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## NEW APPROACHES TO MEDIEVAL WATER STUDIES

# Thinking Wetly: Causeways and Communities in East Anglian Hagiography

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Water defined the landscapes of medieval East Anglia. Hitherto scholarly attention has focussed on the physical geography of the region, with landscape archaeology and excavations revealing sites of international importance and speaking to the potency and ubiquity of water as a ritual element. Surprisingly, however, very little attention has been paid to the symbolic importance of water in medieval East Anglian literature, and this article addresses this scholarly lacuna. Water features prominently in the literature from the region, particularly in the lives and legends of the numerous saints venerated at its many cult centres. This article begins by outlining some of the key ways in which water signifies in these contexts, before discussing a case study from the *Liber Eliensis* which, at first reading, seems to confound the received notion of water's symbolic resonances but which, on closer consideration, reveals an additional, previously unidentified aspect of this most fluid of metaphors.

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## Introduction

George Perec advises his readers that, in order to really see, we have to learn how to look:

Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid. You still haven't looked at anything, you've merely picked out what you've long ago picked out. Force yourself to see more flatly. (Perec, 1974: 50–1)

David Matless borrows this phrase as the epigraph to his *Regional Book*, a literary-geographic description of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, an area of navigable rivers and lakes formed from flooded medieval peat diggings (Matless, 2015; Williamson, 1997; Matless, 2014). Matless puns on Perec's assertion of 'seeing flatly' to evoke both the flatness of the Broadland landscape but also the need to slowly, and seemingly, navigate such terrain in order to uncover its secrets.

Flatness, however, is not what defines East Anglian landscapes as they are depicted in medieval literature, and this article asserts that in order to fully appreciate the literature, and particularly the extensive body of hagiography produced in the region in the Middle Ages, we need to acknowledge its defining characteristic and think more wetly. Water and watery landscapes of various kinds (coastal, salt marsh, riverine, broadland, fenland) are found throughout East Anglian hagiography, yet this distinctive characteristic has hitherto remained surprisingly unexplored. In general, however, medieval water studies is flourishing and this article therefore seeks to begin the process of redressing this scholarly lacuna and to make a timely contribution to a rich and complex field of enquiry (Huber-Rebenich et al., 2017; Classen and Sandidge, 2017; Clegg Hyer and Hook, 2017; Ayers, 2016).

## **'Washed by Waters': The Wetland Landscapes of Medieval East Anglia**

The mid-fourteenth-century Gough Map is one the earliest maps on which East Anglia can be identified as a distinct region (Bodleian MS. Gough Gen. Top. 16). Most striking to the eye are the sinuous snaking waterways worming their way seaward from the interior at regular intervals along the coast. Although stylised,

they represent a medieval reality: East Anglia (the modern counties of Norfolk and Suffolk, and parts of Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire) was an area once dominated by water to an even greater extent than it remains today.

Many rivers were navigable far further inland, now silted-up estuaries once accommodated sizable fleets, and the extensive coastline facilitated travel by sea both domestically and abroad (Ayers, 2016: 152–55). Any map showing the extent of the Wash before the great programme of drainage was initiated by Dutch engineers in the 1630s indicates the vast bite which this low-lying hinterland once allowed the sea to take from the land in this corner of the country (Williamson, 2006: Fig. 1.8). These practical realities are significant and perhaps unsurprisingly dominate scholarship concerned with the physical landscapes of medieval East Anglia (Williamson, 2006).

Far less attention, however, has hitherto been paid to the way in which these practical realities intersected with the symbolic resonances of the pre-modern East Anglian landscape. This is surprising given that the idea that landscapes were invested with symbolic significance in the Middle Ages is widely recognised (Howe and Wolfe, 2002). Cosgrove and Daniels describe landscape as 'a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings' (Cosgrove and Daniels, 2002: 1). The desire to 'read' the natural and built environment and invest it with meaning suggests that the process by which these meanings were made, as much as the resulting symbolic system, fulfilled a practical, political or spiritual impulse for those involved. The scholarly tendency has been to privilege the latter, particularly with regarding to landscapes whose meanings to past communities remain obscure and which are frequently designated by modern scholars as being of 'ritual' significance even when the nature and function of the rituals cannot be recovered. Similarly, it is tempting to assert that the ascribing of signification was the result of complex imaginative and practical interactions between communities and individuals within them, without interrogating fully who was involved and what their motivations may have been. Lack of evidence prevents this desirable enquiry in many cases and thus, where instances do exist where the physical evidence of place (geographical, archaeological) is matched with a documentary record which elucidates how a place

acquired its meaning, the critical pressure on these examples is urgent; this article considers one such example.

