THE TORTURER'S 'ART' IN THE JUDAS EPISODE OF BENEDICT'S VOYAGE OF ST BRENAN

In the first quarter of the twelfth century, the popular story of Saint Brendan sailing to Paradise was translated into Anglo-Norman. Rather than following the patterns of hagiography, as was the style of its Latin original, the Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis, the Anglo-Norman Voyage of St Brendan was composed as a secular hagiography that contained didactic and inspirational material, as well as being entertaining. An expert editor, the composer of the Anglo-Norman Voyage, Benedict, excised much of the material that he felt was excessively ecclesiastical. At the same time he expanded some of the scenes, filling them with dynamic imagery. The result is a fast-paced, dramatic narrative.

In Brendan's penultimate encounter before he reaches Paradise he finds Judas Iscariot on a rock. In his version of the Voyage of St Brendan, Benedict has Judas describe his tortures in a detailed and vivid fashion. In the description of what happens to him each day is perhaps the most remarkable addition made by the author to the Navigatio in which the only specific detail mentioned is that Judas states that he 'burns in the centre of a mountain' like a lump of molten lead in a pot, day and night.

Although there were many methods of torture employed around the time of the composition of Benedict's version (first quarter of the twelfth century), many of the descriptions could be found in the books of the Apocalypse (including Maccabees, the Apocalypse of Peter and the Vision of St Paul), and in a variety of texts relating to the Christian martyrs.

The first book of Maccabees contains a list of torture devices used against the seven Maccabees brothers, Jewish rebels who had fought against the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Some of these devices involved, we may conjecture, the same kind of instruments and punishments that Benedict imagined being inflicted on Judas. At one point we read: 'When the guards had placed before them the wheels and joint-dislocators, rack and crucifix, augers and saws, and other tortures, they hung them up by the tongue with a fire under them or hanging over a bubbling mire by their hair, murderers cast into places full of snakes and worms, women sitting in gore and filthy up to their necks, men and women receiving a red-hot iron in their eyes or having flaming fire in their mouths, or rolling around in a lake full of molten lead in a pot' (vv. 13)

In the Apocalypse of Peter (also called the Revelation of Peter), we are told through Peter how Christ took his disciples to see the torments of the damned. Peter reports a variety of punishing tortures: women hanging by the tongue with a fire under them or hanging over a bubbling mire by their hair, murderers cast into places full of snakes and worms, women sitting in gore and filthy up to their necks, men and women receiving a red-hot iron in their eyes or having flaming fire in their mouths, or rolling around in a lake full of molten lead in a pot.

Benedict's description is strikingly similar to the descriptions of torture in the Navigatio, particularly in the way he describes the torments of Judas. The similarity suggests that Benedict was familiar with the Navigatio and may have used it as a source for his own description of Judas's tortures.

The Navigatio also describes Judas as being punished by being 'reviled by the devils' (v. 1364) and bears witness to the psychological abuse inflicted on him. Furthermore, although he describes it as a 'Paradise of Delights', even his respite is still a brutal experience. Instead of being freed from hell, his respite is given to time to reflect on his punishments. The varied nature of Judas's punishments, which are constantly changing and inflicted in different locations, also indicates that Benedict wishes his public to realize that considerable thought has gone into them by the perpetrators, who are presented as being intent on maximizing the pain and misery of the victim's sufferings. They are clearly meant to reflect the work of contemporary torturers who would no doubt have considered their work as an art.

The form of the torture depended very much on the status or fate of the victim and the nature of the crime. Thus, Judas is tortured as if he were a slave, a devil worshipper, or someone who had accepted bribes in public office. He recounts that his first torture is to be turned on the wheel: 'I am impaled upon it and whirl about as swiftly as the wind; the wind propels it through the air, and all day long I go round and round' (vv. 1353-8).

This is not the same torture as being broken on the wheel, as suffered by St Catherine of Alexandria. Judas explains that he is merely stone. The wheel is more likely to induce dizziness, nausea, and vomiting, and it was a punishment for slaves. His second punishment, inflicted when he has been transported to a new location and chained, is to be pierced by spikes: 'I am hurled about in a state of complete numbness; I fly across the sea into the valley, to the other hell where there is much suffering. There I am immediately chained and revealed by the devils. I am laid on a bed of spits and on top of me they pile lead and rocks. My body is all pierced through by being spat upon' (vv. 1359-68). This could be any number of torture devices.


