

THE WALL-PAINTING OF THE UNKNOWN SAINT AT ST MARY'S CHURCH, PADBURY

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One of the medieval wall-paintings at St Mary's Church, Padbury, has, since its discovery some thirty years ago, been regarded as showing the torture or execution of an unknown saint. The present paper suggests grounds for identifying the saint as St Christopher, and also suggests a possible reason for choosing this subject.

A conclusive interpretation of the wall-painting on the second full spandrel from the east of the south nave arcade (Spandrel 2) at St Mary's Church, Padbury, is rendered impossible by the destruction of the upper left-hand part of the painting (see Plate V). Enough is left, however, for the Church guidebook to be able to describe the remainder as follows: 'it shows the torture or execution of a saint, who stands in the centre, stripped to the waist, the executioner on the left and an emperor on the right'. The present writer is suitably chastened by the Guide-book going on to say that 'it is difficult to identify the subject of this painting and it seems fruitless to make guesses',¹ but trusts that what follows will come within the catagory of an informed suggestion.

After an interim report in *Recs. Bucks* xvi (1953-60) by Dr E. Clive Rouse,² the locus classicus on this and all the other wall-paintings at Padbury is his article in *Recs. Bucks* xviii (1966-70). The existence of paintings on the spandrels in question was established in 1955, and Rouse was able to conserve them in 1964, when he dated them to the second half of the fourteenth century.³ Their comparatively recent discovery means that Rouse's two papers are the only source where the spandrel paintings are concerned.

Spandrel 1, to the east of Spandrel 2, shows the legend of St Edmund, the East Anglian king, who, in 869,⁴ was martyred by Danish bowmen and then decapitated. His head was taken care of by a benevolent wolf, until

monks, attracted by the head calling 'Here, here,' arrived to recover it.⁵

The contents of the painting on Spandrel 2 have already been summarised. For a full description reference should be made to Rouse's second article, and to his measured drawing made at the time (Plate V); this has been reproduced, by kind permission, to illustrate the present paper rather than a modern photograph because, unfortunately, less of the painting is now (1985) visible than when the drawing was made. Rouse suggested that Spandrel 2 might show another scene from the life of St Edmund, but saw no evidence of this.⁶ The saint in this spandrel has, however, one thing in common with the fourteenth-century wall-painting of St Edmund's martyrdom at Stoke Dry, Leicestershire,⁷ namely, that both the saint at Padbury and the St Edmund at Stoke Dry have been stripped to the same article of clothing: the sort of medieval masculine underwear known as 'braies'. It is therefore necessary to consider whether martyrdom in this particular garment is a feature of the iconography of St Edmund. Of the paintings of his martyrdom which the present writer has seen, at Belchamp Walter, Essex; Bishopsbourne, Kent; Oaksey, Wilts; and Pickering, Yorks, only the last-mentioned is in a sufficiently legible state, doubtless by virtue of having been 'largely retouched'⁸ by Victorian 'restorers', for it to be possible to say with any certainty what the saint is wearing, namely, a loincloth.⁹ Illustrations or descriptions of wall-paintings of this subject

which the writer has not seen on the site show that at Cliffe-at-Hoo, Kent, the saint wears a loincloth and at Ely Cathedral¹⁰ and Lakenheath¹¹ he is fully clothed. In media other than wall-painting, the saint pierced by arrows in the early fourteenth-century retablo at Romsey Abbey wears a loincloth, but Dr M. R. James considered him to be St Sebastian.¹² The undoubted St Edmund in the early fourteenth-century *Queen Mary's Psalter* wears braies,¹³ while a manuscript in the Pierpoint Morgan collection shows St Edmund being scourged while fully clothed.¹⁴ There is thus no consistency in the clothing worn by the saint during martyrdom, and no iconographical necessity for him to be shown wearing braies.

There is, however, an important common factor in the wall-paintings at Belchamp Walter, Bishopsbourne, Pickering, and Stoke Dry, in that the saint is shown in each as being pierced with a number of arrows, doubtless to conform with the legend that he was 'shot with arrows, till his body was "like a thistle covered with prickles"'.¹⁵ Thus, at Stoke Dry, for example, even the portion of the painting where both sides of the saint's body can be seen has twelve arrows in it, with six on each side; there is nothing of the sort at Padbury. This in itself casts grave doubts on the saint being St Edmund.

