

## Saint *Frideswide*: A Changing Legend for Changing Times

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St. Frideswide is the patron saint of Oxford, the town and university. According to her legend, Frideswide dedicated her life to God, serving as an abbess in what is now Oxford and its surrounding area. She is credited with performing many miracles such as eliciting a well for a nunnery and healing a leper. Even after her death, people thanked Frideswide for healing them from injury and affliction. Frideswide lived from 650–727 yet the earliest recording of her story is from the early twelfth-century, nearly 500 years after her death. The legend of St. Frideswide was written many times. The most commonly studied primary sources include three versions written in Latin and two in Middle English, the common language of twelfth-century England. While all of the versions contain some similarities, they were each written at a different time, by different authors, for unique audiences, and served different social and political purposes. None of the versions are a clear and truthful biography of Frideswide. As England underwent a Christian Reformation, Frideswide, her legend, and her relics were lost. Once rediscovered, her legend continued to metamorphosize. While the legend of Frideswide can explain some aspects of her contemporary society and its views of women, the legends shed even more light on the authors' societies and the changing status of women. These changes to Frideswide's legend continue today.<sup>1</sup>

Because there is not one legend of St. Frideswide, but several versions of a similar legend, retelling her story is complicated. All versions agree that St. Frideswide was most likely born in 650 to

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<sup>1</sup>John Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," *Oxoniensia* 52 (1987), 71–127.

Didan and Sefreth. Didan was either a Mercian king or sub-king who ruled in the Eynsham area. Frideswide was very smart, humble, and loved by all. According to the *South English Legendary (SEL)*, the thirteenth and fourteenth century collection of saints' lives of which many versions are still available, after the death of her mother, she asked her father's blessing to become a nun and may have encouraged her father to dedicate his finances to a new minster built to honor Mary. All versions agree that Frideswide served as abbess of St. Marie church, which her father financed.<sup>2</sup>

Each version puts a different spin on the trials Frideswide faced. The *Vitas*, or Latin versions, were concerned with God's involvement with Frideswide and His deliverance of her from the Devil. The *SEL* versions emphasize Frideswide's own actions as well as her role as a holy woman. Roughly, the versions record how the Devil, unhappy with Frideswide's saintly habits of fasting and prayer, set out to tempt her. He appeared to her along with his minions claiming to be Jesus and the angels. Frideswide saw through the Devil's disguise and cast him out. Not to be deterred, the Devil then appeared to Algar, either a higher king than Didan or maybe his successor, and tempted Algar to defile Frideswide by either marriage or force. Algar sent his men after Frideswide who was divinely protected. His men were struck blind. They repented and Frideswide prayed for their sight to be restored. They returned to Algar who was now mad with thoughts of Frideswide and vowed he would take her himself. Frideswide escaped Algar and fled the area, taking a boat down the Thames and finding refuge in the wilderness. The *Vitas* said Frideswide was divinely protected in her flight and that God provided her the boat at the Thames. Algar was either also struck blind and healed, or died in a horse riding accident in his pursuit. Either way, Frideswide was saved from his intended defilement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Sherry L. Reames, editor with the assistance of Martha G. Blalock and Wendy R. Larson, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2003; Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered."

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

During her exile in the wilderness, she was taken in by an abbey in either Bampton or Binsey. At this abbey, the nuns had to walk to the river for their water every day and it was exhausting them. Frideswide prayed for a new water source for the abbey and a spring appeared where she stood. She returned home to Oxford either because she heard of her father's grief over her disappearance (*SEL*) or because it was time to die (*Vita*). She again presided over an abbey in Oxford and performed many healing miracles for citizens of the surrounding area. She even healed a leper with her kiss while she made her triumphant return. When Frideswide returned to Oxford, the people lined the streets and welcomed her home with great fanfare. Within the parade, a leprous man approached Frideswide and asked her for mercy. He believed if Frideswide would kiss him, he would be cured. The crowd encouraged Frideswide to keep walking past but she stopped and listened to the leper. Unique to the *SEL* version, out of compassion borne from her own heart, Frideswide kissed him, despite her vows to God. And because of her mercy, the leper was healed. She died on October 19, 750. Because she foresaw her own death, she had her grave prepared on Saturday so no one would have to work on Sunday when she passed.<sup>4</sup>

