

## The Cult of St Swithun

Over the past quarter-century, the story of Winchester's St Swithun has been re-examined with great scholarly detail and from different perspectives. The analysis and conclusions do not entirely follow the generally expressed legend of Swithun and offer alternative reasons for the development of his cult. This article reviews the scholarship and introduces contextual reasons for the development of Swithun's enduring cult.

What we know about Swithun largely comes from four sources. First, Lantfred, a Frankish monk who came to the Old Minster in Winchester from Fleury in Burgundy via Abingdon. He prepared the first publication about Swithun's miracles which (in Latin) was *Translatio et Miracula S. Swithuni*, about three years after the cult commenced in 971. He told of early miracles witnessed at the Old

Minster and elsewhere. About twenty years later, Wulfstan, an Old Minster monk and precentor, rendered Lantfred's prose into hexameter verse in a text known as *Narratio Metrica de S. Swithuno*. Then Aelfric, also an Old Minster monk, prepared a *Life of St Swithun* in Old English, the vernacular language of the people. It was a chapter in a legendary called *Lives of Saints* and was written at the end of the tenth century and included new miracles. Finally, around 1100, and about 230 years after Swithun's death, an unknown monk from Sherborne wrote a Life or *Vita* of the saint, titled *Vita St Swithuni*. This was accompanied by a collation of miracles.

There is a pragmatic view in the scholarship of the cults of English saints about their formation. Susan Ridyard wrote in *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England* that 'cults did not simply develop; they were developed. And their development owed less to divine acknowledgement than to successful advertising'.<sup>1</sup> What we now call marketing and promotion was widely undertaken. The most successful, that is most popular, cults had shrines visited by many pilgrims. The popularity of shrines also rose and fell. They were actively promoted and, across the entire medieval period, relaunched in response to competition.



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<sup>1</sup> Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 5.

Other scholars have noticed that the Anglo-Saxon monastic reformers, of whom more follows, had a particular interest in the rediscovery of neglected local saints.<sup>2</sup> These cults were an inseparable component of the monastic reforms of the tenth century. Alison Hudson even has a twist on Jane Austen's famous statement in *Pride and Prejudice* with: 'It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that a monastic reformer in possession of a major monastery must be in want of a saint's relics'.<sup>3</sup> As will be shown, the development of Swithun's cult had the characteristics identified by both Ridyard and Hudson.

Before considering the case study of St Swithun, it should be noted that much of the scholarship on St Swithun, Bishop Aethelwold and the church of that time, including translations of Latin and Old English documents from the principal writers of the tenth century, is contained within Michael Lapidge's *The Cult of St Swithun*, which will be referred to extensively. It was published in the Winchester Studies series in 2003.<sup>4</sup> All references to the contemporary writers are drawn from this book, which has radically revised understanding of Swithun's cult away from the myths and legends that had shaped it for centuries.

Cults of saints were formed and promoted in the context of the times in which they are launched. In the early tenth century, a reform movement started at the great abbey of Cluny in France to establish high liturgical, spiritual and pastoral standards.<sup>5</sup> There was also strong emphasis on celibacy. By 930, the abbey of Fleury had been reformed, and it became the prime connection with minsters and abbeys in the central South of England. Although Bishop Aethelwold never visited Fleury, he was aware of it and sent one of his senior Abingdon monks to learn about the reform movement.<sup>6</sup> A very important by-product of the reform movement in England was the development of the monastic cathedral, which combined the functions of a monastery church, a priory with its accommodation for monks, and the role of chief church of the diocese. Nowhere else in Western Europe had this combination.

This was also a time in England that was largely peaceful under the youthful King Edgar who moved to assert his power across the whole nation. Aethelwold, who had been close to

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Hudson, *Bishop Aethelwold, His Followers, and Saints' Cults in Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2022), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Hudson, *Aethelwold*, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, Winchester Studies 4(ii) (Oxford, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Editors' Note on tenth-century church reform which accompanies this article.

<sup>6</sup> Aethelwold was abbot of Abingdon before he was translated to Winchester in 963.

the royal court since childhood, was translated from the abbey at Abingdon to Winchester to become bishop in 963 at Edgar's express wish. Together they planned the reform of the minsters at Winchester, which was the royal capital and the standard bearer for a more disciplined church and nation. The changes at Winchester were part of what was considered a golden era, although it fell apart rapidly after Edgar's early death in 975. Thus, the context of the formation of Swithun's cult was reform in the church and an ambitious young king asserting his power. It was a powerful combination.

