

Kings, Peasants, and the Restless Dead: Decapitation in Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives

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In the *Vita sancte Moduenna uirginis*, a saint's life written in the early twelfth century, a remarkable story can be found.¹ Two peasants from the village of Stapenhill, which was under the authority of the abbot of Burton, desert their apparent duties to the monastery and bring false accusations against the abbot to a local lord. The lord responds by sending knights to plunder and destroy the monastery's crops. The next morning, the two unscrupulous peasants drop dead simultaneously and are buried the following day. Only hours after their burial, the men rise from their graves, carrying their coffins on their shoulders. Taking the form of bears, dogs, and other animals, the men bang on the walls of houses, and call to the townspeople of the neighboring village to 'Move!' and 'Come!' After continuing to terrorize the populace 'every night and every evening for some time', a plague befalls the village, which only ceases after the two peasants are exhumed, decapitated, and have their hearts removed. The peasants are then reburied in the churchyard at Stapenhill, while their hearts are taken to the local diocesan boundary and burned, at which time a raven flies from the fire.² Fittingly, a decapitated corpse was found in the excavations at

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¹ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, ed. and trans. by Robert Bartlett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 193-99.

² The significance and juxtaposition of ravens and doves has been discussed in great detail with reference to Anglo-Saxon literature, the Bible, and classical literature in a PhD thesis by Janina Ramirez. Although the biblical view of ravens in particular is somewhat mixed, the Anglo-Saxons seemed to have a symbolically negative perception of ravens, as does Bede, and in battle poetry particularly they are viewed as a sign of death or impending doom. Conversely, doves, which appear in the *Life and Miracles of St Kenelm*, discussed below, symbolize a wide variety of things, including, but not limited to, the Roman Church, baptism, and the Holy Spirit. See Genesis 8, 1 Kings 17, Matthew 3,

Stapenhill.³ This and other bizarre stories of decapitation from Anglo-Saxon saints' lives often seem to bear more resemblance to a horror film than hagiography. However, these stories can be illuminated and placed in their cultural context through examining their place in text, image, and archaeology.

Decapitation in Anglo-Saxon Hagiography

Decapitation is not a particularly common event, however notable, in the records of Anglo-Saxon history. Edwin and Oswald, both seventh-century monarchs of northern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, were decapitated after military defeats, in a somewhat similar fashion to the way in which Edmund, the mid-ninth century king of East Anglia, was later killed by Scandinavian invaders.⁴ The cult of Oswald began not long after his death, and soon encompassed both sacred and secular sites in Britain and the Continent.⁵ In addition to the above story from the *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, a number of other grim hagiographical stories can be found. An early example occurs in the *Life of St Ecgbwine*, an eleventh-century writing of the life of an eighth-century bishop of Worcester.⁶ In this account, a peasant accidentally cuts off his own head with a scythe immediately after attempting to defraud a monastery of its land. The peasant in question had deceptively claimed that he owned the ground upon which he stood after filling his

and Luke 12:24 for biblical examples; see Bede, *On Genesis*, trans. by Calvin Kendall (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 193-196; Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels Book One: Advent to Lent*, trans. by Lawrence Martin and David Hurst (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1991), pp. 122-123.

³ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, pp. xxx.

⁴ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by Judith McClure and Roger Collins, trans. by Bertram Colgrave (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 105, 131. Anthony Bale, 'St Edmund's Medieval Lives', in *St Edmund, King and Martyr: Changing Images of a Medieval Saint*, ed. by Anthony Bale (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2009), pp. 1-26 (p. 3).

⁵ Alan Thacker, 'Membra Disjecta: the Division of the Body and the Diffusion of the Cult', in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. by Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), pp. 97-127 (p. 102-03). Annemiek Jansen, 'The Development of the St Oswald Legends', in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. by Stancliffe and Cambridge, pp. 230-40 (p. 130).