John Blair has provided the most comprehensive study of the Latin versions including translations. According to Blair, the first worthwhile source on Frideswide was done by William of Malmesbury, one of the greatest early English historians, and included in his book the *Gesta Pontificum* in 1125. The other two Latin versions are called Life A and Life B and comprise a full-scale *Vita* found in the Bodleian Library. Life A is short and was written in basic Latin, most likely not recorded by a professional hagiographer or a local to the area. Life A is missing geographical information, and contains some discrepancies which led to a property dispute in 1139 over whether or not the townspeople or the canons owned the priory at Binsey. The author of Life A attempted to incorporate known miracles from both the town of Bampton and Binsey into the Frideswide legend, most likely

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

following oral traditions. Both Malmesbury's version and Life A were short, condensed stories, probably re-recording oral histories whose longer versions have been lost.<sup>5</sup>

Life B is longer, resembling other writings for monastic reading complete with stories of miracles and other inspiring elements. The authorship of Life B is credited to Master Robert of Cricklade, a scholar and prior of St. Frideswide. He most likely worked from a copy of Life A but wrote his version for a different purpose. As the prior of St. Frideswide, he wanted to clear up any misunderstandings about the geography of the area as well as deal swiftly with the recent property dispute. Because of the property dispute, Life B contained a unique section explaining the miracles at both Bampton and Binsey and giving the legend a new timeline, stating the clear ownership of the property by the priory.<sup>6</sup>

The Latin versions of Frideswide's legend contain not only information about the lives of their authors, but also about Frideswide's life in the early eighth-century. Frideswide as a king's daughter and the first head of a minster founded by her father in the 700s is plausible. Most likely, her father was a sub-king in the mid-Saxon province called Eynsham which contained both Oxford and Bampton, towns who play a vital role in Frideswide's journey. Beginning in 634, the West Saxons became Christianized. However, the Mercian kings were stronger in the Oxford area and Frideswide would have been under their rule. A Mercian sub-king starting a monastery and making his daughter the abbess is also plausible. Kings kidnapping noblewomen during this time was not unusual. Stories of virginal women hounded by lecherous princes and then saved were common in hagiography. There is also historical record of a Mercian king alive during the eighth-century who seduced nuns for sport. All of the versions of Frideswide's legend included a Mercian

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<sup>5</sup>Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered;" Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, 24; Anne B. Thompson, "Shaping a Saint's Life: Frideswide of Oxford." *Medium Aevum* 63 (1994), 34-52.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

king desperate to marry or at least have sex with Frideswide no matter the cost. In the twelfth-century, Bisney was known as a “place of ancient sanctuary” and other writing of the time backed up the idea that it was secluded away behind thorns just like Life B claimed.<sup>7</sup>

Robert of Cricklade's goal in recording the longer Latin version of Frideswide's life was probably to make her seem commonplace. According to Cricklade, Frideswide was simply moved by God. She took no ownership of her own actions nor is attributed with any autonomous sense of power, individuality, or self-ownership. Robert of Cricklade attempted to mold Frideswide into a martyr, focusing his *Vita* on Frideswide always moving towards and preparing for her death.<sup>8</sup>

St. Frideswide's legend was also recorded in the *South English Legendary* in two different forms. The shorter version is from Trinity College in Cambridge and written as a poem, in couplets. The longer version, also written in verse, is found in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Both of these versions were written in Middle English. Unlike the Latin versions, there is no geographical confusion from the shorter to the longer. They were however, intended for different audiences. The shorter version is simple and generally monastic, meant for the monks and priests in the church. The author pointed out how quickly Frideswide learned the scriptures, which would have more meaning for the clergy. The author also described Frideswide's austere diet in considerable detail as well as the actions of her father willingly giving his only heir to God, both commentary on the value system of the wealthy, used as a caution for the clergy as well as for their sermons.<sup>9</sup>

The longer *South English Legendary* version tied Frideswide to the Oxford area as their protector and healer, emphasizing lessons between good and evil and the actions of the laity. This version was

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<sup>7</sup>Blair, “Saint Frideswide Reconsidered,” 92; Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, 32–5.

<sup>8</sup>Blair, “Saint Frideswide Reconsidered.”

