

# The stories of the Saints

The saints of yore still surround us - in our town names, our churches, our own forenames. How odd, then, that we have so little curiosity about them. Oxford academic and television presenter Dr Janina Ramirez is on a mission to find out more about the real flesh and blood beneath those glowing halos. Katie Jarvis met up with her in Woodstock

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PICTURES BY: ANTONY THOMPSON



If you want to see seabirds wheeling and screeching like boisterous, roisterous crowds at a football match, you should visit Skellig Michael, a godforsaken, thin-soiled, steeply-sheered, salt-sprayed, wind-howlingly rocky offcut in the ocean off Ireland.

Here, when you've puffed your way up 600 feet of vertigo-steps, you'll find yourself on a level with stiff-winged Manx shearwater and fluttering storm petrel (you'd be pushed to find bigger breeding colonies elsewhere in the world). Fulmar, kittiwake, guillemot and puffin cry out alongside them, buffeted by gales, shrouded by stormy skies.

They thrive because of Skellig's barren remoteness. Because the Atlantic is a rich larder; because this is a predator-free zone. (Who on earth would want to make their way here, even for a fat seabird?)

But then, at the top, you come across something strange. On narrow ledges, just below the south peak - the island's highest point - you see a series of upside-down 'beehives'. As you climb further, neck craning, you begin to understand that these are cell-like dwellings, corbelled with neatly-placed stones, oddly uneroded by the passing of time or the brutality of wind.

Long, long ago, a straggle of men sailed here in open-topped boats - primitive boats of wood and animal-skin - braving mountainous seas and deadly moorings. Like the seabirds, they were searching for seclusion. Perhaps as early as the fifth century, they came; embracing a life of extreme asceticism and dreadful hardship: praying, fighting demons, dedicating themselves to God. The ancient graveyard tells of the toll, bones cut to shreds on rocks: some children; most young men; the oldest a veritable Methuselah of 50.

Nina Ramirez - Dr Janina Ramirez, to give her full title - is an Oxford academic, a specialist in Old and Middle English; an expert in medieval art. She has poured over ancient texts in fusty, dusty libraries, white-gloved and respectful. She has studied deep into the night, examined works of art, disputed with fellow scholars.

But, sometimes, pure intellect is not enough.

She was in the middle of writing a book about medieval saints when she walked through a giddy gap in a wall on Skellig Michael and faced those bleak cells herself.

"The experience was so profound," she tells me. "I'd been writing a book where saints were all about money and economics and power. But, when I got to go to those cells, it was a slap around the face. Suddenly, sanctity was also about belief and hardship and spirituality. It was the wake-up call I needed."

Nina Ramirez, slightly late for our meeting in the King's Arms in Woodstock, is a flurry of apologies. As she made her way through town, a cyclist was knocked over and she'd stopped to make sure he was OK. A first degree from Oxford tutored her both in English literature and the perils of cycling. "Mind you, I can remember cycling along while on the phone to my dad. It was quite late and I had been drinking... My poor dad! The phone suddenly went dead, apart from a 'clunk', and he started shouting, 'Nina! Nina! Are you all right?' I was fine - I'd just hit a bollard."

She gives a delicious, full-throated laugh. If you've ever felt awed by the idea of an Oxford academic, Nina Ramirez will de-awe you. She's ferociously clever, prodigiously knowledgeable; but she wears

her learning as lightly as a feather in a medieval quill.

She also picks the most fascinating subjects for her television documentaries and books. I've just read her latest - *The Private Lives of the Saints: Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England* - a complement to her BBC 4 series on monasteries, shown last September, which took her to that bleak outcrop in the Atlantic Ocean.

It's funny. The saints are all around us still: not just in churches but in our street names, our hospitals, our holidays - even our 'Christian' names, for goodness sake. The list is endless.

And we're indoctrinated with their stories. (I well remember at primary school ('All Saints', just to cover all bases), cross-legged infants listening rapt to the

story of St Catherine. Our stern headmaster would never have read us a Stephen King horror - heaven forbid! But he had no such compunction relaying torturous details of a spiked breaking-wheel.)

Yet, bizarrely, we seemingly lack curiosity about these ubiquitous holy men and women. Nina Ramirez is putting that right in her history of a thousand years of saints.

"Being a woman, being young, having made my way in academia the way I have, and coming from a mixed cultural - not particularly privileged - background, I've always looked at underdogs," she says, over her first grabbed coffee of the day. (Life is pretty packed.)

"Everyone wants to know what kings and queens are doing; I've always enjoyed looking at what's going on outside of the big hits. For me, the saints were an obvious pot that hadn't been plundered. And yet they're the medieval equivalent of celebrities in OK! Magazine."

Yep, so they are. The Beckhams, the Paltrows, the Russell Brands of their day. There was Alban, living in Verulamium in the third century AD - before the Hertfordshire town became his eponym, of course - fed up of the Roman Empire; tired of dictatorship and state religion. His intellectual curiosity led him towards monotheism; towards the trendy new cults sweeping in. When his freedom to worship was denied, "He took a radical decision and embraced death. He was given a way out but he decided, 'No, kill me! That's going to make more of an impact.' There have been a couple of academics who have made parallels between St Alban and the jihads."

