CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In his *Chronica majora*, Matthew Paris supplies us with an eye-witness account of a ceremony conducted by King Henry III at Westminster on Sunday, 13 October 1247, the feast of the translation of the relics of St Edward the Confessor. Falling midway between Henry's birthday on 1 October, and the anniversary of his accession on 28 October, the feast of St Edward's translation had long been celebrated as one of the high-points of the royal year, coinciding conveniently with the Michaelmas sessions of exchequer and the Bench, a busy time for King and courtiers, drawing many hundreds of people to attend at Westminster. The Confessor himself was a saint for whom Henry III felt keen, even fanatical, devotion. The pious, demilitarized Edward of legend served as a model for Henry's own preferred style of kingship. There were more personal resonances too, between the Confessor's early life, deprived of both father and mother, and the insecurities of Henry III's own orphaned childhood.[1] For many years past Henry had lavished money and attention upon the Confessor's shrine and upon the monks of Westminster who served it. In 1228 he had written to the Pope requesting Edward's inclusion in the Roman calendar of saints, and in 1239 he had named his first-born son Edward, in the Confessor's memory.[2] In 1245, he had set about the demolition of the east end of the Abbey church in order that the whole might be sumptuously rebuilt. As a result, the relics of St Edward had been removed to a temporary site and Henry had taken the opportunity to obtain further support from the Pope, soliciting a papal indulgence that offered a year and forty days' remission of enjoined penance to all who attended the proposed movement of

[1] P. Binski, *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets* (New Haven 1995), 3–6, 52–89; P. Binski, 'Reflections on "La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei": Hagiography and Kingship in Thirteenth-Century England', *Journal of Medieval History* 16 (1990), 333–50; N. Vincent, 'Isabella of Angoulême: John's Jezebel', *King John: New Interpretations*, ed. S. D. Church (Woodbridge 1999), 215–16.
[2] Binski, *Westminster Abbey*, 52.

Edward's bones.[3] A year later he had established an independent financial office at Westminster for the furtherance of his building projects there.[4] More recently still, in October 1246, he had decreed that his own body was to rest at Westminster after his death; the clearest sign of devotion that a king could bestow upon any religious house.[5] At much the same time he had obtained licence for the abbots of Westminster to offer pontifical blessing to the congregation during the celebration of Mass, Matins and Vespers.[6] Hence, in the autumn of 1247, when he ordered his nobles to assemble at Westminster on 13 October, 'to hear the most agreeable news of a holy benefit recently conferred upon the English', the summons may have been greeted with lively anticipation. Certainly, it was sufficient to draw the chronicler Matthew Paris and at least three of his fellow monks from St Albans to Westminster, possibly at the King's own invitation, to record whatever events might unfold.[7]

[3] Westminster Abbey Muniments MS Domesday fo. 386v, letters of Innocent IV, dated 31 July 1245: *Eius licet immeriti . . . idem rex devotionis ardore succensus corpus beati Edwardi regis Anglie gloriosum de loco ad locum honorifice ac sollempniter transferre proponat*, and see also fo. 406r for another papal indulgence, of 26 July 1245, directed to the inhabitants of the dioceses of London, Lincoln and Winchester, offering twenty days' remission of enjoined penance to all contributing to the Abbey's fabric. The best general accounts of Henry's work at the Abbey are those provided by H. M. Colvin in *The History of the King's Works I: The Middle Ages*, ed. R. Allen Brown, H. M. Colvin and A. J. Taylor, 2 vols. (London 1963), I 130–57, and, in much greater detail, by Binski, *Westminster Abbey*.

[4] *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1232–47* (London 1906), 478, and for the special Westminster exchequer see in general E. F. Jacobs, 'The Reign of Henry III. Some Suggestions', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4th series 10 (1927), 33–41, esp. 38–9; *King's Works*, I 135–6.

[5] Westminster Abbey Muniments 6318A, enrolled in *Calendar of Charter Rolls 1226–57* (London 1903), 306. The chancery enrolment survives only in a mutilated version. See also B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1977), 391, for the King's foundation of chantries in the Abbey in 1245–6 for his father-in-law, Raymond-Berengar count of Provence, and for his mother, Isabella of Angoulême.

