

SLEEPING TOWARD CHRISTIANITY: THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF THE LEGEND OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS IN MEDIEVAL BRITISH ORAL TRADITION

Claire Schmidt

Dr. John Miles Foley, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is a fascinating part of medieval oral tradition, and eminently worthy of further consideration. The legend was obviously popular and widespread during the medieval period, yet it has received little serious critical attention. In this preliminary study I investigate the legend of the Seven Sleepers on the macro level and show the big picture of how this legend existed in medieval England. A better understanding of the legend of the Seven Sleepers from a folkloristic and oral traditional perspective can give scholars a richer, more complete understanding of medieval literary productions like *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi Regis*.

This study is informed by folklore and oral tradition theory and scholarship, as well as medieval literary theory. Using folklore and oral tradition scholarship in concert with literary scholarship provides depth to the study of medieval texts. An interdisciplinary approach allows one to engage one's research topic with a fully-stocked toolbox.

The ubiquity, rate of variation, referentiality, and traces of oral poetics provide convincing evidence that the legend of the Seven Sleepers was a vibrant part of medieval English oral tradition. References to the Seven Sleepers in *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* provide a useful point of entry for an examination of these texts. Investigating the legend of the Seven Sleepers as oral tradition in the context of *Piers Plowman* and the *Vita* contributes to the overall scholarly understanding of the two literary texts.