-57, at p. 241; and Griffiths, *Aspects*, pp. 32-3.

[56] Griffiths, *Aspects*, p. 64.

[57] John of Tynemouth, *Nova legenda Anglie*, ed. C. Horstmann, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1901), II, p. 24.

Even after his death, he exorcised a sick priest, driving a troop of demons into the skies, as evidence, perhaps, that he specialised in sky battles.[58] Éva Pócs discusses different types of magician found in Eastern Europe in the Early Modern era, many of which fit within broader anthropological categories. Wind magicians, for example, were initiated into the troop of the dead among the so-called wind souls travelling in storm clouds. A snake magician, similarly, would enter a trance, on the approach of a storm, to fight aerial battles in the form of a snake or other animal, under the leadership of heavenly, fiery, and lightning spirits. These spirits of light and the wind souls were the patrons of the magicians, against the bad dead and devilish creatures associated with them. A comparable figure, not infrequently accused of witchcraft, was the táltos of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hungary whose particular bodily signs, from childhood, marked him or her as a seer. The táltos too would talk with guardian spirits and fly by night to do battle for the community against hostile magicians and the bad dead.[59] Anchorites could have fulfilled not very different functions in the minds of ordinary clients who sought their help. When the floods came to eleventh-century Trier, the people thought that the foreigner, Simeon, was a *bad* magician; later they learned to love him as their own.

As in the case of the táltos, so in the case of the anchorite, spirit journeys were closely linked to second sight, except in stories where the ability to read people's thoughts did not necessitate soul flight. Indeed, it greatly aided their ministry of combating sin that hermits possessed the discomfiting capacity to sniff out hidden transgressions. 'My dear sons', the hermit Guthlac asked two visiting clerics, 'why were you unwilling to bring hither the two flasks [of ale] which each of you hid away?' Henry of Coquet was 'accustomed to see not only that which was at hand or nearby, but also things elsewhere and not yet come to pass,

[58] Ibid., II, p. 26.

[59] Pocs, *Between the Living and the Dead*, pp. 127-38.

which he saw and foretold through divine notification.'[60] In one instance he had alarmed a monk by recounting details of the brother's recent inebriation, identifying the location and even the hour at which he had succumbed to drunkenness.[61] Again, the accuracy convicted the sinner of his guilt. Godric of Finchale upbraided a man for beating his wife, and chided his servants for stealing from him, reporting their covert operations in such detail that they were humiliated into confession.[62] To expose thieves was another important role of village magical specialists. Wulfric employed prophetic intuition on the one hand to expose major sins and on the other to challenge minor weaknesses. When Agnes came to beg his prayers, he reprimanded her for neglecting the holy festivals; but when a knight sent him only three out of the four pike he had caught, the anchorite returned one with the wry observation that their portions were now equal.[63] Private thoughts could not be hidden. Abbot Geoffrey was astonished that Christina of Markyate could know things supposedly known to him alone.[64] On this occasion the ghost of a dead monk had revealed Geoffrey's plans in a dream. Later Christina learned to apprehend his thoughts by prophetic perception. Guthlac could discern evil intentions, and John of Ford formed an opinion that some who visited Wulfric believed that he could see right into their souls.[65] Seeing hidden intentions became one means, along with travelling in the spirit and sniffing out sins, by which anchorites identified themselves,

[60] *Nova legenda*, ed. Horstmann, II, p. 24.

[61] Ibid., II, p. 24.

[62] *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 291, 195-6.

[63] *Wulfric*, ed. Bell, pp. 111-112.

[64] *Christina*, ed. Talbot, p. 137.

[65] *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac: Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 111-13; *Wulfric*, ed. Bell, p. 96.

in the minds of their clients, as magico-religious practitioners. We can also gather instances in which they are shown uniting their powers as prophet and as healer, or relying on second sight to locate lost animals or ones that could be killed for food.[66]

The last and greatest ability of a seer, whether in the case of the Jewess invited to cast spells on the young Christina, or in the case of any of our anchorites, was the ability to see spirits, specifically angels, saints, demons, and the dead. The subject of seeing demons has been pursued elsewhere.[67] Here, let us draw things together by turning to the dead. As the monk Goscelin noted, c. 1100: 'it is rare and unusual for our bodily eyes to see immaterial things', though he added that when the body relaxes in sleep, the spirit 'is freer to seek the company of other spirits in accordance with its sociable nature'.[68] By this logic, those who weakened their bodies with mortifications or learned how to enter trances might commune with the spirits. By the twelfth century, the soul's departure from the body upon death had become a moment of anxiety when demons would endeavour to snatch a victim. Prayerful confirmation of the soul's safe passage to a place of sanctuary was coveted. Consequently, the ability to divine the fates of souls aroused much interest. In Northumbria the hermit St Cuthbert had received a mystical notification of the departure of souls on three occasions, always at the hour of death.[69] So great was the interest in this phenomenon four centuries

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[66] *Wulfric*, ed. Bell, p. 91; cf. *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: a Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life,* ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 203-7, for a similar case. See Licence, 'Godric of Throckenholt', pp. 27 and 35 (finding an animal to eat), and D. Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2008), p. 159.

[67] Licence, 'The Gift of Seeing Demons'.

[68] *Miracles of St Edmund*, ed. Licence, p. 231.

