

MEDIEVAL SAINTS

A READER

edited by

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35. FIRE AT THE SHRINE OF ST. EDMUND

Early in the tenth century the relics of St. Edmund (see 20 above) were moved to the site of the present Bury St. Edmunds, but when the marauding Danes landed nearby Ipswich in 1010, a layman named Ailwin carried the body to London for safety and placed it in a church near St. Paul's, where it remained for three years. When a Danish threat had receded, Ailwin tried to return the body to East Anglia, but the bishop and citizens of London wanted to move the coffin to St. Paul's instead, so the relics had proved to work many miracles. The coffin, however, refused to be moved when the citizens of London tried to lift it, thus indicating the saint's desire to return to his home. The abbey which flourished around the shrine of this national saint became immensely wealthy and important, for it was granted all of the region now known as West Suffolk, including the town of Bury St. Edmunds itself. In 1182 Samson was elected abbot, and his chaplain was Jocelin of Brakelond, who wrote the 'Chronicle' of Samson's abbacy from which the following account is taken. Besides giving us an insider's view of the quarrels which might develop between an abbot and his monks, it demonstrates the importance of the saint's relics and the income derived from pilgrims even for an abbey which drew much of its wealth from other sources. The miracle of the joining of Edmund's head to his body seems to have been so well-known that it occasioned no comment from Jocelin when the saint's corpse was unwrapped anew; an earlier abbot, Leofstan, had tested its truth by pulling upon the saint's head while a monk pulled upon his feet. The head remained joined to the body, but the abbot's hands were afflicted with palsy from that day forward until he died.

Source: trans. Ernest Clarke, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond: A Picture of Monastic Life in the Days of Abbot Samson* (London: De La More, 1903), pp. 162-177; revised from the Latin text by H. E. Butler, ed., *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond concerning the Acts of Samson, Abbot of the Monastery of St. Edmund* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1949).

14. The Shrine of St. Edmund

In the year of grace 1198 the glorious martyr Edmund wished to strike terror into our convent, and to instruct us that his body should be kept more reverently and carefully than it had been up to this point.

There was a wooden platform between the feretory [romb] and the high altar, on which stood two tapers, which the keepers of the shrine used to renew and stick together by placing one candle upon the stump of another in an unsuitable manner. Under this platform there were many things irreverently huddled together, such as flax and thread and wax, and various utensils. In fact, whatever fell into the hands of the keepers of the shrine was there, for there was a door with iron gratings.

Now, when these keepers of the shrine were fast asleep on the night of St. Hilddreda [23 June], part of a candle that had been renewed and was still burning fell, as we suppose, upon the aforesaid platform covered with rags. Consequently, all that was near, above or below, began to burn rapidly, so much so that the iron gratings were white hot. And lo! the wrath of the Lord was kindled, but not without mercy, according to that saying, "In wrath remember mercy;" for at the same time the clock struck before the hour of Matins [the service held in the middle of the night], and the master of the refectory got up, and observed and saw the fire. He ran at once, and striking the grating as if for a dead person, cried at the top of his voice that the feretory was consumed by fire.

Then we all came running and found the fire incredibly fierce, and encircling the whole feretory, and almost reaching the beams of the church. Our young men ran for water, some to the well, some to the clock [a mechanical water-clock with a large tank], while others with great difficulty extinguished the force of the fire with their cowls, having first carried off certain pyxes [containing the Holy Sacrament]. And when cold water was poured upon the front of the feretory, the stones fell, and were reduced almost to powder. Moreover, the nails by which the plates of silver were affixed to the feretory fell away from the wood, which had been burnt underneath to the thickness of my finger, and the plates of silver were left dangling one from the other without nails. However, the golden image of the Majesty on the front of the feretory, together with certain stones, remained firm and unharmed, and brighter after the fire than it was before, for it was all of gold.

