

THE BODY OF ST. EDMUND

An Essay in Necrobiology

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Unable to resist the Danish marauders who slew him, King Edmund of the East Angles made amends after his death by providing one of the most effective symbols of English resistance to the invader ever recorded in our history. King Alfred and the West Countrymen were able to hold the Danes and bring them to terms, and to Christianity. It is this revival of both Christianity and English patriotism, against the renewed incursions of raiding Northmen, that explains Edmund's prodigious medieval fame. Over sixty English churches were dedicated to him. The first historian of Iceland, Ari, used 'Edmund's slaughter' as the episode from which to measure the date of an event '250 years after'.¹

Such posthumous power naturally, or supernaturally, made Edmund's body, and the shrine that housed it, objects of great veneration and awe. Today in Padua, in the basilica of St. Anthony, who was in life no more than an inspired preacher, one may witness a continuous surge-past of the faithful, uttering anxious prayers as they press their hands against the walls of his tomb. Imagine the dread of those who stood before Edmund's shrine nearly a thousand years ago, in 1014, when King Cnut's father, Sweyn Forkbeard, had threatened destruction or a heavy ransom to the saint's little town, and had himself been struck dead.² East Anglians saw the invisible death-bolts of the saint at work, and voted him money from their ploughlands. Sweyn's son had the same idea, replacing Edmund's secular guardians by a Benedictine monastery and confirming its control over the town. In 1044 Edmund was given all royal customs over the land of everyone in the area now called West Suffolk. Not long after Hastings, the formidable Norman king confirmed Edmund in all his liberties and immunities. The saint had not only vanquished the Danes: he had held his own with William the Conqueror.

King Edward I, no less formidable than William, proposed in 1294 to tax the saint's town, a thing unheard of in 'the Liberty'. When he, of all people, relented, word got about that his body-guard had heard him bellowing in the night, and rushed into his

¹ G. N. Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 1953, p. xix.

² During the Middle Ages two pictures of this dramatic scene were displayed near Edmund's shrine beyond the high altar of the abbey: M. R. James, *The Abbey of St. Edmund at Bury*, Camb. Ant. Soc., 1895, p. 137.

bedchamber to hear him shouting that 'Edmund was making another Sweyn of him'. (For Edward's amends, see pl. XLVIII.)

Such stories reveal the peculiar sanctity of Edmund's shrine, not only with simple superstitious people, but with the most practised potentates. The presence of Edmund's body within that shrine was essential to the maintenance of the fortunes of the abbey, the town and the whole Liberty of St. Edmund. Its removal from the shrine, except to secure it from the Vikings, would have been unthinkable in those days. Yet testimony to its positive presence in the shrine is something we should examine. For, by the fifteenth century, a skeleton in the basilica of St. Sernin in Toulouse had been labelled 'corpus beati Aymundi confessoris Regis Anglie' and later showed itself no ordinary relic.

By about 1580, perhaps much earlier, 'Aymund' had become 'S. Eadmundus Rex Angliae', and ranged among the nine 'protectors' of the town, who were painted in fresco on the great hexagonal columns on either side of St. Sernin's choir: he is found on the Epistle side, with St. Susanna of Babylon.³ In 1631, he repaid all this attention by being invoked at the right moment and ending an outbreak of the plague in Toulouse. Perhaps the most miraculous of all this skeleton's achievements was to survive, or be thought to have survived, the Revolution—as dangerous a time for holy bones in France as our Protestant Reformation was for medieval effigies. In 1901, the Roman Catholic cathedral of Westminster was building, and the Archbishop of Toulouse was persuaded to part with the skeleton. In July it reached Newhaven, and was housed by the Duke of Norfolk at Arundel until Westminster should be ready for it. A letter from M. R. James in *The Times*,⁴ and one from Sir Ernest Clarke in *The Bury Post*,⁵ seem to have persuaded Cardinal Vaughan against taking it in. Whether French or Anglo-Saxon by birth, those old bones have found an unexpected last resting-place in Sussex.

There are those who seriously believe the Toulouse skeleton to be that of the last pre-Danish king of East Anglia. They believe it was stolen from the shrine at Bury in 1216, and removed to

³ *Congrès Archéologique de France, XCIIe session, tenue à Toulouse en 1929*, Paris, 1930, p. 55. In 1968, paintings of, apparently, two centuries earlier were found beneath those of the late 16th century. I have not yet had an opportunity to see them, but they are believed to have included the figure of 'Edmund Confessor and King of England'. I am grateful to Mrs. Rowe, of Ixworth, for informing me of this discovery. No expert opinion of the finds has yet been published. I hope to see them this summer.

⁴ 2 August 1901.

⁵ 3 September 1901. I am indebted to Mr. W. G. Arnott for lending me his offprint of this letter. A full report of Cardinal Vaughan's public acceptance of Sir Ernest Clarke's evidence appeared in *The Times*, 10 September 1901.

France by the French prince Louis,⁶ in league with the anarchical English barons in that year after they had broken the Concord of Runnymede.⁷ It is not impossible. So we look at the English evidence, which is luckily at its most illuminating only a decade or so before 1216, when Jocelin of Brakelond was writing. But we will start at the beginning.

