5.22: The Legend of Saint Kummernis

Kummernis is what this Catholic saint is known by in Austria, but she was also known by Wilgefortis (Germany) and Uncumber (Britain). Saints’ lives, as a genre, were very popular in medieval Europe, and even produced other artistic genres that we are more familiar with today, such as trading cards and, some scholars suggest, torture porn, based on the fact that the woodblock “trading cards” most often depicted the part of the stories in which the saints were mutilated and killed in gruesome ways. Her Saint’s Life may even be the originator of the idiom, “The other shoe dropped.”

From Fordham University's Modern History Sourcebook. You can check out the website here. It has a lot of cool archived texts.

[Halsall Introduction (with contributions from a Hagiomail list discussion)]

This tale is an Austrian version of the story of the legendary Saint Wilgefortis (who has a feast day in the Roman Martyrology, as a virgin martyr in Portugal, 20th July). This story is probably a baroque variation of some sort. The saint was known by a number of names – Liberata, Liberade, Liverade, Kümmerinis, and Uncumber. As St. Uncumber, in England, she could be invoked by women having trouble with their husbands. In this version the saint’s name is also of some significance: “Kümmerinis” comes from ‘Kummer’, i.e. sorrow, sadness. Hence, perhaps, the insistence on the plaintive melodies played by the minstrel.

At one time it was claimed that the story had a connection with ancient hermaphroditic cults in Cyprus and elsewhere. More recently, some scholars have argued that the cult – which featured a woman being crucified, derives from an artistic representations of Christ on a cross with a long tunic. This argument was summarized during an email discussion [11/25/1998]

The spread of the cult after 1350/1400 is based on a misunderstanding: the representation of Christ as a dressed man on the cross according to the model of the Volto Santo at Lucca, which was no longer understood in late medieval
Germany. The christological origins of the cult were only preserved in Bamberg, St. Gangolf, where a similar effigy was venerated as “Goettliche Hilfe” (“Help of God”). [Klaus van Eikels, on Hagiomail]

While not disputing this account of the origins, some modern scholars are unwilling to stop at this attempt to normalize the origins of a cult. In fact, some would claim that concentration on “origins” and “original” stories is a remarkably unproductive way to study the cult of saints. It is a methodology which valorizes one specific approach – i.e. the traditional Bollandist approach that research into the saints is a pious activity to ensure that the faithful are properly informed about figures presented to them for veneration. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach, but it is an essentially theological rather than historical methodology. Some cults clearly do focus on the admirable activities of a real Christian hero, but there are so many cults where the historical actuality (if any) of the saint is entirely beside the point, that we may misunderstand the cultural history of the cult of saints when we persist in concentrating of origins. [Note that some of the largest medieval and later cults were based on figures about whom nothing at all is know, or if it is known, is besides the point – e.g. Nicholas, George, Catherine of Alexandria.]

With Wilgefortis, It could be argued that the haste to stress that this cult was based on a “mistake”, a desire by certain scholars to normalize what for them, in the later 19th and early 20t century, was an intolerable fact: the existence of a cult of a crucified woman, and the way that such a cult made explicit the exploitation in much Christian symbolism of contradictory liminalities in gender. Such playing around with gender can probably be discussed in many religious traditions, but is so widespread as to be fundamental in some way to Christian thinking about the power of the divine.

Thus, the cult of Wilgefortis may indeed be derived from an artistic misprision, an interesting observation indeed, but not the place to stop analysing the cult. What is perhaps more interesting is that such a cult became so widespread. In this respect, the Fordham scholar, Christina Carlson, who gave a paper I missed on Wilgefortis at the recent New York QMA conference is actively challenging normalizations of the Wilgefortis cult.

The point of view here sees the basic issue as this: it appears that a large number of very well trained, and very erudite, scholars have – without any suspicion of “conspiracy” worked to normalise the histories of really quite odd aspects of the past. The emphasis on origins, which takes on its own rhetoric of authenticity, hase proven to be one very effective method of denying the much more Rabelaisian nature of the past.

