ST EDMUND OF EAST ANGLIA AND HIS MIRACLES THROUGH THE CENTURIES: VARIATIONS IN LITERATURE AND ART.

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Less than two years ago, at the end of 2006, St Edmund was a news item in the English local and national media. BBC Radio Suffolk and The East Anglian Daily Times led an intensive campaign for St Edmund to be reinstated as England's patron saint, instead of St George. They even took a petition to 10 Downing Street and the House of Commons. The British government later refused to relieve St George of his title, but Suffolk County Council officially adopted St Edmund as the patron saint of Suffolk.[1] Despite this lack of success, the action was attempted in order to restore Edmund's position before the Norman Conquest, following introduction of a foreign patron saint for England – St George – who gradually overcame local patron saints (such as St Germaine, St Botolph, St Walstan, St Felix, St Aethelbert and St Fursa) in prestige, albeit not in support.

St Edmund was an Anglo-Saxon Christian king who ruled the realm of East Anglia between 855 and 869 AD. The earliest sources about him date back to the end of the ninth century, for example, a passage in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle describing his death[2] and the so-called St Edmund Memorial Coinage (circa 885-915 AD). These sources testify to the king's early reputation as a saint man.[3] From that moment onwards, truth and legend begin to intermingle. Abbo of Fleury in his 'Life of St Edmund' (985 AD) states that Edmund was *ex antiquorum Saxonum nobili prosapia oriundus*,[4] which seems to link the saint with a continental Old Saxon origin. However, the earliest and most reliable accounts present him as descending from the preceding line of Wuffing kings of East Anglia. Nevertheless, the legend of his continental origin was later expanded, adding particulars about Edmund's parents (the

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[1] British Broadcasting Corporation, 'BBC Radio Suffolk Campaign to make St Edmund the patron saint of England'
(http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2007/04/18/st_edmund_day_feature.shtml)
[31.10.2008].
[2] B. Thorpe (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (2 vols, London, 1861), i, 135; ibid., ii, 60.
[3] C. E. Blunt, 'The St Edmund Memorial Coinage' in *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, xxxi (1969), pp 234–53.
[4] Abbo of Fleury, 'Passio Sancti Edmundi Regis et Martyris', iii, vv 3-5, in M. Winterbottom, *Ælfric's Three Lives of English Saints* (Toronto, 1972), p. 70.

otherwise unknown Alcmund and Siware), his birth at Nuremberg, his adoption and succession to King Æthelweard of East Anglia, and his journey to England to claim his kingdom.

Edmund was said to have been crowned at the age of just fourteen years by St Humbert on 25 December 855 in the then royal capital Burna, (probably Bures St Mary, Suffolk).[5] Almost nothing is known of his life and reign, though he was recorded as a just and uncompromising ruler, the embodiment of the Greek ideal of the *kalòs kai agathòs* – that is, the right balance of the Good and the Beautiful, the combination of virtues that could create the perfect nobleman.

As stated in Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' (893 AD), King Edmund was killed in battle, during a confrontation with the Danish invaders Ubbe Ragnarsson and Ivar the Boneless (in other traditions called also Hubba and Ingwar):[6] It is not known if he was simply killed in action or condemned to death after denying to submit to the invaders and to renounce his faith. Abbo of Fleury adds some particulars to this account, claiming that his Archbishop related the story as he heard it in his youth from a very old man claiming to have been King Edmund's armour bearer at the time of his death. These additions include the imprisonment of the king, the tortures inflicted on him and his passion: he was whipped and lashed while tied to a tree, then shot with arrows and decapitated. According to this story, his head was then cast away in the forest, and guarded by a grey wolf until some devoted people came to rescue it. They were guided to the site by the head's calling 'here, here, here'. The head of the king, miraculously reunited with his body, was then buried in a small chapel and later moved to a larger church in Beodericsworth – later called Bury St Edmunds.

Edmund's popularity among the English people, noble and common, was both sudden and lasting. The shrine at Bury St Edmunds quickly became one of the most famous and wealthy pilgrimage locations in England, and his banner was borne in battles,

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[5] P. Dearmer, *The Little Lives of the Saints* (London, 1904), p. 88.
[6] D. Whitelock, 'Fact and Fiction in the Legend of St. Edmund' in *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, xxxi (1969), pp 227-28; I. P. McKeehan, *Some Relationships between the Medieval Legends of British Saints and Medieval Romance* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1923), p. 73.