The first need is to establish the condition of the king's corpse at the time of his death, and the circumstances of its first burial. Whether he was overpowered in his hall at Haegelisdun, or more robustly fought and was slain in battle, we need not deny him the wounded body and severed head specified by Abbo.⁸ Abbo's version of the miraculous finding of the head may contain a grain of truth. When Edmund's forlorn followers searched Haegelisdun Wood for the head they were guided to it, according to Abbo, by shouts of 'here' and found it between the paws of a wolf. We need not believe, as medieval people did, that the shouts came from Edmund's own lips or that the wolf had any but disloyal intentions. When the wolf had 'withdrawn', those entrusted with the job 'applied all their skill and ability to fitting the head on to the body *pro tempore*, and committed them, joined in this way, to a suitable tomb. Over it they built a primitive chapel, where the body rested for many years'.⁹

Sometime during the first half of the tenth century,¹⁰ when the Danes had been brought to terms by Wessex, Edmund's body was translated to Bedricesworth, one of his family's 'vills', and where his predecessor Sigbert had founded a monastery early in the seventh century.¹¹ When Edmund's body was brought here, it was guarded first by voluntary devotees, then by a college of half-a-dozen seculars.¹² The desire to have them replaced by regular monks probably explains Abbo's emphasis on the remarkably incorrupt condition of the corpse. He said it might have been assumed that in the years since Edmund's death the body would have putrified; but, on the contrary, there was no trace of his wounds, or scars,

⁶ See below, pp. 311-4. The Rev. Richard Yates, in his *Monastic History of St. Edmund's Bury*, 1805, p. 147, noticed that this belief had been expressed already by Pierre de Caseneuve in 1644: see below, note 50.

⁷ A. L. Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, 1951, p. 477.

⁸ Thomas Arnold, ed., *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, 1, 1890, pp. 15-16 (hereafter cited as *Memorials*); Garmonsway, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71. Cf. p. 220, above.

⁹ *Memorials*, 1, pp. 18-19. The words *pro tempore* imply that a more permanent connexion was made later; see below, note 27.

¹⁰ See above, p. 222.

¹¹ E. O. Blake, ed., *Liber Eliensis*, 1962, p. 11. It was presumably the first St. Mary's (minster) church, that was moved to its present site to make room for the new north transept of the abbey church by Godfrey the Sacrist, c. 1115. See A. B. Whittingham, *Arch. Jour.*, cviii, 1952, p. 173.

¹² *Memorials*, 1, p. 30.

only a tenuous red crease, like a scarlet thread, round his neck.¹³ Abbo referred to a woman, called Oswen, who had opened the tomb regularly on the anniversary of the Lord's Supper, and carefully attended to the corpse.¹⁴ The point he was making was that incorruptibility of the flesh was a miraculous consequence of the young king's carnal purity in life. Abbo was an emissary of the great Benedictine house of Fleury on the upper Loire, sent over at the request of the monks of Ramsey to 'raise the tone' of religious life in England, including the tightening of the Benedictine rules of celibacy and chastity. Towards the end of his account of Edmund's 'passion', Abbo came to the point: 'The Catholic Fathers, in the rolls of their religion . . . teach that men who preserve their chastity till death and endure persecution even to martyrdom are compensated on earth, after death, with incorruption of the flesh . . . the natural attribute of angels'.¹⁵

Abbo made two other points about this valuable corpse. The first was that Theodred, bishop of London (942-951),¹⁶ who led the renewal of Christianity in Danish East Anglia, himself checked the saint's condition: 'handled the body, washed it, clothed it afresh in the best clothes and replaced it in a wooden coffin'.¹⁷ This shows that Edmund's value as an English patriotic and anti-heathen symbol was clearly recognised by the bishop. Secondly, Abbo recorded the story of a headstrong young magnate who demanded to have the coffin opened up so that he could see Edmund for himself, and who was alleged to have gone out of his mind at the

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁴ Her trimmings from his nails and hair were still preserved in the abbey and reported present by Henry VIII's Commissioners. From their Report Weever, in his *Funerall Monuments*, 1631, disconcertingly mistranslated 'crinis' (hair) as 'a sinew'.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁶ From the location of the private estates bequeathed in his will, it seems likely he was a Suffolk man.

¹⁷ C. F. Battiscombe, *The Relics of St. Cuthbert*, Oxford, 1956, pp. 44-46, draws attention to the remarkable similarity between the two cults—of St. Edmund at Bury and St. Cuthbert at Durham. Referring to this passage of Abbo, he writes: 'Since the preservation of a mummy depended primarily on the extent to which it could be kept free from contact with air and moisture, stories of grooming "incorrupt" bodies or washing them . . . must be treated with the greatest reserve'. He adds: 'It would be hard to think of any pious attention calculated to destroy a mummy more quickly than washing it, even supposing that there could have been a mummy of St. Edmund to wash!' There can be no doubt at all that an embalmed body was present in St. Edmund's shrine at this stage; and no strong reason for supposing it could not have been Edmund's: see below, note 27. In the discussion following my reading of this paper on 26 February 1970 at a research seminar of the University of East Anglia's Centre of East Anglian Studies, Dr. Calvin Wells pointed out the fallacy in Battiscombe's belief that air is inimical to mummies. At the same time he expressed reservations about the probable efficiency of embalmers in ninth-century East Anglia.