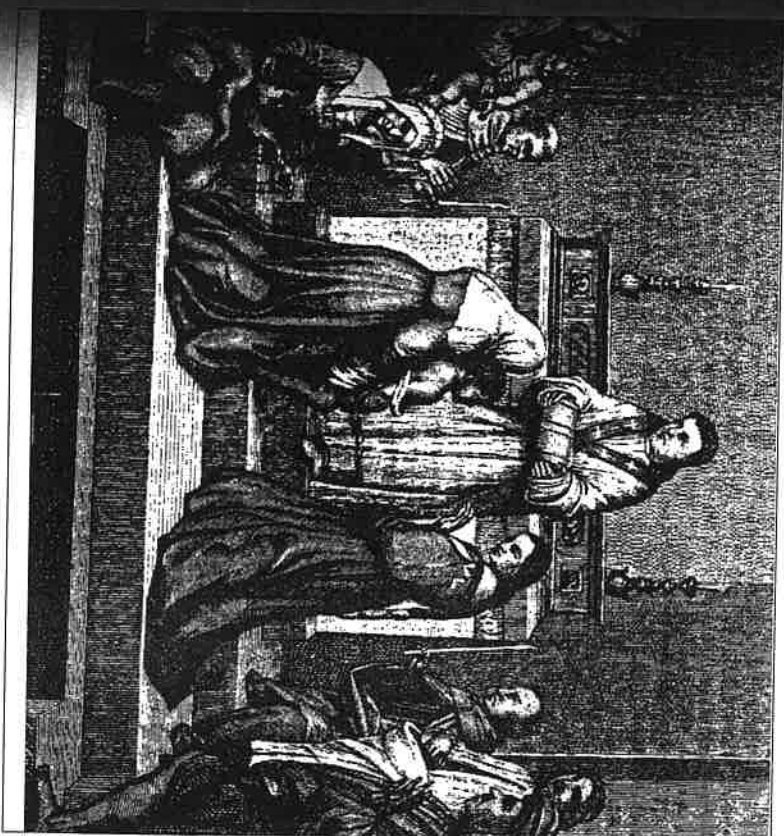
It so happened, by the will of the Highest, that at that time the great beam which used to be behind the altar had been removed, in order to be adorned with new carving. It also happened that the cross, the small statue of the Virgin Mary and St. John, the chest with the shirt of St. Edmund, and the reliquaries which used to hang from the same beam, and other pyxes which also stood upon the beam, had every one of them been previously taken away. Otherwise we believe that all these would have been burnt, as was a painted cloth which hung in the place of this beam. But what would it have been had the church been hung with curtains? When, therefore, we had warned ourselves by carefully inspecting any chinks and crannies that the fire had in no way penetrated the feretory, and had perceived that all was cold, our grief in a great measure subsided, but all at once some of our brethren cried out with a great wailing that the cup of St. Edmund had been burnt. When many of them were searching here and there for stones and plates among the coals and cinders, they pulled out the cup entirely unharmed, lying in the middle of burning embers, which were then put out, and found

the same wrapped up in a linen cloth, half burnt. But the oaken box in which the cup was usually placed had been burnt to ashes, and only the iron bands and iron lock were found. When we saw this miracle, we all wept for joy.

Now, as we observed that the greater part of the front of the feretory was stripped off, and abhorring the unsightliness of the burning, we consulted together and sent secretly for a goldsmith, and caused the metal plates to be joined together and fixed to the feretory without the least delay, to avoid the scandal of the matter. We also caused all traces of the fire to be covered over with wax or in some other way. But the Evangelist testifies that "there is nothing covered which shall not be revealed": for some pilgrims came very early in the morning to make their offerings, and although they could have perceived nothing of the damage, nevertheless, certain of them, peering about, inquired where was the fire that they had just heard had been described. The feretory. And since it could not be entirely concealed, these inquirers were told that the candle had fallen down and that three napkins had been burnt, and that by the heat of the fire some of the stones in front of the shrine had been destroyed. Yet for all this a false rumor went out that the head of the saint had been burnt. Some indeed contented themselves with saying that only the hair was singed; but after the truth was known, the mouth of them that speak lies was stopped."

All these things came to pass by God's providence so that the places round about the shrine of his saint should be more decently kept, and that the purpose of the lord abbot should be sooner and more speedily put into effect: that is to say, that the feretory itself, together with the body of the holy martyr, should be placed with greater security, and with more pomp, in a more dignified position. For before this misfortune occurred, the crest of the feretory was half finished, and the marble blocks on which the feretory was to be elevated and was to rest were for the most part ready and polished.

The abbot [Samson], who at this time was absent, was exceedingly grieved at these reports; and on his return home, going into the chapter-house, he declared that these and even greater perils might befall us for our sins, especially because of our grumbling about our food and drink, thus turning the blame somewhat upon the whole body of the convent, rather than upon our avarice and carelessness of the keepers of the shrine. And in order to induce us to do without our pitaunces [the extra food provided on special occasions] for at least one year, and to put the revenue of the pitauncy towards repairing the front of the feretory with pure gold, he himself first showed us an example of generosity by giving, in our presence, all the gold treasure he possessed, namely, fifteen golden rings, worth, it was believed, sixty marks towards the restoration of the feretory. Furthermore, we all agreed to give



[Fig. 40] Pilgrims approaching the relics of St. Philip, from a fresco by Andrea del Sarto in the cloister of the Church of the Annunziato, Florence (Lacroix, *Military and Religious Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 378).

our pitauncy for this purpose; but our decision was changed because the sacristan said that St. Edmund could very well repair his own feretory without such assistance.

