

Relic Lists and Relic Inventories of Early England: Selection Criteria and Procedure for Determining Canonical <@ref> Entities for Venerated English Saints

Antony R. Henk
University of Göttingen
Ruhr-Universität Bochum

2024

In an ideal scenario, the pool of <@ref> tags for this digital editing project would contain a <@ref> tag for every possible known figure in the corpus of Early English relic lists. Additional tags would also ideally exist for the cases in which a name is provided in a list, but the canonical identity of the saint belonging to that name is not fully clear. Saints often share names and offices, and it is infeasible, and indeed impossible, for a single researcher to attempt to fully disambiguate the identity of all relics in the corpus.

Even merely composing a controlled vocabulary of such a size would overstep the bounds of the current project. Thus, the controlled vocabulary for the <@ref> tags must satisfy the research needs of the users as thoroughly as possible, while remaining manageable. Ideally, then, the <@ref> tag pool should look to medieval sources which might reflect common ‘canons’ of saints, while also accounting for modern research interests as well, which are likely to be especially tuned to local saints. It thus seemed best to aim for fair distribution between ‘local’ and ‘non-local’ saints, while also accounting for major biblical figures (particularly Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Twelve Apostles, and other major figures such as Mary Magdalene). The classification of ‘local’ and ‘non-local’ saints has been drawn along the lines of ‘Insular’ versus ‘Continental’. These classifications are necessarily somewhat imprecise, but importantly they aim to avoid de facto exclusion of non-Anglo figures, a not-uncommon flaw of Early English studies. ‘Continental’ saints are defined as those that have little hagiographical connection to the Isles, such as Perpetua and Felicity. ‘Insular’ saints are those who lived for extended periods in the Isles, and who are closely connected with the roots of Insular Christianity, such as Patrick, Aidan, Cuthbert, and Alban.

An obvious place from which to draw pools of saints is to survey extant texts. Medieval texts that could be crudely categorised as ‘lists of saints’ are widespread due to the demands of medieval liturgy. For this project, two extant texts of this kind and one reconstructed work seemed ideal. The Old English *Secgan be*, a resting place list, is argued by Rollason (1978) to refer to shrines generally containing whole bodies¹, and the very vast majority of the figures in the list can be easily classed as Insular. For a selection of major Continental saints, one extant source is the *Old English Martyrology*, which has been distilled conveniently into a tidy list format by Lapidge (2005). The second source is also indebted to Lapidge (1996), a reconstruction of the festal calendar for which

¹ This statement needs some nuance and revision; a forthcoming chapter will discuss the relevance of S. Vincent’s cult to this argument.

Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* seem to have been intended. While more cross-referencing, such as with individual calendars, might have resulted in more exacting estimates of cult popularity, further manual disambiguation and data entry would be beyond the scope of this project.

The data of these sources is not arranged by individual saints, but rather is often sorted according to hagiographical or 'festal grouping'. For example, the twin martyr brothers Cosmas and Damian share the feast day of September 27 in Old English material, including the *Old English Martyrology*, and share a single passion legend (Whatley 2001:92–4). Their names thus do not appear individually in liturgical sources; rather, they appear as a unit in calendars (see e.g., Rushforth 2008). Notably, though, some festal groupings are flexible, in part because their hagiographical narratives may intertwine or depart. For example, the *Old English Martyrology* contains a hagiographical entry on June 2 for Marcellinus and Petrus, as well as another entry on the same day for Artemius, Candida, and Virgo/Paulina, who appear early in Marcellinus and Petrus' narrative (Whatley 2001: 196–8). In all such cases, saint names were simply entered as given in the sources (either grouped or singly) and left in the groups that their primary sources suggested were most pertinent to their legend and identity, with given feast date data used to help further disambiguate or combine the figures into appropriate groups. In these 'festal groups', the first saint's name is treated as the de-facto representative of the whole for the purposes of alphabetisation.