Significant contributions have been made to our understanding of pre-historic sites on the fringes of the region, most notably at Flag Fen in modern-day Cambridgeshire, where excavation has revealed the complexity of human physical interaction with the wetland landscape through the construction of an extensive network of timbered causeways, but also the ideological hinterland which is suggested by the seemingly ritualised deposits of offerings to an otherworld beneath the fen (Pryor and Bamforth, 2010; Pryor, 2005; Pryor and Barrett, 2001). Arguably the most analogous medieval site from the east of England is the extraordinary landscape of the Witham Valley in Lincolnshire where medieval monasteries were built at the termini of prehistoric causeways, which in turn point towards Bronze Age barrows built at the confluence of tributary streams (Stocker and Everson, 2003; Everson and Stocker, 2003). Given that archaeological evidence speaks to the ideological significance of wetland landscapes, it is surprising that more scholarly effort has not been trained in this direction. This is perhaps due to water's fluidity as a signifier.

This complexity is reiterated in one of the earliest written descriptions of East Anglia, which identifies the wateriness of its landscapes as an essential component of its geographical, but also by implication, its cultural identity:

But the above-mentioned eastern part attracts consideration for the following among other reasons: that it is washed by waters on almost every side, girdled as it is on the south and east by the ocean, and on the north by an immense tract of marsh and fen, which starting, owing to the level character of the ground, from practically the midmost point of Britain, slopes for a distance of more than a hundred miles, intersected by rivers of great size, to the sea. (Abbo of Fleury, 1907: II, 13–5)

This passage is from the *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, the earliest known written life of St Edmund, King and Martyr (d. 869). Written in the late 10th-century by

the Benedictine scholar Abbo of Fleury (c. 940–1004) during his extended stay at Ramsey Abbey, it opens with a conventional narrative gesture borrowed from Bede's (672/3–735) *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in which the author praises the fertility of the landscape, the exuberant growth of crops and the abundance of its livestock and wildlife (Bede, 1969). However, the conjunction in the middle of the passage is key: it indicates a degree of equivocation which 'and' would not convey; 'and' would indicate that the region's overwhelming wetness is congruent with its other charms, whereas 'but' suggests a less straightforward relationship. Indeed, this is very soon realised in Abbo's narrative when, a few chapters later, the rivers and inlets which water the region and feed its folk provide the means for the 'Great Heathen Army' of Danish Vikings to penetrate the waterways of the kingdom in their longboats, wreaking havoc and eventually killing Edmund, the king of the region and the protagonist of Abbo's tale (Abbo of Fleury, 1907: 19–21ff).

Abbo's assertion that the eastern province is vulnerable on account of its western land border with the rest of the island is therefore disingenuous, as it is its wateriness which proves its undoing in this instance. Water was therefore both a means of defence and East Anglia's greatest vulnerability. It facilitated trade and communication but also invasion. It watered the land and enriched the soil but also brought devastating floods and even more devastating invasions. In East Anglia, as in any other coastal province, the day-to-day relationship with water in its various guises was complex. Unsurprisingly, then, watery landscapes signify in ways as various as their physical manifestations.

These two examples, the Gough Map and Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, serve as bookends for the topic under consideration: chronologically, they fall towards opposite ends of what is commonly termed the Middle Ages, and ideologically they demonstrate that watery landscapes can signify in many, and sometimes, divergent ways. And although these examples are drawn from sources divergent in both date and media, they do represent the spectrum of ways in which water appears in the hagiography produced in East Anglia.

## The Contested Fenland

Of all the watery landscapes which are depicted in East Anglian hagiography, the fenland is possessed of the most compelling ambiguity. It is also one which has attracted relatively more scholarly attention. Wickham-Crowley, for example, reminds us that water is unstable, and that fenland water in particular troubles epistemological distinctions as it is frequently difficult to tell where the land begins and the water ends, with the boundaries between the two constantly shifting (Wickham-Crowley, 2006: 85–100). Jacobsson's study of lentic bodies of water in Anglo-Saxon sources attests to both the practical and cultural significance of these landscapes in the earlier Middle Ages (Jacobsson, 1997).

The most compelling account of the fens' complex signification is found in the legend of St Guthlac (d. 714). According to his 8th-century biographer Felix, when the aspiring hermit Guthlac arrived from Mercia 'on the path to eternal bliss', he was looking for 'a solitary place' in which to pursue the ascetic life he so desired, and having decided on the 'dismal fen' 'near Grantchester [Cambridge]' he was forced to seek local assistance in order to penetrate the wilderness:

It happened accordingly that when he was questioning those who lived near as to their knowledge of this solitude and they were telling him of many wild places in this far-stretching desert, a certain man among those standing by, whose name was Tatwine, declared that he knew a certain island in the more remote and hidden parts of that desert; many had attempted to dwell there, but had rejected it on account of the unknown portents of the desert and its terrors of various shapes. Guthlac, man of blessed memory, on hearing this, earnestly besought his informant to show him the place. Tatwine accordingly assented to the commands of the man and, taking a fisherman's skiff, made his way, travelling with Christ, through trackless bogs within the confines of the dismal marsh until he came to the said spot. (Felix, 1956: XXV, 89)

Here, the East Anglian fenland is explicitly recast as the deserts sought out by the first hermits desirous of a life away from the temptations of the world.