[6] *CM*, IV 589; *Les Registres d'Innocent IV (1243–54)*, ed. E. Berger, 4 vols. (Ecole française de Rome 1884–1921), I no. 1866. The abbots had for many years been allowed to dress themselves in pontificals: *Westminster Abbey Charters 1066–c. 1214*, ed. E. Mason, London Record Society XXV (1988), nos. 173–5.

[7] For what follows see *CM*, IV 640–5. The gift of the Holy Blood is briefly mentioned in various later chronicles, for the most part derived from Matthew Paris: *De antiquis legibus liber. Chronica maiorum et vicecomitum Londoniarum*, ed. T. Stapleton, Camden Society XXXIV (1846), 13; *Eulogium (historiarum sive temporis) . . . a monacho quodam Malmesburiensi exaratum*, ed. F. S. Haydon, 3 vols., Rolls Series (London 1858–63), III 138 (under the year 1248); *Chronica Johannis de Oxenedes*, ed. H. Ellis, Rolls Series (London 1859), 178 (under the year 1247); *Chronicon Henrici Knighton vel Cnitthon, monachi Leycestrensis*, ed. J. R. Lumby, 2 vols., Rolls Series (London 1889–95), I 218; *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, monachi Cestrensis*, ed. C. Babington and J. R. Lumby, 9 vols., Rolls Series (London 1865–86), VIII 238–9 (misdated 1248); *Flores historiarum*, ed. H. R. Luard, 3 vols., Rolls Series (London 1890), II 343–4, III 241. This last account, although derived from Paris, states that the blood was brought to England by a Hospitaller. In the *Chronica majora* it is said to have been delivered by a Templar.

According to Matthew Paris, on the day appointed, the King announced that he had come into possession of a most precious relic; a portion of the blood of Jesus Christ, sent to him under the seals of the patriarch of Jerusalem, the masters of the Templars and the Hospitallers and various bishops from the Holy Land. From the time of its arrival in England, the relic is said to have been kept a closely guarded secret, stored at the London church of the Holy Sepulchre.[8] Having spent the previous night in fasting and prayer, early in the morning of 13 October Henry led a solemn procession from St Paul's Cathedral to Westminster. Dressed in a simple cloak, he carried the crystal vase containing Christ's blood in his own hands, supported by two attendants and walking beneath a pall borne upon four spears. For the two miles of his journey he is said to have kept his gaze fixed upon heaven and the relic he held in his hands. At the bishop of Durham's house in Whitehall, he was met by the monks of Westminster and by a great congregation of bishops, abbots and other prelates. The King then continued on his way, carrying the relic in procession around the church, the palace and the royal apartments of Westminster, before presenting it to the monks and to their patron saints, St Peter and St Edward. Mass was then celebrated and a sermon preached by the bishop of Norwich, who extolled the virtues of the relic, comparing it in flattering terms to the relics of Christ's Passion that had been acquired a few years earlier by the French King Louis IX. The bishop announced that indulgences totalling six years, one hundred and sixteen days had been granted to all who should come in future to venerate the Holy Blood. After this, crowned and dressed in cloth of gold, the King bestowed knighthood upon his half-brother, William de Valence, and upon a number of William's associates. Matthew Paris tells us that he himself was then summoned to the throne and questioned by the King on what he had seen. The King commanded Matthew 'to write a plain and full account of all these events, and indelibly to insert them in writing in a book, that the recollection of them may be in no way lost to posterity'. The chronicler and three of his companions were invited to dine with the King, whilst a splendid feast was arranged in the monks' refectory for the whole convent of Westminster.

[8] The secret storage of the relic is not mentioned by Paris, but appears in the London chronicle printed in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols., Rolls Series (London 1882–3), 1 44 *sub anno* 1246: *ante festum sancti Michaelis venit sanguis domini nostri Iesu Cristi Londonias et occulte depositus in hospitali Sancti Sepulcri*. For the reference here to a hospital of St Sepulchre, see below p. 28.