such as the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. His fame was increased by the number of miracles performed by the saint or attributed to his intervention, and carefully recorded by the monks of the abbey guarding the shrine. The powerful Bury St Edmunds abbey, before its dissolution in 1539, was one of the richest Benedictine monasteries in England, with extensive lands and rights in Suffolk and links to the court. It was also a centre of artistic splendour and culture, with a rich library and frequent contacts with the University of Oxford. Its close connection to the court provided strong patronage from various kings (such as Henry II, Richard I, John, Henry III), who also used to pay visits to the abbey.[7]

In 1433, the twelve year old King Henry VI spent the period from Christmas through Easter to St George's Day (March 28) of the following year visiting the abbey, and at the end of his stay he received the honour to becoming a member of the abbey fraternity. The message from the council anticipating the royal visit arrived to Abbot Curteys only eight weeks in advance: he immediately commenced work to enlarge the abbot's palace, in order to better lodge the king,[8] and asked the renowned writer and monk of St Edmunds, John Lydgate (at that time already well known for his works, especially the 'Troy Book', the 'Siege of Thebes' and the 'Life of our Lady'), to write a life of St Edmund to be presented as a gift to the young king. The author decided to add the life of St Fremund, King Edmund's cousin also to this account, thus creating a double hagiography, an uncommon typology used again by Lydgate in a later work, the 'Lives of SS Alban and Amphibal'. It is improbable that the work was finished for the king's arrival, or even before his departure from the abbey, being a massive composition of 3700 verses, accompanied by 120 miniatures which run alongside the whole text, thus probably creating one of the most beautiful manuscripts of the 15th century. This book, now called Harley MS 2278,[9] is composed of 119 parchment sheets. Each leaf approximately measures 25 x 17 cm, while the text, the miniatures and any *litterae notabiliores* (i.e., enlarged or decorated letters) are all arranged into a single column space justification, open ruled, measuring 14 x 11 cm. The quires

[7] A. B. Whittingham, 'Bury St. Edmunds Abbey, Suffolk' in *Archaeological Journal*, 108 (1971), pp 7-9.

[8] T. Arnold (ed.), *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey* (3 vols, London, 1890), iii, pp xxx-xxxix.

[9] A. S. G. Edwards (ed.), *The life of St. Edmund, king & martyr: John Lydgate's illustrated verse life presented to Henry VI: a facsimile of British Library ms Harley 2278* (London, 2004), passim.

consist of eight sheets each, except for the first (made of six sheets) and the last one (made of just two sheets). Catchwords are written in the margin on the last page of each section. The manuscript follows Gregory's rule, having each quire starting with the hair side, and then alternatively facing the hair and the flesh sides of the sheets. The *ductus* reveals that there was a single hand writing the whole text: he used a pointy, formal and regular *bastarda anglicana*.[10] The 120 miniatures were created by at least three limners: the master illustrator was probably of foreign origin (as the Flemish influences may suggest), and was helped by an assistant following his style and by another limner, who occasionally overlapped with the previous work, while completing the last part of the book.[11] There is a good chance that it was written under the direct supervision of John Lydgate, therefore it is also probable that he had an active role in the assessment of the display of both text and illustrations.

In fact, the written and iconographic texts are strongly connected: the verses are often following the image they refer to, hence creating an expansion of meaning by underlining the message and also by adding some supplementary visual features. Lydgate almost certainly drew his inspiration from older sources relating the life of the patron saint of his abbey: these were probably preserved in the abbey's library. He mostly followed Abbo's work,[12] however adding some undertones, concerning politics (the saint is presented as a role model to the young king) and religion (by almost creating a parallel between the passion of St Edmund and that of Christ), as well as an epic (the poem is regarded as a *legendenepos*). He divided his work into three books: the first two relate Edmund's life and death, while the third is dedicated to the story of Edmund's holy cousin, the otherwise unknown St Fremund, who came to avenge Edmund's death and was later slain while praying and thanking God for the victory over the Danish invaders. At the end of the last book, as was customary,[13] Lydgate decided to add a further section wholly dedicated to the miracles ascribed to

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[10] C. E. Wright, *English Vernacular Hands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1960), p. 18.
[11] K. L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts: 1390-1490* (2 vols, London, 1996), ii, 227.
[12] Arnold (ed.), *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, iii, pp xlviii-li.
[13] A. Dierkens, 'Réflexions sur le miracle au Haut Moyen Âge' in *Miracles, prodiges et merveilles au Moyen Âge. Actes du XXVe Congrès de la Société des Historiens Médiévistes de l'Enseignement Public, Orléans, 3-5 juin 1994* (Paris, 1995), p. 17; M. E. Goodich, 'A note on sainthood in the Hagiographical prologue' in idem, *Lives and Miracles of the Saints: Studies in Medieval Latin Hagiography* (Aldershot, 2004), p. 172.

