

The Two Heroes

King Athelstan and Saint Edmund

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Introduction

Our Order is named for King Athelstan, regarded by his contemporaries as a very great king indeed. Today he languishes in obscurity and certainly does not attract the proper attention which he deserves as 'first King of all the English'.

Earlier this year, a new Court was consecrated in the province of East Anglia in the name of St. Edmund. Appropriately enough, Edmund was the last English king of East Anglia, but in past times he was regarded as the greatest of the English saints. Like Athelstan, he today lacks the fame which is due to him: in fact some would say that he should be England's patron saint.

This paper explores how these two great English heroes were linked.

The historical King Edmund

We know almost nothing about the historical king. He came to the throne of the East Angles in 855, ruler of one of the four kingdoms

**which then existed in England (the others were Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria)**

**Ten years later, a cataclysm occurred when a huge Viking army came not to loot but to conquer. The 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', an annual account kept by monks of the important events of the year, tells us for 865**

**'in that year a great heathen force came into English land, and they took winter quarters in East Anglia, there they were horsed. And they made peace with them'.**

**In other words, the Vikings were too strong to resist, and the East Anglians had to give tribute in the form of horses. The invaders destroyed Northumbria and Mercia, and in 870 the Chronicle tells us**

**'the force went over Mercia to East Anglia and took winter quarters at Thetford. In that year St. Edmund the king fought against them, and the Danes took the victory, killed the king and overcame all the land. They destroyed all the churches they came to.'**

**After this, East Anglia would be ruled by Danes until Athelstan absorbed it into the unified English Kingdom some 70 years later.**

## The Legend of St. Edmund the Martyr

Our earliest and best account of Edmund's martyrdom is by the monk Abbo of Fleury in his 'Passio Sancti Eadmundi'.

Abbo tells us that the Vikings under Ivar Ragnarsson were in winter quarters at Thetford, and were ravaging the countryside. Edmund, at his royal hall at Haegilisdon nearby, received a messenger from the Vikings, demanding a tally of all his treasure, which he would be required to share with Ivar. If he did this, he could retain his throne, but under Ivar's overlordship.

Edmund asked his bishop for advice, and the bishop urged him to accept these terms for his own safety. Abbo tells us that on the contrary, Edmund, a devout Christian, was wracked by grief for the suffering of his people, and decided to die on their behalf. Consecrated by the triple unction of baptism, confirmation and coronation, he was ruler under God of a sovereign people. Dedicated to Christ, he could not share with heathens, and even death could not separate him from the love of Christ.

**This brave refusal, together with a demand that Ivar should forsake his false pagan gods resulted in savage consequences.**

**Ivar led his forces to Edmund's hall, mocked and beat Edmund then tied him to a tree at the edge of the woods. Edmund was scourged, but called on the name of Christ at each blow. Enraged, the heathen warriors started to shoot arrows at him as if at target practice, until his broken, bloody body was bristling with barbs.**

**Realising that Edmund would never give way, Ivar ordered him beheaded. Wrenched from the tree, barely able to stand, yearning to be released to eternal life, Edmund was ordered to stretch force his head, that royal, thrice anointed head. Meek, a prayer on his lips, he was beheaded with one blow. The Vikings contemptuously flung the head deep into the woods.**

**His people came to bury him, and searching in the woods for his head, they heard a voice calling 'here'. Drawn to the spot, they found the head guarded by a huge wolf. They united head with body, and buried Edmund reverently.**

### **Fact and Legend**

**You will note that there are very significant differences between the account in the 'Chronicle' and that of Abbo. In the former, Edmund is simply slain in battle. In the latter, there is no mention of a battle, only the long protracted torture and execution, although the two accounts do agree that the Viking army was at Thetford. We know that Abbo wrote his book at Ramsey in Cambridgeshire in 985-7. Which is some 115 years after Edmund's death.**

**What is fascinating, and what gives this present paper its point, is the preface to the book, which contains a unique dedication.**

**Abbo dedicates his work to Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, and makes it clear that Dunstan is the source of the account of the martyrdom. Dunstan himself is simply repeating the story which he heard as a very young man at the court of King Athelstan. Dunstan was present when a decrepit old man swore on oath before Athelstan that in his youth he had been armour bearer to Edmund, had been with him on the day of his martyrdom, and had witnessed these events. So powerful was the old man's account that Dunstan had been**

reduced to tears, and had retold the story many times as an example to all Christians.

Some historians have attempted to calculate the chronology of this- could a young armour-bearer in 870 have still been alive to speak to Athelstan, whose reign did not commence until fifty four years later? In a sense, the factual basis of the story is irrelevant. What is important is that the story was being told at Athelstan's court and came to have a vital role in the collective spirit of the age.

### A Spiritual Hero

When Athelstan came to the throne of Wessex, he faced a formidable coalition of enemies. East Anglia and Northumbria were in Danish hands, and there was a very aggressive Viking kingdom based on York. The powerful Viking kingdoms in Ireland, led by the kingdom of Dublin, were pressing into north-west England. The struggle, which would last until Athelstan's victory at Brunanburgh in 937, had a political dimension- the unification of all four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms under Athelstan 'first king of all the English'. But there was also a

religious dimension, in that this was the struggle of Christianity to prevail over heathen forces of darkness.

Here was the partnership of Athelstan and Edmund- a resistance to the invaders in both military and spiritual terms. Athelstan was the great war lord. Edmund, once king of an area now ruled by Danes, was not a defeated king but a triumphant martyr. By his death he rises to glory, the terrible manner of his death being overcome by his entry into a blissful hereafter. He is truly a great spiritual hero, the counterpart of Athelstan the military hero.

### Conclusion

After the victory at Brunanburgh, Edmund's body was brought to Beodricsworth (now Bury St. Edmunds) to be placed in a great Abbey, the ruins of which can be seen to this day. The Abbey received extremely generous gifts of land from Athelstan's descendents, who were clearly aware of Edmund's value as a symbol of English patriotism and anti-heathen faith.

Perhaps then it no exaggeration to call Athelstan and Edmund the two forgotten heroes of English history.

## **Bibliography**

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