

St Kenelm at Wicken

Graham Jones

In 1529 someone left money to an image of Kenelm in 'Wyke Dyve' church, and since in 1509 the dedication of the church is said to be John the Evangelist, a very rare, and therefore suspicious dedication, my guess is that earlier the church's patron saint had been Kenelm. Since K was a Mercian prince, devotionally he would make a good pair with that other Mercian prince, Guthlac. (OK, you're asking: 'If K and the Evangelist were both exotic, where's the difference?' The answer is that I'm hard put to think of a single early dedication to JE, and he rarely appears in iconography other than in the company of the BVM at the foot of the cross. I'd want very good reasons to accept him as the patron of Wicken in, say the eleventh century. K, on the other hand, is out of his immediate region in Northants, and there needs to have been some exceptional circumstance to explain this.)

K was heir to the Mercian throne and was murdered c. 820 by his stepmother's suitor (rather like Wigstan c. 850). The murder took place at Romsley on the Clent Hills and the story of the miraculous disclosure of his grave through the agency of a cow that gave copious milk, his funeral procession from Clent all the way to Winchcombe (involving a battle for his body between the men of Worcestershire and the men of Gloucestershire), and the fate of his stepmother (her eyes fell out on her psalter as the body passed beneath her window), was keenly promoted by Edward the Confessor's wife Edith. There was much pilgrimage to both Clent and Winchcombe and also to a miraculous image of K at Halesowen Abbey.

Though K's appearance at Wicken is peripheral to his distribution, there are two dedications in Oxfordshire, so this could be grist to the Glenn Foard thesis. I'd see his cult at W as supporting the possibility that W and Passenham had formed a single unit in royal hands, or, less likely perhaps, that W's TRE lord Azor was keeping in with Edward through Edith. K certainly expresses 'Mercianess', so that, on the Danelaw frontier, is another card to play.