⁶ Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgbwine*, ed. and trans. by Michael Lapidge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 297.

shoes with dirt from his own property.⁷ A further, and increasingly strange, account comes from the *Life and Miracles of St Kenelm*.⁸ Kenelm, a ninth-century atheling, is murdered in a plot conceived by his sister. As a young boy, he is led into the forest ostensibly to go hunting, and his companion, at the behest of his sister, cuts off Kenelm's head underneath a thorn tree, after which Kenelm catches his own head as it falls and a white dove flies away from the body.⁹ The dove carries a letter which reveals the whereabouts of Kenelm's hidden body and the bird soon reaches the pope in Rome. Once the news is relayed back to England, the body is recovered and brought back from the forest in procession, during which Kenelm's sister attempts to stop the procession by means of witchcraft, and this results in her eyes falling from their sockets.

The cultural and thematic origins of these unusual hagiographical tales are not immediately apparent. A small number of biblical and early Christian precedents are somewhat similar to the events described above, but most of them differ significantly from these hagiographical accounts in terms of content and context. Of the *vitae* considered here, the *Life of St Kenelm* draws most strongly on biblical precedent. Kenelm is Joseph, his evil sister represents either Jezebel or Herodias, and Kenelm's murderer is Judas Iscariot.¹⁰ In terms of biblical examples, the most well-known decapitation is that of John the Baptist, who was beheaded in prison by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great.¹¹ Additionally, Ishbosheth, one of King Saul's sons, was killed by decapitation in his bed in II Samuel 4. The early Church also experienced several notable incidents of martyrdom by means of beheading. Tradition holds that Matthias, Paul, and Justin Martyr were

⁷ A very similar miracle story can be found relating to St Mildrith's help in upholding a land claim in favor of St Augustine's Abbey. See David Rollason, 'Goscelin of Canterbury's Account of the Translation and Miracles of St Mildrith (BHL 5961/4): an edition with notes', *Mediaeval Studies*, 48 (1986), 139-210 (pp. 201-02).

⁸ *Three Eleventh Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives*, ed. and trans. by Rosalind Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 61-73.

⁹ Though the *Vita Et Miracula Sancti Kenelmi* portrays Kenelm as quite young, it seems from charter attestations that he lived at least into his twenties. See Catherine Cubitt, 'Folklore and Historiography: Oral stories and the writing of Anglo-Saxon history' in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Elizabeth Tyler and Ross Balzaretta (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 189-223 (p. 191).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹¹ Matthew 14.9-12.

all executed in this fashion.¹² In relation to the history of the British Isles, St Alban, a Romano-British Christian, was beheaded in the third or fourth century both for his faith and for hiding a Christian priest, the story of which was recorded by Bede and other writers. The eyes of the executioner also fell from their sockets after St Alban was executed, similarly to the story of Kenelm's sister, and the writers of Kenelm's *vita* were certainly aware of Bede's account of Alban.¹³ As can be seen from this short list of examples, there are generally few similarities between the biblical and Anglo-Saxon contexts of decapitation. Most of the biblical and early Christian examples are political, quasi-political, or martyrial in nature. In Anglo-Saxon saints' lives, it is more often the antagonist than the protagonist who is beheaded, and the rate of thematic correspondence is generally low. Though cultural surroundings of the decapitation events in these *vitae* differ from those in the Bible, there are similarities in terms of imagery. The zoomorphism of the two peasants of Stapenhill corresponds to some passages in the Psalms and with some aspects of Near Eastern culture. In the ancient Near East, demons were often portrayed as animals, particularly lions, bulls, serpents, and dogs.¹⁴ The equation of evil men with animals underscore that these men do not seek the possessions one has, but the life of an individual—perhaps embodying a more profound type of evil than a thief or brigand.¹⁵

It is important here to take note of some significant distinctions between royal saints associated with decapitation and the other saints dealt with herein. In *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors*, John Damon makes a compelling argument for the method of creation of royal warrior-saints. He argues that the sanctity of the kings in question was not something that they achieved by their conduct in life, but more by the way in which they died, typically at the hand of pagan kings, such as in the cases of Oswald, Edwin, and Edmund.¹⁶ The Christian king was rewarded in life for his personal holiness and righteous deeds, but

¹² Miles Stanford, *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, ed. by William Forbush (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 3-4, 10.

¹³ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pp. 16-19. See also Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, Book X-XI.

¹⁴ Psalm 22.16, 59.5-6.

¹⁵ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: ancient Near Eastern iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 85-88.