### **About Saint Swithun**

Swithun who died in 863, was bishop of Winchester and 'is better known for his activities as a miracle-working saint than for his tenure of episcopal office'.<sup>7</sup> Little is known about him other than connections with the Anglo-Saxon royal family, which was based in Winchester, and his interest in the city. In view of reforms of the English church that were to follow in the tenth century, it should be noted that Swithun was a secular cleric and not a monk.

According to the Sherborne hagiography, *Vita s. Swithuni* (Life of St Swithun), Swithun was a pious and exceedingly humble man. Other records and accounts indicate that he was a cleric promoted within the church and had been tutor to the future King Aethelwulf (r. 839-858; father of King Alfred) who later appointed him as Bishop of Winchester which he took up on 30 October 852. Swithun's name appears as a witness on nine surviving charters. He may have repaired several dilapidated churches in the diocese and a tenth century poem 'stated that Swithun constructed a bridge at the East Gate of Winchester in 859'.<sup>8</sup> But that is all. After he died on July 2, 863, he was buried in a sarcophagus on open ground between the western entrance to the Old Minster in Winchester and a stone cross dedicated to St Martin of Tours. The tomb's position can be seen in outline on ground by the northern side of the Cathedral.

In the centuries following the translation of his remains into the Old Minister on 15 July, 971, Swithun became one of the best-known and most widely culted Anglo-Saxon saints, both in England and on the Continent. Of the saint's career on this earth, by contrast, very little is known. Winchester sources, such as Wulfstan and Aelfric, were explicit in stating that

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Yorke, 'Swithun [St Swithun] (d.863)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), online.

<sup>8</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, p. 7.

nothing whatsoever was known of Swithun's life at the time of the translation.<sup>9</sup> Even the details from the *Life of St Swithun* are of doubtful validity. Lapidge calls it 'a work of pure fiction – the creation of a scholar who had few historical resources at his disposal'.<sup>10</sup> Also, Swithun was not *sanctus*; that is, he was not considered saintly either in life or in the century after his death.<sup>11</sup> The status of being considered *sanctus* was an important pre-condition for elevation to sainthood. After his death, it appears by his absence from contemporary writings that Swithun was ignored and the tomb was little regarded, despite its position by the entrance to the Old Minster. Although it has been suggested that the choice of the site of his tomb 'was a sign of his humility as he wanted people to walk over his grave',<sup>12</sup> Lapidge disagrees and commented:

One conjecture, however, is utterly implausible: namely that Swithun in humility sought an inconspicuous burial place. On the contrary, he was buried in a highly prominent position, his tomb marked by a stone cross and covered by a house-shaped tomb-structure which lay immediately outside the west door of the Old Minster.<sup>13</sup>

It was the prominence and position of the tomb which, in the late 960s, may have suggested to Bishop Aethelwold and his advisers the possibility of moving Swithun's remains into the Old Minster itself, and making them the focus of a new cult. By choosing the neglected Swithun as a local patron saint in addition to SS Peter and Paul, Aethelwold ignored earlier bishops such as Birinus and Headdi and recent Winchester bishop-saints such as Alphege the Bald, Birstan and Frithestan.<sup>14</sup>

### **Monastic reform campaign**

Thus, around 101 years after his death, Swithun became an important element in a campaign by Aethelwold to radically reform the Anglo-Saxon church. Along with the Bishops Dunstan and Oswald in other parts of England, Aethelwold took the church in a more religiously rigorous and monastic direction. In 964, with the support of King Edgar, he had sent an armed

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<sup>9</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Statement by Martin Biddle in WARG lecture, Winchester, January 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Yorke, *Swithun*, online.

<sup>13</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Watson, 'Winchester's Lesser-Known Saints, *Record Extra*, May 2018. Access via [www.wincathrecord.org](http://www.wincathrecord.org).

force into Winchester's two major churches and expelled all the secular clerics at the points of spears and swords and replaced them with monks. Secular clergy, who were often married, were also ejected from other southern churches. This widely-resented move had been agreed with the Pope in the previous year but had been kept secret. In order to maintain his ecclesiastical leadership and appease the ejected clerics, Bishop Aethelwold developed a campaign to promote a cult of St Swithun, who as noted earlier, was a secular cleric.

