

## 2.4

### Narrative from Nonsense: Questions of Identity in the St Cuthbert Window, York Minster

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#### *Récit d'un non-sens : questions d'identité dans la fenêtre de Saint Cuthbert, York Minster – Résumé*

La structure narrative est un élément crucial de l'identité d'un vitrail narratif. Cet article prend comme exemple la baie de saint Cuthbert, datant du XV<sup>ème</sup> siècle à la cathédrale de York, pour explorer comment la perte de la structure narrative originale

et l'introduction de nouvelles séquences au sein de celle-ci affectent l'identité de ce genre de vitraux monumentaux. Les questions éthiques, les défis et les opportunités que peuvent rencontrer les conservateurs qui souhaitent définir, communiquer et soutenir cette identité originelle sont explorés.

#### *Narrative from Nonsense: Questions of Identity in the St Cuthbert Window, York Minster – Summary*

Narrative structure is a crucial element of a narrative window's identity. This paper uses the 15th-century St Cuthbert Window, York Minster, to explore how the loss of original narrative structure, and the

introduction of new narrative sequences, affect the identities of monumental narrative windows. The ethical questions, challenges and opportunities faced by conservators who wish to define, sustain and communicate this identity are explored.

### Introduction

Monumental narrative windows present complex challenges for conservators who aim to characterise and preserve their identity. As the transmission of a specific story or message is often the primary function of these windows, their legibility and structure are crucial components of their identity. Consequently, they are particularly vulnerable to the loss of narrative structure, as a result of disarrangement and damage, which can render a window's subject incomprehensible. Yet attempts to retrieve 'original' narrative structures present additional risks to both the historic fabric and structure of a window, and to material from later interventions. This paper draws upon insights gained during the author's recent doctoral research into the 15th-century St Cuthbert Window, York Minster, to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by conservators who wish to define, sustain and communicate the identity of monumental narrative windows.

### The St Cuthbert Window, York Minster

The St Cuthbert Window (s7) was glazed in c.1440 and remains *in situ* in the eastern choir transept of York Minster.<sup>1</sup> The five lights of the window are divided by transoms into four equal sections (A-D), each containing twenty-five main panels (fig. 1). The lowest section (D) contains a large central figure of St Cuthbert, holding the head of St Oswald, flanked by two rows of members of the Lancastrian elite, all set within architectural canopies. The upper three sections (A-C) contain narrative scenes from St Cuthbert's life. The tracery that surmounts the main lights originally depicted figures of saints.

The author's recent doctoral research has established that there were originally seventy narrative panels, which were intended to be read from top to bottom, running left to right along each row (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> However, interventions during the past five centuries have led to substantial disruption of the original design. The imagery of individual panels is affected by numerous mending leads, the disarrangement or loss of original glass and the introduction of alien insertions. The original tracery glass and six narrative panels had been lost by 1775, and the narrative had been entirely disarranged by 1877 (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> The current arrangement of the narrative panels reverses the original reading order, and is intended to be read from left to right, from the bottom to the top (fig. 4).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sarah BROWN, 'Our Magnificent Fabrick', *York Minster: An Architectural History c.1220-1500*, English Heritage, Swindon, 2003, p. 232; Katharine HARRISON, "Illuminating Narrative: An Interdisciplinary Investigation of the Fifteenth-century St Cuthbert Window, York Minster", Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of York, 2019, p. 38, 165.

<sup>2</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 39, 58.

