

## **The battle over Birinus' bones**

St Birinus, the seventh-century Apostle of Wessex, is somewhat forgotten now but he could have been chosen as a patron of the Old Minster instead of St Swithun in the tenth century. Although his saintly cult was overshadowed by others, he came back into prominence in the early thirteenth century as a result of a short but intense dispute when the Augustinian canons of Dorchester-on-Thames contested Winchester's long-held claim to have his relics. It was a row that was sent to Rome for a decision with farcical results.

Birinus, also called Berin and Birin, was probably a Lombard from northern Italy. He was sent to 'the most inland and remote regions of the English'<sup>1</sup> by Pope Honorius I in 635 as a bishop-evangelist. His plan had been to travel to the Midlands but when Birinus encountered the Gewissae (the West Saxons), 'he found them completely heathen'<sup>2</sup> and chose to focus his evangelization in the central South. Birinus was preceded as an apostle to the English by Augustine who established himself at Canterbury from 597 onwards.



After converting Cynegils, king of the West Saxons, to Christianity with the assistance of King Oswald of Northumbria, Birinus established his episcopal see at Dorcic, a Romano-British town by the Thames which we know as Dorchester-on-Thames. Many people were baptized by Birinus and he built and dedicated several churches, according to Bede.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of his fifteen-year apostolate, he dedicated a church at Winchester, whose political importance caused it to become the ecclesiastical centre of the West Saxon kingdom.<sup>4</sup> His later successor Hedda (or

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<sup>1</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, translated by L. Shirley-Price, revised by R. E. Latham. London: Penguin, 1968, iii. 7, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Bede, *History*, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> David Hugh Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed., revised. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 52-53.

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Haeddi) translated his body from Dorchester-on-Thames to Winchester (which Bede called Venta). It was laid in the Old Minster in c. 690, which was dedicated to the apostles Peter and Paul.

Until the establishment of the cult of St Swithun in 970, the relics of Birinus would have been an important shrine for pilgrims to visit in the south of England. However, King Edgar and Bishop Ethelwold chose Swithun as Winchester's patron saint as his life offered greater support to their advocacy of monastic reform. Nonetheless, Birinus was treated with great reverence and in 980 his body was moved and placed next to the high altar in the Old Minster.<sup>5</sup>

In the period before the Norman Conquest, the date of Birinus's festival on 3<sup>rd</sup> December was included in many kalendars of saints' festivals; in eighteen of the twenty-seven surviving Anglo-Saxon kalendars of saints' festivals, as well as twelve inclusions of the festival of his translation on 4<sup>th</sup> September. Birinus was also included in many litanies which also indicated his popularity and high standing among the English saints until the mid-late eleventh century. After this time his importance was confined largely to Winchester,<sup>6</sup> although the prolific hagiographer Goscelin of Canterbury is credited with a Life (*Vita*) of Birinus in the late eleventh century.

Birinus' relics would have been brought from the Old Minster into the new cathedral in the late eleventh century. They were moved again in the time of Bishop Henry of Blois in 1150. According to the *Winchester Annals*, the bodies of the 'holy confessors Birinus, Swithun, Haeddi, Beornstan and Alfheah' were translated into prominent positions but it is unclear where these were.<sup>7</sup>

The quiet, established and respectful situation of Birinus' relics was shaken up almost seventy-five years later when in 1224 the Augustinian (Austin) canons of Dorchester Abbey launched their own cult of Birinus. They claimed to have rediscovered his relics and petitioned Pope Honorius III to support their case.

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<sup>5</sup> John Crook, *English Medieval Shrines*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016, 86

<sup>6</sup> R. C. Love, "Birinus", *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, edited by Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes and Donald Scragg. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Crook, *Shrines*, 174.

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This claim, which John Crook calls a 'dubious cult',<sup>8</sup> came soon after Thomas Becket's relics had been translated to a more prominent position at Canterbury Cathedral in 1220. His new shrine rapidly became the main place of pilgrimage in England and very important within Europe. It drew pilgrims away from other shrines and religious places which scrambled to revive cults and renew shrines. There was a wave of enthusiasm for the translation and rediscovery of relics of English saints. This included the translation of Augustine's relics at Christ Church, Canterbury, the canonization of Hugh of Lincoln, and among others, attempts by Salisbury Cathedral to gain recognition of the cult of bishop Osmund.<sup>9</sup>

