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978-0-521-08810-7 - The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults

Susan J. Ridyard

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Chapter 1*THE ROYAL SAINTS OF ANGLO-SAXON
ENGLAND: SOME PROBLEMS OF
INTERPRETATION

In the early days of January, in the momentous year 1066, 'King Edward, the beloved of God, languishing from the sickness of soul he had contracted, died indeed to the world, but was joyfully taken up to live with God.'¹ Thus wrote Edward's earliest biographer, probably within two years of his death. And almost a century later, on 7 February 1161, the apotheosis which he describes received universal recognition when Pope Alexander III announced the canonisation of Edward and decreed that his name should be enrolled among the confessors of the Christian church.²

Edward the Confessor was the last and most famous of the Anglo-Saxon royal saints: but he was far from unique. It is clear from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, completed in the year 731, that already by that date Anglo-Saxon England was remarkable for the very considerable number of its kings, princes and royal ladies who, in an age before the development of papal canonisation, had come to be venerated as saints by the regional church.³ A vernacular tract on the resting-places of the saints in England not only includes many royal saints but also is associated in its extant manuscripts with the so-called Kentish royal legend – an account of Kent's earliest Christian kings and their saintly families.⁴

¹ *The Life of King Edward the Confessor*, ed. F. Barlow, Nelson's Medieval Texts (1962), p. 55. It is unclear whether Edward died on 4 or 5 January: see *ibid.*, p. 80, n. 2. For the nature, date and authorship of the Life see *ibid.*, pp. xiv–xxx, xli–lix.

² For Edward's canonisation see *ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv and App. D; F. Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (London, 1970; repr. 1979); for the Bull of canonisation see *PL*, cc, cols. 106–7.

³ *HE*; on the development of papal canonisation see E. W. Kemp, *Canonisation and authority in the Western church* (London, 1948).

⁴ The tract, entitled *Secgan be þam Godes sanctum þe on Engla lande ærost reston*, together with the 'Kentish royal legend' (headed *Her cyð ymbe þa halgan þe on Angelcynne restað*) (hereafter *þa halgan*, is edited by F. Liebermann, *Die Heiligen Englands* (Hanover, 1889). On the *Secgan* see D. W. Rollason, 'Lists of saints' resting-places in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 7 (1978), 61–93. The tract is preserved in Cambridge, Corpus Christi

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Towards the end of the eleventh century the professional hagiographer Goscelin of Canterbury produced an impressive series of Lives of the English royal saints.⁵ And William of Malmesbury, writing his history of the English kings almost forty years before the events of 1161, was able to preface his account of the Confessor with a special section devoted to that king's saintly predecessors and to write of the English saints that 'It is not necessary to name any of the common people but only the male and female members of the royal stock, most of them innocently murdered, who have been consecrated martyrs not by human conjecture but by divine acknowledgement.'⁶

Royal sanctity was not exclusively an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. Continental parallels are found, for instance, in the royal saints of Merovingian Frankia and in the reputed sanctity of Henry II, king of Germany, and his consort, Kunigund.⁷ The Celtic Christianity of Ireland and Wales was not unfamiliar with the concept of a saintly ruling family.⁸ The Scandinavian world, in the persons of Olaf, king of Norway, and Cnut, king of Denmark, possessed its own royal martyrs.⁹ In Eastern Europe, the death in

College, MS 201 (pp. 149–151) and in London, BL, MS Stowe 944 (fols. 34v–39). Rollason notes that the list was completed in its present form c. 1031, at which date it was entered in the Stowe MS. The second half 'in its present form was completed in or after 1013'; the first half seems 'to consist of more ancient material . . . as well as dealing with earlier saints and resting-places' ('Lists', p. 68). For discussion of the 'Kentish royal legend' see Heiligen, ed. Liebermann, p. xiii; Rollason, 'Lists', p. 73; and Rollason *The Mildrith legend: a study in early medieval hagiography in England* (Leicester, 1982), p. 28.

⁵ For the life and works of Goscelin of Canterbury (also known as Goscelin of Saint-Bertin) see below, p. 37, n. 103. ⁶ GR, I, 260–71, at 260.

⁷ See especially F. X. Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger* (Prague, 1965); R. Klauser, *Der Heinrichs- und Kunigundenkult im mittelalterlichen Bistum Bamberg* (Bamberg, 1957). Somewhat different but none the less interesting is the tradition of thaumaturgic rulership in Capetian France: see M. Bloch, *Les Rois thaumaturges* (Strasbourg, 1924).