At this time there came a man of great account, but who he was I do not know, who told the abbot about a vision he had seen, and at this the abbot was much moved. Indeed, he related the same in full chapter [before all the monks], with a very bitter speech. "It is indeed true," he said, "that a certain great man has seen a vision in which the holy martyr St. Edmund seemed to be lying outside his feretory, and with groans to say that he was stripped of his clothes and was wasting away with hunger and thirst; and that his cemetery and the porches of his church were negligently kept."

This dream the abbot expounded to us all publicly, laying the blame upon us in this fashion: "St. Edmund alleges that he is naked, because you defraud the naked poor of your old clothes, and because you give with reluctance [only] what you are bound to give them, and it is the same with your food

and drink. Moreover, the idleness and negligence of the sacristan [the monk designated to look after services to the altar] and his associates are apparent from the recent misfortune by fire which occurred between the feretory and the altar." On hearing this the convent was very sorrowful, and after changing several of the brethren met together, and interpreted the dream in this way: "We," said they, "are the naked limbs of St. Edmund, and the convent is his naked body; for we are deprived of our ancient customs and privileges. The abbot has everything – the chamberlainship, the sacristy, the cellary, while we perish of hunger and thirst, because we have not our victuals, save [for the pleasure of] the abbot's clerk and by his ministration. If the keepers of the shrine have been negligent, let the abbot take responsibility for it himself, for it was he who appointed such careless fellows."

Many in the convent spoke in this way. But when this interpretation of the dream was communicated to the abbot in the forest of Harelow, on the way back from London, he was very angry and concerned, and replied, "They will turn that dream against me, will they? By God's face! as soon as I reach home I will restore to them the customs that they say are theirs. I will withdraw my clerk from the cellary, and will leave them to themselves, and shall see the fruits of their wisdom at the end of the year. This year I remained at home, and kept their cellary in such a way as to incur no ill, and is this the way they thank me?" When the abbot returned home, since he wished to translate the blessed martyr, he humbled himself before God and man, meditating inwardly how he might reform himself and make himself at peace with all men, and especially with his own convent. Therefore, sitting in chapter, he commanded that a cellarer and sub-cellarer should be chosen with the consent of us all, and withdrew his own clerk, saying that whatever he had done, he had done it for our good, and he called upon God and his saints as his witnesses, and justified himself in various ways.

"Hear O Heaven! the things that I speak; give ear, O earth!" to which Abbot Samson did. Since the feast of St. Edmund was now approaching, the marble blocks were polished, and everything was made ready for raising in the feretory. The feast day was kept on the sixth day of the week, and on the following day a three days' fast was proclaimed to the people, and the occasion of the fast was publicly explained. The abbot also announced to the convent that they should prepare themselves to transfer the body on the night following the second day of the week, and to transfer the feretory and place it upon the high altar until the masons' work was finished, and he appointed the time and the manner for doing this work.

When we came to Matins that night, there stood the great feretory upon the altar, empty within, adorned with white deer skins above and below.

would about, and all fixed to the wood by silver nails; but one panel stood below, by a column of the church, and the sacred body still lay in its accustomed place. When we had sung Lauds, we all proceeded to receive our disciplines [penances given for sins committed]. When this was done, the lord abbot and those with him dressed themselves in albs and approaching reverently, as was fitting, they hastened to uncover the coffin.

First there was an outer cloth of linen, enclosing the coffin and all the rest. This was found tied on the top with cords of its own. Within this was a cloth of silk, and then another linen cloth, and then a third. And so at last the coffin was uncovered, standing upon a tray of wood, so that the bottom of it might not be damaged by the stone. Fixed to the outside, over the breast of the martyr, lay an angel of gold, about the length of a man's foot, holding in one hand a golden sword and in the other a banner. Underneath it, there was a hole in the lid of the coffin, where the custodians of the martyr in earlier times used to lay their hands in order to touch the sacred body. And over the figure of the angel was inscribed this verse: "Behold! St. Michael's image guards the holy body." At either end of the coffin were iron rings, as there used to be on Danish chests.

So, raising up the coffin with the body, they carried it to the altar and I put my sinful hand to help in carrying it, although the abbot had strictly commanded that no one should approach unless he was called. The coffin was placed within the feretory, and the panel was put back and fastened down. Now we all began to think that the abbot would show the coffin to the people on the octave of the feast, and would replace the sacred body before all of us. But we were sadly deceived, as the sequel will show; for on Wednesday, while the convent was singing Compline [before retiring for the night], the abbot spoke with the sacristan and Walter the physician, and it was resolved that twelve brethren should be appointed who were strong enough to carry the panels of the shrine, and skilful in fixing and unfixing them.