Not surprisingly these events have found a place in most accounts of the reign of Henry III. The procession from St Paul's to Westminster was later depicted by Matthew Paris in one of his better known drawings, whilst his interview with the King has been justly regarded as an indication of the close relations that bound the chronicler to the court.[9] However, to date no attempt has been made to investigate the background to the gift of the Holy Blood to Westminster. Historians have been content to recite Paris' description, without searching for further evidence.[10] As will become apparent, the archives of Westminster Abbey yield important new material relating to the affair, including a letter from the patriarch of Jerusalem that describes the relic of the Holy Blood in some considerable detail. The present study is intended both as a commentary upon this rediscovered letter, and as an attempt to provide an overview of the history of relics of Christ's blood, their origin, distribution and place in popular devotion, essential if we are to understand the particular blend of scepticism and reverence with which the Holy Blood of Westminster was regarded from the moment of its arrival in England. Remarkable as it may seem, there exists no comprehensive account of the history of such relics, a fact that is all the more extraordinary given the attention that historians have lavished upon relics in general, and in particular upon Corpus Christi, the more solid counterpart to relics of the Holy Blood.[11]

The present study begins with the immediate circumstances behind the gift of the blood to Westminster. This in turn will carry us on to the letter from the patriarch of Jerusalem and an attempt to explain its rather peculiar contents by reference to the wider relations between England and the church of Jerusalem. Thereafter we shall turn back to investigate the history of blood relics prior to 1247, posing one question above all others: why was it so difficult for the Westminster relic to find acceptance as a genuine relic of Christ's blood? This question requires an answer, since, as we shall see, the Holy Blood of Westminster, unlike similar relics elsewhere in Europe, was not destined to serve as the object of

[9] The drawing is variously reproduced by S. Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris in the Chronica Majora* (Aldershot 1987), plate 10 between pp. 290–1; M. E. Roberts, 'The Relic of the Holy Blood and the Iconography of the Thirteenth-Century North Transept Portal of Westminster Abbey', *England in the Thirteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1984 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. W. M. Ormrod (Harlaxton 1985), figure 8; *The Illustrated Chronicles of Matthew Paris: Observations of Thirteenth-Century Life*, ed. R. Vaughan (Stroud 1993), 38.

[10] The one honourable exception being Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates*, 44 n. 3, who notes the existence of letters from the patriarch of Jerusalem, treated in greater detail below.

[11] For the few general accounts of blood relics which I have been able to trace, see below pp. 51–3 n. 76. For works on related topics, see M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi* (Cambridge 1990).

any popular cult or devotion. In seeking to explain this failure, we shall look to the schools and to scholastic opinion, specifically with regard to the relic of Westminster and more generally in respect to the wider problems associated with all relics of Christ's bodily presence on earth. Finally we shall consider the aftermath of the events of 1247, the grant of indulgences, the pictorial representation of Henry III's relic and the cult that developed, or rather that *failed* to develop, around the blood of Westminster in the later Middle Ages. To appreciate the full extent of this failure, we shall compare the Westminster relic with its rivals elsewhere, and in particular with the cult of the Holy Blood at Hailes. Here too, new evidence will be brought to light, suggesting that the blood of Hailes enjoyed a more respectable pedigree than the Westminster blood, sufficient, perhaps, to explain its greater attractiveness to pilgrims.

In what follows, I have been able to do no more than touch upon some of the more important themes associated with relics of Christ's blood. My enquiry will not please all readers. To certain critics, it will no doubt appear hopelessly 'old-fashioned'. In particular, I have made little or no attempt here to incorporate the findings or to adopt the methods of many of those historians now engaged in the study of the medieval 'body'. The best of such studies are excellent: none better than those of Caroline Walker Bynum, cited frequently below. For the rest, however, I find myself unimpressed by the mixture of crude Freud and over-ripened Derrida that too often passes for 'body history'. The authors of such studies too often appear to be as ignorant of the learned languages of the Middle Ages as they are incapable of coherent expression in the modern vernacular. 'Misdirected' is perhaps the politest term that can be applied to much of this sort of writing. The pursuit of 'mentalities' is a valuable scholarly exercise. Indeed, much of what follows can be read as a study in the medieval mentality – political, religious, cultural and otherwise. I have held back, however, from what I regard as some of the wilder attempts by historians to superimpose modern terminology upon the thought-processes of the past. Such themes as sacrality, 'the holy' and the interplay of scientific and theological belief-systems will be found here in abundance. I plead guilty, however, to a charge of attempting to rob such themes of much of the numinous aura with which they have on occasion been invested.

