
The shrines of saints in later Anglo-Saxon England: distribution and significance

David Rollason

Some of the most imposing monuments of Anglo-Saxon architecture testify to the importance of the cult of saints' relics in the Anglo-Saxon church. The corridor-crypts of Hexham and Ripon appear to have been constructed to provide a suitable ambiance and appropriate access to relics of some sort enshrined in them; and the crypt of Brixworth may have served similar functions (Taylor 1969). At Repton, as Harold Taylor has shown, passageways were bored with immense labour to give access to the relics of St Wigstan which were buried in the former mausoleum which was converted into a crypt (Taylor 1971; 1977; 1979). The imposing westwork of the Old Minster, Winchester, was in part intended to glorify the cult of St Swithun and the porticus at St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, served to provide a suitable setting for the mortal remains of the saintly archbishops of Canterbury which lay buried there (Biddle 1975; Taylor & Taylor 1965-78, 134-43). No-one has done more to enhance our understanding of this aspect and so many other aspects of Anglo-Saxon England than Harold Taylor and it is with respect and admiration and in gratitude for the stimulus he has given and continues to give to my own studies that this attempt to explore some of the implications of the Anglo-Saxon cult of saints' relics is offered.¹

In England, as elsewhere, relics could be of various types. They could be the whole of a saint's body, fragments of the body, dust from it, or objects which had been in contact with the saint during his or her life or with the corpse after the saint's death (Rollason forthcoming a). It seems that the English, probably influenced by the views of Gregory the Great, favoured the complete bodies of saints, which they regarded as the most desirable sort of relic, particularly if, as in the case of Cuthbert, Edmund, and Æthelthryth, the body had not decayed (Rollason 1978, 80-2). Fragments of bodies, usually bones, were also treasured and some monasteries and individuals built up large collections (Förster 1943; Thomas 1974). Objects which had been in contact with the saint were also revered although these were probably of secondary importance. Such relics include the portable altar of St Cuthbert, preserved as a relic and enshrined in a silver casing in the 8th century (Battiscombe 1956, 326-35).

All the evidence suggests that the importance of relics in the early medieval world can be summed up in a word: power. A saint's capability of interceding with God for the good or ill of those on earth was focused in the relics. Many accounts of miracles allegedly worked through the saint's intercession suggest a belief that the saint was somehow actually present in the relics and could, at least in visions, emerge from the shrine to console, cure, or smite (Rollason 1982, 3-8). Such beliefs in the power inherent in relics found expression in the judicial and other functions which they served in Anglo-Saxon England: as objects on which oaths were sworn, as components of the judicial ordeal and in manumissions, and as a supposed means of warding off disease and even war (Förster 1943, 3-23; cf Herrmann-Mascard 1975, 217-70).

Relics could evidently contribute to the prestige and influence of the places where they were located and of the communities or individuals who possessed them. They could bring practical benefits too. Pilgrims converged on the shrine seeking spiritual profit or cures for illnesses; donors clamoured to make offerings to it and to be buried nearby. In short, the location of saints' relics must, I suggest, be a factor in a study of the geography of power and influence in Anglo-Saxon England. We must not only focus attention on the obvious centres of power - places where kings or bishops resided, where the *witan* met, where kingdoms are said to have had their centres; places which possessed mints, fortifications, ports - but, if we are to take full note of contemporary beliefs and outlooks, we must also concern ourselves with places which possessed shrines, for these too were potentially centres of power.

Mere location of relics is not the only factor worthy of analysis. Those who possessed relics had the opportunity to increase their prestige and influence by careful management and promotion of the relic-cults. This could be achieved by constructing awesome architectural settings for the relics, by enshrining the relics in ever more sumptuous reliquaries, by focusing liturgical ceremonial on them, by involving the laity in the cult. Above all attention could be drawn to the relics by translating them to a richer or more prominent shrine; and such translations seem *par* excellence to provide evidence that the communities involved were being vigorous in promoting relic-cults and therefore in promoting their own prestige and influence. Relics could of course be moved from one place to another and their ownership transferred from one community to another. Such translations naturally involved transfers of the power believed to reside in the relics and the sources tell us that they were often bitterly resented by those losing their relics. In practical terms, we should study the incidence of translations of this type since this may clearly provide an indication of which places or communities were rising in prestige and influence at the expense of others.

