Low Tide and a Red Horse: St. Cuthbert's Relics and Morecambe Bay

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The movement of St Cuthbert's relics during the ninth century, as told principally by the medieval historian Symeon of Durham, has one clear Cumbrian connection. The monks entrusted to their care fled west and attempted to depart by boat to Ireland from Workington, although they were forced back by a storm. The details of where they travelled soon after this event are generally vague but certain topographic elements and their arrival at a place named 'the White House' have been taken as indicating that they crossed the Solway Estuary and arrived at Whithorn. This article reconsiders the description of these events and, taking into account the unusual topography and geology of South Cumbria, places them in Morecambe Bay instead, with an alternative location for 'the White House' suggested. The difficulties of using Symeon's text, which was heavily motivated by political and ecclesiastical interests, are also discussed.

THE account of the movement of St Cuthbert's corporeal relics, during a period of instability in the late ninth century brought about by the fear of renewed Norse attacks on the North East coast, has one certain connection to the modern county of Cumbria[1]. The monks responsible for the safekeeping of the relics, including one Eadred, Abbot of Carlisle[2], despairing that they would ever reach a place of safety, arrived at the mouth of the River Derwent – assumed to be somewhere in the vicinity of Workington (Fig. 1), and made the desperate decision to cross the Irish Sea to Ireland[3]. However, fate and, so it was thought, St Cuthbert's spirit, opposed this decision, and their vessel was violently turned back by a storm. Other ominous events occurred in association with this: three massive waves that crashed over the boat 'changed into blood' and a precious gospel book, decorated with gold and gems, was washed overboard.

The boat appears to have been forced back to approximately where it originated, as the monks were reunited with those they had left behind. Back on land they found themselves once again in a desolate and unfamiliar place. Over time, after facing great hardship, the group dispersed leaving only a select number of monks with the relics. One of them, Hunred, had a vision of St Cuthbert, who told him that they should search for the lost gospel book, and that they would also find a bridle hanging from a tree and a horse willing to be harnessed, which would thus ease their journey. Being near the sea they searched the shore, having arrived by this time at 'a place called the White House or by the common people Whithorn[4]'. This has ever since been taken as Whithorn in Galloway (Fig. 1). However, no particular detail is given in the account, which seems remarkable given its spiritual importance, and there is no certainty that that is the location that is being referred to[5]. At this stage any connection with Cumbria would seem to be lost. However, the vagaries of the original source and uncertainty caused by the strange lack of detail regarding their arrival at Whithorn make attempts to use it to locate specific events problematic. In addition, there are a number of subsequent aspects of the story that could position some of the events described in
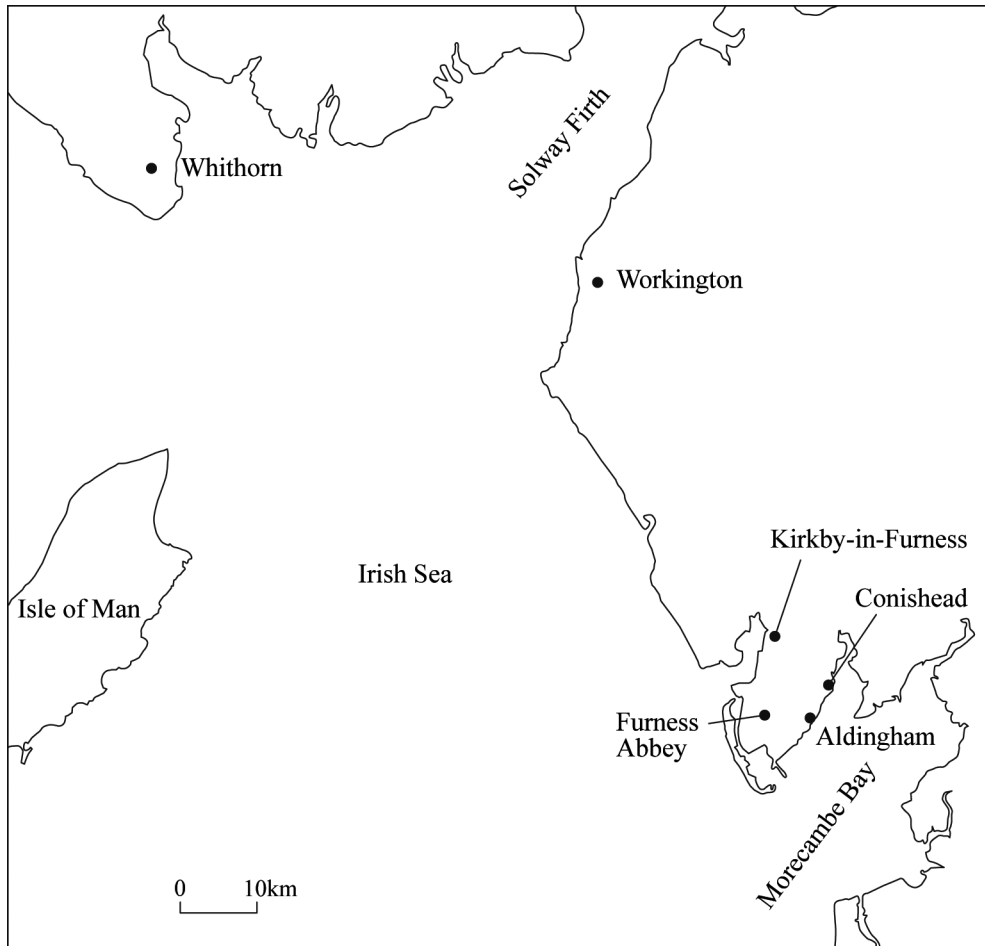
Fig. 1. Places mentioned in the text.