Bibliography

Anton Doerrer, St. Küemmnens als bräutliches Seitenstueck zum hl. Koenig Oswald der Spielmannsepik, Innsbruck 1962
– maintains that the core of the legend is of early medieval origin and that Wilgefortis is constructed as a “bridal complement” of St. Oswald in high middle German epic; cf. Doerrers short article “Kuemmmernis” in the new edition of the Lexikon füer Theologie und Kirche (published recently).


J. Gessler, La legende de Ste Wilgefortis ou Ontkommer, Bruxelles/Paris 1938.

Michael Ott, Wilgefortis, in Catholic Encyclopedia 1913 [online]

J.M. Ritz and G. Schnüerer, article in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 1934, vol. 6, p. 301

Comprehensive information about the origins of the cult and its spread from the Low Countries to South and East Germany, and to some degree France and England.

There was once a heathen king who had a daughter named Kümmernis, who was fair and beautiful beyond compare. A neighboring king, also a heathen, sought her in marriage, and her father gave his consent to the union, but Kümmernis was distressed beyond measure, for she had vowed in her own heart to be the bride of heaven. Of course her father could not understand her motives, and to force her to marry put her into a hard prison.

From the depths of the dungeon Kümmernis prayed that she might be so transformed that no man should wish to marry her; and in conformity with her devoted petition, when they came to take her out of the prison, they found that all her beauty was gone, and her face overgrown with long hair like a man’s beard. When her father saw the change in her, he was indignant, and asked what had befallen her. She replied that He whom she adored had changed her so to save her from marrying the heathen king after she had vowed to be His bride alone. “Then shall you die, like Him you adore,” was her father’s answer. She meekly replied that she had no greater desire than to die, that she might be united with Him. And thus her pure life was taken a sweet sacrifice; and whoso would, like her, be altogether devoted to God and like her obtain their petition from heaven, let them honor her, and cause her effigy to be painted in the church.

So many believed they found the efficacy of her intercession, that they set up memorial images of her everywhere, and in one place they set one up all in pure gold. A poor minstrel once came by that way with his violin; and because he had earned nothing, and was near starving, he stood before St. Kümmernis and played his prayer on his violin. Plaintive and more plaintive still grew his beseeching notes, till at last the saint, who never sent any away empty, shook off one of her golden shoes, and bid him take it for an alms.

The minstrel carried the golden shoe to a goldsmith, and asked him to buy it of him for money; but the goldsmith, recognizing whence it came, refused to have anything to do with sacrilegious traffic, and accused him of stealing it. The minstrel loudly protested his innocence, and the goldsmith as loudly vociferated his accusation, till their clamor raised the whole village; and all were full of fury and indignation at the supposed crime of the minstrel. As their anger grew, they were near tearing him in pieces, when a grave hermit came by, and they asked him to judge the case. “If it be true that the man obtained one shoe by his minstrelsy, let him play till he obtain the other in our sight,” was his sentence; and all the people were so pleased with it that they dragged the minstrel back to the shrine of St. Kümmernis.

The minstrel, who had been as much astonished as any one else at his first success, scarcely dared hope for a second, but it was death to shrink from the test; so he rested his instrument on his shoulder, and drew the bow across it with trembling hand. Sweet and plaintive were the shuddering, voice-like tones he sent forth before the shrine; but yet the second shoe fell not. The people began to murmur; horror heightened his distress. Cadence after cadence, moan upon moan, wail upon wail, faltered through the air, and entranced every ear and palsied every hand that would have seized him; till, at last, overcome with the intensity of his own passionate appeal, the minstrel sank unconscious on the ground. When they went to raise him up, they found that the second golden shoe was no longer on the saint’s foot, but that she had cast it towards him. When they saw that, each vied with the other to make amends for the unjust suspicions of the past. The golden shoes were restored to the saint; but the minstrel never wanted for good entertainment for the rest of his life.