Another key symbolic function of the fenland is the challenge it presents to any who attempt to dwell there. Fastness and abstinence are important topoi in the lives of the Desert Fathers, and again we can see Felix adapting his wetland landscape to this model: Guthlac chooses as his home 'a mound built of clods of earth', its side split by 'greedy comers' in search of treasure, in which fissure Guthlac began to dwell. He eschewed comfortable clothing and 'ate no food of any kind except that after sunset he took a scrap of barley bread and a small cup of muddy water' (Felix, 1956: XXVIII, 91–5). His ascetism and grave-dwelling take their inevitable toll, and before long he is tormented at night by 'horrible troops of foul spirits' (Felix, 1956: XXXI, 101–3). The discourse of seeking solace in the desert is a familiar hagiographic topoi inspired by the lives of the Desert Fathers such as St Paul the First Hermit and St Anthony, who retreated to the deserts of the east where they too were tormented by demons. In the absence of actual desert, the wildest, least hospitable terrain to be found in the local landscape was read in light of these traditional precedents and designated 'desert'.

Many modern scholars were convinced by this rhetorical framing of the fenland; in particular Darby's account of the medieval fens as a 'wide wilderness' has held critical sway since its publication (Darby, 1974: 8; Campbell and Bartley, 2006). Yet more recent work has highlighted the extent to which this was strikingly at odds with what the historical reality seems to have been. Oosthuizen in particular has radically revised our understanding of population density in the fens, demonstrating that the average figure needs to be increased by many multiples from Darby's assessment (Oosthuizen, 2017: 13–30). This disjunction between rhetoric and reality reiterates the powerful symbolic role of the fens in the Middle Ages.

Similarly, the marked contrast in the wetness and dryness of the respective landscapes should not be read as problematic but rather as advantageous to the reclassification of the East Anglian landscape, as it is the extremes of its wetness, its coldness and its bleakness which contribute to its symbolic intensity. Abbo of Fleury corroborates this understanding of the suitability of this watery terrain for a life of contemplative seclusion, asserting that 'these marshes afford to not a few



congregations of monks desirable havens of lonely life, in the seclusion of which solitude cannot fail the hermits' (Abbo of Fleury, 1907: III, 15). This model of wetland wilderness is frequently repeated by medieval authors and dominates the modern critical discourse: fenland equals demon-land, equals testing-land and proving-land.

Yet even a cursory survey of other East Anglian sources reveals that the fenland offered far more than demons and dysentery to the medieval imagination. To its inhabitants, the fenland was rich and productive, teeming with waterfowl and eels, with reeds for building material and waterways for navigating, as attested by the 12th-century Peterborough commentator Hugh Candidus (c. 1095–c. 1160):

[The fen] is very valuable to men, because there are obtained in abundance all things needful for them that dwell nearby, logs and stubble for kindling, hay for the feeding of their beasts, thatch for the roofing of their houses, and many other things of use and profit, and moreover it is very full of fish and fowl. There are diverse rivers and many other waters there, and moreover great fishponds. In all these things the district is very rich. (Candidus, 1949)

References to fishing of various kinds abound in the *Liber Eliensis*, a cartulary chronicle and history compiled at Ely ('The Isle of Eels') in the 12th-century, where at least 10 edible species are mentioned, and disputes over fishing rights feature frequently, attesting to their importance to the monastic community. After the Conquest, the isle became a stronghold of resistance to Norman rule, and in the context of King William's failed attempts to subdue the isle in 1070, the *Liber Eliensis* compiler attributes to Earl William de Warenne (d. 1088) an angry tirade regarding the futility of the would-be invaders' attempts to broach the island in their desire for its rich resources (Anon., 2005: II. 105, 212–4; Rippon, 2009; Rippon, 2004; Van de Noort, 2004). Although the context of the speech affords it a certain rhetorical flourish, the agriculture, livestock and wildlife mentioned are nevertheless credible (Ballantyne, 2004).

The Normans were also frustrated by the guerrilla tactics employed by small bands of men led by Hereward, later known as 'the Wake', who set out from the isle to harry the Norman troops, forcing King William to concede that 'we are not having

success against these men, and we are not anticipating their stratagems' (Anon., 2005: II. 106, 215; Knight and Ohlgren, 1997). Nearly a century earlier, King Alfred (849–99) similarly exploited the relative security offered by the reedlands of the Somerset Levels at Athelney to seek safety from Viking invaders and 'make frequent and unwearied assaults upon the heathen' (Asser, 1906: 27–8).

The fenland as a kind of defensive frontline is presented throughout the three books of the *Liber Eliensis*. Where it has been possible to identify and date the sources on which the compiler drew in the 12th-century, the considerable antiquity of many suggests that the imagery of water and marsh had long been part of the community's rhetorical identity, or at least that the compiler wished it to seem so, attesting once more to its potent signification (Fairweather, 2005: xiii–xxiii).