moment of looking. Does this story suggest the preparation of an ultimate safeguard in case anything should happen to that body? It was already attracting rich gifts; and theft, at least by unbelievers, could not be ruled out. An attempt had already been made on the treasures. Nor could the good condition of the corpse be forever guaranteed. Unless we believe in miracles of this primitive kind, we are bound to assume that those early devotees of Edmund were very gifted embalmers: this story of Abbo and his successors must be reckoned *prima facie* evidence. And we must assume that repair-work was occasionally necessary; indeed that some element of deception was implicit in this 'miracle' of incorruptibility. Unless we believe that such skill in embalming was beyond Edmund's court, there seems no serious reason to suppose that the body guarded in the shrine at Bedricesworth was a substitute for Edmund's. The variety of prodigious technical accomplishments exposed at Sutton Hoo, from an earlier age, as well as Sutton Hoo's evidence of links with the Near East, should make us cautious before assuming that embalming skills were beyond the capacity of the servants of Edmund's household or the craftsmen of his kingdom.¹⁸

From this time of 'the tenth-century Reformation', St. Edmund's collegiate church at Bedricesworth began to acquire its great possessions. Bishop Theodred himself left estates to the Saint.¹⁹ In 945, the Saint's namesake, King Edmund, granted him great privileges over the immediate neighbourhood.²⁰ The King's son Eadwig gave Beccles and Elmswell to the Saint,²¹ and so on. During the new savage Viking onslaughts the chief guardian of the shrine Aylwin, whose parents were patrons of St. Etheldreda, personally conducted Edmund's body to the greater security of St. Gregory's church in St. Paul's churchyard, in London, for the three years 1010-13.²² It was after this period of crisis that Cnut took the hint from Abbo, and from his own father's sudden death: he replaced

¹⁸ C. F. Battiscombe, *op. cit.*, p. 60n., cites Dom H. Leclercq in the *Dictionnaire Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, who in turn cites Rufinus of Aquileia and St. John Chrysostom, both testifying to the efficacy of myrrh as a preservative of the body and a preventive of corruption. He notes that the mixture of myrrh and aloes, which Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea brought to embalm Jesus with, became the normal Christian prescription in subsequent centuries. According to John XIX, 39, they used 'about an hundred pounds weight'. Tight bandages coagulated with the ointment and formed a second skin. However indirect they may have been, links between East Anglia and the Near East in the time of Edmund's seventh-century forebears are unquestionably demonstrated in the Sutton Hoo silver, as Ernst Kitzinger at once recognised (*Antiquity*, March 1940, pp. 40-63).

¹⁹ C. R. Hart, *Early Charters of Eastern England*, 1966, pp. 53-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²² *Memorials*, I, pp. 40-45.

the secular priests by a monastery of Benedictine celibates. A new monastic church was built under the supervision of Bishop Aelfwine, c. 1022.²³ When Danegeld was levied, the people of Bury were to pay their geld to the use of Edmund's monastery. Bedricesworth's change of name to Bury about this time, reflects the need to fortify the place in the teeth of the Viking raids: *burh* implies a defended town. It remained for Edward the Confessor, in 1044, to grant St. Edmund even more lavish privileges over the whole liberty, and for William the Conqueror to confirm them.

Yet, in the time of Edward the Confessor, a woman cured of dumbness at the shrine complained that it was neglected and covered with cobwebs.²⁴ Abbot Leofstan (1044–65) was stung into holding a public inspection of the body. Old Aylwin, himself now one of Edmund's monks, his eyesight growing dim, was asked to attend. He felt the body and found it in as good order as it had been on its return from London, a cross that St. Alphege had coveted still lying on the breast. A marvellous fragrant odour of sanctity²⁵ pervaded the church, and two extraordinary episodes followed. Some of the details were recorded by Archdeacon Hermann at the end of the century; some by Abbot Samson a whole century later. First the Saint's clothes were removed, apparently so that the body might be properly reddened with blood and riddled with wounds.²⁶ Then, to test whether the Saint's head and body really were miraculously reunited, Abbot Leofstan took hold of the head, told a young monk called Turstan to hold on to the feet, and pulled. Turstan was pulled towards the Abbot!²⁷ One might suppose this to have been pre-arranged were it not recorded by Hermann that the Abbot's hands were thereafter paralysed and his speech and sight temporarily affected. His unseemly forwardness and exertion with the holy king, virgin and martyr had brought on a stroke.²⁸ At the end of the next century Abbot Samson referred to his predecessor as

²³ Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

²⁴ *Memorials*, I, p. 52.

²⁵ Battiscombe, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–60, notes the frequency with which 'an odour of heavenly sweetness' was enjoyed on such medieval occasions, and admits that this 'terebinthic' odour is an added indication of embalming if other signs of embalming are also present.

²⁶ *Memorials*, I, p. 53. 'Exuitur itaque sanctus sancti martyrii vestibus partim rubeis rubore sanguinis, partim perforatis ictibus telorum crebris, sed tamen reponendis, salutis credentium profuturis'. The absence of wounds may be explained by the creation of a new outer skin in the embalming process.