The cult began on July 15, 971 when Swithun's remains were translated from the sarcophagus outside the Old Minster and taken into the Minster itself. It was a grand event that dwarfed all previous events of this kind as Bishop Aethelwold strove to launch the cult and complete his leadership of change in the church. In the years that followed, Aethelwold expanded the footprint of the Old Minster on a large scale to incorporate the saint's original tomb and make it the focal point for the cult. The rebuilding was completed in 980 and made the Old Minster one of the largest church structures in the Western Christian world and comparable with major churches in France, Germany and Italy.

### **Why Swithun?**

Swithun was an unexpected choice for Aethelwold's campaign of church reform, but he was a canny choice. There is no evidence that Swithun had even been a monk, as he was one of the secular clerks whom Aethelwold despised. Yet, this campaign using a local saint helped mitigate the threats posed by the unreformed clerics whom the bishop had expelled from the Old Minster.<sup>15</sup> Aethelwold went a step further and appointed one of the expelled clerics, Eadsige, to be guardian of the Swithun's reliquary in the role of sacrist.<sup>16</sup> Eadsige, who became a monk, thus had a prominent position in the promotion of the cult and acted as a bridge between Aethelwold's monastic management of the diocese and the ousted secular clergy.

There is doubt as to when and how St Swithun's miraculous powers were first evidenced. There was one incident in his lifetime when he restored broken eggs to their whole state, but this was not recorded (and with dubious validity) until *The Life of Swithun* was published, around 120 years after Swithun's translation and more than 220 years after his death. The main evidence for the *inventio*, the Latin term for a full demonstration of a saint's

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<sup>15</sup> Hudson, *Bishop Aethelwold*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Hudson suggests that Swithun 'might have been an ancestor' of Eadsige, which was one reason why the cleric was appointed as sacrist. (p. 105)

miraculous powers (three are needed!), was expressed in Lantfred's *Translatio et miraculo s. Swithuni*. He wrote that the first occurred as late as 968 (105 years after Swithun's death). The bishop appeared as a vision to a blacksmith, whom he told to report his appearance to Eadsige, the expelled secular cleric, and thence to Aethelwold. The blacksmith, however, took two years to do so! [Lantfred was one of those he told]. As part of the reconciliation between Aethelwold and the secular clergy, this appearance may have a reasoning that was added *ex post facto*. The next miracle to occur was in 969 when a man suffering from the pain of a hump-back lay down by Swithun's tomb and fell asleep but awoke fully cured. There was a third miracle of the man who suffered a paralysis after seeing the apparition of 'three terrifying and naked Ethiopian women' in the city's water meadows. He was told in a dream that he should go to Swithun's tomb where he was cured.<sup>17</sup> Once this third miracle had been ascribed to Swithun, the process of *translatio* went ahead with the recovery of the relics and their translation into the Old Minster.

Although there were three miracles that occurred shortly before the translation and the formation of the cult of St Swithun, there remains the question why this humble bishop of no great note in his lifetime was elevated ahead of other bishops of greater standing who were entombed in the Old Minster. Lapidge has commented that, 'one cannot help thinking, perhaps cynically, that Bishop Swithun was chosen to become the focus of a new cult not because he had appeared in dreams, but because his tomb was situated in an extremely prominent position outside the west door of the Old Minster, in a direct line midway between the door and the tower of St Martin [also a prominent place of pilgrimage]'.<sup>18</sup>

### **Developing the cult**

The process of cult formation and promotion proceeded after the sainthood had been confirmed and the relics had been moved to the Old Minster. This was the first, essential step in the strategic formation of the cult. After the construction of the reliquary, in which the saint's relics were kept, the next steps were the expansion of the Old Minster to handle increased pilgrim traffic, and to add publicity and liturgical commemoration.

The church was extended westward to cover Swithun's original tomb and Aethelwold also strengthened and extended other sides. This work was continued by later bishops,

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<sup>17</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

although in little more than a century, the Old Minster would be gradually replaced from 1079 by the new Norman cathedral which had Swithun as one of its patron saints.

The propagation of the cult brought new income to the diocese. By translating the remains and creating a point of pilgrimage, Aethelwold wanted to attract substantial numbers of pilgrims (and hence of revenues) to the Old Minster. The contemporary publications by Lantfred, Wulfstan Cantor and Aelfric reported large numbers of miracles. Lantfred reported that 200 sick people were cured in a ten-day period. Wulfstan's own preaching was frequently interrupted by calls for him to go to the Old Minster for yet another miracle. Aelfric recorded that many crutches and stools were left by cured cripples in the Old Minster.<sup>19</sup> All three were contemporary witnesses, which gives them an authenticity that is difficult to challenge.