¹⁶ John Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 28-32.

he could not achieve sainthood without a martyr's death. Furthermore, accounts of post-mortem mutilation could act to further the royal martyr's saintly veneration, or as Alan Thacker has asserted in the case of Oswald, 'The process of sanctification was assisted by the treatment of the remains.'¹⁷ It should also be noted that the hagiographical (and in some cases historical) accounts of the death of these kings are likely not wholly accurate. Certainly these kings did die in battle against pagans, but it would seem that the circumstances surrounding their deaths were often generously embellished. In the case of Edmund, sources universally agree that he died in battle against the Danes, but Anthony Bale notes that both the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser's *Life of Alfred* record nothing of his martyrdom, though they both record his death.¹⁸ The gruesome tale of his demise only emerges more than a century after his death, recorded in the *Life of St Edmund* by Abbo of Fleury.¹⁹ On the other hand, most non-royal saints, even if they died a martyr's death, were venerated for their holiness in life. The way in which they died could serve to enhance perceptions of their sanctity, but it did not guarantee cultic veneration in the vein of martyred Anglo-Saxon kings. Texts concerning royal and non-royal saints are both connected with decapitation, but the models of sanctity utilized in reference to these different groups by hagiographers and perpetuators of saints' cults do not necessarily correspond.

The Archaeology of Decapitation

Recent interpretations of both new and old archaeological findings have assisted scholars significantly in understanding what role decapitation played in early medieval England. In the first and second centuries, the most common funerary practice in Roman Britain was cremation, while inhumation gradually increased in popularity until it outstripped cremation, though neither mode of burial was ever used exclusively. Most Roman decapitation burials show little to no evidence of 'spatial segregation' and they typically 'followed the

¹⁷ Alan Thacker, 'Membra Disjecta', p. 97.

¹⁸ Anthony Bale, 'Medieval Lives', p. 2.

¹⁹ *Three Lives of English Saints*, ed. by Michael Winterbottom (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1972), pp. 4-6, 67-87. David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 155.

alignments of the cemeteries in which they were buried.’²⁰ The bulk of the Anglo-Saxon decapitation burials that have been found date from the sixth or seventh centuries, but they extend into and past the late Anglo-Saxon period as well.²¹ Decapitation burials from the early Anglo-Saxon period most typically occur in community cemeteries, where the only segregated inhumations were those of high-status individuals, not unlike late Roman decapitation burials. In fact, more often than not, early Anglo-Saxon community cemeteries contain at least a few deviant burials.²² This trend seems to have continued until the eighth century, at which point a gradual shift may be noted. Burials dating from after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, excluding deviant burials, can be found in close proximity to ecclesiastical centers. Decapitation and other deviant burials then moved from community cemeteries to what are known as execution cemeteries, in which nearly every burial is nonstandard in terms of the cause of death, orientation, treatment of the remains, or a combination thereof. About twenty of these cemeteries are known, and there are certainly many others which lack identification or excavation.²³ Additionally, burial with grave goods essentially ceased by 730, seemingly indicating the general adoption of Christian burial practices.²⁴ Deviant burials, which are thought to be those of criminals, though not exclusively so, are often found with limbs askew, meaning that these

²⁰ Belinda Crerar, ‘Contextualising Deviancy: a Regional Approach to Decapitated Inhumation in Late Roman Britain’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014), p. 31. M. Harman, T. Molleson, and J. Price, ‘Burials, bodies and beheadings in Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon cemeteries’, *Bulletin of the British Museum (Natural History)*, 35 (1981), 145-188, (pp. 162-64). I greatly appreciate Ms. Crerar’s willingness to provide me with early access to the relevant sections of her thesis.

²¹ M. Pitts and others, ‘An Anglo-Saxon Decapitation and Burial at Stonehenge’, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 95 (2002), pp. 131-45 (p. 140).

²² Andrew Reynolds, ‘Burials, Boundaries and Charters in Anglo-Saxon England: A Reassessment’, in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, ed. by Sam Lucy and Andrew Reynolds (London: The Society for Medieval Archaeology, 2002), pp. 171-194 (p. 186-87).