<sup>3</sup> James TORRE, "The Antiquities of York Minster Collected out of the Records of the Said Church and Some Other Authorities", York Minster Library and Archives, L1/7, c.1690-1, f.51r; Joseph Thomas FOWLER, "On the St. Cuthbert

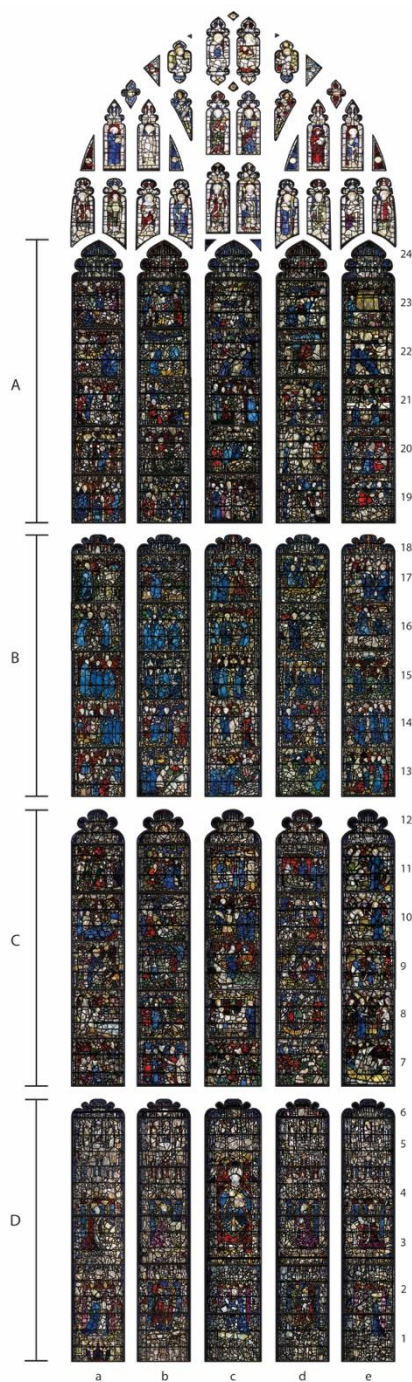


Fig. 1. Photo-composite diagram of the current arrangement of panels in the St Cuthbert Window, York Minster, c.1440, showing section (left), row (right) and light (bottom) labels. Image by author, using photographs by The York Glaziers Trust, reproduced courtesy of the Chapter of York.

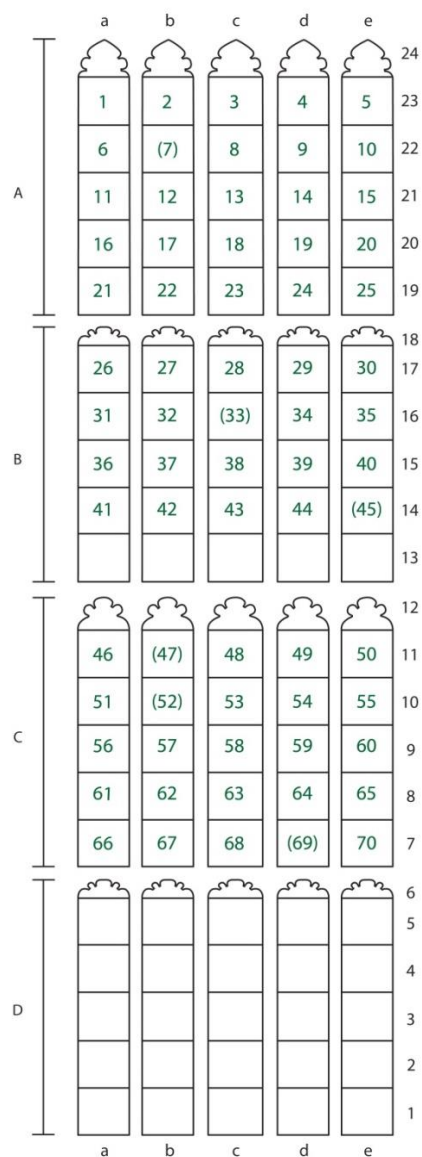


Fig. 2. Diagram of the St Cuthbert Window, York Minster, c.1440, showing the original arrangement of the narrative panels, numbered according to the reading order. Lost panels are shown in brackets. Image by author.

Window in York Minster", *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal*, IV, 1877, p. 363, 373-375; HARRISON, 2019, p. 39, 1025.

<sup>4</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 70, 78.

