

THE TORTURER'S 'ART' IN THE JUDAS
EPISODE OF BENEDEIT'S VOYAGE
OF ST BRENDAN¹

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*, Benedeit, 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*, Benedeit has Judas describe his tortures in extensive detail. His 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'.²

Although there were many methods of torture employed around the time of the composition of Benedeit's version (first quarter of the twelfth century), many of the descriptions could be found in the books of the Apocrypha (including Maccabees, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Vision of St Paul*), and in a variety of texts relating to the Christian martyrs. The fourth book of Maccabees contains a list of torture devices used against the seven Maccabee brothers, Jewish rebels who had

fought against the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.³ Some of these devices involved, we may conjecture, the same kinds of instruments and punishments that Benedeit imagined being inflicted on Judas. At one point we read: 'When the guards had placed before them the wheels and joint-dislocators, rack and hooks and catapults and cauldrons, braziers and thumbscrews and iron claws and wedges and bellows, the tyrant resumed speaking' (4 Maccabees 8:13). 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.⁴ Peter reports a wide variety of punishments: 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 filth 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 pitch, blood, and mire, etc. In the *Vision of St Paul (Visio Pauli)*, originally written in Greek in the third century AD, Paul sees a furnace around which are seven torments: snow, ice, fire, blood, serpents, thunderbolt, and stench (James edn, 525-55).

Torture was a means of inflicting pain on victims without killing them (although this was sometimes an inevitable result). If they had been tortured to death, the victim would be unable to recant or confess. The first stage was to inflict psychological torment on the victim before the actual physical torture began. This is conveyed by Benedeit when he indicates that Judas knows *exactly* what tortures he will suffer on a day-to-day basis. Judas's comment that on the second day he is 'reviled by the devils' (v. 1364) also bears witness to the psychological abuse inflicted on him. Furthermore, although he describes it as a 'Paradise of Delights', even his respite from hell, he is given time to reflect

³ James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), II, 531-64.

⁴ M. R. James (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 505-24.

on his punishments. The varied nature of Judas's punishments, which are constantly changing and inflicted in different locations, also indicates that Benedeit wishes his public to realize that considerable thought that has gone into them by the perpetrators, who are presented as being intent on maximizing the pain and impact of their endeavours. 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 faith 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 spun. The wheel is more likely to induce dizziness, nausea, and vomiting, and it was a punishment for slaves.⁵ 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 thrown into chains and reviled 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 spitted there" (vv. 1359-68). This could be any number of torture devices,

⁵ See Antonio Gallonio, *Tortures and Torments of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. A. R. Allison (Paris, 1903; repr. Los Angeles: Feral House, 2004), 24, and George Riley Scott, *A History of Torture* (London: Werner Laurie, 1940; repr. London: Senate, 1995), 180-2. Gallonio died in 1605; at least one publication of his volume *De sanctorum martyrum cruciatibus Antonii Gallonii liber* had been printed during his lifetime by Johan Gymnich in Cologne in 1602. The more widely known 'Catherine Wheel', very popular in Europe, was a form of crucifixion; stretched across the hub, the victim's limbs were broken and they would asphyxiate, although sometimes the execution was made worse by turning the victim over a bed of nails or a fire, see Karen Farrington, *A History of Punishment and Torture* (Toronto: Reed Consumer Books, 1996), 34.

However, the device described by Judas is relatively basic. The chair or bed of spikes ('broches', v. 1365) was often fashioned from iron. Thus, when a fire was lit beneath it, it would heat the spikes. St Severus, amongst others, is tortured by being 'stuck with nails' (Gallonio, 166). Presumably, the state of numbness ('tot acaliz', v. 1360) experienced by Judas is carried over from his experience of being hurled about on the wheel the previous day.

Judas's third torture is to be boiled in tar or pitch: "I am hurled up above, to the place where my plight is altered; for much of the day I am taken out and put to roast there, bound to a post between two fires; the iron post is set up there for me and me alone. It is as red as if it had lain ten years in a fire with the bellows blowing; because of the tar, the fire takes hold to increase with my torment.⁶ Again I am thrown into tar and smeared with it so that I burn more fiercely. No marble could be so hard that it would not be melted if placed upon it, but I am so inured to this torture that my body cannot perish.⁷ This pain, however agonizing, lasts a whole day and night" (vv. 1369-88). The punishment of being boiled is also mentioned in the second book of Maccabees (7:3-5).⁸ It was exacted on a number of Christian martyrs including Saints Saba, Zeno, Boniface, and Veneranda. As well as its unbearable agony as a very old means of torture and execution, there is an additional embellishment of being boiled in pitch provided by Benedeit: pitch is sticky and would probably also blind and suffocate the victim, as a pitch mask was formed around their faces (Gallonio, 129; cf. Scott, 164-5).

