

SOME MEDIEVAL DRAWINGS OF ST SWITHUN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines three drawings of the head of St Swithun made in the late 13th and early 14th century. The drawings were devised and put into registers of documents created in the royal exchequer at Westminster, where they functioned as finding-aids. As such, they are unusual examples of religious imagery with no religious purpose, and throw some light on prevailing ideas about Winchester cathedral priory at the time they were made. Their appearance was possibly conditioned by their maker's acquaintance with head-shaped reliquaries: this matter is briefly discussed, and a hitherto unremarked head-relic of St Swithun at Westminster Abbey introduced.

This short article discusses three medieval drawings of St Swithun, found in page-margins of two separate manuscripts now in The National Archives (hereafter TNA) at Kew. Executed in brown ink, they are original features of page-design rather than – as commonly with medieval marginal drawings – later additions. Each represents the head of the saint facing left wearing a decorated amice arranged as a collar and a mitre with the lappets known as *infulae* hanging down at the back. The faces are lightly bearded and have grave, somewhat hypnotic expressions. These are not elaborate or aesthetically distinguished images, and were not made for public view. Quite understandably, modern scholarship has passed them by. They have not been brought into discussion of the cult of St Swithun, and only one has previously been published, in a tiny engraving (Palgrave 1836, 83) which was later reprinted with a misleading caption (Hall 1898, 55). Yet their artistic insignificance is compensated for by the interest of their purpose and connotations, which give them a certain value for historians of late medieval Winchester.

The manuscripts containing the drawings are thick parchment registers of documents and

documentary abstracts compiled in the royal exchequer at Westminster during the reigns of Edward I and Edward II. Their main purpose was that of streamlining document retrieval in the exchequer archive. This archive, housed at Westminster Abbey, had grown very complex by the late 13th century. It held documents on a vast range of subjects relevant to the business of Plantagenet government. These documents were stored in a large number and variety of containers, including bags, purses, cases, wicker baskets, wooden boxes and chests, of many different shapes and sizes. While some of the containers looked distinctive – chests, for example, might have heraldry painted on them – many others must have looked alike. With time, it became increasingly difficult for clerks to locate particular documents promptly as demand for them arose. Thus, a cross-referencing system was devised, based on series of unique and distinctive-looking signs. Some of the signs were pictorial, others heraldic, alphabetic or syllabic. They were put onto containers in the archive, and also copied into registers alongside a heading, abstract or transcript of the documents inside these containers. Information about the type and appearance of the containers was often written next to the signs. The earliest registers have tables on contents which could be quickly scanned by any clerk tasked with fetching documents on a given subject. The clerk would see the distinctive sign in the margin and check the adjacent text to make sure he had located the documents he was after. If necessary, he could then turn to the transcripts of the documents contained in the body of the register. These transcripts also had a copy of the sign drawn next to them, at the head of the relevant section of documents. The later registers, containing only abstracts, have the signs drawn next to these abstracts along with information about the sort of container the

