

A king, a jester, and a saint who challenged Satan

BARTHOLOMEW'S LEGEND IS ABOUT DIVINE INTERVENTION IN HEALING AND THE RE-USE OF ANCIENT SHRINES

RATHERE'S CURE

Henry I: St Bart's to Bartlemas

London's most famous hospital, St Bart's, was founded around 1120 by Henry I's court jester, Rather, in thanks for recovering from illness while visiting Italy. He had been treated at the hospital of St Bartholomew on the Tiber Island in Rome, so dedicated his new hospital at Smithfield, just outside the walls of London, to the saint whose powers, he believed, had made him well.

Henry's own foundation of a hospital of Bartholomew on his manor of Headington outside the walls of Oxford very soon afterwards is a direct reflection, therefore, of the setting-up of St Bart's by his jester. It also responded to his Queen, Matilda's well-known personal care for lepers.



The priory church at St Bart's

AN ANCIENT TALE

Smashing idols, calling angels

From at least the sixth century and probably much earlier, the legend of Bartholomew's mighty acts and eventual martyrdom was set in stone. It begins with the apostle frequenting the temple of a healing god called Asturoth, who because of Bartholomew's presence is unable to answer the prayers of the pilgrims. The saint calls down an angel to smash the idol's statue and sign with the cross on the four corners of the building.

This, of course, is what a bishop does when consecrating a church – so Bartholomew was taking over the temple for Christian use.

He goes on to heal the king's daughter, defeat other gods called Berith and Baldad, and meet his death, flayed alive by the king's brother. Though the legend places the events in India, the gods' names are thinly-disguised versions of the east Mediterranean Astaroth, Berytus (ancient god of Beirut) and Baal.

The place of martyrdom was traditionally said to be Derbend on the Caspian Sea. From there the saint's body was taken in 580 to the Sicilian island of Lipari, to Beneventum, in 838, and then to Rome. An arm bone was given to Canterbury by Cnut's Queen Emma.

Derbend



Bartholomew holding a flaying knife, instrument of his martyrdom.



WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

Bartholomew has been linked with supernatural powers since biblical days. Christ tells his disciple Nathanael (Bartholomew, 'son of Ptolemy', is his patronymic) that he will see angels on the steps of heaven – an allusion to Jacob's ladder, a story of the Israelites appropriating the Canaanites' temple of Bethel.

One apocryphal text, the 'Questions of Bartholomew' tells how Christ allows the apostle to summon Satan, tread on his neck, and command him to give up his secrets.

Another has Mary telling his fellow Apostles that he will be 'the keeper of secrets'.

Then, circa 740, our first near-contemporary biography in (Old) English, tells how St Guthlac, a young warrior turned hermit, gained the help of Bartholomew, his role-model, to beat off the demons who were disturbing his sleep and leaving him in despair. The episode was shown in the design (top right) for stained glass at Guthlac's abbey of Crowland, Lincs, circa 1210.

A few years before, around 1190, a drawing of St Bartholomew confronting two horned demons was included in the Pamplona Bible (below left).



Earlier kept on Lipari (middle right), Bartholomew's remains were enshrined in Rome by Otto III in 997. On the altar steps (below right) is an oddity, the head of a deep well which is considered miraculous.

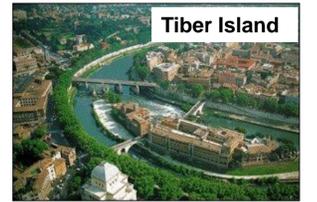


RENEWAL

Adapting ancient medical centres

It is probably no coincidence that when brought to Rome, Bartholomew's remains were enshrined on the Tiber Island. This had been the site of the temple of Aesculapius, the Greek (and then Roman) god of healing, presented as a medic whose son, too, practised the arts of medicine. The apostle's stay on Lipari may also have been linked with healing: In Roman times the island was a spa and place of retreat and renewal.

Bartholomew's takeover of a temple can be read as a reform and renewal of medical practice under the aegis of Christianity. It is also in line with Pope Gregory's order to Augustine to adapt, not destroy the temples of the English. This has huge significance... Here's why.



Tiber Island

In place of Thor and Woden

In terms of location, there is a positive statistical correlation between places with churches and chapels of Bartholomew, and places whose names indicate pre- or non-Christian worship and ritual. Cases of direct correlation include Wednesbury, Staffs ('Woden's hill'), where St Bartholomew's occupies the summit (right), a landmark for miles around, and Churchdown (below) where the apostle's church sits on the ramparts of the large and prominent Iron Age hillfort which preceded the Roman colony of Gloucester.

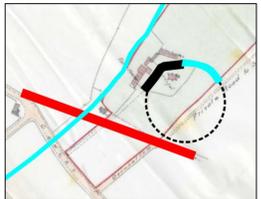


BARTLEMAS

What was King Henry up to?

It is odd that Henry I's advisors chose a site on the very edge of the manor for this hospital, and on what must have been a side road – certainly not as busy as Headington Hill, which also carried the road to London. In the seventeenth century the future Cowley Road was called 'The Way of St Bartholomew', not 'The Way of Garsington' – which seems to indicate that Bartlemas was a notable landmark nevertheless.

Is it possible the site was chosen because Strowell Spring was already a 'holy well'? Could the curved 'pool' (shown in blue) and chapel yard wall (black) preserve the line of an earlier, circular feature beside the Roman road (red)? What do you think?



READING

Graham Jones, *Saints in the Landscape* (Stroud, Tempus, 2007).

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