⁸ Columba, who founded the Irish monasteries of Derry, Durrow and possibly Kells before travelling to Iona as an 'exile for Christ', was said to be a member of the royal clan of the Uí Neill (see *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. A. O. and M. O. Anderson (London, 1961)). In Wales St Clydog, allegedly 'martyred' by a rival lover, was said to be one of the many saintly descendants of the legendary King Brychan (ODS, p. 85). On the Welsh royal saints see also M. Miller, *The saints of Gwynedd*, Studies in Celtic History 1 (Woodbridge, 1979), especially ch. 5; G. H. Doble, *Lives of the Welsh saints*, ed. D. S. Evans, 2nd edn (Cardiff, 1984), especially the introduction by D. S. Evans.

⁹ Olaf was in large measure responsible for the conversion of Norway to Christianity. He was exiled following a rebellion in 1029; his death in the attempt to regain his kingdom was regarded as a martyrdom and his cult spread rapidly throughout the Scandinavian world and to England (B. Dickens, 'The cult of St Olave in the British Isles', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 12 (1937–45), 53–80). Cnut, king of Denmark, was murdered in 1086 by his brother and rebellious subjects; his cult was approved by Paschal II early in the

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1038 of Stephen, king of Hungary, was followed by the performance of miracles at his tomb, and as late as the fifteenth century Poland acquired a royal saint in the person of Prince Casimir, who abandoned his secular and military role for a life of devotion and austerity.¹⁰ And in Byzantine tradition the Emperor Leo appears as a worker of miracles and Constantine V as the object of a cult in Constantinople.¹¹

What was characteristically Anglo-Saxon, however, was the ubiquity and the persistence of the royal cult. What was remarkable was the frequency with which new royal cults emerged and the consistency with which those cults, once established, continued to attract the attention of churchmen and hagiographers. For these reasons the tradition of Anglo-Saxon royal sanctity is of sufficient interest and importance to merit a specialised study. It has as yet received little attention from historians. A few detailed studies of individual cults, such as that of Professor Barlow on Edward the Confessor and that of David Rollason on St Mildrith of Thanet, have awakened interest in the subject. And Rollason's study of the cults of murdered royal saints has demonstrated the value of a comparative study of several cults of the same general type.¹² There has however been no comparative study of a number of royal cults of different dates and types. In particular there has been no study which seeks to arrive at an understanding of English royal sanctity by treating simultaneously and equally the cults of both men and women of royal birth. This book is a contribution towards filling that gap. It is focussed upon saints of the West Saxon and East Anglian royal dynasties and upon saints whose major Lives were written between the mid tenth and the mid twelfth centuries. It takes the form of a series of detailed case-studies – of Edmund, the *rex Christianissimus* martyred by the heathen, of Edward, a child

twelfth century (*Vitae sanctorum Danorum*, ed. M. Cl. Gertz (Copenhagen, 1910–12), I, 69–129; ODS, p. 68).

¹⁰ ODS, pp. 363, 68–9. On the royal cults of Russia see I. Kologrivov, *Essai sur la sainteté en Russie* (Bruges, 1953), pp. 73–85; G. Fedotov, *Sviatyje drevnej Rusi* (Paris, 1931).

¹¹ G. Huxley, 'The Byzantine saint in iconoclasm', Discussion Paper presented at the University of Birmingham Fourteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, March 1980.

¹² *Life of King Edward*, ed. Barlow; Rollason, *Mildrith legend*; Rollason, 'The cults of murdered royal saints in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 11 (1983), 1–22. See also R. Folz, 'Saint Oswald roi de Northumbrie: étude d'hagiographie royale', *AB* 98 (1980), 49–74; Folz, 'Naissance et manifestations d'un culte royale: Saint Edmond roi d'Est Anglie', in K. Hauck and H. Mordek (eds.), *Geschichtsschreibung und geistiges Leben im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Heinz Löwe zum 65. Geburtstag* (Cologne and Vienna, 1978), pp. 226–46.

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king allegedly murdered by his wicked step-mother and treacherous subjects, of Æthelthryth, a royal lady who preserved her virginity through two marriages and attained sanctity as the bride of Christ, and of the other princesses and royal widows of Ely, Winchester and Wilton, whose lives were dedicated *ad illum qui speciosus est forma prae filiis hominum*.