The attraction of pilgrims was achieved rapidly without modern tools of mass communication. Publications, however, made an important contribution to message distribution and the validation of claims of miracle-working at the shrine. Within a relatively short period of twenty years there were the two publications about St Swithun from Lantfred and Wulfstan. In Aethelwold's successor Alphege's time, Aelfric wrote the Old English *Life of St Swithun*. The first two documents were written in Latin, the language of the church. They captured the enhanced story of St Swithun and made it available for dissemination among the whole church. By offering the saint's life in Old English through Aelfric's brief text, the church was also communicating to the whole of its congregation, particularly laymen, and not just the few who understood Latin.

The principal purpose of Lantfred's *Translatio et miracula S. Swithuni*, was 'demonstrating how pilgrims were attracted, in large numbers, from far and wide, to the Old Minster once the translation had taken place'.<sup>20</sup> The publications were used to promote the cult and the Old Minster via channels of privileged communication amongst the clergy (who could read and write) in order to spread news amongst their congregations and so attract more visitors.

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<sup>19</sup> Tom Watson, 'Creating the cult of a saint: Communication strategies in 10<sup>th</sup> century England', *Public Relations Review*, 34 (2008), p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, p. 21.

## Other Promotion

Word-of-mouth was the most likely way by which St Swithun's reputation as a miracle worker reached so many people in southern and central England. Clearly, people who were unschooled were not coming to Winchester because they had read about the saint. On the contrary, it seems that oral report was the route by which the saint's fame spread.<sup>21</sup> Other methods of supporting the cult, similar to modern day brand promotion, were the inclusion of saints' days in church calendars, the dedication of churches to saints, the distribution of relics and the inclusion of prayers to saints within the liturgy.<sup>22</sup>

As a method of reinforcing the importance of a saint and placing her or him in the mainstream of church life, their inclusion on the annual calendar of worship and celebration was vital. Swithun has three commemorations – July 2 (deposition), July 15 (translation) and October 30 (ordination). The few remaining church calendars from the period up to 1100 show nineteen calendar entries for the Winchester saint (the now forgotten Paulinus of York had the most at twenty-seven).<sup>23</sup> It can thus be seen that Swithun's cult became popular very quickly. After 1100, Swithun remained among the 'Top Ten' English saints that were celebrated in litany and calendars, not just in England but in northern France and Scandinavia.

At present, there are sixty-eight churches, ancient and modern, dedicated to St Swithun in England. There are none in the other countries of the United Kingdom and none north of Wakefield in south Yorkshire. Thus, St Swithun can be seen as a very English saint who is mainly commemorated in the south and central parts of the country. While these seem to be substantial numbers, they fall well behind dedications to the Virgin (more than 2300) and All Saints (more than 1200).<sup>24</sup>

## In the Cathedral

With the construction of the Norman cathedral after 1079, Swithun's reliquary was moved from the Old Minster in 1093 and placed on or near the High Altar. In 1150, during the time of Bishop Henry of Blois, it was moved to the apse behind the altar where it was placed on a foramina (plinth). It was after this time that the Holy Hole was constructed, in what became

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Watson, *Cult of a saint*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Rushforth, *Saints in English Kalendars Before A.D. 1100* (London, 2008), see Table of Saints in English Kalendars between pp. 58-59.

<sup>24</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, p. 47.



the retrochoir, as the entrance to a tunnel leading to the foramina. Moving ahead to 1476, a new shrine was built in the retrochoir aided by funds bequeathed by Cardinal Henry Beaufort.<sup>25</sup> Faced with competition from other shrines, notably Thomas Becket in Canterbury, this was a relaunch of Swithun's cult in the hope of attracting pilgrims (and their money). This shrine was destroyed and stripped of its precious metals in 1538 by Henry VIII's commissioner. The site is marked by the frame placed in the retrochoir in the 1960s.