[69] *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 165-7, 243-9, 261-5.

later that in Godric's *Life* eleven tales appear in which the hermit learns the fates of souls, including seven in which the hermit sees souls departing.[70] Sometimes, Godric saw them nearby or far away as fiery crystalline orbs, rushing in a burning wind. Sometimes he saw angels conveying them to heaven; at other times he received some notification, such as an inexplicable peal of bells. In most of these stories the anchorite is merely a seer, but a few accounts do evoke the more interesting belief that these figures, in the manner of Orpheus, entered the spirit world to rescue trapped souls.

Wulfric's hagiographer, the Cistercian John of Ford, heard such a report from Richard, the cantor of his monastery. Years earlier, he had gone to Wulfric's cell, anxious about the condition of his dead father Sigar, a local priest who had occasionally heard the anchorite's confession. Wulfric had replied that Sigar had suffered the gravest torments but was now at rest. In a dream, he had seen him stuck in deep mud, trying but unable to escape. Riding to him on a horse, he had lifted him out and borne him away rejoicing. Richard left somewhat assured that his father was no longer suffering, but later, overcome by anxiety, he pestered Wulfric again. Wulfric replied curtly: 'Have I not already told you? I put him on my horse!'[71] There are four additional tales in which the recluse, Wulfric, instantaneously apprehends a death.[72] But the tale of Sigar recalls Blanc's work on shamanic sessions used to overcome anxiety in the Andes, in which the curer 'projects his or her mind to the sites of the drama evoked by the patient in order to meet there…the protagonists of the situation: the family,

[70] The four post-mortem cases are discussed in Licence, *Hermits*, pp. 166-71; for the others see *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 50, 151, 171, 173-4, 189, 205, 209-10.

[71] *Wulfric*, ed. Bell, p. 105, and for Sigar, pp. xxv, 38; the image of being stuck in mud: Ps. 68. 3.

[72] Ibid., pp. 103-4, 106-7, 116-17.

friends, and enemies'.[73] On returning from the spirit world, the curer imparts new insights, resolving the patient's tension. Recluses such as Wulfric, who had undergone ritual death, and who lived among the dead in the cemetery, may have been specially charged with the care of departed spirits, who appeared in their dreams.[74] Their knowledge of the pathways through the spirit world, attained in trance, ecstasy, and spirit journeys, and their ability to travel those paths and return safely, enabled them to help other souls who lost their way in dark regions. Moreover, their initiation and training in spiritual combat and their expertise gained in battling demons armed them against the beings of darkness encountered en route. Wulfric, a warrior-pathfinder, rode through the otherworld, on a shamanic horse, plucking lost souls from the shadows, bearing them to bliss, and returning to comfort their relatives who visited him in the cemetery.

We began by posing the question, what was the difference between an anchorite and a sorceror? It should be clear by now that binary distinctions will not get us very far. There is no warrant for assuming that anchorites' lowlier clients understood their vocation as monks did, in relation to the desert tradition, monastic rules, or hagiographical role models. On the contrary, the stories told about them suggest that they were recognised for their specialisms, in tasks that required occult knowledge. Although this article has only touched on the many attributes common to anchorites and other magical specialists, we now have a way to break free from the educated sanitizing gloss of hagiography, by the cross-cultural comparison of stock persona, invaluable to rural premodern societies. Anchorites were holy men, and they were magico-religious practitioners. The boundaries should be left blurred. Although it has recently been argued that anxiety about sin contributed to a hope that anchorites possessed

[73] Blanc, 'Trance', p. 89.

[74] Licence, *Hermits*, pp. 123-6; cf. pp. 167-72.

the power to overcome it, there is another important dimension to explore, for as soon as the anchorite had come to be seen as a locus of power, a development datable to Antiquity, any proliferation of such figures, or extraordinary attention paid to them, such as the remarkable growth of interest in their profession during the central Middle Ages, would have resulted in the proliferation of hopes, fears, and assumptions on the part of those wanting to access that power for whatever ends.[75] Medieval anchorites thus came to perform functions attributable to the universal magico-religious practitioner, because the rural clientele in Western Europe at that time charged them with expectations. It did so with trepidation, not knowing what to expect. If a seer could prophesy famine, as Godric of Finchale once did, people might think him complicit.[76] That the same risk was present in cases of sickness or death would explain Wulfric's very great concern when his curse seemed to have killed a mouse and, worse, the cellarer of Montacute.[77] Two Durham monks named Laurence, who visited Finchale before setting off for Rome, were told, disconcertingly, that only one Laurence should return.[78] In such cases, prophecies and curses elided, and the business of differentiating between honest foreknowledge and hostile pre-emption owed much to good faith. Seldom do hagiographers report broken relations between anchorites and clients, although disappointments must have fuelled recriminations. Anchorites were sometimes attacked, even killed.[79] And the unusual

[75] Licence, *Hermits*, pp. 197-205.

[76] *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 101-2, 182.

[77] *Wulfric*, ed. Bell, pp. 61-3.

[78] *Libellus*, ed. Stevenson pp. 232-3.

[79] Licence, *Hermits*, pp. 102-3; J. Blair, 'A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Saints', in A. T. Thacker and R. Sharpe, ed., *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), 495-565, at pp. 505 and 558, for the cases of Ælfnoth and Waerstan.

admission that Simeon of Trier was suspected of sorcery, as well as sanctity, is evidence of the ambivalence communities felt towards those with uncharted powers.[80]

Words: 8,842

(Text: 7,345)

(Notes: 1,497 – under 17%.)

[80] 'The shaman and shaman/healer are characterized by an ambiguous moral assessment of them by their society, reflecting their involvement in malevolent and benevolent activities': Winkelman, 'Shamans', p. 334: