

Cathedral Classicism: a Nineteenth-Century Claudia in St. Nicholas' Cathedral

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ABSTRACT

The medieval parish church of St. Nicholas in Newcastle upon Tyne, which in 1882 became the cathedral of the diocese, was conspicuous for its classicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as donors and architects celebrated the proximity of the church to Hadrian's Wall. It is against this background that the statues of St. Margaret's Chantry, carved by North-East craftsman and artist Ralph Hedley, ought to be understood and interpreted. Hedley's carved oak figure of a Roman matron, named simply 'Claudia', poses problems of identification, but should be read in the context of nineteenth-century biblical studies and the conjectural connections between Tacitus, Martial and St. Paul which led to the development of a controversial character known as 'Princess Claudia of Britain'. Princess Claudia, a popular figure in literature and scholarship from the 1830s to the 1860s, was later acknowledged to be an unconvincing over-interpretation and was dropped by the Anglican Church. However, her influence on the craftsmen working on St. Nicholas' Cathedral in the 1880s can be seen in the nineteenth century reimagining of the Chantry of St. Margaret.