St Edmund after his burial. Particular records of these miraculous events were kept by the guardians of the shrine[14] at least from the time of the translation of the relics to Beodricsworth in 903 AD:[15] These first sources are now lost but part of their contents reach us through later works, firstly Abbo's "Life of St Edmund" and the "Miracula Beati Edmundi Regis" of Hermann the Archdeacon, alongside the collections of miracles compiled by Osbern of Clare and the Abbot Samson of Bury (MSS Titus A. VIII and Bodley 240). These chronicles include miracles which occurred until 1375 in Bury St Edmunds as well as other parts of England and abroad (Angers, Lucca, Santiago de Compostela, etc.).[16] John Lydgate decided to recount only a small portion of these events: in fact, there are only eight miracles described in the last book of his work, but they are illustrated by as many as 15 miniatures. These events happened in a time-span starting from the burial of the saint in the first chapel built to protect his body (869 AD) until the election of Abbot Baldwin and the building of the shrine (1095 AD).

The miracles written by John Lydgate seem to have been specifically chosen, creating a sort of *manifesto* of the power of the abbey and of its patron saint. In fact, this section begins with the narration of a subsequent Danish invasion, led by King Sweyn. In order to protect his abbey and his devotees, St Edmund appears to a monk, named Ailwyn, and urges him to go to King Sweyn exhorting him to leave. The Dane refuses and in the following miniature, St Edmund takes revenge on him by appearing in his castle, fully armed, and killing him with a spear. Amazingly, this marvel is announced by a dying mute man, miles away from the King's castle. Then, Lydgate refers of the rescue of a woman, chased by Sheriff Leofstan inside the sacred shrine, where she was trying to take refuge: she is put to death and, as soon as this happens, an evil spirit appears and drives the Sheriff mad before taking his soul away. The following two miniatures refer to a group of thieves robbing horses and goods from the abbey. The monks appear to be desperate and powerless; the intercession of the saint makes the thieves go insane and come back to the abbey to return everything and solemnly repent in front of the shrine. The next miracle recounts a Flemish pilgrim

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[14] B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215* (London, 1982), pp 34-5.
[15] Arnold, *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, i, 270.
[16] Arnold, *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, i, 290.

tries to steal some precious stones from the shrine by removing them with his mouth while kissing them in devotion: the revenge of the saint makes him get stuck to the shrine until he repents. After that, the vengeance taken on the Danish lord Osgoth for despising the saint is illustrated in a beautiful miniature showing three subsequent events in just one scene. Osgoth is seized by madness, and then restored to sanity when he repents. The next miniature lets us follow the relics of St Edmund, carried by the monk Ailwyn, during their transportation to London (1010 AD) in order to preserve them from another Danish invasion. Marvellous things happen during their journey, such as the fire set to the house of a priest who denied them hospitality, but also the healing of various people. After three years, the bishop of the church of St Gregory, where Edmund's shrine was located, secretly tried to transport it to another church in order to keep it in London. Despite the number of monks trying to lift the shrine, it stays firm until the arrival of Ailwyn, who immediately takes it back to Bury. On the way back, the saint heals a devout man who offered them hospitality in his manor. This is the last miraculous event referred to by Lydgate.

Grouping together these miracles according to their main features, there are two visions, two episodes of rescue, three violent instances of revenge and another three acts of punishment followed by forgiveness, as well as some minor healings. This ratio is striking, given the usual preponderance of healing miracles[17] over the other areas ascribed to wonder, such as punishment and salvation.[18] This probably reflects the *Zeitgeist* and the necessity for the then growing abbey of St Edmund and his cult to be seen as dominant and protected by the power of God (whose providence and saving grace were believed to allow every miracle to happen). In fact, the monks could not ward off force by force in contrast to the power of kings and lords, so they had to rely on a shielding figure:[19] this is probably the reason why Edmund mostly embodies the distinctive features of a knight rather than those of a saint, in this way recalling some common chivalric elements.[20]

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[17] M. E. Goodich, 'Cult and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century' in idem, *Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century: Private Grief and Public Salvation* (Chicago, 1995), p. 2.
[18] Ibid., pp 42-57.
[19] Arnold, *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, i, 274.
[20] McKeehan, 'Some Relationships between the Medieval Legends of British Saints and Medieval Romance', p. 104.