The *Liber Eliensis* is crucial in developing an understanding of what watery landscapes meant to medieval writers, as it further elucidates the relationship between saints and the landscapes in which they were venerated. The Ely compiler makes this abundantly clear: the fenland is the terrain of St Æthelthryth (636–79), founder of the monastic community on the Isle of Ely and its posthumous saintly protector, and she will defend it against all comers, examples of which abound. For instance, she vigorously repels the greedy Viking who hacks into her sarcophagus in search of the treasure he believes it to contain, only for his eyes to be 'torn from his head by divine agency' (Anon., 2005: I. 41, 74–6). The treasure here is clearly coded as Æthelthryth's own virginal body and the physical and symbolic integrity of the Ely lands and holdings over which she presides (Blanton, 2007: 132–71).

A symbolic relationship between the physical body of a saint and their spiritual body, represented by the corporate body of their community, is not unique to Æthelthryth's hagiography but is, I believe, afforded additional significance by the watery terrain which surrounded her foundation (Pinner, 2015: 51–8; Licence, 2009: 516–44). In a gesture of effective hagiographic back-formation, the Ely compiler codes water into Æthelthryth's narrative, most notably during her flight from her second husband, King Ecgrith of Northumbria (d. 685), who has tired of her insistence on chastity and pursues her as she returns with her companions to her

lands in East Anglia. Seeking sanctuary on higher ground, God causes the waters to rise and isolate the women in a protective lagoon:

We believe it came about by his decree that the sea, leaving its bed and now pouring forth its waters in many directions, surrounded the place where the holy virgins had climbed, and ... kept them hidden for seven days on end ... it forgot how to ebb back in the usual manner, so long as the king remained there, or near the place. And thus the water stood still, to make clear to everyone the merit of the virgin, and the water served as a means of help and protection and was, as it were, not water, with its propensity to harm or destroy. (Anon., 2005: l. 11, 34–5)

This scene is also depicted in a 14th-century capital in the octagon of Ely Cathedral. Water which is not water in its usual form allows the compiler to evoke the familiar hagiographic topos of the power of the saint enabling nature to act against custom. It also establishes that the Isle of Ely is not protected simply by its natural geography but also by Æthelthryth's saintly presence. The two factors combined, particularly given Æthelthryth's now established affinity for watery miracles, makes the isle an ideal place for her to found a religious community and a formidable location in which to do so.

This rhetorical convergence continues after Æthelthryth's death and is, if anything, strengthened. As noted above, the convergence of corporeality and materiality is similarly associated with Æthelthryth's tomb and body, and Blanton notes that whilst the idea originates from Bede's account of the discovery of the (presumably Roman) sarcophagus which so perfectly fits her corpse, and which he interprets as a sign of her physical perfection, itself later confirmed by the incorruption of her remains, the *Liber Eliensis* compiler extends the metaphorical association between spiritual perfection and physical integrity to include not just the tomb and the monastery but the whole isle:

The enclosures presented, moreover, are multiple in that the sarcophagus holds the body, the shrine contains the sarcophagus, the church surrounds the shrine, and the monastic close envelops the church. Ely, an island in the

East Anglian fenlands, was at that time completely surrounded by marshes. Thus the body, which Bede had characterised as sealed off by God, is described in the *Liber Eliensis* as being enclosed by a number of architectural and geographic elements. The narrative capitalises on this imagery to suggest that just as the body of the saint is paralleled by the monastic body, the multiple enclosures of her body are symbols for the institution's boundaries, both architectural and geographical. Enclosed within the fenland waters, the monastery on the Isle of Ely is represented as a bounded place protected by God. (Blanton, 2007: 135–6)

The *Liber Eliensis* is therefore a crucial source for scholars of medieval water studies wishing to decode saints in their watery settings. To a great extent, it corroborates the discursive signifiers seen in other East Anglian sources: to outsiders, the fenland could be treacherous and unforgiving, yet to those who knew its ways, it offered solitude conducive to prayer, safety and munificence.

### **Reconfiguring Saint and Fen**

However, one brief chapter in the *Liber Eliensis* seems, at first glance, to confound these models and to swim against the tide of scholarly consensus. Yet, far from muddying the waters, I believe that consideration of this episode elucidates additional ways in which water can signify in medieval hagiography, furthering our understanding of the richness of this metaphor and opening up additional channels of enquiry.

The episode appears in the third book which details events in the author's present day and is cited here in full:

III. 32 That a causeway was made through the fen to the shrine of St Æthelthryth as the result of a revelation.

Here is another thing which ought not to be concealed in silence. The proof of it is fact that many people report it and it is well-known.

Well then, in the time of Bishop Hervey [1109–31], St Edmund appeared in a vision to a farmer from the vill of Exning, and spoke to him in the following words, chivvying him into action by saying: "Good man, attend carefully to

what I am saying. Fulfil the commands given you without fail, and, on rising, go with all haste to the Bishop of Ely. And you are to say in my name that he should provide me with a causeway by which I may go to visit my lady, the most blessed Æthelthryth". And soon, in Ely, just as he was commanded, the man hurried to the bishop and reported to him the command which he had just received. The bishop, on hearing such remarkable news, wept for joy and put the question to several people as to whether he might by any chance be capable of fulfilling the command. And, as no one was coming forward to undertake the venture, a certain monk of the church, called John, a man of the utmost simplicity of nature, speech and appearance, came and presented himself to the bishop, saying that he was willing and, with God's help, able, to carry out this work. And in fact, subsequently, on the orders of the bishop himself, he began to measure out a route from the land of Soham and cut a swathe of reeds to make a causeway; he also arched over riverbeds with little bridges, and in this way that man, beloved of God as he was, in a short space of time was successful, and brought the work envisaged by Heaven to its conclusion. He constructed a causeway right into Ely through trackless expanses of marshland, while everyone marvelled and blessed God. (Anon., 2005: III. 32, 319–20)