What follows is an attempt to pursue these ideas in the context of late Anglo-Saxon England. It should be said at once that formidable problems arise from the character of the available evidence. I have relied most heavily on the *Secgan be Pam Godes sanctum*, a list of the resting-places of 89 saints which reached its present form in the early 11th century (Liebermann 1889, 9-19; Rollason 1978, 61-8); and also on what appear to be the more ancient components of the post-conquest lists of saints' resting-places in the Chronicle of Hugh Candidus (*Hugh Cand*, 59-64), in the Breviate of Domesday (*Gaimar*, i, xxxix-xlii), and in the *Catalogus sanctorum in Anglia pausancium*, preserved in late medieval manuscripts (CSP). The evidence of such lists must be treated with great caution, as also must the evidence of pre- and post-conquest liturgical texts, saints' lives, chronicles, and monastic histories with which they can be supplemented (Rollason 1978, 68-74). Apart from the usual

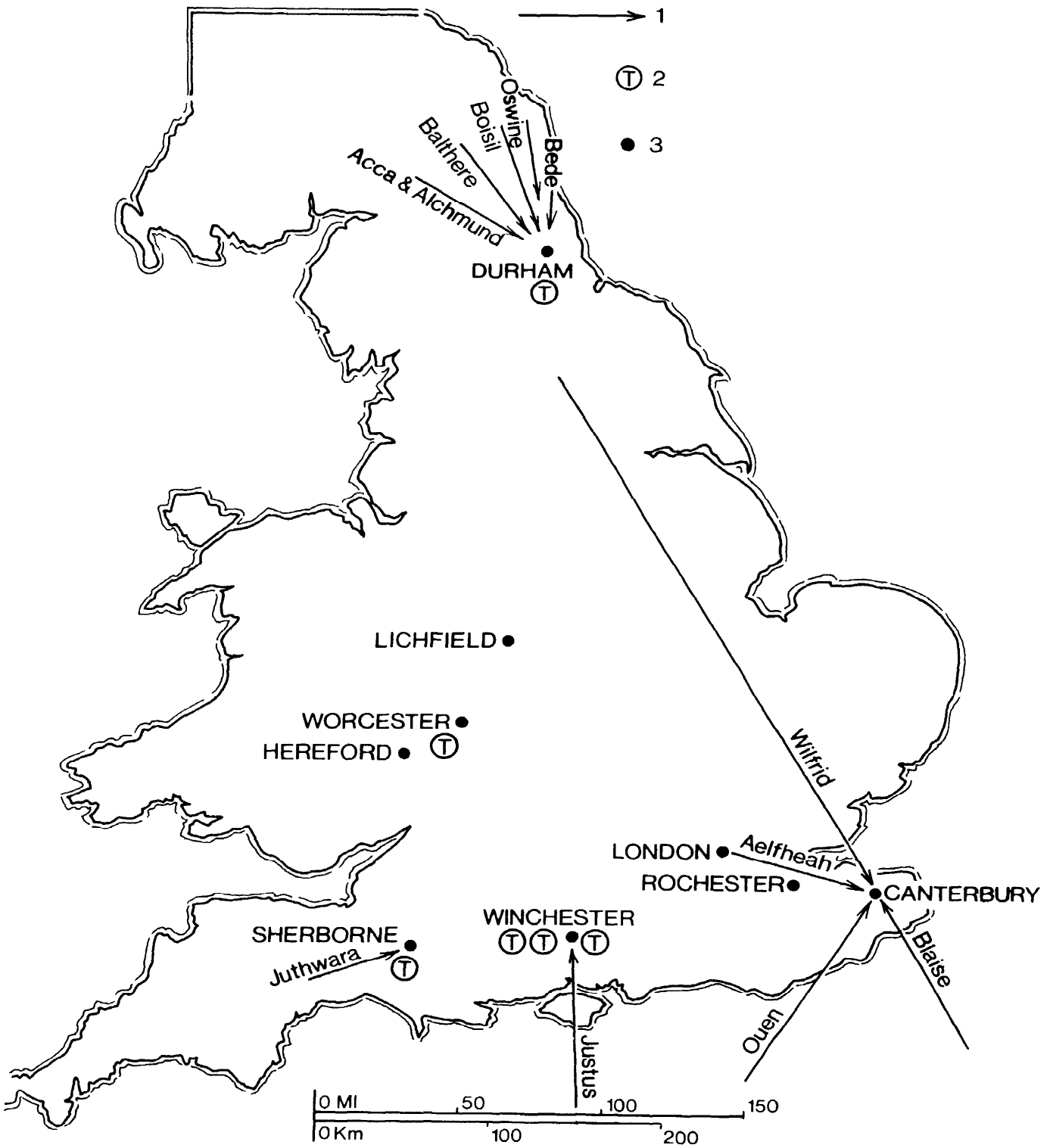


Fig 15 Relics and translations at cathedral churches. Key: 1 Translation of relics to a new place; 2 Translation of relics to a new shrine on the same site; 3 Place known to have possessed relics

difficulties inherent in using such texts, it should be noted that problems often arise because of the existence of rival claims to the same saint's relics by two communities. These disputes often led to the fabrication, or at least distortion of traditions about the origin and location of relics which has seriously confused the picture. Moreover fragmentary relics often came to be treated as if they were the whole relics of a saint, giving rise to a situation in which two or more centres claimed to possess the complete relics.

I have tried, with the aid of a series of sketch maps, to address two main problems:

- 1 What sort of communities had relics?
- 2 Is it possible to establish any relationship between the distribution of shrines and translations and the pattern of political and territorial power in late Anglo-Saxon England?