There was famous Guthlac, busy in the Fens fighting invisible demons.

"And we fixate on the same sorts of characters in our magazines today. The unusual, eccentric people; people who are exceptional at something or people who are just odd. It was no different in the early medieval period. The reality of writing history books is that you focus on the weird ones; the exceptions."

There was Brigid of Ireland, whose feast day falls on February 1, the old pagan festival of Imbolc, which marks the first day of spring. Was she a real



person or the reinvention of an ancient goddess?

"There's such weird treatment of her legend, when you look at it," Nina says. "She is said to have carried out an abortion on a young girl, for example. What have we got coming through here? A grain of truth? Hers is certainly not dressed up in quite the same way the other saints' lives are tidied up."

"Tidied up"? Exactly. That's the problem. The early medieval period was stuffed with Alastair Campbells - such as the Venerable Bede - inventing and reinventing saints for political and economic reasons; knowing writers, whose spin colours our stories to this very day. What Nina does so brilliantly is to unpick small facts and wider truths; to turn those impossibly haloed paragons into living, breathing people.

"It's fascinating when tiny snippets of information slip through," she says. "There's a wonderful scene in the Bayeux Tapestry, with a monk and a nun in a top panel. Then, in the bottom panel, they're naked and it looks like he's whacking her! There's no explanation, yet almost every other scene in the tapestry has an inscription describing what's going on. No need in that one because it's insider gossip! Everybody at that time would have known who that monk and nun were."

Yes, in some ways, these people were incredibly like us. We might guffaw at Simeon Stylites who, somehow in the service of God, spent decades living up a 50-ft column. But, as you guffaw, think again. The cult of denial - that giving things up is good for body and soul - is alive and well. You only need read Gwyneth Paltrow's blog to see that.

There again, in other ways these saints were so different that most of us can barely begin to comprehend their motivations and psyches. If you believed, as did they, in eternal damnation, then half-an-hour being burned to death could seem a bargain.

Nina Ramirez nods. "You have to understand the physical and emotional reality of the afterlife for the early medieval world. Thirty years on this planet and then the rest of your eternal life damned or saved; every single thing they do will have a consequence for their eternal life, and that colours everything."



Dr Janina Ramirez, academic and TV historian

“The saints were the medieval equivalent of celebrities in OK! Magazine. The Beckhams, the Paltrows, the Russell Brands of their day

Nina Ramirez has just retweeted a Victoria Coren Mitchell quote: "Making BBC4 documentaries means standing in the rain for 15 hours, and then it turns out you owe them money".

It's a hoot. But, like the hagiography of the saints, there's at least a grain of truth. Equally, Nina gets cross with people who think TV work is dumbing down.

"That's complete nonsense! I have seen things my academic colleagues will only have read about in books."

Not just Skellig, either. It was through the telly that she got the chance to handle the only full-scale copy of the Codex Amiatinus, for example: one of three single-volume Bibles made at Wearmouth-Jarrow in the 7th Century. Its beauty, created using more than 1,000 calf skins, is as astonishing as its literal mass. As one early scholar put it, it weighs the same as a Great Dane (dog, I assume, not Cnut).

"Three years in a row, I wrote asking to

access it and every time I was denied. I go in with the BBC and it's there in front of me. I'm delighted that I get those experiences; but it also flags up to me that I wouldn't have got them as an academic. I did a whole series on the private lives of kings, where I looked at the Royal Manuscript Collection. It was the only time the British Library was prepared to have those manuscripts out."

So keen was Nina to see them that she rocked up with her baby daughter in arms and her mum in tow. "They said, 'Do you really want to do this?' and I said, 'Are you kidding me! It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance.'"

(NB the interesting subtext - that she took her family with her. Her children are now six and four, "And I was a full-time mum; they've never had a nanny. They've gone to school now, which is liberating, but my husband and I did the childcare.")

There's plenty more work in the pipeline, too, over and above her Oxford teaching.

**Victoria Coren Mitchell says making BBC4 documentaries means standing in the rain for 15 hours, and then it turns out you owe them money"**

She's just been made president of Gloucester History Festival, which takes place in September. "How amazing is that title! President! I nearly dropped my laptop."

And her next TV programme and book will be on Julian of Norwich, the 14th century mystic and anchoress, who lived her life as a prayerful hermit. "I want her rehabilitated. She was the Shakespeare of her day and now's her moment. As part of

that, there's talk about me being locked in an anchorite cell for two days."

All her friends think she's nutty. Locked up in a cell? For two days? In the dark? No mobile, no computer, not much to eat.

Come on! Much easier just to read about it in a book, isn't it?

Dr Janina Ramirez looks at me as if the rest of the world is nutty.

"How could I understand the life of a hermit without being locked in a cell?" she points out. "I'm really, really, REALLY hoping that happens!" ■

The Private Lives of the Saints; Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England by Dr Janina Ramirez is published in hardback, price £20, by WH Allen. You can read more about Nina's life and work at [www.janinaramirez.co.uk](http://www.janinaramirez.co.uk)

Nina will be talking about her book on Wednesday, May 4 at 10am as part of Chipping Campden Literature Festival: [www.campdenlifefest.co.uk](http://www.campdenlifefest.co.uk)