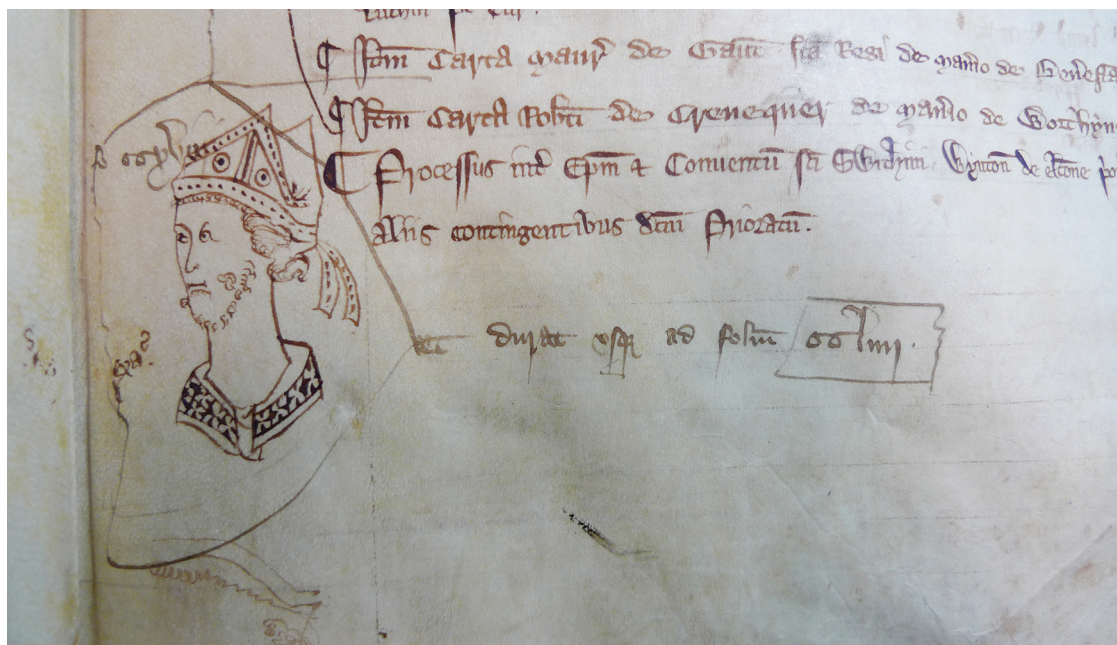


Fig. 1 TNA, E 36/274, fol. 29: drawing of St Swithun's head in the table of contents in Liber A (c. 1282-92). (Reproduced by permission of The National Archives)

fetching clerk should look for. (For a more detailed discussion of this system, see Luxford 2016).

Specific reference to the drawings of St Swithun will make this short description of a complex archival system clearer. These drawings are all versions of the particular sign chosen by exchequer officials to identify documents relating to Winchester cathedral priory. They corresponded to a now-lost image of Swithun's head that was represented on a leather-covered chest bound with iron bands. The king's copies of the original, sealed documents were kept inside this container. Two of the drawings are in the earliest of the registers, made sometime between c. 1282-92. This manuscript, originally called 'Liber A', now has the shelf-mark TNA, E 36/274. One drawing is in the table of contents (fol. 29) (Fig. 1), the other in the body of the manuscript (fol. 287) next to the transcripts (Fig. 2). At this period, it was not thought necessary to specify the type of container next to the sign. However, there is a heading which tells the reader what documents the drawing pertained to, specifically, those concerning 'The proceedings between the bishop and

convent of St Swithun's, Winchester, about the election of the prior of that place, and other documents touching on the said priory.' ('Processus inter Episcopum & Conuentum sancti Swithuni Wyntoniensis de electione prioris loci eiusdem et aliis contingentibus dictum Prioratum.') In addition, the drawing on fol. 287 has 'The head of St Swithun' ('Capud sancti Suithin[i]') written next to it, and this inscription presumably appeared on the document-container as well. This is a curious addition, because functionally otiose. No other sign used in the archive represented a mitred prelate's head, so there was nothing with which to confuse the image. A sign devised for documents about Canterbury cathedral priory does show a bust of St Thomas Becket, but with his mitre falling off as a sword is stuck into his head (fols. 29v, 295). The identifying inscription is, however, valuable to the historian, because it shows that the drawings were supposed to represent Swithun as opposed to a generic bishop of Winchester.