I have concentrated on shrines holding major relics of particular saints and no attempt has been made to indicate where places possessed fragmentary relics as part of the sort of major collections listed in the relic-lists of particular churches, although it should be borne in mind that such collections existed alongside the shrines of particular saints. Figs 15-18 relate to the first of these questions and show, respectively, the distribution of shrines in cathedral churches, in abbeys associated with the 10th century monastic reformation, in secular and unreformed communities, and in other places usually of unknown or uncertain status.²

Fig 15 shows cathedral churches possessing major shrines and the translations associated with them. The most striking thing about it is the fact that so many cathedral churches do not appear at all. There is no evidence that in the late Anglo-Saxon period Elmham, Dorchester, Crediton, St Germans, Ramsbury, Wells, and Selsey possessed major portions of the relics of particular saints, although they no doubt had some fragmentary or secondary relics. When the see of Crediton was moved to Exeter in 1050, the bishops acquired by this move a large collection of fragmentary relics which had been built up by the church of Exeter, as well as the relics of St Sidwell, who was enshrined there (Förster 1938; 1943, 43-114). The most surprising non-appearance of all is that of the church of York. Bede located the head of St Edwin, king of Northumbria, at York but, according to the *Secgan*, neither this nor any other saint's relics appear to have been preserved there in the late Anglo-Saxon period (Bede, *HE*, ii, 20). According to the list in Hugh Candidus's chronicle, a certain St Evorhilda was enshrined there (*Hugh Cand*, 62) but she remained utterly obscure and the similarity of her name to the Latin name for York suggests that she was a pure invention, perhaps one made by post-conquest ecclesiastics faced with an absence of relics. If so, they remedied the deficiency effectively only by the canonization of Archbishop William of York in the early 13th century (*Brev Ebor*, 388-90; *ASS Iul*, ii, 713; *Hist ch York*, ii, 270-91).