<sup>9</sup>Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, 24; Thompson, “Shaping a Saint's Life: Frideswide of Oxford.”

meant for the citizenry of Oxford to read themselves. The longer version recorded her father as a gentleman, not royalty, letting him stand in as an attainable example to all good fathers. This version is also more focused on the actions of the father, who built and financed a church, remained celibate after the death of his wife, and who gave lands and money to finance the monastery. It is less about Frideswide's virginity than the shorter version, making it more applicable to the contemporary women of Oxford who were married. The author encouraged his lay audience to keep the Sabbath, stay away from temptation, and to be virtuous.<sup>10</sup>

In the *SEL*, Frideswide's life and her purposeful choices to maintain her life, are what drive the story forward. The longer *SEL* author understood not only Frideswide's personal experiences, but those of his audience as well. The author seemed to understand small towns and rural communities like the one Frideswide lived in, where both women and men shared power. He does not favor men over women, as was the clergy tradition. The *SEL* version of Frideswide was focused on the everyday lives of typical people just as much as it was about the extraordinary lives of God and the saints. The versions of Frideswide's legend contained within the *SEL* gave Frideswide back some of her agency. These versions, while based on the Latin versions, showed Frideswide as strong and in charge of her own actions. She is less a victim and more the hero in her own story, planning her own escape from Algar and staying away from Oxford until she was ready to return on her own. When she cured the leper in the streets, the author made it clear that Frideswide made this choice on her own, out of her own empathy towards the leper, against the urging of others in her party. She was the agent of change in her life. She was not just a pawn moved around the area by God's good graces.<sup>11</sup>

A French counterpart to the Frideswide legend was found in Bomy, France. Their documents look like Cricklade's Life B with

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<sup>10</sup>ibid.

<sup>11</sup>ibid.

different geography. Archeological evidence of a chapel and spring have been found in the area of Bomy, as well as documentation from 1187 of a woman named Frewisse who lived there and had healing powers. While Blair believed the legend was transported by the English Jesuits to the area and Frideswide herself was never there, Francis Goldie, S.J., recorded in his version of the St. Frideswide legend, in 1881, that the saint herself, as part of a pilgrimage journey to Rome, did stop in Bomy. According to Goldie, Frideswide traveled to Rome before her death and established priories and churches along the way. The priory at Bomy is the only evidence to substantiate this claim. Despite records found by Goldie, there is no other evidence Frideswide traveled through the continent and a church founded by Frideswide in Rome has never been recorded.<sup>12</sup>

Medieval legends are often exaggerations or propaganda of a character, used to strengthen influence over a specific audience, or to influence a particular point about morality. Some hagiographic texts might have been used in daily devotions or read aloud. Many manuscripts survive containing the legends of female saints. These books focused on female piety and virginity. Some hagiographies were used in sermons which contained an element of spiritual truth, a literary quality for performing aloud, and appealed to a lay audience. To this end, the church used folklore from an oral tradition to appeal to its audience and teach them more about church doctrine and theology. However, hagiography was not just a transcript of an oral tradition. It was molded by the recording monks and authors to fit a particular community's needs. Elements of folklore passed down orally were often filtered out or censored in order to shape the legend for a more specific use or address a more specific community issue. For example, it is more probable that Frideswide was the abbess of a mixed gender community. However, because of the changes to monasteries, priories, and nunneries by the time Frideswide's legend was recorded, there is no mention of a mixed gender minster.

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<sup>12</sup>Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," 92; Francis Goldie, S.J., *The Story of St. Frideswide: Virgin and Patroness of Oxford*, London: Burns and Oates, 1881.

Instead, Frideswide is depicted as living only among other nuns, in a cloistered community, which characterized the twelfth-century more than the eighth-century.<sup>13</sup>

From 650–750, the characteristics of female saints were similar to their male counterparts. Women acquired property and wealth as well as the power that goes with them. Beginning in the ninth-century, the Church limited a woman's power by curtailing her public involvement and leadership opportunities requiring a woman to remain in the newly defined women's sphere and behave within the confines of her female nature. Because of this change in societal attitudes, female saints were recorded differently. Now, their stories were molded to focus more on their chastity, compassion, and nurturing capabilities, attributes associated more strongly with the female sphere. While male saints from the same time period were portrayed in a variety of situations and actions, the women of the era were limited to evading the assaults of lustful men, which is the driving plot of the Frideswide legend.<sup>14</sup>

Many women of this time period chose to be nuns as a way to experience independence and freedom. Unlike nuns on the continent, most English nuns were not cloistered until Pope Boniface VIII's call for universal enclosure in 1298. They had freedom to leave the abbey as needed and were expected to contribute to the cost of the monastery. For those women who were cloistered, they remained inside the abbey away from society and eventually lived in their own abbeys, away from the men. Holy men, however, were allowed to go back and forth into villages or towns, making the nuns dependent on

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<sup>13</sup>Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*; Hilary Powell, "Once Upon a Time There Was a Saint...": Re-evaluating Folklore in Anglo-Latin Hagiography," *Folklore* 121 (August 2010), 171–189.; A.S.G. Edwards, "Fifteenth-Century English Collections of Female Saints' Lives," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 33, *Medieval and Early Modern Miscellanies and Anthologies* (2003), 131–41.