The fourth torture that Judas describes is being frozen: "I am put in a cold place, which is very dark and gloomy and I am so cold there that I long to be back in the fire which burns so fiercely" (vv. 1391-4). Although not specifically employed as a means of torture in

⁶ Benedeit had already referred to bellows (*fols, fous*) in connection with the monk's visit to the first hellish island ('The roaring wind sounded like the blowing of bellows', v. 1125).

⁷ This is the only day's torture in which Benedeit specifically makes use of the traditional association between hell and fire, which had been mentioned in the *Navigatio*.

⁸ *New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990).

¹ I am very grateful to Glyn S. Burgess for his comments and guidance on the drafts of this paper.

² Benedeit: *The Anglo-Norman Voyage of St Brendan*, ed. Ian Short and Brian Merrilees (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979); *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis from Early Latin Manuscripts*, ed. Carl Selmer (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959; repr. Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1989). Translations are taken from *The Voyage of St Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002; paperback version, 2005).

the Middle Ages, this punishment is a suitable contrast to the previous one. Howard Patch 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'.⁹ The concept of frozen areas in hell appears in the twelfth-century Vision of Alberic, in which Alberic is taken into a valley where sinners are submerged in ice (Patch, 112). Similarly, as discussed above, in the version of the *Vita Brendani* known as the *Vita Dublinensis* (VB, 3), one of the brethren complains in a storm of hail and snow that 'the cold in the infernal regions is not more than this we feel now'.¹⁰

Judas's fifth day of torture is spent being flayed alive. "I come back up to where so many forms of death await me; then they 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 of this torment a completely new skin is soon formed. They flay me thoroughly ten times a day and force me down into the salt. Then they make me drink the molten lead and copper, scalding hot' (vv. 1399-410).¹¹ The use of whips and scourges, and the stripping of skin from the head, is one of the tortures against the seven sons in the second book of Maccabees (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 served to strip the flesh from any part of the victim's body. Skin could also be torn away with fragments of pottery. Saints who suffered in this way include Nestor, Hilary, and Justa. Judas's torture is particularly malicious as the flesh grows back after each bout of torture, so that the agony may begin again.¹²

⁹ R. Howard, *The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950; repr. New York, Octagon Books, 1970), 111.

¹⁰ Patrick F. Moran, *Acta sancti Brendani: Original Latin Documents Connected with the Life of Saint Brendan, Patron of Kerry and Clonfert* (Dublin: Kelly, 1872), 22.

¹¹ Lead, mentioned in the *Navigatio*, is referred to twice in Benedeit's account (vv. 1366, 1410), as is copper (vv. 1410, 1421). There is also a mention of an iron post (v. 1375).

¹² Gallonio, 104. Scott reports that flaying was an old method, much favoured by the Chinese and other Eastern countries, but less common in Europe (216).

Judas's final description of torture is that of confinement within a dungeon. The punishment of being imprisoned after death is a reference to one of the states of death to which the Bible refers. *Tartarus* in Greek mythology is the name of a prison where the wicked are punished: it is the place where Sisyphus pushes his boulder up the hill. The Bible uses the verb *tartaroo* – to imprison – where Peter explains that the fallen angels were cast into 'gloomy dungeons' to await judgement.¹³ Judas is denied the state of *Hades*, or *Sheol* where the dead sleep until the Resurrection and there is no conscious awareness of the state of death.¹⁴ Confinement in these vermin-infested dungeons would most likely lead to disease through the unsanitary conditions of living amid blood, defecation, urine, and vomit. The stench itself would be a harsh punishment, but Judas explains that because of the boiling copper he has been forced to ingest, he is no longer able to vomit. The boiling copper apart, this last day of the six days of punishment no doubt brings Judas close to the prevailing conditions of imprisonment, with its psychological torture due to loss of freedom (Scott, 293).

