



PRESS RELEASE (2024/11/28)

## Listening to the past: How medieval pilgrims found faith in the roaring sea

A new study of medieval texts shows how the open sea's soundscapes served as trials of faith and windows into human interaction with nature.

**Fukuoka, Japan**—What did the historical world sound like, and how did humans interact with nature? Associate Professor [Britton Elliott Brooks](#) from Kyushu University's [Faculty of Languages and Cultures](#) has explored these questions in a unique arena: the open sea in early medieval English literature. This conceptually vast body of water, isolated from land, appears in medieval authors' works not only through visual imagery, but often through sound.

In the early Middle Ages, while coastal journeys were common, crossing the North Sea or the English Channel was more limited and dangerous. The open sea, its storms and depths, was primarily imagined from land. The most tangible experience of the watery expanse came during storms, with their crashing and clapping waves. When depicting the open sea, early medieval English literature employed these sonic elements.

In Brooks' article published in [The Review of English Studies](#) in March, he highlights the relatively rare Latin word "undisonus." The adjective combines the words *unda* (waves) and *sonus* (sound), and is used very precisely in early medieval English descriptions of the sea during storms. Through roaring and pounding waves, these texts painted a picture of the powerful open sea.

Through an extensive analysis of Old English and Anglo-Latin texts, Brooks finds that the sea's sounds serve a deeper purpose. In poems like Bede's Latin metrical *Life of Saint Cuthbert* and the anonymous Old English *Andreas*, wave sounds were used to create a literary place isolated from everyday life—a place where saints could seek God. "The open sea stands unique in its use of sound as the source of its impeding power," Brooks explains. "It is far beyond human control, structured and ordered by God alone."

Many who sailed far offshore were pilgrims, making the open sea a deeply spiritual place. The sea's endless roar evoked both fear and awe. What tested their faith came not only through the physical danger of high waves or bitter cold, but also the constant, soul-shaking sound of the open sea itself. "For medieval people, sound opened a direct path to the soul," Brooks observes.

This portrayal of the sea as a spiritual testing ground reflects a distinct cultural adaptation. While early Christian narratives from places like Egypt often feature saints wandering deserts in search of God, the British and Irish islands offer no such arid landscapes. Instead, the boundless, mysterious sea became the site to confront the unknown and seek divine connection. The endless roar of waves, rather than burning desert sands, became the saints' path to God.

Beyond depicting challenges, the sounds in these poems show how humans and nature come together in worship. In *Andreas*, for instance, God calms the seas in response to a pilgrim's faithful prayers during a violent storm. Through poetic variations and onomatopoeic combinations, the transition from stormy seas to calm waters is vividly portrayed, suggesting that strong faith can tame even the ocean's wild roar. When the sea falls silent, it marks the pilgrim's spiritual triumph on the journey.

The role of soundscapes and sonic features in literature is a growing field of research. Continuing to explore the soundscapes of English literature, particularly those rooted in nature, Brooks aims to

reveal how people engaged with their world and how they positioned themselves in it.

While we can never hear sounds from the past, we can explore how particular sonic environments were engaged with and then used in the creation of literary soundscapes. "More attention could be paid to the sounds made by nonhuman things, both animate and inanimate, because so much of the sound in our world originates from them," Brooks notes. "Studying these texts encourages us to think about what sound is, what it does, and how it can affect and transform us, even today."

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For more information about this research, see "Sonic Journeys on the Open Sea: Testing the Faithful in Old English and Anglo-Latin Literature," Britton Elliott Brooks, *The Review of English Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgae015>

### **About Kyushu University**

Founded in 1911, [Kyushu University](#) is one of Japan's leading research-oriented institutes of higher education, consistently ranking as one of the top ten Japanese universities in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and the QS World Rankings. The university is one of the seven national universities in Japan, located in Fukuoka, on the island of Kyushu—the most southwestern of Japan's four main islands with a population and land size slightly larger than Belgium. Kyushu U's multiple campuses—home to around 19,000 students and 8000 faculty and staff—are located around Fukuoka City, a coastal metropolis that is frequently ranked among the world's most livable cities and historically known as Japan's gateway to Asia. Through its [VISION 2030](#), Kyushu U will "drive social change with integrative knowledge." By fusing the spectrum of knowledge, from the humanities and arts to engineering and medical sciences, Kyushu U will strengthen its research in the key areas of decarbonization, medicine and health, and environment and food, to tackle society's most pressing issues.



Fig. 1. An illustration from a late 12th-century manuscript showing St. Cuthbert, a medieval English saint, in a boat at sea. (British Library, MS Yates Thompson 26, f.62r)

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