As discussed above, the construction of causeways across the fens was nothing new and the invocation of the two saints is therefore unlikely intended to authorise a novel practice or lend credibility to a proposed scheme. At the literal level, what is proposed is too mundane to necessitate elaboration and this suggests that what is at stake is far more symbolically rich yet occluded. The remainder of this article will therefore consider this hitherto overlooked miracle with particular reference to the symbolism of the causeway and the watery fenland it is intended to span.

### **Conceptual Causeways**

Given the many ways in which saints were conceived as symbols of the institutions which house their remains, it seems fair to assume that each is invoked here synecdochally. I am therefore interested in exploring what kind of interaction this

imagines between the two communities. For example, is this a new relationship or the consummation of existing connections? Is Edmund's approach amorous, protective, patriarchal? What gender politics are at play? This article therefore considers what is at stake in the depiction of Edmund's supposed initiation of this interaction and the extent to which we can read this miracle narrative as indicative of a real and/or imagined relationship between the two monastic communities.

The wording of the narrative is ambiguous and leaves room for speculation as to whether this is a new alliance, previously impossible due to the lack of causeway, or the renewal of an old and fond acquaintance. The gendered dimension of this narrative and the allusion to Edmund's desire to visit 'his lady' makes it tempting to read the account as some kind of symbolic wooing, although the Latin is suggestively, and I would argue deliberately, ambiguous, allowing for multiple readings of '*dominam meam*' as both familiar and hierarchical, in the latter case casting Edmund more in the guise of a respectful supplicant (Anon., 1962: 266). The nature of the land which the causeway is to cross reiterates this: wet and abundant with life, the fenland is much like the medieval conception of the female body, associated with dampness and fluidity in humoral theory (Jose, 2008). It is thus tempting to read the causeway as a phallic image of symbolic penetration; this reading is certainly supported by studies of causewayed structures in other archaeological contexts (Cormier and Jones, 2015: 88–112). Given the origin of the narrative in an Ely source, are we therefore to read this as the island monastery extending a wet welcome to her near neighbour across the fen?

However, it is unlikely that the Ely monks would be hoping to exploit the amorous potential of this exchange, or at the very least they would have been misguided in doing so and are likely to have known this. As discussed above, Æthelthryth was staunchly chaste in life and her post-mortem *miracula* evince a similar commitment to preserving the integrity of her body and the community of which it was a symbol. Strikingly similar imagery is found throughout Edmund's *vitae* and *miracula* (Pinner, 2015: 17–21ff). The causeway which Edmund asks to be built is therefore unlikely to be a coital causeway.

Indeed, what is known of the interactions between the two houses suggests a degree of distance, and at times active hostility between them. This is evident, for

example, in their respective relic collections. I have argued elsewhere that the post-conquest acquisition of relics by the abbey at Bury was in part at least a response to the integrity of the saintly assemblage at Ely (Pinner, 2015: 141–4). Ely's claim to fame was its possession of the intact body of its holy royal foundress Æthelthryth, along with an extensive saintly sorority consisting of Æthelthryth's sisters, nieces and other female relatives (Anon., 2005: 1). In contrast, Bury St Edmunds possessed the intact body of St Edmund, a male royal saint and, I believe, during the abbacy of Leofstan (1044–65) set about building a holy court of royal relics around his shrine in the abbey church to rival its female equivalent at Ely. Notable amongst these relics were those of Botwulf (d. c. 680), another royal East Anglian killed by Vikings to whom is attributed the founding of the monastery at Icanhoe, and Jurmin, a close relative of Æthelthryth (Newton, 2016). It seems to me, then, that on Bury's part, at least, we can witness some acquisitive competitiveness aimed at surpassing, or at least, equalling, Ely's relic collection. In each case, the posthumous incorruption of both Edmund and Æthelthryth rendered it impractical for either house to claim to possess primary relics of the other's patron, but as far as I am aware no secondary relics were held either. In fact, each saint is notable by their marked absence in what we know of the relic culture and iconography in both monastic churches. It therefore seems that each collection developed with reference to the other, but with that reference marked by absence rather than overlap.

It is tempting, and indeed feasible, to regard this competitiveness at the level of relic acquisition as symptomatic of the less-than-cordial relations that existed between the vassals of the respective abbeys. Although slightly later than the miracle of the causeway in the *Liber Eliensis*, a particularly spectacular outbreak of unrest occurred in 1201 on the border between the jurisdictions between the two abbeys concerning a dispute over the granting of market rights in Lakenheath (Norfolk), a village under the jurisdiction of Ely but located within the Hundred of Lackford within the Liberty of St Edmund, the eight and a half hundreds in west Suffolk granted to the abbey by Edward the Confessor in 1044 (Gransden, 2007: 236–44). Both houses asserted their own claims and both decried the validity of the other and the disagreement eventually deteriorated into physical violence (Jocelyn, 1989: 118; Champion, 2012).