A further point against the saint at Padbury being St Edmund is that at Stoke Dry and Pickering it is clear that the only persons involved are the saint and the archers, who are on either side of him; no 'emperor' is included in the composition. Even in a painting which has deteriorated as much as that at Bishopsbourne, it could be seen (in 1973) that arrows are placed symmetrically on either side of the saint's body, so that it can be deduced that there too, there were archers on either side of him.

For all these reasons the present writer concludes that the saint on Spandrel 2 cannot be St Edmund.

Any interpretation of the painting must begin with a detailed consideration of its surviving

figures, beginning on the left with, to adopt Rouse's description, the 'torturer or executioner'.¹⁶ Only his legs are still to be seen, but it is clear that he is kneeling on his right knee. Rouse mentions that 'the end of some implement (? whip or scourge) hangs down above' the right foot of this person, but 'since the upper part is destroyed, one cannot say what weapon or instrument he was wielding'.¹⁷

The central figure is now visible from just above the navel downwards. The greyish-blue diagonal band now to be seen, where the saint's chest was originally, forms no part of the wall-painting, but is probably discoloration caused by the penetration of damp which must have occurred since Rouse's measured drawing was made. Rouse commented that 'the pose is curious, on tip-toe, as if strung up', but he pointed out that, on the other hand, 'no post, cross, or gallows, is visible behind the figure'.¹⁸

The person on the right is crowned, so will be referred to as a king. In his right hand he holds upright a large sword, indicating that he is dispensing what is, at any rate in his own opinion, justice.¹⁹ The forefinger of his left hand is pointing upwards; Rouse said that this hand 'points in condemnation'.²⁰ Most persons ordering torture or executions in English medieval wall-paintings sit with their legs crossed; Rouse explains that 'the crossing of the legs was important. It was held to be an interruption of the normal flow of life . . . and became the attribute of wicked Emperors—the only ones who could do it with impunity'.²¹ In the present case the king's legs are neither crossed nor placed together in a suitably decorous, regal, attitude; indeed, the right leg appears to be being jerked upward.

The present writer suggests that the only saint whose martyrdom accords with all the factors outlined above is St Christopher. H. C. Whaite's book on this saint²² conveniently sets out his story, taken from the late thirteenth century *Golden Legend*, in the Caxton translation of 1483. It was believed that Christopher consulted a hermit about conversion to Christianity, and was advised to make himself responsible for carrying travellers