<sup>14</sup>Thompson, "Shaping a Saint's Life: Frideswide of Oxford;" Jane Curran, "St. Frideswide: Oxford's Patron Saint," [http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/oxford/hi/people\\_and\\_places/history/newsid\\_8403000/8403977.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/oxford/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_8403000/8403977.stm), November 4, 2013; Andrew Atherstone, *Oxford: City of Saints, Scholars and Dreaming Spires*, Leominster: Day One Publications, 2008, 7–19.



the men for help. This double standard was purported to protect women against violence as well as assert control and order over the women who were seen as slaves to their own sinful natures. As women became more dependent on others, their public role was diminished. By the time Frideswide's hagiography was written, women had lost much of their independence and standing within society.<sup>15</sup>

Frideswide was first recognized as a saint in the early eleventh-century although the original records were lost in a fire in 1002. By this time, most of the nuns at the monastery were gone, and the church was overseen by a secular priest. The priory was re-established in 1004 by Ethelred but it was already well known and had a strong foundation. St. Frideswide's was one of the wealthiest churches in Oxford and Frideswide herself was a familiar and helpful saint. In 1122, Frideswide's priory was re-staffed by canons who followed the Rule of St. Augustine. According to John Blair's research, there were a group of Augustinians who wanted to find Frideswide and came to Oxford to seek out her shrine. They were not sure where to look once they got into town, but after three days of fasting, they set out by torchlight to dig where they thought she was buried. First, they found an empty coffin which would have been a common way to protect against grave robbers in the 700s so they dug deeper. Once they found the skeleton, their torches mysteriously went out and then were relit. The men saw this as a holy sign that they had indeed found Frideswide. They reburied the bones, leaving Frideswide in peace. Once established she was there, miracles happened with more frequency and people began to visit her grave more often. In 1180, with the Archbishop of Canterbury and Henry II, the grave was opened and her bones were moved into a more prominent shrine, where people could more easily gather. From the twelfth through the

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<sup>15</sup>John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, eds., *Medieval Religious Women: Volume One: Distant Echoes*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984.

sixteenth-centuries Frideswide's shrine was housed in what is today the Oxford Cathedral.<sup>16</sup>

Over 100 miracles accredited to Frideswide occurred in the following year, drawing pilgrims and followers to her shrine. She cured people from their desire for suicide, anxiety, and women-specific problems like the fear of marriage or moving into puberty. Women were the recipient of these miracles over men two to one. Oxford accepted St. Frideswide and acclaimed her cures. During 1180–90, when most of the Frideswide's miracles are recorded, healthcare, combining science and the supernatural, was popular. She is mentioned in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as not only the patron saint of Oxford, but also has a healer. It was popular in the Middle Ages to invoke the name of a saint in an oath. The carpenter in *Canterbury Tales* swears an oath to St. Frideswide. Because she was the patron saint of Oxford, it associated the character more firmly with that geography. But because of Frideswide's reputation as a healer, when the carpenter called out for help from her, he was asking for Frideswide's healing power.<sup>17</sup>

The town and university of Oxford claimed her as their patron saint beginning in the early 15th-century. In 1525, Frideswide's monastery was closed by Cardinal Wolsey who used the revenues for what would become Christ's Church. Her shrine was destroyed during the Reformation though the bones of St Frideswide remained buried there. In 1552, Catherine Martyr, the wife of a prominent Reformer, was also buried at the site but when Mary became Queen of England, she had Catherine's body exhumed and moved to a dung

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<sup>16</sup>Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," Appendix C, 116–9.

<sup>17</sup>Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, 22–24; Thompson, "Shaping a Saint's Life: Frideswide of Oxford;" Jan Ziolkowski, "Saints in Invocations and Oaths in Medieval Literature," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol 87, No. 2 (Apr., 1988), 179–192.; Ruth Huff Cline, "Four Chaucer Saints," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 60, No. 7 (Nov., 1945), 480–2; Ruth H. Cline, "Three Notes on "the Miller's Tale"," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Feb., 1963), 131–145; Henry Mayr-Harting, "Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine: The Miracles of St. Frideswide." In *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R.H.C. Davis*. Ed. Henry Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore. London: Hambledon Press, 1985, 193–206.