The competition for relics and the jostling for land and authority in contested parishes are just two of the ways in which we can detect the very opposite of a history of co-operation between the monastic houses which might provide a context for the instruction to build a causeway for St Edmund to cross. Are we, therefore, to view St Edmund's instruction for the monks of Ely to construct a causeway as an aggressive, almost imperialistic, gesture designed to facilitate the symbolic incursion of one monastery right into the heart of another?

This reading is confirmed by the guise in which causeways appear elsewhere in the *Liber Eliensis*, where they most commonly signify aggression and intrusion: during King William's campaign to subdue the isle in 1070 he repeatedly orders causeways to be built to facilitate ingress (Anon., 2005: II. 102, 207, II. 110, 227–8). Yet on each occasion the Normans are thwarted by the rebels under the protection of St Æthelthryth and the soldiers flounder in the 'marsh of horrific appearance' which collapsed 'like chaos into a whirlpool of solid matter' (Anon., 2005: II. 110, 227, II. 109, 225). The only overtly positive reference to a causeway occurs in the preface, where the compiler, in the context of his description of the isle, notes that 'now a causeway has been built, because at one time it was dangerous for people wishing to go there in boats, an approach on foot is possible through the reed-swamp' (Anon., 2005: 3–4). Even though this is an ostensibly felicitous development in the isle's infrastructure and associated communications, the danger of the fens is nevertheless evoked in the same sentence. In most cases, then, allusions to causeways equate to a kind of metaphorical closing of the drawbridge whereby the isle's unassailability is repeatedly emphasised. Blanton notes that miracles concerning the integrity of St Æthelthryth's remains conform to a distinct pattern wherein 'the invocation of the body at this moment [of threat] demonstrates that whenever the monks feel threatened this symbol of their autonomy will be presented' (Blanton, 2007: 159). On the whole, this can also be said of causeways as symbols of Ely's autonomy, with the exception of the miracle involving St Edmund. In the case of the causeway which St Edmund commands, this most common association is unlikely, not least because the incident is recorded by the monastery who would, according to this formulation, be the victims of the aggression, whereas the account of the episode features no indignation nor sense of slight.



## Causeways and Communities

Where, then, are we to look to read the signification of this causeway across the fens? Consideration of the historical context in which the miracle is relayed offers the most compelling explanation. We are told that the events took place ‘in the time of Bishop Hervey’ which allows the episode to be dated 1109–31, the years of Hervey’s episcopate, which is consistent with the dates given for other events in Book III. The naming of Hervey as bishop is the most significant detail of all, because the Diocese of Ely was only created in 1109 with Hervey as its first incumbent. Along with Carlisle, Ely was the only entirely new see created between the 10th and 16th-centuries.

The *Liber Eliensis* compiler presents the creation of the new see as fraught with intrigue: Hervey, at the time Bishop of Bangor in North Wales, had been driven from his see in fear of his life following his fierce suppression of ‘local rebellious barbarians’ (Anon., 2005: III. 1, 297). King Henry I granted Hervey the right to reside in the monastery at Ely whilst the church decided his fate. The compiler tells us that the monks were impressed with their exiled charge and he with them and they agreed that he would petition the king to raise Ely to diocesan status. It is significant that the compiler presents the creation of the see as originating with the monks themselves, overseen by Abbot Richard (1100–7), with the primary aim of protecting the community from the jurisdiction and demands of the bishop of Lincoln (Anon., 2005: III. 1, 297–8; Karn, 2010: 1–3; Eadmer of Canterbury, 1884: 195–6; William of Malmesbury, 1870: 325). Karn notes that the Ely monks’ resentment of the bishops of Lincoln appears as ‘a minor theme’ in the portions of the *Liber Eliensis* which cover the period prior to 1109, and highlights their assertions that they ‘could take episcopal services from any man of that status’ rather than owing ‘particular loyalty to any one bishop’ concluding that ‘in the looser church of the earlier Middle Ages, the monks must have had much more freedom in seeking episcopal help, and converted these historical episodes into a story that their church was particularly independent of the intrusions threatened or made by the Bishops of Dorchester/Lincoln’ (Karn, 2010: 3). Karn describes the arrangement envisaged by the monks as not ‘an episcopal conquest of an existing abbey, but rather the creation of puppet-bishops to serve the monks’ (Karn, 2005: li). In the context of the increasing exertion of episcopal

rights which the *Liber Eliensis* describes the bishops of Lincoln attempting to exert in the later 11th and early 12th-centuries, this new arrangement would have seemed particularly desirable.