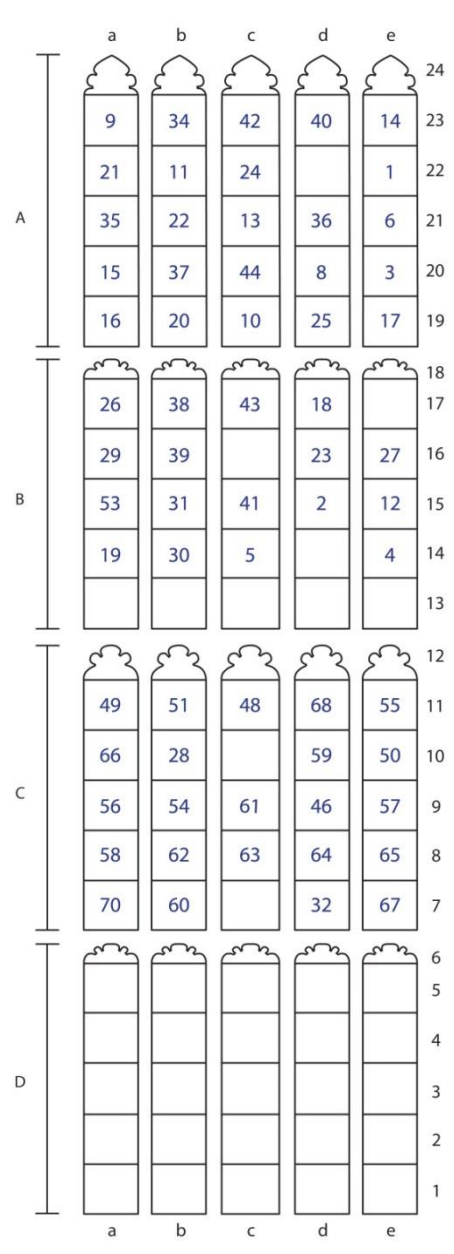


Fig. 3. Diagram of the St Cuthbert Window, York Minster, c.1440, showing the arrangement of the original narrative panels in 1877, numbered according to the original reading order. Image by author.

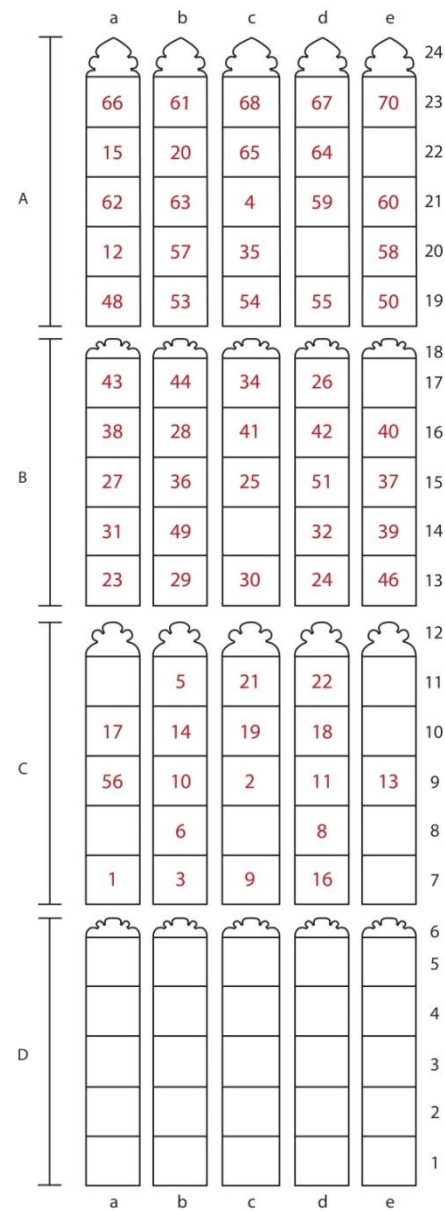


Fig. 4. Diagram of the St Cuthbert Window, York Minster, c.1440, showing the current arrangement of the original narrative panels, numbered according to the original reading order. Image by author.