Dorchester Abbey took advantage of this trend. Its canons had been inspired by a vision in 1223 and found the tomb of a bishop clothed in full pontificals (bishop's robes) which they claimed was Birinus. The find was followed by several miraculous cures including a dumb child who became able to speak both English and French. Spurred on by an Oxford anchorite (hermit) Matthew of Holywell, the canons wrote to the Pope. In their documents they claimed that Bede had made a simple error in his *History of the English Church and People*: it was not Birinus who was translated to Winchester by Hedda but an otherwise unheard-of Bertinus whom they claimed was an unrecorded bishop of the West Saxons. Nicholas Vincent acidly comments that Bertinus 'may have been invented by the canons ... to suit the occasion.'<sup>10</sup>

The Benedictines of St Swithun's Priory in Winchester swiftly contested the Dorchester claim. They referred to Bede's evidence which had been unchallenged for four centuries and pointed to the tenth century *Secgan* which mentioned that Birinus lay in the *Ealden mynster* and made no reference to Dorchester.<sup>11</sup>

The pope's solution to the dispute verged on the farcical. He chose to have a contest of miracles recorded at the rival shrines in order to determine which had the

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<sup>8</sup> Crook, *Shrines*, 224.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Vincent, *Peter des Roches: An Alien in English Politics 1205-1238*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 243.

<sup>10</sup> Vincent, *des Roches*, 245.

<sup>11</sup> Crook, *Shrines*, 227.

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authentic relics of Birinus. The French sociologist Pierre Delooz has made fun of the process:

Let us pause to consider the fact that the pope was convinced that miracles were obtained by the veneration which took place at two tombs, which were both supposed to contain the same saint's body. He decided that the saint's body must actually be in the tomb in which most miracles occurred. Why? If we continue with the story, we learn that the canons of Dorchester near Oxford triumphed because they produced more miracles than the canons of Winchester, which was in fact the real place of burial. In this way social pressure produced miracles on a false basis, if we assume that they should have happened only in so far as the invoked saint's remains were authentic.<sup>12</sup>

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, was appointed by the Pope to implement Dorchester's claim but it is not clear whether he did so. Dorchester never abandoned its claim and soon erected a shrine, which was refurbished in 1320 but removed in the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s. Fragments from the shrine were found in 1858 and incorporated in a monument *cum* shrine erected at Dorchester Abbey in 1963.

The Dorchester claims had the effect of reviving interest in Birinus in Winchester. By 1224, his relics had been translated again into a chapel in the south-east corner of the retroquire, which had been completed by Bishop Peter des Roches some twenty years after he succeeded Bishop Godfrey de Lucy who had planned it. In 1501, the relics were removed when the chapel was transformed into a chantry for Bishop Thomas Langton who died of the plague on the eve of taking up an appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>13</sup> It is not known what became of them. In any case they would most likely have been destroyed in 1539 when Swithun's shrine was demolished and his relics dispersed. However, the well situated in the south ambulatory aisle of the cathedral crypt is still known as 'Birinus' well'.

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Delooz, "Towards a sociological study of canonized sainthood in the Catholic Church", translated by Jane Hodgkin, In *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*, edited by Stephen Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 189-217.

<sup>13</sup> Julie Adams. "An Indulgence for The Chapel of St Birinus", *Winchester Cathedral Record* 80, 2011, 18.

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The controversy led to Bishop des Roches commissioning a metrical life of Birinus *Vita Sancti Birini* on the eve of his departure for the Sixth Crusade (1228-9). Written by Henry of Avranches, it emphasised the bishop's position as successor to the old confessor saints such as Birinus, Swithun and Ethelwold, as well as promoting Birinus' cult.<sup>14</sup>

In Winchester, the Dorchester claims were brushed aside and the pope's decision ignored. If anything, Birinus' status as a major saintly cult in the cathedral and diocese was strengthened. The statutes of the Bishop of Winchester in 1224, at the time of the Dorchester claims, and in 1247 stipulated that the diocese's parishes had to observe the feasts of the saints whose bodies lay in the diocese. It specifically named only the two main saints whose shrines were at the cathedral who were Swithun and Birinus.<sup>15</sup>

Although Birinus was not included in the Sarum calendar of saints' festivals, which was used across the archdiocese of Canterbury, his festival of 3<sup>rd</sup> December was included in a fourteenth century supplement to the Winchester version, indicating that the saint was still considered important to the cathedral and the diocese. His standing outside the Winchester diocese in the period from 1066 to the dissolution of the monasteries, compared with the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish periods, declined as shown by minimal inclusion in litanies and kalendars. There was only one 'ancient church' dedicated to him.

Perhaps it is time to reconsider Birinus, as it was he who established a church in Winchester which became the Old Minster and then the Cathedral.

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<sup>14</sup> Vincent, *des Roches*, 246.

<sup>15</sup> Nigel Morgan, "The Sarum Calendar in England in the Fourteenth Century", in Susan Powell, ed., *Saints and Cults in Medieval England*. Harlaxton Medieval Studies Vol. XXVII, Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2017, 9.