Following the death of Abbot Richard in 1107, his successor, Hervey (1109–31), succeeded in securing papal approval from Paschal II (1099–118), returning from Rome with bulls and letters of authorisation, along with a recommendation that he be appointed as the first bishop, which are transcribed in Book III of the *Liber Eliensis* (Anon., 2005: III. 2–5, 299–302). Royal approval was granted by Henry I (1100–35) at a council held at Nottingham on 17 October 1109 (Anon., 2005: III. 6, 302; *Regesta*, 1956: no. 919). The dating of the charter to coincide with the Feast of the Translation of St Æthelthryth was no doubt intended to suggest evolution and continuity rather than an abrupt break with the past, as well as implying the saintly patron's approval of the scheme. The bishop and canons of Lincoln agreed only in return for compensation comprising the manor of Spaldwick, formerly a possession of Ely (Anon., 2005: III. 6, 302–3; *Regesta*, 1956: ii, no. 919). The new diocese consisted of the county of Cambridge, with the exception that the parishes between Ely and Newmarket (Badlingham, Burwell, Chippendham, Exning, Fordham, Isleham, Kennett, Snailwell, Soham and Wicken) became members of the rural deanery of Fordham in the Norwich diocese (Salzman et al., 1938–2002: ii. 143). Karn suggests that the diocesan boundary in south-eastern Cambridgeshire represented a much older division than the county boundary as it follows the Devil's Dyke, an earthwork from the 5th or 6th-century that originally marked the western boundary of the East Anglian kingdom. In addition, a minster at Soham had been founded for St Felix, so that the association with the diocese of East Anglia would seem to reflect an older allegiance than its inclusion in Cambridgeshire (Oosthuizen, 2001: 59–60).

Following the creation of the see and Hervey's installation, the compiler presents us with a series of episodes detailing the new Bishop's 'manful' struggles to assert the privileges of his new see and to establish its independence which occupy the next seventeen chapters (Anon., 2005: III. 9–26). From chapter twenty seven onwards, we are offered a sequence of narratives in which St Æthelthryth performs various miracles, and it is here that our causeway miracle is recorded.

Karn discusses in detail the challenges faced by the monks in relation to their control of estates and landholdings in the wake of the creation of the see (Karn, 2005: xc–cvi). It is in this context that Karn interprets two forged charters as efforts on the part of the monks to assert what they perceived to be their rights: a charter attributed to Henry I (but rejected by Karn based on its form, structure and language) orders that the monks should receive a just and equal portion of the lands that had been given to the abbey by the faithful (Karn, 2005: xc–xciii; *Regesta*, 1956: ii. no. 919), and a similarly falsified charter of Bishop Hervey also purports to represent the division of lands in the monks' favour (Karn, 2005: no. 6, 11–4). Both post-date the events they claim to describe by several decades and most likely date from the middle years of the 12th-century. Karn attests to the difficulty of discerning the actual division of lands upon the creation of the see and notes that 'the reasoning behind the selection of properties is now entirely impenetrable, beyond the clear basic principle that the lands of the monks were concentrated in the isle [of Ely] and in Suffolk, which remained the pattern throughout the Middle Ages' (Karn, 2005: xciii).

In light of the political turmoil which has preoccupied the previous 16 sections, it seems necessary to read the miracles into this context. The majority of the miracles are fairly standard fare: most are healings, but it is well-attested from other monastic contexts that the recording of miracle narratives often intensifies at times of political unrest; at Bury St Edmunds, for instance, in the immediate aftermath of the Norman Conquest the monastery curated a series of miracles which present St Edmund as the vengeful defender of his lands and peoples: Normans beware! (Pinner, 2015: 51–4; Ridyard, 1986: 179–206). The message in Book III of the *Liber Eliensis* is subtler, but nevertheless serves to remind any would-be encroachers of the presence and efficacy of Ely's saintly guardian. The presence of a causeway would be readily intelligible in this context if it carried the symbolic force of defence and repulsion seen elsewhere in the *Liber Eliensis*. However, this is not how the narrative of this episode reads, particularly as it is St Edmund, the saintly patron of another house, who commands its construction.

However, details of the 'manful struggles' undertaken by Hervey on behalf of his new diocese may illuminate further, in particular a dispute concerning certain lands:

There were a number of individuals holding properties of the bishop by force, whose power was increasing partly as a result of money given to the king, partly through the wealth of their relatives. Against the will of the bishop they had for some considerable time been holding the fortification of the bridge, and certain official positions of the bishopric relating to external affairs, and they had repeatedly kept harassing the bishop himself with a number of feuds. (Anon., 2005: III. 9, 304–5)

This alone would not be remarkable, but in conjunction with the invocation of St Edmund in the causeway miracle, a number of other narratives coalesce around the presence of the saint. Some of St Edmund's most gruesome and punitive miracles concern Bury St Edmund's own struggles with another episcopal authority: the Bishop of East Anglia. Following the Conquest, Bishop Herfast (1070–84) attempted to relocate the see from Elmham to Bury St Edmunds. The *miracula* of St Edmund from this period, primarily those compiled by Herman, describe the bishop's envy of the exemptions enjoyed by the abbey at Bury, his attempts to subvert their privileges and outwit Abbot Baldwin (1065–1097/8), and St Edmund's vigorous attempts in repelling him (Herman, 2014: 67–81; Licence, 2009: 518, 524–5; Galbraith, 1925; Alexander, 1969). The Bury monks triumphed and the see relocated to Thetford in 1070 and finally settled permanently at Norwich in 1094 (Ayers, 1996). Is St Edmund, therefore, the saint to whom you turn when you have a problem with a local bishop? Furthermore, if your bridge is being blockaded, what better solution than for St Edmund to order the construction of a new causeway across the fenland, potentially replacing the contested bridge: is this therefore both a solution to Ely's dispute with the Bishop of Lincoln plus an implied threat encapsulated within one narrative?