These case-studies are not intended to provide comprehensive histories of the growth and dissemination of the cults. My concern is rather to approach an understanding of those cults by outlining, and proposing tentative solutions to, three specific problems. Of these the first concerns the theoretical relationship between royal birth and the attainment of sanctity. A large issue is at stake here. William Chaney almost twenty years ago portrayed the Anglo-Saxon saint king as the lineal descendant of the sacral ruler of the age of the migrations: his sanctity, being likened to sacrality, was an almost inevitable adjunct of his kingship.¹³ And the mystique of the *stirps regia* extended beyond the king himself: for the princes and royal ladies likewise sanctity might readily be expected or assumed. A first step towards the understanding of England's royal cults must be to determine whether this analysis accurately reflects contemporary views on the relationship of royal birth and sanctity – or whether the attainment of sanctity was perceived as being dependent upon something more than membership in a numinous group. Accordingly I seek briefly to outline the general context of early medieval thought on the relationship of royal birth and sanctity. More important, I analyse in some detail the interpretation – or interpretations – of that relationship offered by the hagiographers of the royal saints. And I make some tentative suggestions concerning the possible attitudes of contemporary secular society. Analysis of these three views, of their relationship to one another, and of their relative importance in the formation of the royal cults suggests for those cults an origin and an interpretation both more Christian and more complex than Chaney allows.

The second problem is that of historical explanation. My primary objective is to establish the reasons for the growth and continuing importance throughout the Anglo-Saxon period of the individual cults. To the hagiographers the matter was quite straightforward. The development of cult was dependent in the first instance upon the expression of divine approbation by the

¹³ W. A. Chaney, *The cult of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: the transition from paganism to Christianity* (Manchester, 1970), pp. 77–84.

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bestowal upon the saint of miraculous powers: popular veneration traditionally followed hard on the heels of miraculous intervention. Historically, however, a saint did not perform miracles unless a substantial body of opinion was predisposed to believe in those miracles. Cults did not simply develop: they were developed. And their development owed less to divine acknowledgement than to successful advertising. At the centre of this study therefore lies the identification of the advertisers and the analysis of their aims: for what purpose was each cult conceived and in what sense, if any, was the royal status of its subject essential to the fulfilment of that purpose?

From the particular I shall attempt briefly to confront a very much more difficult problem – that of proceeding to the general. It is possible first to suggest, on the basis of the present case-studies, some general conclusions concerning the place of the royal saint within Anglo-Saxon society. And, taking the process one stage further, it is possible to derive from the history of the royal cults some general conclusions concerning the place of the monarchy – and of the royal dynasties – within that society. The issue of the relationship of royal sanctity to royal power has been highlighted by the work of the Polish scholar Karol Górski. In a paper entitled ‘La Naissance des états et le “roi-saint” : problème de l’idéologie féodale’, Górski seeks to establish the incidence of saint kings in certain countries of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe as an index of progress towards state-formation. The incidence of saint kings, he argues, ‘refléterait le potentiel de la puissance de l’organisation étatique du haut Moyen Age que l’Eglise a voulu, ou non, renforcer’.¹⁴ Where the political power of the Crown was weak, the church sought to bolster royal authority by the creation of the saint king; where the monarchy was strong, the saintly ruler was conspicuously – and deliberately – absent. The theory is important; so too is the testing of its applicability to the royal cults of other countries. The present study, not least because it does not limit its inquiry to the male of the species, suggests that the English royal cults were produced by a society quite different from that of the Górski model.

A third and final problem remains – that of continuity. The year 1066 witnessed the death of the last of the Anglo-Saxon saintly

¹⁴ K. Górski, ‘La Naissance des états et le “roi-saint” : problème de l’idéologie féodale’, in T. Manteuffel and A. Gieysztor (eds.), *L’Europe aux IX^e – XI^e siècles: aux origines des états nationaux* (Warsaw, 1968), pp. 425–32, at p. 426.

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kings and the establishment of a new ruling dynasty of Norman–French origin. What, if anything, was the effect of the Norman Conquest upon the veneration of the Anglo-Saxon royal saints? The Norman antagonist to the Anglo-Saxon saint is a familiar figure. His portrait is most strikingly drawn by David Knowles in his masterly 1940 study of *The monastic order in England*.¹⁵ Here Knowles observes that the Norman treatment of the English monasteries gave rise to complaints on three counts. First, they claimed to have been robbed by the invaders of land and wealth. Second, there were complaints about the imposition of knight service on monastic lands. Finally, ‘A third grievance, quite as widespread, is more curious. The Norman abbots, it seems, frequently outraged the feelings of their monks by their disrespectful attitude towards the old English saints.’¹⁶ A number of examples is cited. At St Albans, we are told, the Norman Abbot Paul slighted the tombs of his predecessors, whom he condemned as *rudes et idiotas*. At Abingdon the feasts of saints Æthelwold and Edmund were allegedly banned on the grounds that the English were boors. Abbot Warin of Malmesbury is said simply to have turned out many relics of English saints. And Archbishop Lanfranc himself allegedly set an example to the Norman sceptic by questioning the sanctity of the English saint Ælfheah. To other writers on the English church Norman scepticism – or worse – is simply an assumed condition of the time. Thus Barlow writes generally of the scepticism of the Norman abbots; Southern boldly of ‘the contempt in which these saints were held by the Norman conquerors’; and Rollason with greater caution of ‘the scepticism of certain late eleventh-century churchmen towards the genuineness of the Anglo-Saxon saints’.¹⁷