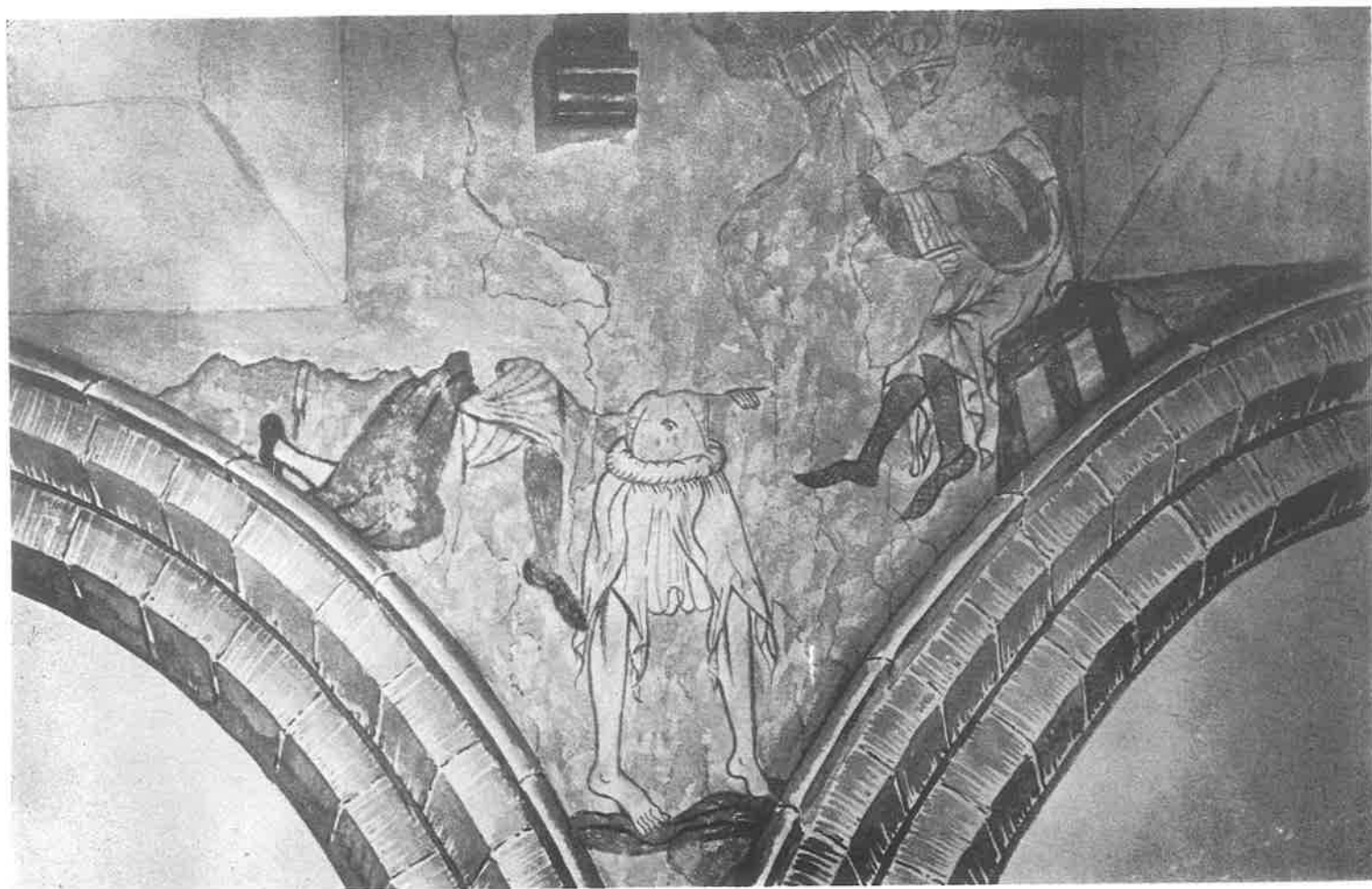


Plate V. The unknown saint in St Mary's, Padbury. From the painting by Dr E. Clive Rouse.

over a local river-crossing. Then, said the hermit, Jesus would eventually reveal Himself to Christopher. This He did in the form of a child wishing to be carried over the river, thus providing the subject for the vast majority of the representations of the saint. The conversion of Christopher (= Christ-bearer) led to his martyrdom by the local king. The penultimate attempt to kill him, before it became apparent that only beheading would serve this purpose, was that 'he shold be thrugh shoten wyth arowes wyth xl knyghtes archers'. After describing how 'none of the knyghtes myght attayne hym, for the arowes henge in thayer about nyghe hym wythout touchyng.' The narrative goes on to say 'and one of the arowes retorned sodenly fro the ayer, and smote [the king] in the eye, and blynded hym.'

It is suggested that this is the moment represented in the painting at Padbury; if the king were pointing his finger in condemnation, the natural thing to do would be to point it at the saint, but the king seems in fact to be pointing at his left eye (which is no longer to be seen). Close examination of Plate 1 shows that immediately beneath the king's pointing finger is a small rectangle which could well be the feathered end of the arrow. If the interpretation now put forward is accepted, it becomes clear why the king's legs are not crossed; they are writhing in agony.

Before leaving the subject of arrows, the fact that the saint at Padbury is, so far as can be seen, untouched by any is in conformity with the martyrdom of St Christopher as recounted in the *Golden Legend*.

The usual identifying feature of St Christopher is the Christ-child he is carrying, but this cannot be included in a picture devoted exclusively to his martyrdom, and St Christopher had no special emblem of his own. For these reasons, it is suggested that a stylised representation of water has been included in the lowest part of the spandrel, since the fact that this saint was the only one regularly shown as walking through water would ensure that, despite being deprived of his usual attribute, he could still be identified. The inclusion of water

at Padbury makes the posture of the feet more understandable, and an examination of the wall-paintings of this saint will show that the Padbury posture is often the attitude adopted to give the impression of his wading through a turbulent river, rather than just standing in water. Whaite has 43 plates of wall-paintings of the saint, of which 22 show at least one of his feet, and in 15 of these the Padbury position for the feet seems to have been adopted.