By analyzing two other collections of miracles attributed to St Edmund, it is possible to compare some indicative records. Of the 55 miracles reported in *Samsonis Abbatis Opus De Miraculis Sancti Aedmundi*,[21] 27 are related to healing, 9 to revenge, 7 to visions (which are often linked to other graces),[22] 6 to salvations and one to liberation. MS Bodley 240[23] collates 75 miracles (some of which are present in other sources as already stated): of these, 37 are related to healing, 10 to salvations (mostly from shipwrecking), 9 to resolutions of problems (mostly stolen or lost things), 7 to revenge as well as liberations, while visions occur only 5 times. This latest collection kept a record of miracles which happened in later times, often personally witnessed by devotees.[24] The importance given to the healing power of St Edmund is underlined: these miracles generally happened at the shrine of the saint, but it was not unusual that they followed the relics on their journeys, as we can see in the event of the transportation of the shrine to London.

Some years after the realization of the manuscript, and its presentation to King Henry VI, an interesting thing happened. In fact, Lydgate's 'Lives' were becoming so popular, that other noblemen asked for copies.[25] In some of these later manuscripts,[26] all deriving from a lost common ancestor, an ulterior part was added:[27] this addition is to be found in the last part of the book that is the one relating St Edmund's miracles. This insertion, consisting of 58 eight-line stanzas, narrates three more miracles. These three events, illustrated by four miniatures, are characterized by two main features. Since the miracles occurred between 1441 and 1444, they are all coeval with the creation of the text, and their protagonists are always children being saved from certain death.

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[21] Arnold, *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, ii, p. xxxix; ibid., pp liii-liv.

[22] Ibid., i, 296.

[23] Ibid., iii, pp l-lv.

[24] Goodich, 'The Use of Direct Quotation from Canonization Hearing to Hagiographical Vita et Miracula' in idem, *Lives and Miracles of the Saints*, pp 177-8.

[25] M. C. Seymour, 'Some Lydgate Manuscripts: Lives of SS Edmund and Fremund and Danse Macabre' in *Transactions of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, 5 (1985), p. 11.

[26] These manuscripts are London, British Library Yates Thompson 47; Arundel Castle *sine numero*; Oxford, Bodleian Library Tanner 347 and Bodleian Library Ashmole 46.

[27] Seymour, 'Some Lydgate Manuscripts: Lives of SS Edmund and Fremund and Danse Macabre', p. 10.

In fact, the first miracle is the account of a child pulled off London Bridge by some passing oxen:

(Yates Thompson MS 47, f. 94v)

He is subsequently rescued by a fisherman on his boat. In the following miniature, the fisherman delivers the saved child to his mother who is standing on the shore, waiting for him.

(Yates Thompson MS 47, f. 97r)

The second miracle tells of another baby pulled out from a pool of water with a long pole, and then taken in procession by his mother followed by other people.

(Yates Thompson MS 47, f. 102r)

The last miracle happens to a child who gets crushed by a cart; he is then restored to health and carried in procession by his mother and other devotees.

(Yates Thompson MS 47, f. 103r)

In fact, the salvation of children in peril, especially from drowning,[28] is a frequent miracle and is often performed by St Edmund. This kind of miracle frequently operated as an unconscious way to unite the population and to strengthen their faith and devotion.[29] In the first edition of his work, as well as in the previous iconographic cycle, Lydgate totally neglected this particular range of miracles. With the addition of this section, the work achieves a better overview on the saint's power. Perhaps, the redressing of the saint's once choleric attitude and of his knightly features was due to the abbey already being at that time a well established and powerful institution.

In these works, then, the key function of miracles is to invite the devotees to praise the Saint King, creating a *continuum* between his saintly life and his lifelike sainthood. The updating of the narrative has a strong effect on the perception of the saint as well as on his fame: the manifestation of miracles generally increased the reputation of the saint among his worshippers, and this amplified faith could induce the attribution of further extraordinary events to his intervention. The later revision by the author can be seen as a very useful way to attempt a reinterpretation and a improved comprehension of this saintly figure. Moreover, the addition of a text strongly connected with illuminations allows the reader to better understand the perception of this cult[30] and the needs of the believers in different historical periods.

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[28] M. E. Goodich, 'Canonization and the Hagiographical Text' in idem, *Miracles and Wonders: the Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150-1350* (Aldershot, 2007), p. 93.

[29] M. E. Goodich, 'Children as Victims' in idem, *Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century*, pp 92-3.

[30] H. Edgren, *Mercy and justice: miracles of the Virgin Mary in the Finnish medieval wall-paintings* (Helsinki, 1993), p. 37.

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