5 At least one publication of his volumes De sanctorum martyrum crucifictione Antonii Gallonio libro habet et erat interprete sive executione in textu... (Lausanne, 1605, at least one publication of his volume De sanctorum martyrum crucifictione Antonii Gallonio libro habet et erat interprete sive executione in textu... (Lausanne, 1605, at least one publication of his volume De sanctorum martyrum crucifictione Antonii Gallonio libro habet et erat interprete sive executione in textu...

6 Benedict had already referred to bellows (flic, flic) in connection with the monk's visit to the first English island ("The roaring wind sounded like the blowing of bellows", v. 1125).

7 This is the only day's torture in which Benedict specifically makes use of the traditional association between hell and fire, which had been mentioned in the Navigatio.
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the Middle Ages, this punishment is a suitable contrast to the previous one. Howard Pichard observes that 'the detail of a sinner submerged in ice is an interesting variant of the motif found in the Vision of Saint Paul, describing those who are plunged into the river of fire.' The concept of frozen areas in hell appears in Alberic's in the thirteenth-century Vision of Alberic, in which Alberic is taken into a valley where sinners are submerged in ice (Pichard, 112). Similarly, as discussed above, in the version of the Vita Benedicti known as the Vita Dublinensis (V.R.), one of the brethren complains in a storm of hail and snow that 'the cold is the infernal regions that is not more than we feel now.'

Judas's fifth day of torture is spent being played alive. 'I come back up to where so many forms of death await me; they then flay my whole body so that there is no skin on the outside. With a burning stake they thrust me down into soot mixed with salt; then as a result this torments a completely new skin is soon formed. They flay me thus, not many times a day and force me down into the salt. Then they make me drink the molten lead and copper, scalding hot' (vv. 339-410). The use of whips and scorpions, and the stripping of skin from the head, is one of the tortures against the seven second book of Macabees (7:1). It was a punishment inflicted on devil-worshippers. There were many devices that could have been used for this: a 'cat's paw' served to rip the victim's flesh to shreds and could be used to strip the flesh from any part of the victim's body. Skin could also be torn away with fragments of metal. Saints who suffered in this way include St. Bridget of Sweden, and Justa. Judas's torture is particularly malicious as the flesh grows back after each bout of torture, so that the agony may begin anew.12

14 Load, mentioned in the Navigatio, is referred to twice in Benedict's account (v. 1366, 1410), as a river (v. 1410).
15 There is also a mention of an iron post (v. 1375).
16 Alberic's account of the suffering of hell, in particular relevant to consider that Benedict has recently witnessed one of the supernumeraries (or late-coming monks) being dragged into hell. The tortures are gruesome in the extreme, and it requires little imagination to realize that as a group they are both physically and psychologically vicious. Although, taken individually, the tortures may lack originality, it is rare, if not unknown, for the victim to describe his punishment. Moreover, by allowing Judas to relate what happens to him, Benedict can allow him to accomplish his aim of his own: to induce his interlocutor, Brendan, a feeling of sympathy. This is duly accomplished, as Brendan is reduced to tears; much to the annoyance of the torturers, he succeeds in obtaining for Judas a few extra hours of freedom. But whereas Brendan is now far from extricating himself from his severe year voyage and visiting Paradise, Judas is left to consider his seven-day cycle of punishments.

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A QUOTATION FROM PRUDENTIUS IN WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY'S GESTA REGUM ANGLOVIN, III.285

In the third book of his Gestes Regum Anglorum, the twelfth-century chronicler William of Malmesbury includes a lengthy poem by Hildebert, bishop of Le Mans, elucidating the reformed heresiasch Berengar of Tours who, early in his life, had denied the doctrine of Transubstantiation. William remains slightly suspicious of the deceased Berengar and attributes Hildebert's excessive praise to his affection for his former teacher (fortasse metuerae laudis amore incitatus transitisti) (III.284).


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