

Introduction

The Fates of the Apostles is a Christian poem written in Anglo-Saxon England. Until recently, editors placed it after *Andreas*, thought to be its epilogue, and often marginalised to the category of minor poems with respect to other more renowned works of Old English literature. However, its content and artful runic signature, which decodes into the name Cynewulf, have always been elements of great interest. It is not surprising that scholars not considering *The Fates of the Apostles* as a whole, but analysing just limited parts of it, expressed a variety of opinions relating to both the style of this poem and the provenance of its content based on many literary sources, which extend beyond Cynewulf's Anglo-Saxon England.

My attention was drawn to *The Fates of the Apostles* owing to its abundant weaving of hagiographical and theological themes, which flawlessly merge with my interest in Anglo-Saxon Christian culture, runes and the Holy Scriptures. During my numerous readings of the poem, I reflected seriously on its underlying litany structure and its veiled resemblance to liturgy. I then became profoundly curious regarding its identity and style. The riddle of the runes and the plea for prayers, which Cynewulf makes to those who take pleasure in the *giddes begang* 'the rendition of [his] song', called for scrutiny. An essential part of this study of the poem deals with its liturgical background, as well as its references to both the Holy Writ and the works of the Fathers of the Church.

The present work has been thought-provoking for several reasons, especially regarding the presence of eschatological themes in Cynewulf's

epilogues. The poem is not just a list of the apostles' deaths. It is also a celebration of them. There one reads of the Twelve's heroic deeds and how they sealed their faith in God with the shedding of their own righteous blood.

The Fates of the Apostles contains some veiled references to death liturgy. It is likely that Cynewulf was a monk or someone holding some office in the priesthood who had access to liturgical sources such as missals, breviaries or prayer-books. Cynewulf also endows the epilogue of *The Fates of the Apostles* with his own fear of death. Furthermore, not only are they praised because of their deeds, the Twelve are also invoked to guide the poet, as well as all those who solve the riddle of the runes, throughout the journey back to God's presence. The apostles become the poet's comfort and invocation in such a challenging time of his mortal existence. As a result, *The Fates of the Apostles* can be read as Cynewulf's final prayer before his *transitus* into the eternities.

Since the dawn of Anglo-Saxon studies, scholars have often wondered whether poems should be translated into modern languages using modern idioms while adhering to the Old English alliterative tradition. As I was considering how to translate *The Fates of the Apostles*, I had decided not to be restricted by the obvious constraints of the alliterative measure. Yet, the task of finding suitable, poetic words to accommodate the needs of alliteration was both a challenge and an intrigue. In the Appendix, my translation attempts to keep the original alliterative force wherever modern English syntax allows.

Finally, the image in the book cover portrays the essence of this work rather well. It is taken from Roundel 14 in London, British Library, MS Harley Roll Y.6 and portrays the dying St Guthlac, whose soul is taken by the angels and brought to the heavens in a pillar of light. If one places *The Fates of the Apostles* into a funerary-liturgical perspective, it might provide a new and compelling reading of the poem as Cynewulf's literary *commendatio animae*. Such an interpretation might be helpful into narrowing the various views regarding the poet's real identity and in considering *The Fates of the Apostles* as Cynewulf's cry of *fnit* before his journey back to God.