Several cathedral churches which do appear on the map were neither well endowed with relics nor vigorous in promoting relic-cults. Rochester had the relics of the 7th century missionary Paulinus, but there is no evidence that his cult was promoted there in the pre-conquest period - and the Norman bishops of Rochester apparently found

their church so poor in relics that, when they wished to promote a cult, they had to turn their attention to the obscure 7th century bishop Ithamar (Bede, *HE*, iii, 14; Bethell 1971, 424-5). Hereford had the relics of one saint, the 8th century murdered king Æthelberht (James 1917). London actually lost the relics of the saintly archbishop Ælfheah, when they were translated to Canterbury in 1023 (*ASC*, *sa*; *Ang sac*, ii, 145-7). It retained the relics of its early bishop Eorcenwald and may have venerated the remains of the 7th century king Sebbi and the 10th century bishop Theodred, although the evidence for this derives only from post-conquest sources (Liebermann 1889, 13; *Hugh Cand*, 59). Lichfield had the relics of the 7th century bishop Chad and had also, according to the *Secgan*, the relics of his brother Cedd and those of an obscure ceatta (Liebermann 1889, 11). No translations are known to have occurred in the late Anglo-Saxon period at Lichfield, Hereford, London, or Rochester so it appears that little was being done to promote the cults of the relics they possessed.

The remaining cathedral churches were, by contrast, actively involved in relic-cults. Durham could claim that the community which served the church had possessed important relics since the 7th century. The community had of course been exiled from its original see at Lindisfarne and had been established at Chester-le-Street and elsewhere before its settlement at Durham in 995. Throughout its wanderings, it had taken with it the relics of St Cuthbert, St Aidan, and others (*Sym op*, 1, 56-79). In the late Anglo-Saxon period, vigorous efforts were nevertheless being made to add to this heritage. Symeon of Durham tells us that the early 11th century sacrist Ælfred Westou brought to Durham relics of Balthere and Bilfrith from Tynningham, Acca and Alchmund from Hexham, Oswine from Tynemouth, Ebba and Æthelgitha from Coldingham, Boisil from Melrose, and Bede from Jarrow (*Sym op*, 1, 87-9). Ælfred Westou was no doubt, as Symeon implies, an exceptionally ardent relic-collector; but this collection, even if it was really his own work, must have been endorsed by his community. The activity may reflect the Durham community's wish to emphasize its close association with St Cuthbert by enshrining in its cathedral the relics of saints associated with him and with his period. It may also have reflected Durham's territorial and political ambitions, for several of the places from which relics were brought to Durham were claimed as possessions of the see of Durham and it may have been hoped that possession of the relics would strengthen these claims (Craster 1954, 179).

Christ Church, Canterbury, had become the burial-place of the archbishops from the time of Archbishop Cuthbert (d 758) and so it had the relics of a series of these prelates. The *Secgan* mentions Dunstan's resting-place there (Liebermann 1889, 15) but it seems that Odo (941-58) was, like Dunstan, given the prominence of a raised tomb and apparently regarded as a saint (Willis 1845, 2, 6; *Inventories*, 29-43). The church was also acquiring relics from elsewhere. Archbishop Plegmund, who visited Rome in 891 and 908, is supposed to have purchased there the relics of St Blaise and to have brought them to Christ Church (Willis 1845, 3; *Inventories*, 30, n 1). Archbishop Odo is said to have obtained from Ripon the relics of St Wilfrid (Brooks 1984, 227-31); and we are told that Archbishop Ælfheah, when he was translated from the see of Winchester in 1005, brought with him the



Fig 16 Relics and translations at reformed Benedictine monasteries other than cathedral churches (for key see Fig 15)