heap. St. Frideswide's bones were also exhumed and encased in two silk bags which were set aside. Ten years later, when Elizabeth became Queen, she ordered Catherine's body reburied in a Christian manner, and tasked Canon James Calhill with Catherine's funeral. During the planning, he found the two silk bags containing the ancient remains of St. Frideswide. In order to directly confront what he called the "popish sacrilege" of the remaining Catholics in the area and at the same time treat the remains with some respect, Calhill decided to intermingle St. Frideswide's bones with those of Catherine Martyr and rebury them together.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in at least the seventeenth-century, medieval history included separate records for women, suggesting it was already established that the experiences of women were not the same as the age in general. Women in medieval history were used in the Victorian era to argue against their limitations and further document the shrinking women's sphere. In the nineteenth-century, women argued that medieval nuns were independent educated women to bolster their arguments for women in higher education. These same hagiographies were used to support the Civil Rights movements in the twentieth-century, linking the women of the Middle Ages with the contemporary struggle for equal rights. In 1936, Sir Frank Stenton was the first modern scholar to take on the legend of Frideswide. He concluded the entire legend was made up in the late twelfth-century and he found no evidence to suggest any older sources. No other scholars agree.<sup>19</sup>

Many British websites' ideas on Frideswide run contrary to the historical record. Several sites as well as contemporary books on Oxford report Frideswide was not a nun but a young girl when the Mercurian Prince asked her father for Frideswide's hand in marriage

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<sup>18</sup>Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, 4; Thompson, "Shaping a Saint's Life: Frideswide of Oxford," ; Ziolkowski, "Saints in Invocations and Oaths in Medieval Literature;" Cline, "Four Chaucer Saints;" Cline, "Three Notes on "the Miller's Tale."

<sup>19</sup>Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*; Powell, "'Once Upon a Time There Was a Saint...';" Susan Mosher Stuard, ed., *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.

and her father agreed. Frideswide's ladies in waiting were listening at the door and alerted her to this development so she ran away from home in order to become a nun. She stole away on a boat and was taken in by an abbey. When she heard how her father pined for his only child, she returned to Oxford as did the prince. The prince, through divine intervention, was struck blind during his pursuit of Frideswide. He begged her forgiveness so she prayed on his behalf and his sight was restored. He left never to return and no sitting king ever returned to Oxford until Henry II. Frideswide lived out her remaining days as a nun. Several stained glass windows throughout Oxford and one at Kidlington show the restoration of the sight of Algar, lending credibility to this more modern version.<sup>20</sup>

The most recent version of St. Frideswide's legend while possibly based on the Latin or Middle English versions, takes its own shape and meets the needs of a more modern audience. It contains few of the elements that were so important to the twelfth-century authors such as Frideswide's virginity and makes no mention at all of the Devil tempting her or Frideswide's early dedication to learning scripture. She is instead portrayed living in a more modern royal life with ladies in waiting and marriages arranged between kingdoms. Through these modern sources, the legend continues to grow and change to fit the present society. In this latest version, the emphasis is fully on Frideswide and her beliefs and actions separate from any divine actions. Frideswide was fully in charge of her own destiny. She made the choice to flee from the prince. Frideswide herself wanted to become a nun instead, and took her destiny into her own hands to make that happen. She was bright, and courageous, both attributes highly prized by modern inhabitants of Oxford.<sup>21</sup>

By comparing the many written versions, the picture of what the author's contemporary society needed, emerges. While the real

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<sup>20</sup>Atherstone, *Oxford: City of Saints*; Curran, "St. Frideswide: Oxford's Patron Saint;" Ellen Ettlinger, "Folklore in Oxfordshire Churches," *Folklore*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Autumn, 1962), 160-177.

<sup>21</sup>Thompson, "Shaping a Saint's Life: Frideswide of Oxford;" Atherstone, *Oxford: City of Saints*; Curran, "St. Frideswide: Oxford's Patron Saint."

Frideswide was most likely an independent, educated woman, who was the head of a minster filled with monks, priests, and other nuns, the retelling of her story makes no mention of men in her priory. Instead, versions for the clergy focus on her piety, her study of the scriptures, a divine protection in her life, and her near martyr-like devotion in preparing for her own death. Versions for the laity focused on Frideswide's goodness, chastity, and devotion to others. Modern day versions of her legend have tied Frideswide and her experiences to the early equal rights movement, to furthering women in education and the professions, and to the civil rights movement. The most recent versions of Frideswide's legend focus on her increased agency even within a male-dominated early modern period depiction. Because of these metamorphic qualities, the legend of St. Frideswide will continue to change throughout time, creating for each new society, a view of womanhood less about the England of 727 and more about the contemporary times of its authors.