²⁷ This episode leaves no doubt that there was a body in Edmund's shrine; presumably one whose skull and vertebrae had been firmly wired together before embalming, if this *was* the venerated king. Grave doubts about the likelihood that this corpse was that of the king were expressed at the seminar referred to in n. 17 above.

²⁸ When he and Aylwin died, they shared a tomb with the woman Oswen (see above, p. 306) at the very feet of Edmund: James, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

a doubting Thomas, and when he himself came to inspect Edmund, though a friend of Richard the Lionheart, was nervous enough to mutter: 'Turn not to my perdition my boldness in touching thee: thou knowest my devotion, and my purpose.'

It must be admitted that those two acts of Leofstan, taken together, do raise doubts whether the body in his care really was that of the young king arrow-riddled and beheaded by the Danes two centuries earlier. The most persuasive reason for accepting its authenticity is the testimony of Aylwin, whose devotion and whose authority on the subject can hardly be doubted.

If we can accept the authenticity of Edmund's body in the Confessor's reign, then the balance of probability is in favour of its having remained in its shrine at Bury until the Dissolution of his abbey. So far as the Toulouse bones are concerned, the suggestion has not yet been made that they were removed from Bury in Anglo-Saxon times.

Eleventh-century people were not all silly, unquestioning believers of anything the monks cared to 'stage'. Hermann, writing soon after Abbot Baldwin's death in 1098, mentioned rumours that were put about at William Rufus' unconventional court to the effect that Edmund's body was not truly incorrupt; people were bold enough to say they thought the riches lavished on the shrine might be better spent on the army. Hermann naturally expressed his opinion that they would regret such impious thoughts.²⁹

That was being said in 1095, when the great apsidal east end of Baldwin's new abbey church was finished and ready for the translation of the saint's body from the old church built under Cnut. A direct result of the rumours was that Rufus declined to sanction the new building's dedication to the saint at that time, though he agreed to the translation. Hermann recorded how Herbert, bishop of East Anglia, tried to exert his authority and take part in the translation. But the saint's liberty was maintained and the ceremonies were performed by Bishop Walkelin of Winchester and Ranulf Flambard, the king's chaplain. Abbot Samson, writing a century later, added much detail to Hermann's contemporary account. He seems to have used the work of Prior 'John of C.', who probably went on from Hermann's time into the first half of the twelfth century, introducing a rather objective view of a monk called Hermann who made familiar play with some relics of Edmund to embellish his otherwise commended sermons.³⁰

The translation of the saint took place in the presence of an enormous multitude. (Two other East Anglian saints were translated with him to the new sanctuary, St. Jurmin, probably King Anna's son, who was slain in 653, and St. Botolph). There was a drought

²⁹ *Memorials*, I, pp. 86-7.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*, pp. lv, 156-160, 168-175.

in East Anglia at the time of the translation. Bishop Walkelin commanded that Edmund's body should be carried outside the church. Walkelin was not bishop of St. Swithin's diocese for nothing. Happily for Edmund's reputation, he timed the demonstration well, and the drought was duly ended.

The most circumstantial piece of medieval testimony lies in the *Chronicle* of Jocelin of Brakelond, written at the beginning of John's reign.³¹ Jocelin showed how the Judges of the Exchequer dared not approach the shrine to strip part of its precious metal to help ransom Richard I, 'for the fury of St. Edmund can strike at a distance, much more those who approach to strip him of his shirt'. If judges were frightened, monks were, presumably, more so. Jocelin went on to write: 'In the year of grace 1198, the glorious martyr Edmund wished, by scaring our convent, to teach us that his body should be guarded with greater care.' One night, the guardians of the shrine fell asleep, a candle slipped, and the whole area of the shrine was ablaze; when it was extinguished, 'the silver plates came away from the wood, which was reduced to the thinness of my finger'. They sent for the goldsmith that night to avoid scandal. Yet next morning the pilgrims were inquisitive, 'for lying rumours had spread that the saint's head had been singed'. Samson made plans to celebrate Edmund's feast (which fell five months later, on 20 November) by placing the shrine on a loftier marble plinth, 'for greater security and glory', and restoring the front of the shrine in pure gold. The three days following the feast were declared a public fast, and on the third day the feretory containing the body was placed on the high altar while the work on the new plinth was done. Jocelin describes the silk³² and linen cloths that were bound round the coffin, and the coffin itself, 'with iron rings at the end like a Norse chest', standing in a wooden trough to protect the coffin from the stone. A gold figure of St. Michael, a foot long, covered up the hole in the coffin-lid through which in ancient times the guardians used presumably to check the presence and condition of the body.

Two nights later, Samson inspected the body himself, with his Sacrist and Walter the Physician: twelve strong monks, white-robed, took off the panels and, with difficulty, the lid, which was held down by sixteen long nails. Many linen and silk³³ wrappings

³¹ *Chronicle*, ed. H. E. Butler, 1949, pp. 97, 106-116. ³² See next note below.

