COINCIDENCE?

JENNIFER WELCH

Keith Stevens sent me the following anecdote from amongst his collection of notes on Chinese religion:

Tao Bing Taizi – The Earth Soldier Prince

The story is that of a young man in his early twenties, with the surname Cai, who was killed by local people near Kaohsiung during a trip he made away from his home village of Hu Tung in Yun Lin county in central Taiwan. He was buried where he fell, but later his family, who regarded him as a heroic youth, came and took some soil from his grave, and built a shrine in his honour back in Hu Tung. As time passed people who prayed at his shrine found that their prayers were answered, and as a result of this success he became a popular local god.

In the late 1890s, after the occupation of Taiwan by the Japanese, a troop of Japanese cavalry passed through the village of Hu Tung destroying crops as they went. The villagers were angry but too afraid to protest. The cavalry tethered their horses to the shrine, whereupon one of the horses neighed and dropped dead. This was seen as Cai punishing the Japanese both for destroying the crops and for desecrating his shrine by using it as a tethering post. The villagers considered that Cai had meted out retribution to the Japanese in this way so that they could not blame the villagers for the mishap.

A few days after receiving this tale I took some visitors to see Beverley Minster, our local cathedral, founded before 1066, but a wonderful example of medieval architecture. On entering an official offered to give us a guided tour, which included the 14th century stone canopied tomb of Lady Eleanor Percy, a truly beautiful work of exquisitely carved fruit, leaves, angel figures and symbolic beasts, where the central position is filled with a representation of the Deity raising the soul of a woman from her winding sheet. Our guide informed us that this was a rare surviving example of such medieval art in England, as in other churches similar depictions of Christ had been destroyed, not during the Reformation, but a century later by the Puritan Roundheads. We inquired how this carving had survived, and this is
the tale the guide told us. A troop of Cromwell’s Roundhead cavalry had entered the Minster determined on the destruction of all ‘popish monuments,’ but St John of Beverley, the local saint, canonised in 1037 had been so incensed at the desecration of the Minster by the Roundheads riding their horses into the building, that he had “caused” the leading horse to stumble, and its rider in falling off had struck his head on the flagstone floor and been killed, whereupon the rest of the troop had left vowing not to incur further wrath and disaster by destroying the Minster’s interior.

How true these two tales are I could not say as both came from oral traditions which do not seem to have been recorded, but I found it quite curious that two such similar tales of divine intervention could occur in two small and relatively unknown places at opposite ends of the world.