1. Introduction

Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, lies just off the coast of north-eastern England, connected picturesquely to the mainland at low tide. A pilgrim on Sunday morning could walk across the causeway for divine services, and in the evening return home dry. As Sir Walter Scott wrote in *Marmion* (1808):

For, with its flow and ebb, its style  
Varies from continent to isle;  
Dry-shod, o’er sands, twice every day,  
The pilgrims to the shrine find way;  
Twice every day, the waves efface  
Of staves and sandaled feet the trace.1

In July 1671, John Ray made a point of trekking there on one of his “simpling” expeditions to gather specimens for his second edition of his *Catalogue of English Plants*.2 The island’s isolation may have made it a choice place to gather rare plants, but its remote location and spare beauty were also conducive to spiritual practice. In the seventh century, King (later Saint) Oswald of Northumbria invited the Scottish monks who had converted him at Iona (founded earlier by missionaries from Ireland) to build a monastery on Lindisfarne.

At the time of Ray’s arrival, Lindisfarne was also famous for its associations with St Cuthbert (c.634–87). Originally a shepherd boy, Cuthbert became bishop of Lindisfarne, where during his life he was renowned for his holiness and miracles. But it was in circumstances surrounding Cuthbert’s death that he attained his sainthood. According to Bede, the monks exhumed Cuthbert eleven years after his death.

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1 Scott, *Marmion*, 113.  
to enshrine his bones for veneration, and found his corpse had not undergone any decay. Cuthbert’s body, kept on display at Holy Island, became a source of popular veneration until repeated Viking raids, beginning in the eighth century, made the monks quit their monastery around 875. The monks took Cuthbert with them to the mainland, and traveled with his remains for more than a hundred years until he could be laid to rest at Durham Cathedral.

Ray delighted not only in these tales, but also in the plants he found on Holy Island, such as German madwort with its hairy leaves and delicate blue flowers. When not plant hunting, he spent his time examining the island’s geology. In this he collaborated with his traveling companion, the naturalist Thomas Willisel (1621–75), the Royal Society’s official collector of minerals, flora, and fauna, and probably England’s first professional field naturalist. The two men gathered from the “sea-shore under the town, those stones which they call St Cuthbert’s beads.” The beads, which ranged in size from a pea to a half-dollar, were the ridged and perforated fossil disks of crinoids or sea-lilies.

Ray and Willisel probably found the beads on the north-eastern part of Lindisfarne, amid the limestone quarries which had been mined since the fourteenth century for building material or lime plaster. The base of the island is part of the Carboniferous Middle Limestone Group formed between 363 and 325 million years ago. At that time the region that would become northern England was near the Earth’s equator, and was covered with warm, shallow seas. The ancient seabed had been thronged with the sea-lilies, echinoderms related to starfish, and sea-urchins.

While some crinoids, called “feather stars,” are mobile and free-swimming, a sea-lily’s base was stuck to the seafloor, and from it grew a flexible stem supporting a head or calyx. From its head grew five (or multiples of five) branched and moveable arms, which filtered food particles and tiny organisms from the seawater. Cilia lining grooves on the insides of the arms manipulated the food along the arms down to the mouth, which was situated in the center of a membrane that covered the base of arms (the tegument). The flexible branches and stem

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3 Lankester, ed., Memorials, 151.
6 Lane and Ausich, “Legend,” 69.