Cumbria, more specifically the north side of Morecambe Bay. The entire tale relies on the assumption that the monks wandered northwards to Whithorn in Galloway following the storm, which is by no means proven.

The story later recounts that the monks walked for three miles, across an area of shore where the tide 'had receded much farther than normal'[6]. This has been taken to be a description of the Solway Estuary at low tide[7]. However, the massive tidal range of Morecambe Bay[8] also fits this description remarkably well, perhaps even better than the Solway, and to someone unfamiliar with the area it would have perhaps seemed extraordinary, even miraculous. The monks could even have been, in effect and perhaps inadvertently, 'crossing the sands'. It is on this shore that they rediscovered the lost gospel book, and following this remarkable event, Hunred found a bridle hanging from a tree, as prophesised. A short distance from this he saw 'a horse of reddish colour – where it had come from and how it came to be in that lonely place he could

by no means discover'[9]. Here we find another possible connection with Morecambe Bay, and specifically the particular geology of the Furness peninsula.

The shore at Conishead was utilised well into the nineteenth century as one of the principal place for shipping iron ore from Furness[10], although it seems reasonable to assume that it was used for this purpose for a considerable time before that. Red Lane, which takes its name from staining caused by the iron ore (haematite)[11], is a good demonstration of the connection to the iron ore trade, and Conishead is also recorded as being the termination of a road of Roman origin (the 'Streetgate'), that is thought to have crossed the peninsula[12]. The ability of the haematite to stain red everything it touched is well-known and recorded in detail in several sources. Thomas Pennant, visiting in the late eighteenth century, describes it as 'very greasy and defiling … men, women and children are perfectly dyed with it, and even innocent babes do quickly assume the bloody complexion of the soil'[13]. Charles Jopling, in the early nineteenth century, recalls how 'Every stranger is struck with the appearance of the red roads in Furness, caused by carting the iron ore … The iron miner is a singular looking being as he emerges from his gloomy subterraneous operations, his clothes red with the oxide of iron, and his face as resplendent as the greasy visage of a copper-coloured indian'[14]. A vivid account of conditions in the iron mines of a later date records that 'There are no colours, just the black shadow and the greasy crimson of iron ore which stains everything: your face, your clothes, your tools, pit props, rock, and even the cheese in your pocket'[15]. An even more recent account, from the west coast of Cumbria rather than Furness, recalls that 'the men walked home in their red ore-caked work clothes … The path didn't always lead home, sometimes it led to the "Red Room", a room set aside in a pub for miners … Then there was the red dust … giving a red colour to everything even the people. It was breathed in by the miners all the time and I remember [them] spitting red'[16].

Even today it is possible to see livestock stained red simply by being kept in fields where the soil is rich in iron ore. Indeed, a visit to the wild animal park at Dalton will provide the opportunity to see a vast range of animals stained red, the area having been the site of one of a substantial iron mine, the original name of which, Eure Pits, is also indicative of its ancient origins.

This is of course an exaggerated way of arguing that, given such accounts, it would seem inconceivable that a horse utilised in the mining and/or movement of the local iron ore would not also have been stained through contact with it. The discovery of a horse, noteworthy for being 'of reddish colour' at such a location would therefore perhaps not be surprising. Certainly the ore seems to have been mined in the area from an early date[17] and the place-name Orgrave, first recorded in the Domesday survey, 'gives the important information that iron mining must have been carried on in the district since before the Conquest'[18]. Although there is no specific evidence for the transportation of ore at that time, the presence of a road of apparently Roman origin linking this embarkation point to an area containing major haematite deposits in the area suggests it was entirely possible. Assuming that it was a horse used in transporting ore, the fact that it had a bridle and was willing to be harnessed and then used to transport the relics is perhaps also not particularly remarkable. Certainly

horses were used in the transportation of ore only a few centuries after the events described by Symeon[19].