The students of another variety of 'misdirected' research will likewise be disappointed by my findings. No one who ventures upon the study of relics, and in particular the relics of Christ, can avoid an encounter with the world of esoteric publishing. There are any number of studies,

populist or arcane as the case may be, devoted to such themes as masonic blood sacrifice, or the Druidic mysteries of the Grail. In pursuing the story of the Holy Blood, I have met with more than my fair share of such stuff. Its authors – worthy men and women no doubt – can claim at least one distinction from the gnostics of academe. For the most part they write in pursuit of some private obsession, or merely to put money in their pockets. The gnosis to which they lay claim is of a different, and for the most part more innocent, order to that claimed by tenured university scholars. The writers of esoteria, through personal psychosis or healthy commercialism, are preconditioned to detect conspiracy behind even the most innocent of facts. Academics, by contrast, have no excuse for burdening their readers with that which is sloppy or fraudulent. Those in search of 'body' language, or esoteric enlightenment, should look elsewhere. I make no claim here to have discovered the whereabouts of the Holy Grail, or to have unearthed the treasure of the Templars, and I leave it to others to apply 'bodily' or 'mental' spin to my findings. By drawing attention to a rich new vein of source material I hope none the less, that my enquiry may encourage, rather than pre-empt, further research into a fascinating and altogether remarkable aspect of medieval spirituality.

CHAPTER 2

The ceremony of 1247

King Henry III was neither a devious nor a calculating man.[1] His taste was for spontaneous emotional display. In particular he had a love of grand public ceremony, all the better if it could be combined with pious acts: the feeding of paupers, pilgrimage, the celebration of masses. Such religious observances followed in a much longer tradition of royal piety that even as late as the thirteenth century can be regarded as an expression, albeit a much diluted expression, of the Plantagenet claim to both royal and sacral authority. The reception afforded by Henry to the Holy Blood represents an entirely genuine display of devotion to an important relic. It would be wrong to think of it as a calculated political act, still less as a cynical exercise in propaganda. Yet, whilst the King may have been lacking in guile, there was guile in plenty at his court. Even if we admit that the gift of the Holy Blood to Westminster was a spontaneous, heartfelt gesture, it was a gesture from which the King might hope to reap numerous incidental benefits. To this extent, it is only natural that we should look for worldly motives behind the veneer of other-worldly piety. But precisely what motives?

To begin with, the ceremony of 1247 can be represented as an attempt to emulate, indeed to better, the splendid reception afforded by King Louis IX to the relics of Christ's Passion. Purchased from the bankrupt Latin Emperor of Constantinople, these had been brought to France in several instalments after 1239, and finally ceded to Louis in legal title as recently as June 1247.[2] Obvious comparisons can be drawn between Matthew Paris' description of the reception of the Holy Blood of Westminster and his account of the ceremony conducted by Louis IX in

[1] In what follows I have benefited greatly from discussion with David Carpenter.

[2] For the grant of legal title, see *Exuviae sacrae Constantinopolitanae*, ed. P. E. D. comte de Riant, 2 vols. (Geneva 1877–8), II 134–5 no. 79. The comparison between Henry III's gift of the Holy Blood to Westminster and Louis' earlier acquistion of the Passion relics is well drawn by S. Lloyd, *English Society and the Crusade 1216–1307* (Oxford 1988), 203–5.

1 King Louis IX of France displaying the True Cross and the Crown of Thorns as depicted by Matthew Paris *c.* 1250 (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 16 fo. 141r)

March 1241, in which the Holy Cross was paraded through the streets of the French capital.[3] Just as the rebuilding of Westminster Abbey appears to have been planned in conscious competition with Louis' patronage of the Sainte-Chapelle, so the Holy Blood may have been intended to rival the sanctity of Louis' collection of Passion Relics.[4] Although by 1247 Henry had yet to view the Sainte-Chapelle in person, he had undoubtedly been made aware of its splendours: according to a later satirical poem, so impressed was he after his first sight of it in 1254 that he expressed his desire to have the entire building transported on a cart from the Seine to the banks of the Thames.[5] Matthew Paris refers explicitly to the French relics in his account of the Westminster blood. Both in his summary of the sermon preached by the bishop of Norwich and in a short tract on the Holy Blood that he attributes to bishop Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln, Matthew suggests that the blood deposited at Westminster was in its way a far greater treasure than the relics acquired by Louis IX:

> If the True Cross [one of the Passion relics brought to France] is sanctified on account of its contact with the body of Christ, and the Crown of Thorns, the Lance and the nails likewise; so much more holy is the blood of Christ, the price of man's redemption, since it is because of and through the stain [of that blood] that the Cross and the other relics are sanctified, not the blood that is sanctified by the Cross.[6]

It is also worth noting that earlier in 1247 Henry III had been upstaged by King Louis in respect to another set of relics that by rights should have been brought to rest in England. On 7 June 1247 it had been Louis, not Henry, who presided over the translation of the relics of St Edmund of Abingdon at the Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny.[7] It was at Pontigny that St Edmund, archbishop of Canterbury (1234–40), had spent his final days in exile following a bitter quarrel with King Henry. In exile, Edmund

[3] *CM*, IV 90–2.