The third drawing is in a register made in 1323 for Walter de Stapleton, bishop of Exeter, when he was Lord High Treasurer (TNA, E

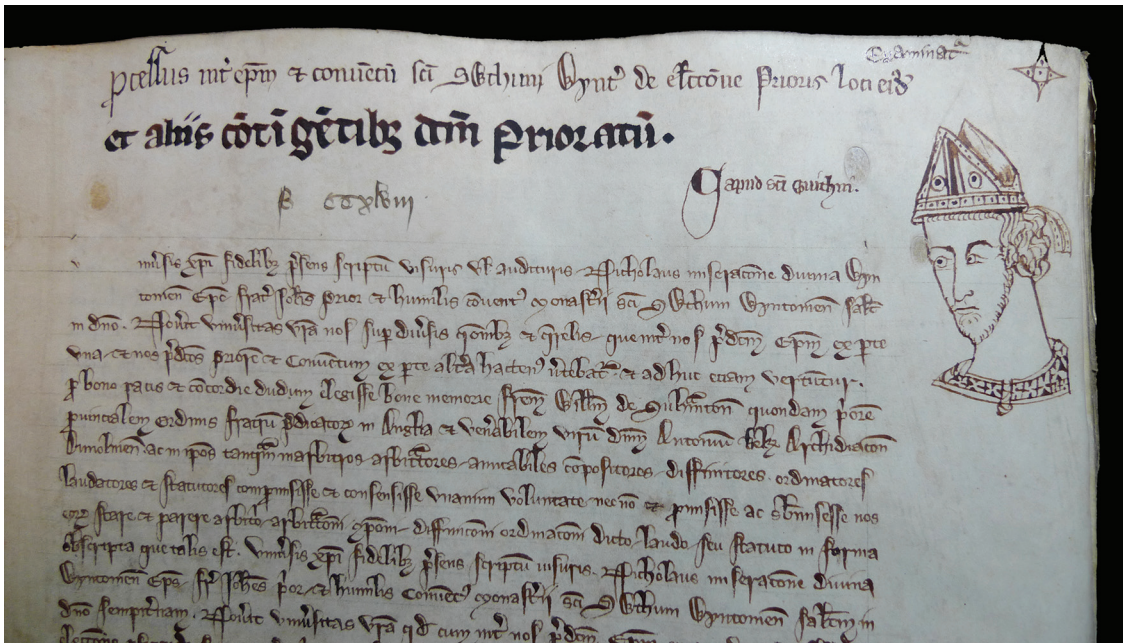


Fig. 2 TNA, E 36/274, fol. 287: drawing of St Swithun's head at the beginning of a series of documents about Winchester cathedral priory in Liber A (c. 1282-92). (Reproduced by permission of The National Archives)

36/268, p. 151) (Fig. 3). This is a smaller manuscript with narrower margins, so the drawing is smaller, but it reproduces the salient features of its earlier counterparts. The written information specifying the contents of the documents is the same, but with the addition of the date 1278. This was, perhaps, the date of the earliest document in the container: the 'proceedings' referred to are presumably those which culminated in 1284 with ratification of the convent's right to elect its own priors (on which, see Greatrex 1993, 141-3). It is here, above this drawing, that the scribe wrote a caption stating that the documents were kept 'In a leathern chest [or box] bound with iron, displaying this sign' ('In forcerio de coreo ferro ligato ad hoc signum'). The addition of this extra help to the fetcher suggests that the archive had grown more complex and harder to use by the 1320s than it was during Edward I's reign.

It seems impossible to say whether these drawings ever served the purpose of their design. Shortly after Liber A was made, its contents seem to have been checked against what was in the archive, as notes stating that

'it has been examined' ('Examinatur') were written next to the signs throughout. The fact that the register and the cross-referencing system it embodies remained valuable is shown by a comprehensive re-examination of the manuscript done in the 15th century. As part of this process, each section of documents had a folio number written at the beginning, and the table of contents was supplied with a running series of such numbers, making it easier for users to find what they sought. Thus, what is now folio 287 is numbered 'fo. ccxlviii', while on folio 29, the drawing of Swithun's head has been circled and a remark written alongside it to the effect that the documents it symbolises 'continue until folio 254' (et durat usque folium ccliiij'). This explains the annotation seen in Figure 1.