While these two details of the local topography are of interest in connecting the story to Morecambe Bay, there is still the difficulty of the one place-name given: the 'White House' or 'Whithorn'. However, this too can perhaps be located in the vicinity of Conishead. Thomas West, writing in 1774, recalls that in the perambulation roll of Ulverston, 'a record of high antiquity', Conishead Bank is named 'the Spina Alba, the White-thorn'[20]. Could it be that this term is in actual fact a corruption of Whithorn? Rather than suggesting that this is the true site of Whithorn, which would seem extraordinarily unlikely, is it possible to suggest that there were in fact several sites known as the 'White House', in honour of or inspired by Whithorn? Such a suggestion is perhaps not implausible; Whithorn was a place greatly famed in the early medieval and medieval periods[21]. Confusion over similarly-named religious institutions did occur: Capel Meugan in the parish of Eglwys Wen (the White Church), north Pembrokeshire, was confused with Whithorn, apparently on account of their similar names, leading Irish scholars to transfer St Meugan from one site to the other[22]. Similarly, the automatic equating of an important religious site, known to Irish writers as *Rosnat*, with Whithorn has also been questioned, with alternative locations suggested in Wales and more recently two different sites in Cornwall[23]. In addition, given that the White House is thought to have been a reference to the building technique used, which was notable for producing a white finish, either through the application of lime or use of dressed white stone[24], it is a name any number of places could have been given and the area around Conishead is certainly not short of white limestone suitable for building.

Further evidence for an early Christian connection to Conishead might also be found in the recent realisation that there is an *eccles* place-name recorded at Conishead[25] indicating an early Christian connection to the site. It is also noteworthy that the runic inscription discovered at Conishead during excavations carried out in the 1920s, which is thought to be a late example of the use of runes, has been read as 'KOTBERT' – a crude and awkward attempt at 'Cuthbert'[26], although it should be noted that other translations differ from this[27].

As has been previously discussed[28], there are three other sites connected with St Cuthbert in Furness: he is the patron saint of the parish churches at Aldingham and Kirkby-in-Furness, and Furness Abbey had a chapel dedicated to him, in somewhat unusual circumstances, in the mid-twelfth century. While the previous notion that churches dedicated to St Cuthbert were all places where his relics rested during their travels has largely or entirely been dismissed, it is notable that Aldingham is a short distance from Conishead and all three sites are relatively close to the route one might take, using the ancient road across the peninsula heading north[29]. Given that the monks are then said to have to have followed the red horse 'wherever it went … because they were using as a guide a horse provided for them by God'[30] they may well have found themselves taking this route as the one most familiar to the horse.

Needless to say, if the apparent similarities between the account given by Symeon of Durham and topographical features of Morecambe Bay are believable, this simply

generates more questions: is there any compelling physical evidence for early medieval (or earlier) activity at Conishead for example? Is there an earlier religious connection at the site of Furness Abbey explaining the choice of St Cuthbert as a patron[31], and what did the grant of land at Cartmel in the late seventh century equate to 'on the ground'[32]? It is notable in this respect how the seemingly unplanned escape from Lindisfarne conveniently managed to locate the monks 'at or near places where the community is known to have possessed property'[33] on more than one occasion.

There are also, of course, a number of significant problems with Symeon's text and it clearly cannot be taken at face value. Symeon was writing some time after the events he described though he clearly had access to earlier sources[34] and was well regarded as a historian[35], but the *Libellus* was as much political as historical. Not only was it in part a critique of the previous religious community at Durham, which was thought to have moved away from the monastic ideal, it also attempted to position the Benedictine community established at Durham in 1083 as the heirs of the seventh-century monks at Lindisfarne[36] and justify the reforms made at that time[37]. He has also been accused, 'As the most influential Northumbrian historian since Bede [and therefore having] the means to alter history' of doing just that to further the cause of the Bishops of Durham in enshrining their control over lands held by the crown[38]. He undoubtedly had an interest in trying to enhance the link between Whithorn and Northumbria at the time he was writing, and may have been responsible for a political tract arguing the case that Carlisle diocese was, and always had been, a possession of the community of St Cuthbert[39]. Is it therefore possible that in identifying an apparent reference to Whithorn in the story of St Cuthbert's relics Symeon emphasised this even though it was not necessarily describing the location he assumed it was?