³³ Since nothing of this has survived, little can usefully be surmised. An up-to-date discussion of the silks found when St. Cuthbert was uncovered in 1827 may be read in Battiscombe's symposium on *The Relics of St. Cuthbert* cited above: Gerard Brett, discussing the 'Rider' silk from that shrine, describes a considerable silk industry south of the Caspian in the 10th century, centred on Tabaristan and exporting from Bokhara. Various other silks at Durham derived from Byzantium. At present there seems to be no general study of the early distribution of silk in the West.

were removed, and when the outlines of the body appeared, Samson said he dared not go further and see the sacred flesh unclothed. He touched the eyes, the nose, which he pronounced very large and prominent, the breast, the arms, the fingers, the toes. The other twelve, including Jocelin himself ('Jocellus the Cellarer'), then crowded forward to see, and John of Diss, and the vestry servers, were sitting watching from above in the roof. The rest slept, and were in tears next morning when they heard what they had missed. Samson clearly did not want another public spectacle of the kind Abbot Leofstan had allowed. All seems to have gone well. The panelled shrine was then set up on its grander, safer plinth, and the guardians by whose negligence the fire had started were replaced by new ones with new rules for stricter vigilance.

Now, can we envisage that in 1216, only eighteen years later, some monks of St. Edmund (presumably at least a dozen), were able to find the courage, the means, and the total secrecy, to smuggle this awe-inspiring body out of the monastery, into the hands of the French prince Louis, '*Le Lion*', who was leading the English baronial rebels that year? This is the theory held by those who believe St. Edmund's bones were in St. Sernin's, Toulouse, by 1450. They rely on a short passage in an anonymous medieval French history of the Dukes of Normandy, apparently by a contemporary chronicler in Flanders or Artois.³⁴ It gives a remarkably detailed narrative of the civil war in England, in which the lawless and reactionary barons, not content with Magna Carta, had offered John's crown to Louis (the son of King Philippe Auguste, whom he succeeded in 1223 as Louis VIII). The passage quoted describes the breakdown of peace-negotiations in June 1217, and continues: 'Then Louis sent the viscount of Melun o grant chevalerie vers St. Edmont, por tenser la terre'—'towards St. Edmund, to contest the country.' It goes on to say that 'they made their sortie, then pillaged³⁵ the town of St. Edmund, acquired much booty from the land, and returned to London.'³⁶ The abbey is not mentioned, still less the shrine. One difficulty in accepting the authenticity of this whole passage is its firm placing in June/July 1217. Roger of Wendover, also a contemporary, described very circumstantially, in the *Chronica Majora*, Melun's death in London a whole year earlier, in the summer of 1216. (Edmont, according to the distinguished nineteenth-century editor of the *Histoire*, appears in the manuscript as Odmont!)

The English chroniclers described this war of 1215-17 in considerable detail. As monks they might have been expected to note a ransacking of St. Edmund's town, still more his abbey and shrine.

³⁴ F. Michel, ed., *Histoire des Ducs de Normandie*, 1840, p. iii.

³⁵ *Barroierent*. The use of *baroier* in this passage is actually cited in F. Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de L'Ancienne Langue Française*, 1, 1881, p. 589.

³⁶ Michel, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

They do not. They chronicle ferocious excursions by John and his separate forces through the baronial territories early in 1216, which included the capture of Colchester keep, the biggest object of its kind in Europe. A most significant witness is Ralph of Coggeshall, who was chronicler (as well as abbot and a remarkable builder) of the Cistercian abbey at Little Coggeshall. There he was close enough to the affairs of Bury to devote a well-informed paragraph to Samson's examination in 1198 of the 'incorrupt and supple' body of Edmund 'in the presence of eighteen monks.' He recorded that at Christmas 1215 Tilty Abbey had been violently entered during Mass and many stores ('apothecas') broken into and goods ('institutorum deposita') taken. Similarly his own abbey had been entered on 1 January, and twenty-two horses taken.³⁷ These outrages were blamed on John's retainers rather than on himself, and notably on a character called Buc de Brabant. Ralph described how they then rushed off via Bury St. Edmunds to Ely.

The headquarters of John's enemies suffered: Bury had nothing to fear from him. There is a clear account of his behaviour on a visit to the abbey just over a year earlier, in November 1214.³⁸ Though the monks at that time were legally in the wrong, he reasoned with them, without losing his notorious temper, and finally agreed to appoint as their new abbot their own candidate, Hugh of Northwold, a gentle but impressive man, who was with John later, at Runnymede, afterwards dining at Windsor and conversing with him side by side on the royal couch.³⁹

Would St. Edmund's accord with John explain an assault on his town by the barons when they were joined by Louis, as Pretender, in May 1216? It might, though the corollary would be that among the monks there was at least a strong party loyal to their abbot and John. They would give immediate publicity to any such outrage, by his opponents, as the theft of their most priceless treasure, their principal *raison d'être*. Father Bryan Houghton has postulated a 'fifth column' within the abbey, smuggling the corpse out secretly to Louis and the barons.⁴⁰ He has adduced not a word of contemporary evidence for such double treachery—to both their abbey and to John—nor any comprehensible motive. Louis and the barons were all under the pope's solemn excommunication,⁴¹

³⁷ Joseph Stevenson, ed., *Radulphi de Coggeshall Chronicon Anglicanum*, Rolls Series, 1875, p. 177. Cf. *V.C.H., Essex*, II, pp. 134, 125.