These three drawings are rare examples of saintly imagery with no religious purpose. They belonged to a complex, hermetic referencing system invented by secular bureaucrats for purely administrative reasons. As such, they resist interpretation: they were neither didactic nor intended to stimulate reflection, prayer or anything else. Nevertheless, the choice of St



Fig. 3 TNA, E 36/268, p. 151: drawing of St Swithun's head next to documentary abstracts in Bishop Stapleton's 'calendar' (1323). The note above describes the appearance of a box in the exchequer archive that displayed the same sign. (Reproduced by permission of The National Archives)

Swithun's head, with its identity emphasised by the accompanying caption, conveys meaning in spite of itself by expressing medieval ideas about Winchester cathedral priory. Most obviously, the choice reveals a tendency on the part

of learned people as far away as London to associate the monastery and bishopric with its patron saint. The immediacy of this association may not be surprising, particularly given that the priory's dedication is mentioned in the accompanying text, but it is always valuable to have confirmation of what could otherwise only be guessed at. The drawings thus have an exemplary value for the historian. Two things may be noted in support of this claim. First, a synoptic consideration of the signs in the registers shows that they were devised to epitomise individuals or institutions rather than the content of the adjacent documents. Thus, for example, the Winchester documents are not about St Swithun, and the Canterbury ones not about Becket. Secondly, the exchequer officials were not compelled to use a particular type of sign for a monastery. A cowled head was chosen to accompany documents about Peterborough abbey and a church with open doors for documents about Westminster Abbey (TNA, E 36/268, pp. 160, 185). A distinctive version of either pictograph would have functioned just as well for Winchester, as would some other type of motif. Strictly speaking, the Winchester-Swithun association noted here can only be attributed to the official who devised the sign. However, it seems reasonable to think that it reflects a more widely held association.

For the modern observer, the choice of a disembodied saint's head with a face staring fixedly in this way recalls a head-reliquary of a type common in the treasuries of later medieval English monasteries and cathedrals (overview in Falk 1991, 105–6). To associate the drawings with such an object is a more speculative venture, and it is certainly not possible to confirm a link. But the exercise is justified by the fact that the man who devised the sign is certain to have known such reliquaries. It is also encouraged by the existence of an independent case in which a head-reliquary was used to epitomise a saint. In an early 15th-century book of homilies, the scribe or rubricator has drawn a basic but unmistakable head-reliquary in red ink next to a text about St Thomas Becket (San Marino, California, Huntington Library, HM 129, fol. 15v: description of manuscript in Dutschke & Rouse 1989, 164–73). In this case, the inference is that a text mentioning

Becket immediately suggested a head-reliquary to the scribe who did the drawing because relics were what Becket was most famous for, and also because a mitred head, as opposed to a shrine of architectural form, effectively expressed the words ‘A narsehybyssehope’ (i.e. ‘an archbishop’) written in the adjacent text. Perhaps some exchequer official had a similar mental reflex when he thought about St Swithun. In principal, the object that sprang into his mind need not have contained Swithun’s head, although this head was probably still at Canterbury cathedral priory when the drawings were made, and thus potentially accessible to him. (The head is supposed to have been taken there from Winchester in 1006; during the 14th century, it went to Evreux cathedral in Normandy, as John Crook has shown (2003, 61–5; 2013, 139.) There were several head reliquaries at Westminster Abbey itself that men working in the exchequer could have seen. Intriguingly, Westminster’s monks claimed to possess Swithun’s head in the late middle ages, although the evidence for this does not go back to the reign of Edward I. It

is found in three inventories of the St Edward the Confessor’s chapel made for shrine-keepers of the abbey, dated 1467, 1479 and 1520 (Westminster Abbey Muniments 9477, 9478, 9485). Unfortunately for this line of inquiry, this Swithun-relic (whatever its actual status) does not seem to have been kept in a container shaped like a head: the record of 1467, which may stand for all three, mentions a standing box reliquary ‘paintyd gilt [...] with the hede of seint Swythune’. It would be useless to speculate further on this point. In the current state of knowledge, all it seems reasonable to say is that the drawings in the exchequer registers may reflect acquaintance with a head-reliquary at some level. If they do not, then it is anyway clear that they indicate awareness of how prelates were generally represented in the art of the period.

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