The current arrangement was largely implemented by the York glazier John Ward Knowles in 1886-8, under the direction of Joseph Thomas Fowler, a canon of Durham.<sup>5</sup> I will not undertake a detailed analysis of Fowler and Knowles' restoration here, but the impact of their intervention upon questions of the window's identity warrants a brief summary. It must be acknowledged that Fowler and Knowles' restoration was affected by the complete loss of narrative structure, and the constraints of the technology, knowledge and evidence available. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Fowler's analysis of the evidence was flawed. His misinterpretation of both individual panels and the overall reading order led to the introduction of a new narrative sequence, rather than the reinstatement of the "historical" narrative structure, as intended.<sup>6</sup> The rearrangement of the panels led to the loss of original material, as slight differences between the heights of the rows across the window meant that many panels were cut down to fit their new locations. Fowler and Knowles also created eleven new narrative panels, six to replace the lost medieval panels and five to replace plain glazing which filled a row obscured by stonework.<sup>7</sup> When considering the role narrative plays in the identity of the St Cuthbert Window, the extent to which the new scenes and narrative sequence introduced by Fowler and Knowles have affected the window's identity, and the challenges they present for future conservation, must be explored.

### Defining Identity and Significance

First, it is necessary to establish how narrative structure contributes to the identity and significance of a window. Most obviously, narrative windows rely upon structure to convey meaning. While there is great diversity in the complexity and reading order of medieval narrative windows, all rely upon the arrangement of scenes in a particular sequence, which may emphasise certain elements of a story, or omit others. Often, the specific narrative depicted in a window was tailored to the interests of its patron and intended audience. The transmission of this narrative is therefore a primary original function of a window, and arguably an essential aspect of its identity.

The importance of narrative structure as a locus of identity and significance can be demonstrated by assessing a narrative window using modern conservation guidelines. These provide definitions and frameworks which enable the range of values that contribute to a work's cultural significance to be identified and considered during a conservation plan. This paper draws upon the guidance of the International Council on Monuments and Sites' (ICOMOS) 1964 *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites* (Venice Charter) and *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance 1999* (Burra Charter), which have both long been accepted as being applicable to stained glass conservation. Naturally, the author has also consulted the Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi's (CVMA) 2004 *Conservation Guidelines*, whose ethical principles follow the broader conservation principles outlined in a number of internationally recognised guidelines, including the Venice Charter, while providing guidance that is more specific to the medium.<sup>8</sup> As the St Cuthbert Window is in the UK, guidance published by English Heritage (now Historic England) is also relevant and valuable when defining significance.<sup>9</sup>

The Burra Charter defines cultural significance as "aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations" and recognises that cultural significance is embodied in a work's "fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects".<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the *Conservation Principles* promote comprehensive consideration of all of the values that contribute to significance, dividing these into four categories: evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal (including

<sup>5</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> FOWLER 1891, p. 486; HARRISON, 2019, p. 39, 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Thomas FOWLER, "On the St. Cuthbert window in York Minster: Additional notes", *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal*, XI, 1891, p. 486-487; Frederick HARRISON, *The Painted Glass of York: An Account of the Medieval Glass of the Minster and the Parish Churches*, S.P.C.K., London, 1927, p. 103, 110-111.

<sup>8</sup> CORPUS VITREARUM MEDII AEVI (CVMA), *Guidelines for the Conservation and Restoration of Stained Glass*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Nuremberg, 2004. Published online at [www.cvma.ac.uk/conserv/guidelines.html](http://www.cvma.ac.uk/conserv/guidelines.html) [accessed 13 December 2019]: para. 1.3.

<sup>9</sup> ENGLISH HERITAGE, *Conservation Principles Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment*, English Heritage, London, 2008, p. 27-32, 35-40.

