



# Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615

*Virginia Blanton*

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*Signs of Devotion* is the first longitudinal study of an Anglo-Saxon cult from its inception in the late seventh century through the Reformation. It examines the production and reception of texts—both written and visual—that supported the cult of Æthelthryth, an East Anglian princess who had resisted the conjugal demands of two political marriages to maintain her virginity. Æthelthryth forfeited her position as Queen of Northumbria to become a nun and founded a monastery at Ely, where she ruled as abbess before dying in 679 of a neck tumor, which was interpreted as divine retribution for her youthful vanity in wearing necklaces. The cult was initiated when, sixteen years after her death, Æthelthryth's corpse was exhumed, the body found incorrupt, and the tumor shown to have been healed posthumously.

*Signs of Devotion* reveals how Æthelthryth, who became the most popular native female saint, provides a central point of investigation among the cultic practices of several disparate groups over time—religious and lay, aristocratic and common, male and female, literate and nonliterate. This study illustrates that the body of Æthelthryth became a malleable, flexible image that could be readily adopted. Hagiographical narratives, monastic charters, liturgical texts, miracle stories, estate litigation, shrine accounts, and visual representations collectively testify that the story of Æthelthryth was a significant part of the cultural landscape in early and late medieval England. More important, these representations reveal the particular devotional practices of those invested in Æthelthryth's cult.

By centering the discussion on issues of textual production and reception, Blanton provides a unique study of English hagiography, cultural belief, and devotional practice. *Signs of Devotion* adds, moreover, to the current conversation on virginity and hagiography by encouraging scholars to bridge the divide between studies of Anglo-Saxon and late medieval England and challenging them to adopt methodological strategies that will foster further multidisciplinary work in the field of hagiographical scholarship.

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