Acknowledgements

Notes and References

1. The most detailed account of these events is given by Symeon of Durham; D. Rollason, ed. and trans.), *Symeon of Durham: Libellus de Exordio atque Procursu istius hoc est Dunhelmensis Ecclesie*, (Oxford, 2000), 112-121.
2. I*bid.* 101.
3. Ibid. 115.
4. Ibid. 119.
5. D. Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places: St Ninian, Whithorn and the Medieval Realm of Galloway*, (Edinburgh, 1998), 63. The time at which the monks would have arrived corresponds to the renewal of the minster church following an earlier phase of instability and destruction, as revealed through excavation (see P. Hill, *Whithorn & St Ninian: The Excavation of a Monastic Town 1984-91*, (Whithorn, 1997), 22 and 48), so the supposition that the site was abandoned when they arrived and hence had no welcome does not seem tenable.
6. Rollason, *op. cit.* 119.

[7] Brooke, *Wild Men*, 63.

[8] Morecambe Bay is the second largest bay in the UK, has a tidal range of up to 10.5m, and can retreat up to 12km (Morecambe Bay Partnership, n.d., *Morecambe Bay: The Secrets of the Sands*, (Kendal), 9.

[9] Rollason, *op. cit* 119.

[10] A. Fell, *The Early Iron Industry of Furness and District*, (Ulverston, 1908), 91.

[11] T. West, *The Antiquities of Furness*, (Ulverston, 1774), viii.

[12] See D.W. Elsworth, 2007, 'The "Streetgate" at Conishead, the "Castellum" at Dalton, and Roman Furness', *CW3*, 7, (2007) 31-48, for the most recent discussion of the evidence relating to this.

[13] A. Simmons (ed.) *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides 1772 by Thomas Pennant*, (Edinburgh, 1998), 27.

[14] C.M. Jopling, *Sketch of Furness and Cartmel*, (Ulverston, 1843), 13.

[15] Cited in B. Trescatheric, *The Book of Furness*, (Whittlebury, 1993) 75-76), but based on work by Alan McFadzean.

[16] D. Kelly, *The Red Hills*, (Marton, 1994), 16.

[17] M. Bowden, *Furness Iron*, (Swindon, 2000), 12.

[18] E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire*, (Manchester, 1922), 207.

[19] In 1271 pasture was granted at Moushil (Mouzel) for the horses of Hugh de Morisby 'which have carried the stone mineral', evidently meaning haematite; Fell, *Iron Industry*, 162.

[20] West 1774, viii. It is also perhaps relevant to note that what would appear to be the same place was named the 'white cross' in a boundary roll for Bardsea dated 1282 (H.I. Anderton, 'The Manor of Bardsea', *CW2*, 12, 1912, 229.

[21] F. Edmonds, *Whithorn's Renown in the Early Medieval Period: Whithorn, Futerna and Magnum Monasterium*, 17th Whithorn Lecture, (Whithorn, 2009).

[22] Edmonds, *Whithorn's Renown*, 25.

[23] C. Thomas, 1971, 'Rosnat, Rostat, and the Early Irish Church', *Ériu*, 22, (2009), 100-106 and A. Breeze, 'Rosnat, Whithorn and Cornwall', *TDGNHAS*, 3rd ser, 83, (2009), 43-50.

[24] C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, (London, 1981), 280.

[25] D.W. Elsworth, 2011, 'Eccles Place-Names in Cumbria', CW3, 11, (2011), 234-238.

[26] F. Barnes, *Barrow and District*, 3rd edn, (Barrow-in-Furness 1978), 17.

[27] E.g. R.I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, (Woodbridge, 2006), 209.

[28] V. Tudor, 'St Cuthbert and Cumbria', *CW2*, 84, (1984), 67-78.

[29] Elsworth, 'Roman Furness'.

[30] Rollason, *Symeon of Durham*, 121.

[31] The evidence for this is currently being investigated by the author.

[32] This has also been previously discussed (Tudor, 'St Cuthbert') and more recently examined by Mike Hancox.

[33] T. Johnson South (ed), *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto: A History of Saint Cuthbert and a Record of His Patrimony*, Anglo-Saxon Texts, **3**, (Cambridge, 2002), 100.

[34] Johnson South, *Historia*, 9.

[35] D. Rollason, 1998, 'Symeon's Contribution to Historical Writing in Northern England', in D. Rollason (ed), *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North*, (Stamford, 1998), 1-13.

[36] M. Foster, 1994 'Custodians of St Cuthbert: The Durham Monks' Views of their Predecessors, 1083-c.1200', in D. Rollason, M. Harvey, and M. Prestwich, 1994, *Anglo-Norman Durham, 1093-1193*, (Woodbridge 1994), 53-65.

[37] W.M. Aird, 1998 'The Political Context of the *Libellus de Exordio*', in D. Rollason (ed), *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North*, (Stamford, 1998), 32-45.

[38] A. Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789-1070*, (Edinburgh, 2007), 76.

[39] R. Sharpe, 'Symeon as Pamphleteer', in D. Rollason (ed), *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North*, (Stamford, 1998), 214-229.