<sup>10</sup> AUSTRALIA INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES' (ICOMOS), *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance 1999*, Australia ICOMOS Incorporated, 2000, para. 1.2.

commemorative, symbolic, social and spiritual values).<sup>11</sup> Using the definitions provided by the conservation guidelines, we can identify the original narrative structure of a window as a locus of its significance, and identity, because it enables the meaning of a work to be understood, thereby contributing to the spiritual and social value of the window.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the narrative structure of a window, chosen for a specific setting or audience, will have evidential and historical value.<sup>13</sup> Assessments of aesthetic value can be subjective, but as aesthetic value can partly be derived from composition and “conscious design”, original narrative structures often contribute to the aesthetic value of an artwork.<sup>14</sup>

### Narrative and Identity in the St Cuthbert Window

Turning back to the St Cuthbert Window, we can now consider how the disarrangement of the narrative affects the window’s identity and significance. While the window remains *in situ*, and the majority of the original narrative scenes survive, the window’s meaning, as originally conceived, is undoubtedly obscured by the loss of its original structure. Because the original sequence has been disrupted, numerous panels have, until recently, been misidentified and so are located in the wrong place within the narrative (fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> This is particularly evident when scenes spanning more than one panel are considered. Of the seventeen groups of multi-panel scenes identified during the author’s research, only five now appear together within the window.<sup>16</sup> As a result, both their meaning and that of the narrative as a whole remains unclear to the modern viewer. Additionally, the reversal of the narrative reading order means that the relationship between the narrative and the broader iconography of the window is no longer apparent. In particular, the author’s recent research has suggested that the original narrative structure was designed to fill Section C with panels showing Cuthbert’s election and life as a bishop.<sup>17</sup> It is likely that these scenes were intentionally placed in close proximity to the commemorative section below, which contains figures of kings and prelates, including the window’s donor. The reversal of the reading order means that scenes from Cuthbert’s episcopate no longer appear directly above the commemorative section, preventing viewers from considering the didactic or symbolic messages created by the original arrangement.

It is, therefore, apparent that the loss of the original narrative structure not only affects the communal value of the window, but also the evidential and historical value. By obscuring the meaning and symbolism of individual panels, the wider narrative and the window as a whole, the disarrangement of the narrative has a negative impact upon the spiritual and symbolic value of the window. Additionally, as this structure also provided evidence of the interests and agendas of the window’s patron, the design approach of the medieval glaziers and the contemporary understanding of St Cuthbert’s cult, the historical and evidential value of the window is also affected.

### Future Conservation: Questions of Identity

The author’s recent research has demonstrated that it would be possible to introduce a narrative order that is much closer to the original than the current arrangement, and which is based upon rigorous examination of the evidence.<sup>18</sup> This intervention would prioritise the original material, and arguably its historic identity, by promoting the communal, historic and evidential values of the window that are negatively affected by the current arrangement. Such an intervention is permitted by the Venice Charter, provided that it is based upon “respect for original material and authentic documents”.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, it would arguably comply with the CVMA *Guidelines*’ statement that rearrangements “should only be undertaken when fully justifiable based on thorough art-historical and technical research”.<sup>20</sup> However, although it could be argued that a rearrangement based upon a comprehensive review of the evidence would comply with this guidance, such an intervention would

<sup>11</sup> ENGLISH HERITAGE 2008, p. 27-32, 35-40.

<sup>12</sup> AUSTRALIA ICOMOS 2000, para. 1.2; ENGLISH HERITAGE, 2008, p. 31-32.

<sup>13</sup> ICOMOS 1964, art. 3; AUSTRALIA ICOMOS, 2000, para. 2.3; ENGLISH HERITAGE, 2008, p. 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> ENGLISH HERITAGE 2008, p. 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 39, 56, 82.

<sup>16</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 58, 220, 260.

<sup>18</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 88-89.

<sup>19</sup> ICOMOS 1964, Art. 9.

<sup>20</sup> CVMA 2001, para. 4.4.1.



raise a number of ethical and practical issues, particularly regarding the treatment of the 19th-century arrangement and panels.