The Norman confrontation with the unfamiliar Anglo-Saxon saints raises problems which cannot be resolved either by the anecdotal approach of Knowles or by the generalising approach of the other writers. The interaction of Norman monk or abbot with the long-dead heroes of the English church can be understood only

¹⁵ *MO*, pp. 118–20. For a more general study of the Norman reception of the English saints, in which Knowles’s argument is reviewed in detail, see S. J. Ridyard, ‘*Condigna veneratio*: post-Conquest attitudes to the saints of the Anglo-Saxons’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 9 (1987), 179–206. ¹⁶ *MO*, p. 118.

¹⁷ F. Barlow, *The English church 1066–1154* (London, 1979), p. 191; R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and his biographer: a study of monastic life and thought 1059–c.1130* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 249; Rollason, *Mildrith legend*, p. 59 (where it is however conceded that attitudes towards the English saints were not always determined by racial considerations).

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by detailed analysis of the individual cults within the context of the post-Conquest history of the religious houses in which those cults were centred. Such analysis, where the evidence permits, shows the Normans to have possessed a shrewd awareness that in accepting or rejecting the cults of the English saints, both royal and non-royal, they did something far more than pass judgement on a few rather suspect collections of bones. It shows them also to have proceeded shrewdly in the utilisation of that awareness for the furtherance of their aims. It calls for a radical reassessment of the relationship between Norman churchman and English saint.

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THE SOURCES

THE LEGENDS OF THE SAINTS

In the making of a cult the preservation or acquisition of relics and the establishment of a shrine was but a first step. The success of the shrine was dependent upon continuing effective publicity; and that dependence generated a specialised literature whose function was to document the earthly career of the individual and to demonstrate the authenticity and efficacy of the relics there venerated. Among sources for the history and interpretation of the cults of the saints that literature occupies a place of prime importance. For the great majority of cults hagiography provides the earliest and by far the most complete evidence; for some it provides the only evidence. More than this, because it was generally written in association with the promotion of a cult, hagiography was itself a product of the phenomenon which it describes: it opens a unique window on the meaning which the cult held for its promoters and for its clients. The problems inherent in the genre, however, have caused it to be viewed with deep suspicion by generations of historians: it is the purpose of the following pages to review some of those problems and to propose a working model for the constructive use of the legends of the saints.¹

At the root of the traditional distaste for the Lives of the saints lies a major conceptual gulf between the task of the hagiographer and

¹ For general discussion of the nature and purpose of hagiography see especially H. Delehaye, *Les Légendes hagiographiques*, revised 3rd edn, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 18 (Brussels, 1927); Delehaye, *Cinq leçons sur la méthode hagiographique*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 21 (Brussels, 1934); Delehaye, 'La Méthode historique et l'hagiographie', *Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Académie Royale de Belgique*, Fifth Series 16 (1930), 218–31; R. Aigrain, *L'Hagiographie: ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire* (Paris, 1953); B. de Gaiffier, *Recherches d'hagiographie latine*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 52 (Brussels, 1971); also Rollason, *Mildrith legend*, pp. 3–8.

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that of the historian as it has generally been defined in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historian seeks the objective reconstruction and interpretation of the past; the hagiographer writes with a moral and often propagandist purpose. This purpose varies in accordance with the earthly career and the posthumous role of the individual saint: it may, however, be reduced to two essential elements. Hagiography aims to educate and to edify: accordingly its subject must present an example of Christian virtue in such a way as to encourage emulation.² More important, it seeks to increase the reverence felt for the individual saint;³ closely related to this, it may seek also to enhance the prestige of the church or religious community which claimed to possess that saint's relics. Hence the hagiographer attempts not the detailed and critical reconstruction of past events but rather the creation of a literary vehicle for the fulfilment of a didactic or propagandist aim: the reliability of his account suffers accordingly.