## Relics

As a method of propagating a cult, the distribution of the saint's relics was widely used. The situation in Winchester was this: as news of his miraculous powers became known, pilgrims flocked to the Old Minster from an ever-widening range. This led to other churches wishing 'to gain access to these powers; in other words, to have their own relics of St Swithun'.<sup>26</sup> It was customary for churches to have extensive collections of relics. Although there was reluctance for Winchester to release total control over the saint's reliquary (in which the relics were stored), there seems to have been some 'leakage' with the first recorded dispersal being to Canterbury when Aethelwold's successor Alphege was elevated to the archbishopric in 1006. He took Swithun's head with him. Recent research has found that it may be at Evreux Cathedral in northern France.<sup>27</sup> By the twelfth century, many churches had relics of Swithun. There are records on fourteen relic lists and Lapidge has tartly commented, 'one wonders how many bones still remained in the 'Old Reliquary' at Winchester when it was melted down in 1451'.<sup>28</sup> Be that as it may, the distribution of relics supported the cult of St Swithun and gave it longevity as well as accessibility to people who did not normally travel far from their hometown or village in a lifetime.

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<sup>25</sup> Philip Lindley, 'The 'Great Screen' of Winchester Cathedral Part II: Style and Date', *Burlington Magazine* 1345 (1993), p.801.

<sup>26</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, p. 37.

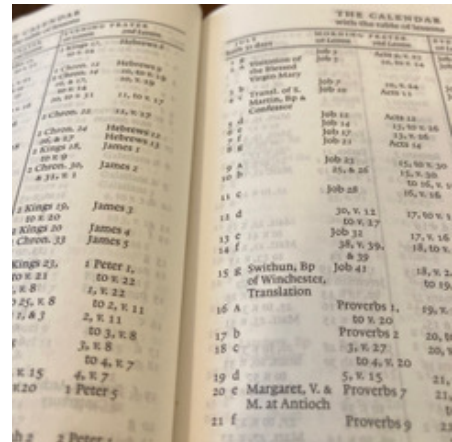
<sup>27</sup> Lapidge, *Swithun*, pp. 61-65.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

## Book of Common Prayer

Swithun was one the few English saints to be retained in *The Book of Common Prayer* which celebrates his translation on July 15 in its festal calendar.

Like almost all saints, other than Mary, the apostles and some early martyrs, Swithun was omitted from the calendar of Thomas Cranmer's first two editions of *The Book of Common Prayer* in 1549 and 1553. He returned, however, in the first Elizabethan edition in 1559 on July 15 as a Black Letter Day, for which there was no Holy Day, and was one of only twelve English saints. This status was confirmed in the 1662 edition which is essentially the version that is used now.<sup>29</sup>



If Aethelwold's campaign to reform the tenth century Anglo-Saxon church is considered, we can see that the bishop was using promotional strategies and tactics that would be common in the twenty-first century. Although he held immense power, because the Bishop of Winchester was fully supported by King Edgar, he understood the need to engage the support of those whom he had displaced from the churches and so offered them a saintly symbol of secular clerical miracle-working. Over time, he created a brand of the cult of St Swithun, used promotional communications to promote the shrine in Winchester amongst the clergy and monastic orders, produced publications that recorded the saint's miracles and incorporated liturgy about Swithun into the daily language of the church's worship. That promotional activity continued for centuries and is with us today.

### Did it rain on Swithun's translation?

The aphorism that 'if it rains on St Swithun's Day, it will rain for forty days' or words to that effect is well known. It does not appear, however, to have started from legendarily torrential rain on the day of his translation on July 15, 971. The source may have been a prognostic couplet for the saints' days of two Roman martyrs Saints Processus and Martinianus, which was on July 2 and the same day as Swithun's deposition. Lapidge speculates that there may have been a shift of dates from July 2 to 15 over time.<sup>30</sup> In any case, it was not until the late

<sup>29</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge, 2004), p. xxvii.

<sup>30</sup> Lapidge, Swithun, p. 48.

medieval period that it was ascribed to Winchester's local patron saint and became fixed in folk memory and print. It is ironic that, just as the cult officially ended in 1538 when his shrine was broken up, the one memorable popular reference to St Swithun arose. The claim of rain or a tempest on the day of Swithun's translation to the Old Minster appears to come from a misinterpretation of the Latin phrase *qua tempestate* written by Wulfstan. According to Lapidge, it means 'at that time' in this context and not a tempest.<sup>31</sup>

## **TOM WATSON**

### **IMAGES**

P. 1 – Statue of St Swithun in the Great Screen (Simon Newman)

P. 10 – Page in Book of Common Prayer (Author)

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48, n. 135.