Even if we focus upon questions of identity and significance linked to narrative structure, it is evident that the original narrative order is not the sole locus of the window's identity. We must consider the significance of the current arrangement and how this would be affected by any potential rearrangement. With the exception of three panels, which were rearranged in the 1950s, the present arrangement follows that introduced by Fowler and Knowles during their intervention of 1886-8.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, while the current narrative structure is demonstrably different from the original arrangement, it nevertheless has value as evidence of both the history of the window and 19th-century approaches to restoration.<sup>22</sup>

In particular, as records created by Fowler and Knowles survive, comparison with the window's current condition can support analyses of their restoration approach.<sup>23</sup> For example, despite his flawed analysis of the evidence, it is evident that Fowler employed a methodology which is not dissimilar to modern conservation research, drawing upon the examination of historic records of the window and comparable cycles to guide his interpretation of the "historical" narrative order.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Knowles' limited alteration of the glass within each panel, and the retention of previous insertions, demonstrates a degree of sensitivity and respect for the original material that was by no means universal in this period. The 19th-century panels support this interpretation, as they reveal Knowles' careful study and understanding of the original glass' design.<sup>25</sup> Both these panels, and the new narrative sequence they were designed to fit within, are not only evidence of the window's 19th-century history, but have now been part of the window for more than a century.

It can be argued that Fowler and Knowles' arrangement is now an integral part of the St Cuthbert Window's identity. The rearrangement of the narrative to an order closer to the original, as proposed above, would automatically result in the loss of the 19th-century arrangement. The eleven 19th-century panels could be retained to fill the gaps in the narrative created by the lost panels, and the previously plain-glazed row. Nevertheless, because they were designed to fit within the erroneous narrative sequence devised by Fowler, they would potentially be removed from the context for which they were designed. This would affect their evidential and historical value. However, to retain the current arrangement on these grounds would effectively prioritise the values derived from the 19th-century intervention over those derived from the original narrative sequence. This brings us back to the question of how we define the identity of the window. Are some aspects of its identity more significant than others? And how should conflicting loci of identity be treated in future conservation interventions?

The *Conservation Principles* recognise that, while conservation aims to retain all heritage values, "on occasion, what is necessary to sustain some values will conflict with what is necessary to sustain others".<sup>26</sup> This is particularly true of values derived from the original design or function, which "may be recoverable through repair or restoration, but perhaps at the expense of some evidential value".<sup>27</sup> They caution that, when deciding which values should be prioritised, the relative importance of these values should be comprehensively assessed.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the *CVMA Guidelines* recognise that both rearrangements and later additions provide evidence of a window's history, and state that further "rearrangements, or replacements of later additions should only be undertaken when fully justifiable based on thorough art-historical and technical research".<sup>29</sup>

In the case of the St Cuthbert Window, an argument can be made that the author's doctoral research provides sufficient evidence for the introduction of an arrangement which is closer to the original narrative sequence, and that this would have significant positive impacts upon the communal, historical

<sup>21</sup> Eric MILNER-WHITE, "The Return of the Windows", *The Friends of York Minster Twenty-Ninth Annual Report*, H. Morley and Sons Ltd., York, 1957, 37; FOWLER, 1891, p. 487-501.

<sup>22</sup> CVMA 2001, para. 4.4.1; ENGLISH HERITAGE, 2008, p. 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 40, 54-55.

<sup>24</sup> FOWLER 1891, p. 486; HARRISON, 2019, p. 44, 56.

<sup>25</sup> HARRISON 2019, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> ENGLISH HERITAGE 2008, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> ENGLISH HERITAGE 2008, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> ENGLISH HERITAGE 2008, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> CVMA 2001, para. 4.4.1.

and evidential value. Moreover, as any future conservation intervention would involve the installation of a protective glazing system, it would be possible to implement a support system which enabled future rearrangement of the panels to return them to their current arrangement, thereby adhering to CVMA principles of reversibility.<sup>30</sup> As noted above, the implementation of a narrative structure closer to the original would not necessitate the removal of the 19th-century panels, so some evidence of this part of the window's history and identity would be retained.

