
Christina of Markyate and the St Albans Psalter

ON the first weekend in August, a team from Aberdeen and Oxford Universities held a conference at St Albans School. The basis for the conference was the new website for the St Albans Psalter funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. The electronic psalter was on display, on a large state-of-the-art touch screen provided by the school, to gain an evaluation of the site from the 90 scholars and lay people who attended. Far from being blinded by science or technophobia, a group of ladies well past the normal age for computer experiments were spotted during the lunch break, avidly touching and manipulating the site. It passed the user-friendly test.

Our aim was to bring to life, as vividly as possible, the world of Christina of Markyate, a feisty twelfth-century anchoress. The rich evidence she left behind lent itself to such imaginative treatment. Christina's *Vita* was written by a monk of St Albans following intimate briefings from the lady herself. Her story is complemented by the St Albans Psalter, a glorious illuminated manuscript

given to her by her close companion Abbot Geoffrey of St Albans.

The conference began with papers dealing with the St Albans Psalter manuscript, showing how its particular selection of illustrations related to Christina's circumstances (Jane Geddes). Rod Thompson developed the situation in the St Albans Abbey scriptorium, a powerhouse of production at which the Psalter's great painter, the Alexis Master, was a temporary employee. Sandy Heslop linked the cycle of paintings in the St Albans Psalter with other works by the Alexis Master, specifically the Life of St Edmund.

Christina's world remains easy to visualise. She was

In 2003 the British Academy sponsored a conference in St Albans, drawing together a project to digitise the St Albans Psalter, and an edited volume on Christina of Markyate. Dr Jane Geddes, director of the digitisation project and organiser of the conference, describes the highlights.



Figure 1. *The St Albans Psalter*, Psalm 105, p.285 (© St Godehard, Hildesheim) Christina begs Christ for mercy on behalf of the monks of St Albans.

a famed embroideress, providing bootees for the pope and underwear for her beloved abbot. Francis Pritchard illustrated examples of the type of needlework Christina produced: questions from the audience, about love-token underwear for an abbot made by an anchoress, nearly halted proceedings. Richard Plant and Martin Biddle were able to show in detail the buildings from Christina's home territory between Huntingdonshire and Hertfordshire. The description in the *Vita* of an affluent Anglo-Saxon home after the Conquest is a rare and detailed account. Although her priory at Markyate no longer exists, a surprising number of domestic buildings and churches, not least St Albans Abbey, still survive. Jane Kelsall and other guides took the delegates on a tour around the parts of the abbey which Abbot Geoffrey endowed and which Christina saw when she first visited as a child in about 1111. Henry Mayr-Harting explained the context of Christina's religious experiences from an historical point of view, a world of Norman prelates in splendid new monasteries and Anglo-Saxon religious recluses in the woods.

The second day of the conference was concerned with texts. This Psalter is not simply a devotional book. A quire, probably orchestrated by Abbot Geoffrey himself, contains the very early French text, the *Chanson of St Alexis* while several illustrations throughout the book suggest familiarity with the earliest stages of liturgical drama. Abbot Geoffrey was known for directing a play. Margaret Jubb, through a careful unpicking of the Alexis text and its layout, demonstrated its particular emphasis in this document. It dwells on Alexis' chaste marriage and departure, and his final reunion with his wife in heaven: aspects of the story most appropriate for Christina and Geoffrey. Carol Symes argued that the threefold

Some aspects of the conference can be found on the St Albans Psalter web site where the entire manuscript is reproduced: www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanpsalter. Publications following the conference: *The St Albans Psalter: a book for Christina of Markyate*, Jane Geddes, British Library, October 2005; *Christina of Markyate*, eds. H. Leyser and S. Fanous, Routledge, 2004.



Figure 3. *The St Albans Psalter, The Annunciation, p.19* (© St Godehard, Hildesheim). *The Virgin Mary actively reads a book, in the same way that Christina held a psalter open on her lap every day.*

depiction of the Emmaus story provides very early evidence of the Peregrinus play, probably from before it was formally written down.

Christina as a saintly woman was thoroughly deconstructed. Sister Benedicta Ward compared her predicament and response with that of Héloïse and Abelard. Rachel Koopmans discovered that our attractive seductive virgin could be quite fierce and domineering but her biographer wished to polish up her reputation as a saint for St

Albans. Samuel Fanous and Anneke Mulder-Bakker finally revealed the extent to which Christina's engaging and personal *Vita* was a literary construct. Christina's life fell into the predictable phases of a virgin martyr topos and even the more dramatic incidents could be mirrored in the other contemporary saints' lives. Finally, attempting the almost impossible, came a paper from Mark Atherton, about the speech of Anglo-Saxon hermits in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As a matter of principle, anchorites did not



talk very often, but we know that Roger the hermit of Markyate called Christina 'My Sunday Daughter'.

The conference ended with a performance of Vespers in plainchant, in the cathedral, performed by the Woodhill Singers. This was the original spine-tingling experience which made Christina of Markyate become a nun 900 years ago. The acoustics and emotional effect provided a final vivid interlude in a weekend where twelfth-century St Albans came alive, bustling with personalities, splendid architecture, and ethereal sound. We held the conference more or less on the spot where the Psalter was created, evoking Christina's world physically and spiritually with stunning pictorial evidence.

Speakers at the conference included:

- Dr Carol Symes, University of Illinois
- Dr Rachel Koopmans, Arizona State University
- Dr Anneke Mulder-Bakker, Groningen University
- Dr Jane Geddes, University of Aberdeen
- Professor Rodney Thomas, University of Tasmania
- T.A. Hislop, University of East Anglia
- Mrs Henrietta Leyser, University of Oxford
- Professor Martin Biddle FBA, University of Oxford
- Dr Richard Plant
- Professor Henry Mayr-Harting FBA, University of Oxford
- Dr Benedicta Ward
- Dr Margaret Jubb, University of Aberdeen
- Dr Samuel Fanous, Bodleian Library, Oxford



Top: Figure 4. *The St Albans Psalter. Psalm 143, p.361.* (© St Godehard, Hildesheim). 'Lord, send forth lightning and thou shall scatter them'. The sinners, proud and vain with their long hair, quake in a cabaret chorus-line beneath the wrath of God.

Bottom: Figure 5. *The St Albans Psalter. Psalm 28, p.123.* (© St Godehard, Hildesheim). 'The Lord shall break the cedars of Libanus.' The lofty cedars represent the sin of pride.