³⁸ *Memorials*, II, pp. 95–100. ³⁹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 128.

⁴⁰ The Very Rev. B. R. S. Houghton, Roman Catholic parish priest of Bury St. Edmunds, very kindly supplied me with a copy of his unpublished monograph, dated 20 February 1965. His book, *St Edmund, King and Martyr*, is being published this year by Terence Dalton, at Lavenham, Suffolk. Father Houghton tells me (letter of 6 March 1970) he now attaches great importance to the spelling *Eadmundus* on the medieval under-painting at S. Sernin (n. 3, above).

⁴¹ Poole, *op. cit.*, p. 478.

though it is true that a small group of religious intellectuals at St. Paul's supported them.⁴² The royalists fought in the name of the Church, and wore the badge of crusaders.⁴³ Abbot Ralph of Coggeshall, interested enough to record Samson's inspection of Edmund's body, gives no hint at all of any baronial interference with the saint or his abbey. Head of a Cistercian house, he would have no interest in 'hushing up' such a sensational loss by the Benedictines, rather the reverse.

Louis was supported in 1216 by William de Mandeville, Robert FitzWalter and William de Huntingfield from Essex and Suffolk. They controlled Pleshey and Hedingham and proceeded against a number of other East Anglian castles. Orford was one.⁴⁴ Norwich they found deserted, and garrisoned it.⁴⁵ They besieged Cambridge, took its castle, and marched on, pillaging, through Norfolk and Suffolk. They extorted ransoms from Yarmouth, Dunwich and Ipswich. Then, after ravaging Colchester and thereabout they returned to London. There the viscount of Melun fell ill and died. Roger of Wendover, who recorded this, is as silent as Ralph of Coggeshall about that 'pillaging of St. Edmund's town' a year later with which Melun was credited by the French history of the Dukes of Normandy. Wendover was a monk of St. Albans, whose own troubles with the barons he described minutely. At Redbourn nearby, the reliquary of St. Amphibalus' church was plundered by Louis' henchmen. Indeed this is the one well-attested plunder of relics in the whole war.⁴⁶ Roger would surely have at least mentioned the rape of the famous reliquary of his fellow Benedictines at Bury, less than sixty miles away?

If, despite the absence of English confirmation, the French chronicler was right about Melun and St. Edmunds, then he did establish an indirect link between St. Edmund and Toulouse. In return for 10,000 marks, Louis agreed never to support English rebels again, was absolved, and returned to France. Two years later, in 1219, he himself went crusader and besieged Toulouse whose people were Manichean heretics. We are asked to believe that he acquired the mummy from Melun (who completely mistrusted him), and that then, two or three years after his excursion into East Anglia, Louis had gone campaigning in the 'Midi' with a mummified English saint in his baggage; that the heretical Tolosians now acquired the relics by sallying out and ransacking his camp; alternatively, that he based himself on St. Sernin's, which

⁴² Sir Maurice Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century*, 1953, p. 8. ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ W. Stubbs, ed., *Memoriale Walteri de Coventria*, II, 1873, p. 235.

⁴⁵ H.R. Luard, ed., *Chronica Majora*, Rolls Series, II, 1874, p. 663.

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, III., 1876, pp. 16-17. Apparently Amphibalus' own relics had been translated from Redbourn to St. Alban's abbey in 1178: Sir Henry Chauncy, *Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire*, II, 1826, p. 397.

was then (as we know) an isolated fortress apart from the main town, and personally made the abbey a present of Edmund's body.⁴⁷ It is not impossible. It seems highly improbable. What would seem at least not more improbable is that during the Hundred Years War the Tolosians were engaged in displaying some invented relics of a popular English patriot-saint, either to advertise their attitude to the war, or merely to tease English merchants and travellers in the town. Or that Louis himself was the inventor.

St. Edmund's fame was essentially north-west European. Nevertheless, had they acquired his celebrated body in 1219, the monks of St. Sernin would have known whose bones they were supposed to be (and would have come under very heavy pressure to return them: they were by no means short of relics. Lucca cathedral had had an altar to St. Edmund since 1071.^{47a} Yet in 1517 there was certainly uncertainty at Toulouse about these bones. That year, a fine black-letter history of the town appeared in French.⁴⁸ As Sir Ernest Clarke noticed,⁴⁹ it lists all the saints whose remains reposed in Toulouse, starting with the apostles, James the Less, Simon, Jude and Barnabas. Twenty-fifth down the list comes what is described as 'le corps de saint aymond confesseur du roi d'angleterre', i.e., saint aymond, *confessor to the king of England!* Next in the list came 'saint honeste, confesseur et disciple de saint saturnin', who certainly *was* confessor to Saturnin, or Sernin, first bishop of Toulouse. It was only after Aymond's effectiveness with the plague in 1631 that a local scholar, Pierre de Caseneuve, boldly identified him with the King of East Anglia.⁵⁰ Before that it can have been no clearer to the people of Toulouse than it is to us today whose bones are represented by that strange label: 'Aymond confessor and King of England'.