Nevertheless, the CVMA *Guidelines* state that any treatment of rearrangement or later additions “must be guided by the principles of minimal intervention”.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Venice Charter cautions that interventions “must stop at the point where conjecture begins”.<sup>32</sup> Although there is convincing evidence for most of the original narrative structure, the original arrangement cannot be identified with complete certainty. Consequently, a small proportion of a rearrangement approximating the original order, although based on evidence-led deductions, would be somewhat conjectural. A case can therefore also be made for retaining the window in its present arrangement. Furthermore, as the questions regarding the future treatment of the 19th-century arrangement demonstrate, we must recognise that any interventions we make will contribute to the identity of the window, and consider how this may affect future conservation decisions. Consequently, conservation decisions must balance the treatment of the various facets of the window's identity, and should be guided by their potential impacts upon the expression of identity within the window as a whole.

### Digital Interpretation: New Ways of Looking at Identity?

It is apparent that either course of action would influence the identity of the window for future generations, and would necessarily prioritise some aspects of that identity over others. However, developments in technology provide the opportunities to communicate those values which are not evident within the window itself. A range of digital approaches to interpretation can now be used to facilitate public engagement with cultural heritage, particularly where that heritage is intangible or multi-layered.<sup>33</sup>

For the St Cuthbert Window, interactive digital reconstructions, based upon detailed research and extant documentation, would enable the various historic narrative sequences to be explored, both on-site and remotely. These could range from simple 2D models, such as those created by the author to map the past arrangements of the window, to 3D models of the window, accessible in virtual or augmented reality, which would allow the viewer to move through different iterations of the St Cuthbert Window's narrative, examining the evidence and even rearranging the sequence themselves. As York Minster continues to function as a place of worship, fixed interpretation installations may not be suitable in the immediate vicinity of the St Cuthbert Window, which can only be viewed from the south choir aisle and the choir itself. However, the increasing use of portable devices means that interpretation materials can be provided via applications on these devices.

The creation of virtual versions of the St Cuthbert Window would enable the wider public to explore and question its identity in much greater depth than ever before. Yet, when considering their use as a way of managing or mitigating the potential negative impacts of conservation decisions, the relatively limited lifespan of digital formats must be recognised.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> CVMA 2001, para. 3.2.1., 4.4.1.

<sup>31</sup> CVMA 2001, para. 4.4.1.

<sup>32</sup> ICOMOS 1964, Art. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Jenny NEWELL, “Old Objects, New Media: Historical Collections, Digitization and Affect”, *Journal of Material Culture*, 17 (3), 2012, p. 293-4, 299-303; Mariëtte VERHOEVEN, “Revealing and Presenting the Past(s) for the Public Fethiye Mosque and Museum as a cultural heritage site in Istanbul”, in Linde EGBERTS and Maria D. ALVAREZ (eds), *Heritage and Tourism: Places, Imageries and the Digital Age*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2018, p.89-90.

<sup>34</sup> Stuart JEFFREY, “A new Digital Dark Age? Collaborative web tools, social media and long-term preservation”, *World Archaeology*, 44(4), 2012, p. 555-6.

## Conclusion

Narrative lies at the heart of the St Cuthbert Window's identity. As a result, a case for implementing a narrative order closer to the original can be made. This would arguably prioritise the original material, and enhance its communal, evidential and historical value, by enabling viewers to engage with the window in a format which more clearly expresses its original identity. Nevertheless, the 19th-century arrangement is also part of the window's identity, and we must consider whether its loss would be worth the proposed gains. There is no straightforward conservation solution which can fully resolve these issues. Any new arrangement would not fully retrieve the original arrangement of the window, nor would it fully remove the 19th-century material. Might it therefore represent a balance of the competing loci of identity within the St Cuthbert Window? Or would it effectively create a new identity?

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