²³ Sarah Semple, ‘Illustrations of Damnation in late Anglo-Saxon manuscripts’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 32 (2003), pp. 231-45 (p. 238). Andrew Reynolds, *Later Anglo-Saxon England: life and landscape* (Stroud: Tempus, 1999), p. 105.

²⁴ John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 238. Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 36-37. As Blair has pointed out, in the generations following the conversion of the seventh century, most of the English laity were probably still buried in field cemeteries without a church.

bodies were placed in their graves with little care, if they were not thrown in. There is no standard orientation in which these bodies lay, indicating that they were not laid in their graves in a typical Christian east-west orientation.²⁵ Thus the late Anglo-Saxon cultural understanding of decapitation was defined by its role as a method of execution and a way of putting both physical and spiritual space between the deceased and the communities with which they were formerly associated. An examination of the characteristics of execution cemeteries will serve to clarify these assertions.

Execution cemeteries were usually located near hundred boundaries and away from settlements, as was the case with a decapitation burial at Stonehenge, as well as up to eleven burials at Walkington Wold.²⁶ This seems to correspond to some degree with the story from the *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, in which the two dishonest peasants who were plaguing the town had their hearts removed and taken to the boundary of the diocese to be burned.²⁷ This practice created physical space between settlements and socially unacceptable individuals and it is probable that these cemeteries were spaces allotted by local communities for the burial of criminals. Social exclusion by burial rights can be further seen in Anglo-Saxon law: the royal law code I Edmund, dating from the 940s, admonishes the clergy to celibacy and threatens them with forfeiture of consecrated burial if they do not comply.²⁸ The significance of the hundred boundary points to a burial of the dead in what we might call a ‘no man’s land’, a place that was neither here nor there. Thus the bodies of those buried in execution cemeteries were placed both at the furthest physical distance possible and at a location where neither hundred might claim the land in which they were buried. Charters record a number of execution cemeteries, almost all of which were

²⁵ Annia Cherryson, ‘Normal, Deviant, and Atypical: Burial Variation in Late Saxon Wessex, c. 700-1100’, in *Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*, ed. by Eileen Murphy (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008), pp. 115-30 (pp. 116-117, 122). M. Harman, T. Molleson, and J. Price, ‘Burials, bodies and beheadings’, p. 168.

²⁶ M. Pitts and others, ‘An Anglo-Saxon Decapitation and Burial at Stonehenge’, p. 142. Jo Buckberry, ‘Off With Their Heads: The Anglo-Saxon Execution Cemetery at Walkington Wold, East Yorkshire’, in *Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*, ed. by Murphy, pp. 148-68 (pp. 149, 165).

²⁷ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, p. 197.

²⁸ *Councils and Synods with other Documents related to the English Church I, A.D. 871-1204*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 62.

located along hundred boundaries. The charters refer to them as *cwealmstowe* (killing places) and *heafod stocca* (head stakes), and roughly fifty separate instances in charters refer to places of *hæþenan byrigelsas*, or heathen burial.²⁹

The recognition of places of heathen burial by the Anglo-Saxons also led them to associate contemporary deviant burials with prehistoric pagan inhumations, often found in tumuli, more commonly known as barrows. Execution cemeteries have typically been found in close proximity to barrows, and some deviant burials even occur on these mounds. Anglo-Saxon decapitation burials at Walkington Wold, Rushton, Wor Barrow, Sutton Hoo, and Dunstable, among others, occur in barrows, most of which are Bronze Age.³⁰ Andrew Reynolds has postulated that prehistoric mounds were fearful places in the minds of the Anglo-Saxons, connected both with their unknown builders and the uncertainty of eternity.³¹ Sarah Semple has brought together archaeological evidence as well as late Anglo-Saxon manuscript evidence to suggest that these barrows were seen as the mouth of hell, consciously or subconsciously. Of the illustrations from BL Harley 603 (an Anglo-Saxon copy of the Utrecht Psalter), Semple writes that ‘hell is clearly shown as a space inside a hill or mound’, which is atypical when compared with continental depictions of hell. These illustrations actually show decapitated and dismembered figures in physical proximity to the mouth of hell, as well as showing other figures buried alive beneath the surface of a barrow.³² These conceptions of hell are certainly extra-biblical, as hell, often referred to as Sheol in the Old Testament, is typically

²⁹ Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*, pp. 272-277.