It is appreciated that the absence of anything in the nature of a stake is a serious difficulty, particularly as the *Golden Legend* specifically mentions that the king 'commaunded that he shold be bounde to a strong stake',²³ but the absence of a stake is damaging, not merely to the present writer's own interpretation, but to any other based on the assumption that the painting represents the torture or execution of a saint. The position of the fingers, which was presumably duplicated in the original painting by those of the right hand, in any case precludes the saint from having been tied to a stake by the obvious means of putting the arms backwards around it and tying them at the wrist, since this would have made both hands invisible from the front.

In trying to make out a case for identifying the saint as Christopher, the significance of his garment should not be overlooked, particularly as it is not the loincloth worn by martyrs in medieval wall-paintings generally.

Its importance lies in the fact that St Christopher is the only saint (apart from St Edmund, who has already been eliminated above) who can occasionally be depicted in English medieval wall-paintings as wearing braies. There was nothing immodest to the medieval mind in allowing the braies to be seen when this was sensible having regard to the nature of the work being performed; a full-length robe would clearly be inappropriate to someone carrying travellers over a dangerous river. Thus Whaite illustrates various examples of St Christopher wearing braies, ranging from the one at Willingham, Cambs, where only one braies-clad knee can be seen, protruding through a slit in the saint's tunic, to the case at Cranbourne,

Dorset,²⁴ where the saint's braies are completely uncovered (Whaite refers to the garment as 'knee breeches',²⁵ so that his terminology is open to criticism in that knee breeches in the sense of an outer garment fastening below the knee did not come into existence until well after the period with which his book and this paper are concerned).²⁶

The garment of the figure of the saint at Padbury has the following aspects in common with the text-book definitions of braies, namely, the way they rest on the hips; the fact that they are loose-fitting; the thick roll round the top where a running cord would go; the fullness of the material between the legs; and the fact that the lower ends of the garment hang down in points.²⁷ The only difference between the saint at Padbury and the Christophers shown wearing braies is that they have theirs fastened just below the knee, whereas those of the Padbury saint are loose, but this is merely the difference between the saint going about his normal work and his undergoing execution.

If the argument is accepted so far, it follows that it can be assumed that the third person in the painting is either one of the archers or the executioner who finally put Christopher to death by beheading. Both are depicted at Shorwell, Isle of Wight, and either could be wearing the parti-coloured clothing shown at Padbury, Rouse having pointed out that costume of this nature is indicative of a 'wicked or evil character'.²⁸ If however the painting does in fact represent the moment when the king is struck in the eye by an arrow, one would not expect the executioner to be kneeling, but to be standing in the background, as at Shorwell. An archer, on the other hand, could be kneeling: MS Douce 135 includes a miniature of a kneeling fifteenth-century archer who is out hunting; as at Padbury, it is on his right knee that he is kneeling.²⁹ Moreover the Padbury archer has just shot an arrow which has been miraculously deflected in mid-air and has hit his king in the eye. He might well be kneeling, either in awe or in terror. He was not of course to know that St Christopher, with saintly forbearance, would tell the king how to recover his sight.³⁰ The archer may not

look like a 'knyghte', but neither do the archers at Shorwell.

The object over the bowman's right foot has already been alluded to, but the present writer regrets his inability to suggest any identification of it.

It is appreciated that if the reading of the painting as being the martyrdom of St Christopher is accepted, it would mean that there would be two representations of the saint in the same church; this, however, is not unknown elsewhere, C. E. Keyser arguing that at Little Hampden there are four,³¹ all of which show the saint in his capacity of Christ-bearer. But if one painting is the conventional Christ-bearer and the other is of the same saint being martyred, no question of any duplication arises.