The *Secgan be* differs slightly from the *Old English Martyrology* and the *Ælfrician Sanctorable* in that it includes a fairly long prologue which describes some of the history surrounding the foundings of several religious houses, in addition to naming some further resting places not given in the list portion of the text. Though this data is not given in Rollason's summary list of the *Secgan*, it was included in the selection pool according to the following manner:

1. Figures who, in any recension, are explicitly titled 'sanctus/a/e' or equivalent, e.g., 'halga', were included in the data pool.
2. Figures who are ascribed a specific resting place location were included in the data pool, even if their names were not explicitly prefixed with a saintly title. In naming a specific resting place location in a text like the *Secgan*, the author of the text tacitly implies that the dead person is worthy of pilgrimage, and thus culted, or cult-able, in some approximation.

Compiling these three sources is not sufficient to generate a good <@ref> list, however, as the total of saints achieved by summing this data is too great, even after disambiguation. When disambiguated, the data of the three sources mentioned above comes out to ca. 270 different prospective fixed feasts (subtracting any Biblical figures' feasts). To trim the data back further, any appearance in the three sources was marked with a value, which could then be tallied to rank which figures appear most frequently. Figures appearing in both recensions of the *Secgan be* were assigned a 2, and in one recension only, a 1.² Figures appearing in the *Ælfrician Sanctorable* (Lapidge

² With one exception: 'Branwalator' and 'Branwaltrus' seem likely to be the same saint (see Farmer 2011), so, making this emendation, I assigned Branwalator the value 2.

1996) and in the *Old English Martyrology* were assigned a 1. Thus, a saint appearing in the maximum number of texts is assigned an index value of 4, and the minimum value is 1. This ranking method intentionally slightly weights judgment in favour of Insular saints, as the Continental saints otherwise outnumber the Insular saints significantly (ca. 101 to 161). The list was also cross-referenced with Whatley (2001). Next, the following criteria were applied to the data:

1. All Biblical saints were added to the list of <@ref> figures, regardless of index value.
2. All saints of index value 3 or above were automatically added to the list of <@ref> figures.
3. All saints of index value 2 or below were only added to the list of <@ref> figures if they had been afforded their own heading in Whatley (2001).

The above selection criteria resulted in a more manageable list and generally eliminated very obscure figures, or at least those for which little legendary material is known. Out of personal interest or overwhelming importance, three additional persons were added to the list on their own account: the Venerable Bede, Thomas Beckett, and Bishop Wulfstan II.

Lastly, one frequently appearing 'festal group' was disregarded on logical grounds: *Omnium Sanctorum*, All Saints' Day. While it is reasonable to suspect that the full collection of a house's relics had some liturgical role on this feast day, this term would not appear as a single entry in a relic list.

Bibliography

- Lapidge, M. 2005. 'Acca of Hexham and the Origin of the Old English Martyrology'. *Analecta Bollandiana* 123 (1): 29–78.
- Lapidge, M. 1996. 'Ælfric's Sanctorale'. In *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, edited by Paul E. Szarmach, 115–30. SUNY Series in Medieval Studies. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Liebermann, F., ed. 1889. *Die Heiligen Englands*. Hannover: Hahn'sche Buchhandlung.
- Farmer, D. H. 2011. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. 5th edition revised. Oxford Paperback Reference. Oxford University Press.
- Whatley, E. G. 2001. 'Acta Sanctorum'. Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture, Volume 1: Abbo of Fleury, Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and Acta Sanctorum, ed. F. M. Biggs, T. D. Hill, P. E. Szarmach, and E. G. Whatley, with the assistance of D. A. Oosterhouse. Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture 1. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 22–548.
- Rauer, C., ed. 2013. *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary*. Anglo-Saxon Texts 10. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Rollason, D. W. 1978. 'Lists of Saints' Resting-Places in Anglo-Saxon England'. *Anglo-Saxon England* 7 (December): 61–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675100002866>.
- Rushforth, R. 2008. *Saints in English Kalendars before A.D. 1100*. Henry Bradshaw Society, v. 117. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press.