Even if St. Sernin's had claimed unequivocally in the fifteenth century that they had Edmund's bones, that would hardly amount to proof that they had them. The monks at Bury at that time claimed to have some of the coals St. Lawrence was roasted on:

⁴⁷ See below, n. 50. ^{47a} *memorials*, I, pp. 68, 137.

⁴⁸ *Les gestes des tholosais*, premierement escriptz en langage Latin par discret et lettre maistre Nichole Bertrandi advocat . . . et apres translates en francoy.

⁴⁹ *The Bury Post*, 3 September 1901.

⁵⁰ Pierre de Caseneuve, *Histoire de la Vie et des Miracles de S. Edmond, Roy D'Estangle, Tolose*, 1644. This was a *pièce d'occasion*, undertaken during the horrors of the Plague in 1631, when the town vowed to elevate the relics of 'this great martyr.' In 1644, the Archbishop of Toulouse performed the elevation 'before the eyes of this town'. The book is an industrious, indiscriminate selection from many medieval sources of the life and miracles of the East Anglian king. On the crucial subject of the translation from Bury to Toulouse it says merely: 'On croit que—it is thought that—ce fût le Roy Louys huitième, pere de S. Louys, qui en fit un present a cette venerable Eglise . . . Nous lisons que—we read that—all the Princes who besieged the town of Tolose were lodged in the Abbey of S. Sernin.'

there is a very wide gap between belief and proof. Much nearer this time, two opportunities for the removal of Edmund from Bury did occur: the risings of the town against the abbey in 1327 and 1379-81. In the first of these riots the townsmen attacked and burnt many of the monastic buildings. They were rebelling against the irksome monastic hold over the town, and naturally made for the muniments and records that established that hold. They also made off with priceless gold and silver vessels from the treasury and rich vestments.⁵¹ In a letter seeking the sympathy and advice of the Mayor and Aldermen of London, the Alderman and Commonalty of Bury were careful to blame the monks for starting the violence and 'great mischance which has befallen our town'. They continued: 'The whole commonalty was roused, the abbey was burnt, but by God's grace the church was saved.'⁵² In the exchange of vituperation that led next year to the abbot's abduction to London and Flanders, presumably so that he could not testify in the Crown's case against them, no accusations were made, on either side, of any tampering with Edmund's shrine.

Similarly in 1381, the main object of the attention of John Wrawe, John Tollemache and the Bury rebels was the contents of the abbey's muniment room, the old charters and agreements that gave legal sanction to the town's subordination. The Prior, the Keeper of the abbey's court-rolls, and a third man were summarily beheaded by the mob, who made the monks bring the offending documents to the Guildhall. They also made them hand over a great gold chalice and a gorgeously bejewelled crucifix, worth 300 marks, as a pledge that the monastery would accept an abbot committed to the town's liberation. Then the king recovered control, the Bury townsmen returned the documents and the treasures, and faced a bill for 2,000 marks for damages. All this was described by John Gosford, the abbey's almoner, an eye-witness.⁵³ Again, though both abbey and church were invaded, there is not the least suggestion that Edmund's shrine was violated. If it had been, there would certainly have been venomous recrimination from the opposing party.

One catches a last vivid glimpse of the shrine in the glare of the

⁵¹ The 'Depredations' are detailed in *Memorials*, II, pp. 330-4. The Pleas of the Crown in the case are printed in *The Pinchbeck Register*, ed. Hervey, 1925, I, pp. 95-271. It is important to note that Samson's arrangements for the continuous guarding of the body of St. Edmund, night and day, by two monks, were among the regulations for the abbey that were confirmed by the Pope in August, 1256: see *Rolls Series, Papal Registers*, I, 1893, p. 334.

⁵² See V. B. Redstone, 'Some Mercenaries of Henry, Earl of Lancaster', *Trans. R. Hist. Soc.*, 3rd ser., VII, 1913, p. 116, a transcript from Memoranda Roll, A.1 membr. vi (8) dorso, City of London Corporation Records.

⁵³ Edgar Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia in 1381*, Cambridge, 1896, pp. 14-21, 142-3.

great fire of 20 January 1465.⁵⁴ It was a still, sunny day, and some plumbers left a brazier alight on the west tower of the abbey church while they went down to eat their lunch. A breeze got up, the roof-timbers caught, and suddenly great flames appeared inside the church. An eye-witness described the course of the fire, and M.R. James has printed the description in his *Abbey Church of St. Edmund at Bury*.⁵⁵ The bells clanged out a warning, and the townspeople ran from all quarters to help. From the west front the fire spread eastwards along the roof. The central tower and spire, with its delicate lantern tracery, collapsed and the flames, uncontrollable, leapt and darted on, reducing everything to a huge heap of charred embers. As they approached the shrine they burnt through the rope suspending the wooden cover, which caught alight but fell into place on the sarcophagus and enclosed the martyr as in an oven (*clibanus*), 'so that he was unscathed'. Daring men broke some windows, rushed into the church throwing water on to the flames, and seeing that the shrine was intact raised a shout of joy to those outside. The fire veered north, and destroyed the Lady Chapel before it died down.