[4] For the stylistic similarities between the new work at Westminster and Louis IX's projects in and around Paris, see R. Branner, 'Westminster Abbey and the French Court Style', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 23 (1964), 3–18. Binski, *Westminster Abbey*, esp. ch. 1 pp. 7, 29, 33–5, 39, 44, 46, 106, suggests that the element of copying at Westminster from Paris was relatively slight, and that the entire idea of a 'court style' is badly in need of revision.

[5] Binski, *Westminster Abbey*, 46.

[6] *CM*, IV 642, VI 143.

[7] For the translation of 1247, see *CM*, IV 631, VI 128–30; L. Carolus-Barré, 'Saint Louis et la translation des corps saints', *Etudes d'histoire du droit canonique dédiées à Gabriel le Bras*, 2 vols. (Paris 1965), II 1089–91; *The Life of St Edmund by Matthew Paris*, ed. C. H. Lawrence (Stroud 1996), 99, 166–7. Under the year 1241 Paris refers to France's acquisition of the Holy Cross and the relics of St Edmund as twin, related, blessings; *CM*, IV 91–2.

had deliberately followed the example of Thomas Becket and Stephen Langton, his predecessors in the see of Canterbury, who had sought sanctuary at Pontigny during their own disputes with the English court. The breach between Edmund and the King had been widely reported in England, not least in the papal bull of canonization of January 1247 which draws an explicit comparison between Edmund's exile and that of St Thomas.[8] We would do well to remember that in 1247 the Pope himself was living as an exile at Lyons, on neutral territory between France and the Empire, effectively under the protection of the French King, Louis IX. It must have been all the more humiliating to Henry III that the relics of the first English saint to be canonized in twenty years should have been honoured more by the French than by the English court, much as a few years earlier Henry is said to have been disappointed in his attempts to entice the Pope to take up residence under English rather than French protection.[9] At much the same time that the Holy Blood was being carried through London, Henry's brother Richard of Cornwall was endeavouring to make good his earlier neglect of St Edmund with a pilgrimage to the saint's shrine in France.[10] In the manuscript containing Matthew Paris' verse life of St Edmund, Matthew's poem ends with what may originally have been an independent metrical account of the Holy Blood of Westminster, as in the *Chronica majora* compared in flattering terms to the nails and the Crown of Thorns acquired by King Louis.[11] In this way, the gift of the blood relic can be regarded as a response by Henry III to the triumphs scored by Louis IX over the past few years, both in respect to the Passion relics of the Sainte-Chapelle and to the relics of St Edmund at Pontigny.

Secondly, the ceremony of October 1247 must be set in the context of Henry III's wider devotion to Westminster Abbey. Clearly, the King hoped that his gift would attract pilgrims to the Abbey church that he was in the process of rebuilding. Since the time of his official

[8] For the canonization pronounced on 16 December, and for the bull of 11 January 1247 see *CM*, IV 586, VI 120–5, which also announces an indulgence of a year and forty days to all visiting the saint's shrine each year on the newly instituted feast day, 16 November. Paris reports that Richard of Croxley was elected abbot of Westminster on the same day as Edmund's canonization, 16 December 1246, and that as a former friend of St Edmund he set about building a chapel in Westminster Abbey in the saint's honour: *CM*, IV 589, and see *Flores historiarum*, II 320–1 and *The History of Westminster Abbey by John Flete*, ed. J. A. Robinson (Cambridge 1909), 109–10, for Richard's burial in the chapel of St Edmund.

[9] *CM*, IV 32, 631–2, VI 128–9.

[10] *CM*, IV 632, 646–7, and see *CM*, V 228 for the King's sense of remorse.

[11] A.T. Baker, 'La Vie de saint Edmond archevêque de Cantorbéry', *Romania* 55 (1929), 335, 380–1 verses 1888–2020, noticed by P. Binski, 'Abbot Berkyng's Tapestries and Matthew Paris's Life of St Edward the Confessor', *Archaeologia* 109 (1991), 94.