

Jane Cartwright, ed. 2016. *The Cult of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 299 pages. ISBN: 978-1-78316-867-5. eISBN: 978-1-78316-868-2.

St. Ursula, the Christian daughter of a third-century British King, agrees to marry a pagan prince but puts off the unwelcome nuptials by gaining permission to take ten virgins, and 1,000 virgin attendants for each of them, on a pilgrimage to Rome. During their travels over land and sea, Ursula converts her companions, and they eventually suffer martyrdom in Cologne. *The Cult of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins* is a collection of 12 articles that is both an introduction to these martyrs, and an overview of their legends, relics, art, and cult from across Europe from Hungary to Iceland. As such, it is useful for someone new to the tale of St. Ursula and her companions or to the variety of methods used to study saints and their cults in general. The volume also offers insights into regional, textual, and methodological variations that add nuance for scholars well versed in their own approaches to these virgin-martyrs. The introduction to the volume by the editor masterfully combines an outline of the legend of St. Ursula and her companions with ties to each chapter, noting particularly the types of sources and approaches each contributor brings to the volume. Two chapters on the Nordic countries are of particular interest exemplifying challenges, and offering perceptive solutions, to the study of pre-Reformation religious history in the region.

Historical, liturgical, and archaeological sources introduce significant changes over time to the legend. Scott B. Montgomery tracks the development of the cult from an anonymous collective—a corporate body—with no named figurehead to the eventual emergence of St. Ursula as a titular identity. This corresponds with an increased interest in individual personalities of the virgins over time. Montgomery further shows how the “forensic hagiography” of exhumed bodies (particularly heads) enabled the city of Cologne to lay claim to the virgins and their cult. Klaus Militzer complements Montgomery’s chapter as he lays out archaeological discoveries pertinent to the cult in Cologne and ties them to the local religious orders and practices. Kristin Hoefener examines the “interdependence between the cult of the virgins of Cologne and the production of hagiographic and liturgical texts and compositions” (86), with particular reference to local, regional, or personal interests in the martyrs. She does this by mapping manuscripts, primarily liturgical offices, dedicated to the cult of Cologne’s virgins. Of particular interest are her many tables documenting the nomenclature of individual virgins, with Ursula emerging as the leader as of the 10th century. This complements Montgomery’s chapter by providing additional textual evidence to the evolution of the cult from corporate sanctity to a group with a clearly defined figurehead.

The cult of the virgins of Cologne played a part in the religious practices and strategies of both groups and individuals during the Middle Ages. Helen Nicholson examines the appeal of virgin-martyrs to military orders. The Templars, Hospitallers, and Teutonic Order all exhibit some following of St. Ursula and the 11,000. The regional evidence Nicholson presents shows that local or personal interests, rather than those of the order as a whole, drove the support of the cult. William Flynn argues that Hildegard of Bingen used Ursula's legend as a youthful prophet belittled by others as a cypher for her own prophetic gift. He does this by examining Hildegard's access to relics, legends, and other writings about the virgins of Cologne. Flynn notes that her own documented work on the virgins of Cologne originated later in her life.

The variety of legends and their approaches highlight the versatility of the story. Elizabeth J. Bryan examines British historical portrayals of Ursula and her companions in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* and the *Brut* cycles, arguing that Geoffrey's narrative of the virgins being part of a Christian colonizing project was gradually replaced in the later *Brut* tradition by influences from hagiography where national origins played a tangential role. Ironically, Protestantism precluded the use of Ursula and the 11,000 for British colonial needs, while it flourished for the Spanish and French—for example, when Columbus named the Virgin Islands after the martyrs of Cologne. William Marx complements Bryan's work on the historical writings with a study on hagiographic legend. Where Geoffrey's Ursula suffers martyrdom as an accident of history, or the will or God, Marx lays out a separate tradition where Ursula actively seeks martyrdom, which is based on legends that derive from the *Legenda Aurea* [*Golden Legend*] by Jacobus de Voragine. The virgins' origins are at the heart of Cartwright's detective work to discover the sources and shifts in the 1509 Welsh life of Ursula. In this vernacular translation, Ursula is Welsh, not merely British as in most other texts. Even though the legend in the end ties the virgins firmly to Cologne in their death, their Welsh origins play a significant role in Wales, primarily through churches, relics, and local tradition.

Interdisciplinary approaches are often key to examining the cult. Anna Tüskés lists evidence for the cult of St. Ursula and her virgins in Hungary, where their veneration was tied to the legend of martyrdom at the hands of the Huns. Tüskés introduces sermons, chronicles, relics, altars, and art, highlighting the relevance of the cult in a region all too often overlooked by scholars of Western Europe, and for which many of us continue to lack historical context. Margaret Cormack offers another regional overview in her study of St. Ursula and the 11,000 virgins in Scandinavia and Iceland. Given the effectiveness of the Protestant Reformation in the region, Cormack searches for evidence of the cult not only in liturgical texts and shrines but also in popularity as evidenced for example in women named Ursula. Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and the Oslo Fjord region have evidence of both cult and popularity, while broader Norway's evidence is more

liturgical in nature. Whether the rise of Ursula's presence in the late medieval Nordic countries is indicative of an increase in popularity, or based on higher availability of sources, is unclear, as Cormack points out. An interesting phenomenon is that Norway had a similar native cult—Sunniva and the saints of Selja, based in Bergen—which also had an Icelandic following. Given the sparse evidence for cults of many saints in the region, the example of Sunniva highlights the importance of comparisons between saints, as well as a collaborative effort to map saints and their sources in material culture. Katelin Parson's work complements Cormack's work on Iceland by mapping the maidens of Cologne in a variety of non-liturgical sources. Parson argues that their "cameo appearances" in a variety of vernacular texts, such as skaldic poems, hagiography, saga, and chivalric romance, ensured the survival of Ursula and her companions into post-Reformation Iceland for the remainder of Iceland's manuscript culture, lasting well into the nineteenth century.

The last, and most theoretical chapter, by Samantha Riches argues that St. Ursula and her female companions were masculinized – for example in their naval maneuvers, admired by men who traditionally mastered such martial activities. As militaristic group-martyrs they are comparable to St. Acacius, a Roman military leader, and his 10,000 followers. In the gruesomely penetrative, and hence erotic, martyrdoms, Acacius and Ursula with their companions become images of passive and patient – effeminate – suffering. This highlights the sexualized evil of their murderers, but also serves as models of forbearance for quotidian suffering everyone faces. As these men and women were similarly murdered, an "insistence on binary gender is overly limiting" (256) in the analysis of martyrdom, Riches reminds the reader.

There is some inconsistency in the quality of the chapters, primarily in explaining background and context. However, given the variety of geography and approaches of the collection such criticism is superficial. Overall, the collection succeeds in providing an interdisciplinary overview to St. Ursula and the 11,000 virgins that will be useful for anyone interested in the cult of these saints.

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