No record is known of any formal 'verification' of the Saint's condition after this oven-warming. This does not mean that none took place: it would be surprising, indeed, if none did. Similarly at the Dissolution of the abbey in 1539, there is no mention of Edmund's body by the Commissioners in their report to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's vicar-general. Their two letters from Bury to Cromwell⁵⁶ were written for particular reasons: any reference to Edmund's remains, vitally important though they had been in the formative years and hey-day of the abbey, would have been irrelevant now. Nobody was seriously thinking of trying to make a Sweyn of Henry VIII. One letter, referring to Edmund's 'riche shryne whiche was very comberous to deface', was devoted exclusively to the subject of the value of the loot to be had in Bury. If the matter of Edmund's body had been mentioned, it would have been in Dr. John Ap Rice's letter, but Dr. Ap Rice did not trouble to give the names of those whose 'skulls and bones' he did refer to:

⁵⁴ A vivid illustration of the open shrine in 1433, from B. M. Harl. MS. 2278, is reproduced as Plate XLVIII, *b*. Drawn with unusually realistic detail, much of it confirmed by other written sources, it nevertheless illustrated Lydgate's account of the translation of Edmund's body from the 'rotounde' chapel in 1095, and cannot be regarded as conclusive evidence that the mummy was displayed so flagrantly, or at all, in 1433. The detail in Plate XLVIII, *a*, is naturally more convincing. Professor Peter Lasko's first response to the elaborate goldwork in *b* was that it might represent an early thirteenth-century refacing: but a suggested to him immediately work of Edward I's time.

⁵⁵ *Loc. cit.*, above, in note 2, pp. 204-212.

⁵⁶ T. Wright, ed., *The Suppression of the Monasteries*, Camden Soc., 1843, pp. 85, 144; also James, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-171.



a.



b.

By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

St. Edmund's shrine in 1433. Two illustrations from the metrical *Life of St. Edmund and St. Fremund* by the Bury monk, John Lydgate (?1370–?1451): B. M. Harleian MS. 2278, fols. 9 (above) and 117 (below).

Lydgate presented this MS. book to the young Henry VI during his stay at the abbey. Folio 9 shows the poet praying to the martyr. Behind him a secular figure in a blue gown sits holding a staff. The green marble screen linking the four 3-lb. candles that were alight night and day was probably provided from Edward I's grants in 1285 and 1296 (Pat. 13 Ed. I, m 13 and 24 Ed. I, m 18). His closest counsellor, Henry de Lacy, gave two of the gold crosses on the 'roof' of the golden shrine, one with a carbuncle (sapphire), which prompted Lydgate to address the saint as 'charboncle of martirs alle, o hevenly gemme, saphir of stabilnesse'. The small square panel presumably enabled the guardians of the shrine to check the presence and condition of the saint. Folio 117 shows the 'lid' raised, as it seems to have been when the fire broke out in 1465 (see p. 316).

St. Petronilla's for instance; or St. Botolph's, which were treasured in the abbey and occasionally carried about the fields for purposes of encouraging the rain.⁵⁷ The fact that such details were not reported to Cromwell means that they were beneath his notice, not that such items were not found. Dr. Ap Rice did tell Cromwell he firmly believed that the monks of Bury 'had confedered and compacted bfore our commyng.' If they retained the reverence for their patron we might reasonably expect, they took the opportunity to bury him quietly nearby in their great cemetery.

In 1634, William Hawkins, master of Hadleigh Grammar School, published some ingenious and delightful Latin verses. Describing a lawsuit at Bury, he shows that he had searched everywhere among the ruins and the nettles there for the place where Edmund's bones lay.⁵⁸ He never found it. The site was not remembered. But the story provides a significant piece of evidence. An intelligent schoolmaster-poet, living in West Suffolk one century after the Dissolution, naturally assumed that Edmund's body had in the end been interred in the town whose great distinction it had largely shaped for at least six centuries.

⁵⁷ John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, 1631, p. 724.

⁵⁸ *Corolla Varia*, Cambridge, 1634. This point was first noticed by Sir Ernest Clarke, of Bury, whose studies advanced our understanding of St. Edmund and Bury considerably at the start of the present century. Hawkins's work is fully described in Pigot's *Hadleigh*, 1860, pp. 176-86. These lines come in a passage entitled *Devastalia*:

Pergit & indagans magnivestigia Templi,
Pro tam Daedaleâ fabricatis arte columnis,
Pro tot Nobilium Mitratorúmque sepulchris,
Urticas reperit. Quaerit super omnia, Regis
Ossibus *Edmundi* quisnam locus. Ossa colentúm
Tot votis ambita diu, tot ditia donis
(Ipsum Ubi vix restat) nusquam sunt . . .

Terminal words on the Toulouse relics are provided in a letter to the author dated 5 February 1970 from Mr. Francis Steer, Archivist and Librarian to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk: 'His Grace has no knowledge as to any evidence of the vertebrae showing signs of beheading and neither will he agree to any tests on, or examination of, the bones being carried out. The bones are in a casket behind an iron grille which could not be removed without damage to the wall surface of the Private Chapel.' For their presence in that chapel, see p. 304, above.