³⁰ M. Harman, T. Molleson, and J. Price, ‘Burials, bodies and beheadings’, p. 164.

³¹ Andrew Reynolds, *Later Anglo-Saxon England: life and landscape*, p. 33. Not all barrows in England were constructed before the settlement of the Anglo-Saxons in England. Though the majority of them are Bronze and Iron Age, a handful are from the Roman period, and some were constructed by pagan Anglo-Saxons themselves. For example, at Sutton Hoo, where we find burial mounds constructed by pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons and lavish burial for a pagan, we later find two groups of decapitated individuals at the site, one group on Mound 5 and the other on the eastern edge of the cemetery. Martin Carver, ‘Reflections on the Meanings of Monumental Barrows in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, ed. by Lucy and Reynolds, pp. 132-3.

³² Sarah Semple, ‘Illustrations of Damnation in late Anglo-Saxon manuscripts’, pp. 237, 240.

portrayed as a pit rather than an area of raised earth.³³ But in Anglo-Saxon culture, it seems that being interred in a barrow would be the practical equivalent of eternal condemnation. From all indications, the Anglo-Saxon idea of hell was significantly influenced by pre-Christian anxieties and superstitions that were incorporated into theological ideas of the nature of damnation. With this in mind, the stories from the non-royal saints' lives discussed above use decapitation to suggest the spiritual fate of those who were decapitated.

Finally, execution cemeteries consisted of the burials of individuals killed in a variety of ways. Hanging and decapitation seem to have been the principal methods of execution in the Anglo-Saxon period, but these punishments were sometimes combined with others. In addition to decapitation, burials associated with dismemberment have been found in some execution cemeteries, as well as bodies exhibiting evidence of post-mortem mutilation.³⁴ The practice may have been a continuation of the theme of disrespect for the bodies of these social outcasts, and it may have been connected with a desire to ensure that the unscrupulous and restless dead did not have the capacity to disturb the communities from which they were estranged in life, as in the case of the rebellious peasants of Stapenhill.³⁵ However, it is difficult to conclusively determine the rationale for post-mortem mutilation.

Punishments prescribing decapitation for offenses are not to be found before the time of King Edgar, but it is quite reasonable to assume that the practice of decapitation in the realm of the Anglo-Saxon judicial system long predated the codification of these laws, as even execution cemeteries significantly predate the reign of Edgar.³⁶ Archaeological evidence affirms that around the time of the Anglo-Saxon conversion, ideas about the sanctity and violability of burial space developed. As a result, burials began to diverge from all-inclusive field cemeteries to well-defined ecclesiastical cemeteries and

³³ Job 11.8, Psalm 86.13, Proverbs 1.12, Isaiah 14.15.

³⁴ Jo Buckberry, 'Off With Their Heads: The Anglo-Saxon Execution Cemetery at Walkington Wold, East Yorkshire', p. 149.

³⁵ John Blair, 'The dangerous dead in early medieval England', in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. by Stephen Baxter and others (Ashgate: Farnham, 2009), pp. 539-559 (p. 542).

³⁶ M. Pitts and others, 'An Anglo-Saxon Decapitation and Burial at Stonehenge', p. 141.

execution cemeteries, the latter of which were well outside the boundaries of local communities. Additionally, the proximity of execution cemeteries and individual decapitation burials to both hundred boundaries and barrows, when considered in light of their psychological significance to the Anglo-Saxons, helps to set the tales which are so bizarre to the modern reader in their medieval context.