It suffers, most obviously, because it is subject to a severe problem of bias. This bias may take many forms. It may consist simply of remembering the 'good' and omitting the 'bad' in an individual saint's career,⁴ or, if the saint's earthly role was politically controversial, of adopting a highly partisan stance in the portrayal of that role.⁵ In other cases it may be possible to trace elements of bias to the personal interests of the hagiographer himself.⁶ Most important, however, is the fact that a high proportion of the Lives were written by or for the communities which

² See Delehaye, *Les Légendes hagiographiques*, p. 2: 'pour être strictement hagiographique, le document doit avoir un caractère religieux et se proposer un but d'édification'.

³ *Ibid.*: the title of hagiography must be given only to a work 'inspiré par le culte des saints, et destiné à le promouvoir'.

⁴ See *Felix's Life of St Guthlac*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1956; repr. 1985), p. 80. After a lengthy account of Guthlac's pious youth the author devotes a mere two paragraphs to the nine years in which the saint 'cum adolescentiae vires increvissent, et juvenili in pectore egregius dominandi amor ferveret, tunc valida pristinorum heroum facta reminiscens, veluti ex sopore evigilatus, mutata mente, adgregatis satellitum turmis, sese in arma convertit'.

⁵ For a good early example of this see *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927; repr. 1985). See also *The Life of St Anselm archbishop of Canterbury by Eadmer*, ed. R. W. Southern, Nelson's Medieval Texts (1962; repr. Oxford Medieval Texts, 1979) and the Lives of Thomas Becket contained in *Materials for the history of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. J. C. Robertson and J. B. Sheppard, 7 vols., RS 67 (London, 1875–85).

⁶ See for instance T. J. Hamilton 'Goscelin of Canterbury: a critical study of his life, works and accomplishments', 2 vols., unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Virginia, 1973), pp. 255–73, where it is suggested that Goscelin of Canterbury wrote in order to convince the Normans that the Anglo-Saxon saints were worthy of veneration.

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claimed to possess the relics of the saint in question. They are accordingly heavily biased in favour of those communities, not only against rival claims to the relics but also as regards their wider political dealings.⁷

The reliability of hagiographical sources suffers also from the standardisation of their form and content. The much-decried adherence of later writers to the models provided by the earliest Lives – in particular by Athanasius’s Life of St Anthony, Jerome’s Life of Paul the Hermit and Sulpicius Severus’s Life of St Martin – was not merely the result of slavish copying: it was the product rather of a shared moral aim.⁸ Every saint who was to be a model of virtue must be cast in a clearly recognisable mould which could be traced back through the early Lives to the figure of Christ himself; and likewise the posthumous role of the ‘patron saint’ was from an early date a predetermined one. Hence, in the *Vita*, *Passio*, *Translatio* and *Miracula*, there evolved a series of literary forms of set type, whose purpose was to express and to illustrate certain standardised themes by means of standardised structure, standardised discursive passages and a standardised repertoire of miracle stories. Clearly the form and content of these texts were not invariable; clearly also they varied only within certain long-established and easily recognisable limits: hagiography depended for its intelligibility upon its conformity to convention.

For the historian, however, this conformity presents a serious problem – that of distinguishing the ‘germ of truth’ from what may appear to be an undifferentiated mass of hagiographical *topoi*. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many of these *topoi* take the form of miracle stories which are not only unoriginal but also far from plausible. Such stories were central to the religious belief of the Middle Ages: ‘not to have believed in miracles performed by the saints might well seem to the ordinary man to be equivalent to having no faith at all’.⁹ The early church, threatened by an excess of popular piety, had treated this belief with some suspicion. It emphasised that only those miracles performed in Christ’s name

⁷ For the use of hagiography to lay claim to and defend ecclesiastical property see especially B. de Gaiffier, ‘Les Revendications de biens dans quelques documents hagiographiques du XI^e siècle’, *AB* 50 (1932), 123–38.

⁸ For this dependence upon earlier models see P. Hunter Blair, *The world of Bede* (London, 1970), ch. 25; B. Colgrave, ‘Bede’s miracle stories’, in A. Hamilton Thompson (ed.), *Bede, his life, times and writings* (Oxford, 1935), pp. 201–29, at p. 204; H. Mayr-Harting, *The coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1972), pp. 229–39.

⁹ See Colgrave’s discussion of Bede’s miracle stories in his introduction to the *HE*, pp. xxxiv–xxxvi, at p. xxxv.