In his edition of the Anglo-Norman *Voyage*, Waters states that the Judas episode is 'a product of the poet's own imagination'.¹⁵ This is not strictly true: certainly Benedeit has embellished the original description as it is presented in the *Navigatio*; however, he has drawn on torture practices that were used at the time. Through the types of punishment Benedeit describes he creates a truly horrific vision of hell. This is particularly relevant considering that Brendan 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.¹⁶ Although, taken individually, the tortures may lack originality, it is rare, if not unknown, for the victim

¹³ 2 Peter 2:4; cf. Jude 6, 7.

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10. Cf. Psalm 16:10; Ezekiel 32:27-9; Matthew 11:23; 16:18; Acts 2:31.

¹⁵ E. G. R. Waters (ed.), *The Anglo-Norman Voyage of St Brendan by Benedeit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), xciv.

himself to describe his punishment. Moreover, by allowing Judas to relate what happens to him, Benedeit can allow him to accomplish an aim of his own: to induce in 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 not far from extricating himself from his seven-year voyage and visiting Paradise, Judas is left to continue his seven-day cycle of punishments.

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¹⁶ For a discussion of the use of the term *turment(e)* 'storm, torment, suffering, instrument of torture' in Benedeit's version, see Glyn S. Burgess, 'Repetition and Ambivalence in the Anglo-Norman Voyage of St Brendan', in *Anglo-Norman Anniversary Essays*, ed. Ian Short, Occasional Publications Series, 2 (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1993), 61-74. For a wider study of suffering in this version, see id., 'La Souffrance et le repos dans Le Voyage de saint Brendan par Benedeit', in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia: Mélanges offerts à Philippe Ménard*, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1998), I, 267-77.

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

IN the third book of his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* the twelfth-century chronicler William of Malmesbury includes a lengthy poem by Hildebert, bishop of Le Mans, eulogizing the reformed heresiarch Berenger of Tours who, early in his life, had denied the doctrine of Transubstantiation. William remains slightly suspicious of the deceased Berenger and attributes Hildebert's excessive praise to his affection for his former teacher (*fortasse metas verae laudis amore incitatus transilierit*) (III.284).¹ After transcribing all

¹ All quotations from *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (GRA) are taken from William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors with R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1998). This supercedes the editions of Savile (London, 1596; rpt. Frankfurt, 1601) and Hardy (London, 1840; rpt. *Patrologia latina*, 179). References to GRA are cited by book and chapter.

52 lines of Hildebert's *Carmen minor* 28, William comments again that 'You may see in these lines that the bishop exceeded the limits of panegyric' ('Videas in his uersibus quod laudis excesserit modum episcopus') and notes that 'this is how eloquence makes a display of itself, such is the forward pace of golden charm' ('sic se ostendit eloquentia, tali gestu procedit aureus lepos'). Of Hildebert's eloquence, he further notes 'eo modo "purpureos flores fundit facundia diues"' (3.285).

In their fine Oxford Medieval Texts edition of *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, long in the making, the editors recognize that William has adorned his own prose with an apt quotation here, but they are unable to identify it.² Investigation suggests that William's quotation may in fact be a tag line from Prudentius, either half-remembered or intentionally altered, with a bit of Horace thrown in.

The phrase 'purpureos flores fundit facundia diues' recalls a similar line in Prudentius' *Contra orationem Symmachi* where the poet (like the medieval chronicler) comments on eloquent speech employed in support of an unworthy subject. In speaking of Symmachus' continued public support of pagan deities, the Christian poet marvels:

O linguam miro verborum fonte fluentem,
Romani decus eloquii, cui cedit et ipse
Tullius! has fundit dives facundia gemmas!
os dignum aeterno tinctum quod fulgeat auro
si mallet laudare Deum!

(1.632-6a)

[How marvelous the stream of speech that flows from that tongue, the glory of Roman eloquence, surpassing even Tullius himself! Yet these are the jewels its rich fluency pours forth! Lips worthy to be bathed in the unfading sheen of gold, if only they would rather have praised God!]³

Line 634 – *has fundit dives facundia gemmas* – provides not only the source for William's line, but also contextual clues for translating

² GRA, II, *Commentary*, 260.

³ Ed. and trans. H. J. Thomson, 2 vols, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), I, 398-9.