A number of conclusions are evident from the stories of the Anglo-Saxon *vitae* combined with archaeological and cultural evidence in regards to decapitation. Firstly, the archaeological evidence pertaining to burial distribution strongly correlates with the processes of conversion in the early Anglo-Saxon period. The scenario that seems most likely is that the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons generally buried their dead of relatively equal social status communally, regardless of crimes committed. When the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons took place throughout the seventh century, ideas about burial and the theological security of burying the righteous and the wicked together changed. In the eighth century, most people began to be buried near ecclesiastical centers, and the desire to exclude the socially unacceptable from community burial grounds became strong enough that cemeteries were founded at considerable distances from the communities themselves. These practices continued into and through the late Anglo-Saxon period, including some similar burials occurring in the twelfth century.³⁷

Furthermore, the stories of decapitation in the aforementioned saints' lives find much stronger identification with the themes and motifs of Anglo-Saxon culture and folklore than with biblical or continental hagiographical sources. While the Bible and hagiographical sources both record instances of decapitation, particularly of the early Christian martyrs, the themes and intent that lie behind the stories themselves attest to a very different understanding and rhetorical use of decapitation. The instances of birds flying at pivotal moments in these narratives speaks strongly of the cultural particularity of these stories, as do some of the stranger moments in the *vitae*, such as eyes falling from their sockets and zombie-like humans roaming after dark whilst taking human and animal form. The idea of the reanimation of the dead (in a non-resurrective sense) is certainly not a biblical one, though it appears in a few other

³⁷ Ibid., p. 140.

sources of Anglo-Saxon hagiography.³⁸ So when hagiographers included these grisly and atypical stories, one can see strong cultural reinforcement of the idea that the opponents of churches and monasteries are bound for damnation for their actions.³⁹ David Rollason has argued that hagiography in the tenth and eleventh centuries played an important role in monastic strategies of self-protection and land reclamation. A great deal of land had been alienated from monasteries through the upheaval brought on by the Vikings, and these religious houses were eager to claim what they saw as their historical right, even if their sometimes dubious claims had to be bolstered by saintly intervention, as in the cases of St Modwenna and St Ecgwine. Further Anglo-Saxon hagiographical examples of these strategies can be found in the *Liber Eliensis* and stories of St Mildrith from St Augustine's Abbey.⁴⁰ The portions of the texts that I have discussed particularly concern the saint in question acting as 'an undying defender of his or her community's lands and privileges', including cases in which that defence entailed taking the lives of those who would threaten their holdings.⁴¹

Finally, veneration of decapitated royal saints such as Oswald and Edmund reflects a hagiographical and political use of martyrdom by reversing a degrading method of death so as to reflect sanctity. Decapitation was certainly not seen as an honorable or socially acceptable way for anyone, particularly a king, to die. This was reinforced by the perception of victory as divine blessing and defeat as the judgment of God on the unjust. After the death of Oswald, taking into account his decapitation and the enemies against whom he fought, it was difficult to portray his death in a spiritually positive light. The only way that the king could be seen to have been adhering to the will of God is to have been a holy man who met an unjust end at the hands of

³⁸ Some may object to this assertion on the basis of Samuel's reappearance after his death in 1 Samuel 28. However, the passage makes it clear that Samuel appears in spirit form; he does not seem to be physically present and there is no indication that Endor is near the burial place of Samuel. John Blair, 'The dangerous dead in early medieval England', p. 540.

³⁹ Victoria Thompson, *Death and Dying in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), p. 171-72.

⁴⁰ *Liber Eliensis: a history of the Isle of Ely from the seventh century to the twelfth*, trans. by Janet Fairweather (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), pp. 133-4. David Rollason, 'Goscelin of Canterbury's Account of the Translation and Miracles of St Mildrith', pp. 201-02.

⁴¹ David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 196-97.

heathens and was therefore a martyr. This archetype was reused sometime later when Edmund met his fate in battle with the Danes. After his initial transformation into a saint, Oswald's cult grew significantly, even to the point of veneration in more than a few locations on the Continent and even Iceland in the High and Late Middle Ages. The success and efficacy of this specific political and religious use of decapitation resulted in its adoption within the cult of the saints as time went on.⁴² Every case of decapitation has not been analyzed and placed within its cultural context here; I have addressed only a fraction of the reports of decapitation from early medieval England, but the textual and archaeological evidence examined herein exhibits a clear pattern in the Anglo-Saxon uses of decapitation and their cultural significance.

⁴² Alan Thacker, 'Membra Disjecta', pp. 113-119. Marianne Kalinke, *St Oswald of Northumbria: Continental Metamorphoses* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), pp. 4-8.