The abbot then said that it had been the object of his prayers to see his patron saint, and that he wished the sacristan and Walter the physician to go with him when he looked upon the body, and there were also nominated the abbot's two chaplains, the two keepers of the feretory, and the two masters of the vestry, with six others: Hugh the sacristan, Walter the physician, Augustine, William of Diss, Robert and Richard. The convent being all asleep, these twelve robed themselves in albs and drawing the coffin out of the feretory, carried it and placed it upon a table near where the feretory used to be, and commenced unfastening the lid, which was joined and fixed to the coffin with sixteen very long iron nails. When they had done this with considerable difficulty, all were ordered to go further away, except the abbot's

two forenamed associates.

Now the coffin was so filled with the sacred body, both in length and width, that even a needle could hardly be put between the head and the wood or between the feet and the wood. The head lay united to the body somewhat raised by a small pillow. The abbot, standing close by, looked carefully and then found a silk cloth veiling the whole body, and then a linen cloth of wondrous whiteness, and upon the head a small linen cloth, and after that another small and very fine silken cloth, like a nun's veil. Lastly, they covered the body, wound round with a linen cloth, and then at last all the lineaments of the saint's body were laid open to view.

At this point the abbot stopped, saying he did not dare proceed further to view the holy body naked. Taking the head between his hands, he sighted and said: "Glorious martyr, St. Edmund, blessed be the hour when you were born! Glorious martyr, turn not my boldness to my perdition, because I, miserable sinner, [presume to] touch you, for you know my devotion and intention!" And he went on to touch the eyes and the nose, which were very large and prominent. Then he touched the breast and arms and raising his left hand he touched the fingers, and placed his own fingers between the fingers of the saint. Proceeding further, he found the feet standing up stiffly like the feet of a man who had died that day, and he touched the toes, and counted them as he touched them.

It was then proposed that the other brethren should be called forward in order that they might see these wonders; and six, who were called, approached and also six other brethren with them, who had stolen in without the abbot's assent and saw the saint's body, namely, Walter of St. Alban, Hugh the infirmarer, Gilbert the brother of the prior, Richard of Hingham, Jocellus the cellarer, and Thurstan the Little, who alone put out his hand and touched the feet and knees of the saint. And by the providence of the Most High, so that there might be plenty of witnesses, one of our brethren, John Diss, sitting high up in the roof of the church with the servants of the vestry saw all these things plainly enough.

When all this was done, the lid was fastened down on the coffin with the same and the same number of nails, and in like manner as before, the martyr was covered up with the same cloths and in the same order as he was when first discovered. Finally, the coffin was placed in the accustomed place, and there was laid upon the coffin near to the angel, a certain silken bag in which was placed a small parchment written in English, containing, it is believed, certain salutations of Ailwin the monk, for this parchment was found close to the golden angel when the coffin was uncovered. By the abbot's order another short piece of writing was . . . also deposited in the same bag, with

the following words: "In the year of the Incarnation of our Lord, 1198, the abbot, Samson, inspired by devotion, saw and touched the body of St. Edmund on the night after the feast of St. Catherine, these being witnesses:" and written below were the names of eighteen monks.

Then the brethren wrapped up the whole coffin in a suitable linen cloth, and over the same placed a new and most valuable silken cloth, which Hubert, archbishop of Canterbury, had offered at the shrine that very year, and they placed lengthwise a certain linen cloth doubled under it and next to the stone, to prevent the coffin or the tray on which it stood from being damaged by the stone. Afterwards the panels were brought forward, and properly joined together on the feretory.

But when the convent assembled to sing Matins, and understood what had been done, all who had not seen these things were very sorrowful, saying among themselves, "We have been sadly deceived." However, after Matins had been sung, the abbot called the convent together in front of the high altar, and briefly recounted what had been done, alleging that he neither should nor could have called all of them to be present on such an occasion. Hearing this, with tears we sang "*Te Deum laudamus*," [*We praise thee, O God*] and hastened to ring the bells in the choir. Four days later, the abbot deposed the keepers of the shrine and the keeper of St. Botolph [whose feretory was near that of St. Edmund], appointing new ones and establishing rules so that the holy places should be more carefully and diligently kept. He also caused the great altar, which before this was hollow, and in which many things were reverently stowed away, and also that space which was between the feretory and the altar to be filled in with stone and cement, so that no danger from fire could arise because of the negligence of the keepers as had already been the case; according to the saying of the wise man: "Happy is he who learns caution from the danger of others."