It may be possible to suggest a reason why this particular subject was chosen. The starting point is the proposition that 'the intermingling of religious and political motives is a commonplace of the Middle Ages . . .'.³² An example is provided by the wall-paintings of c.1330 at South Newington, Oxon., where a painting of the martyrdom of St Thomas of Canterbury is flanked by the painting of another execution, this time by beheading. It has been convincingly argued, originally by Dr M. R. James (the case being well summarised by Caiger-Smith) that the second victim is Thomas of Lancaster, the hope being that, by drawing this alleged parallel between the two men who had both antagonised their monarchs and been done to death for it, the canonisation of Lancaster would be facilitated, though Thomas of Lancaster did not in fact get any further than beatification.³³

At the time of the Padbury paintings, St Edmund was already canonised and buried in the Benedictine monastery³⁴ at Bury St Edmunds in a shrine of great magnificence.³⁵ 'During the political revolution of 1327, . . . the townsmen of Bury St. Edmunds . . . attacked the [abbey] which ruled them and restricted their privileges.'³⁶ The paintings at Padbury, dating as they do from the second half of the

fourteenth century would of course post-date this occurrence, and possibly also the further attack on the abbey during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, when the abbey was broken into. The greatest scandal would be that on this occasion a number of priests took part in the attack on the abbey.³⁷

Though on both these occasions the actual shrine of St Edmund was respected,³⁸ it might well have been thought by the Benedictines that, since the abbey owed so much of its great distinction to the presence of the saint's shrine, which had been there for several centuries, the violation of the abbey was an insult to St Edmund. It might therefore have been decided that all other Benedictine houses should be asked to take steps to ensure that the populace was reminded of the respect due to the Royal saint. The houses approached would include Bradwell Abbey, a small Benedictine house which had possessed the advowson of Padbury Church from the thirteenth century, and which retained it until the Dissolution.³⁹ On the opportunity arising of having wall-paintings on Spandrels 1 and 2, it could therefore have been decided to adopt much the same principle as at South Newington. Painting the native saint beside one of indisputable international importance, who nevertheless had something strikingly in common with the person whose cause it was desired to promote, would, it was hoped, in some way transfer prestige to him. In the case of St Christopher and St Edmund the common factor was the method of martyrdom, in that they were both made the target for archers, and both were finally beheaded. The fact that St Christopher was indeed a saint of the required standing is demonstrated by Kendon's statistical analysis of Keyser's *List of Buildings having Mural Decorations* (1883), which shows that there were far and away more wall-paintings of that saint in England when the *List* was compiled than those of any other non-scriptural saint—182, as against the 72 of St

George, the runner up,⁴⁰ notwithstanding that the latter had been officially the patron saint of England since 1222.⁴¹ The same source indicates that there were then 38 paintings of St Edmund; Caiger-Smith (1963) refers, alas, to only 11.⁴² Moreover, the similarity between SS Christopher and Edmund is well brought out by Whaite's comment on another case where they are shown alongside, the former in his usual role of Christ-bearer, and the latter being shot at by two bowmen in the painting at Stoke Dry already mentioned, namely, 'were it not for the crown worn by St. Edmund, the martyrdom might very well represent that of St. Christopher himself . . .'⁴³

Bradwell Abbey was only a small house, and Rouse points out that 'the Padbury paintings are likely to have resulted from the benefactions of successive wealthy patrons or lords of the manor, like the Doyleys, Fitzhamons, etc.',⁴⁴ but the local magnates would have agreed to paintings having any subject-matter about which the Abbey was sufficiently pressing.

In conclusion, it has been accepted throughout this paper that the case it puts forward is, in the nature of things, incapable of strict proof. Should, however, the painting in its original, complete, state have in fact represented the martyrdom of St Christopher, then it may be of interest to add that a painting which dealt solely with this subject would, to the best of the present writer's knowledge, be unique among surviving English medieval wall-paintings.

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4. D. Attwater, *Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (1970) 109. Rouse and other authorities put the year at 870.
5. Rouse, *op. cit.* n. 3, 26; and see Dorothy Whitelocke, 'Fact and Fiction in the Legend of St. Edmund', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. of Archaeol.* xxxi (1967-69) 217-33.
6. Rouse, *op. cit.* n. 3, 26.
7. Rouse, *Discovering Wall Paintings* (1980 edn.) Plate 1.
8. J. C. Wall, *Medieval Wall Paintings* [1914] 173.
9. Consideration was given to including Widford in this list of wall-paintings of the martyrdom which have been seen by the writer, but it was decided to exclude it on the grounds that the identification is too uncertain. Both E. W. Tristram, *English Wall Painting: the 14th century* (1955) 265, and A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings* (1963) 169, query it.
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