At the very least it seems plausible that in their attempts to assert the identity of their new see, the bishop and monks of Ely would seek to form new allegiances, perhaps turning their backs on the Diocese of Lincoln from which their own episcopate had been cleaved, and looking instead south and east towards the greatest monastic and political powerhouse in the region: the abbey at Bury St Edmunds. The later history of the antagonism between the two houses suggests that this strategy

was far from successful, but perhaps this represents an early attempt to co-opt the power and prestige of Bury for the benefit of the fledgling diocese. In this context, the causeway which St Edmund asks to be built across the fenland resonates with the '*mēcillah*' which the author of the Biblical Book of Isaiah imagines will be built between Egypt and Assyria, by means of which the two great warring powers will be reconciled:

In that day shall there be a *mēcillah* (Strong, 1890: no. 4546, 68) out of Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians. (Isaiah 19:23)

In the first years of the 12th-century, at least, Ely and Bury were not in dispute on what could be described as anything like a biblical scale, but the imagery here is nevertheless pertinent and confirms that the causeway St Edmund asks to be built is one of conciliation and inter-community relations. Roberta Gilchrist claims that 'space forms the arena in which social relationships are negotiated, expressed through the construction of landscapes, architecture and boundaries. The resulting spatial maps represent discourses of power based in the body' (Gilchrist, 1994: 43). In this case, the bodies are multiple: the bodies of the saints who posthumously preside over their monastic houses and the bodies of the communities themselves. The space in which the relationship between the communities is being negotiated is the water-logged East Anglian fens.

### **Conclusion: A Fluid Identity**

As the Normans in the *Liber Eliensis* struggle to gain a foothold in the fens, both literally and figuratively, they lament the instability of the terrain across which they toil:

Collapsing like chaos into a whirlpool of solid matter into which, when loosened by the slightest rain, flow waters in streams and rivers, disguised all the time by the hazardous beds of flag-iris which, in general, marshy ground encourages to grow. It can be conjectured on the basis of these considerations how treacherous the beds of these waters are, like headlong descents into

the abyss. Indeed, when touched by the slightest of fine weather, the mud splits open in wide, deep cracks. (Anon., 2005: II. 109, 225)

It is tempting to equate the ever-shifting land with the versatility of water as a metaphor whose meaning and signification, just like the protean fenland, is constantly shifting and therefore of enormous utility to medieval writers. Yet, as demonstrated here, careful consideration can identify both how, and why, these significations came to be. Just as the fenland and the causeway which crosses it is synecdochal for two monastic houses, so too is this rich and varied landscape an apt metaphor for medieval water studies: slipping between sea and land, as between disciplines, and seeking out new channels of enquiry.

The majority of medieval sources which feature the fenland cast it as a place to which people retreat, either for prayer and solitude, for its productivity, or as a stronghold of identity and resistance. However, this article demonstrates that additional and previously unremarked resonance was afforded to the fens by the Ely compiler: he read this particular landscape as a place which could be outward looking and from which connections could be made, based no doubt on the surety that their fenland fastness and their saintly protector afforded the island monastery considerable strength and security. Regardless of the efficacy of the miracle or the political change it might (or might not) have enacted, the rhetoric is clear: the fens could hold many meanings and their watery nature is key to this fluid identity.

Further investigation is required to determine whether this reading of the fenland is indeed unique in medieval hagiography, as well as the extent to which analogous examples may be found in relation to similar landscapes, such as the Somerset Levels in the southwest of England, or further afield in Continental Europe in the Low Countries or in the Venetian lagoon. Nevertheless, in bringing together two rich fields of enquiry (hagiology and water studies) in a new way it establishes the validity of this methodology and makes a timely contribution to the rich and complex field of enquiry, providing a robust foundation for further work and adding a new subset to the symbolic vocabulary in which this important landscape and its defining element—water—can be discussed.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Rebecca Pinner is a historian of the literature and culture of the Middle Ages. Her primary research interests are in the relationship between literature, context and culture, the construction and dissemination of individual and collective identities, relationships between literature and other cultural artefacts, and literature and place. Her first monograph, *The Cult of St Edmund in Medieval East Anglia* (Boydell Press, 2015), is an interdisciplinary study of a medieval saint's cult, and her current research interrogates water as a symbol in medieval hagiography. She teaches at the University of East Anglia in both the Literature and History departments.

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