

St Ragner of Northampton Prince, Soldier, Martyr

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In the library of Trinity College Dublin there is a beautiful 13th Century folio volume recording the lives and traditions of major saints, such as Thomas Becket, Edward the Confessor and Hugh of Lincoln, and also of more local East Anglian saints, such as Werburg, Etheldred, and Guthlac of Crowland. There is also the finding and translation "in the time of God's dear saint, Edward King of the English", of Saint Ragner, soldier, martyr, kinsman of St Edmund, king and martyr, in the church of blessed Peter the Apostle in Northampton. In the text, Ragner is described as nephew (nepotem) of King Edmund. The original burial and the subsequent discovery, described in this document, were of course in the Saxon stone church, which the excavations by the archaeologist, John Williams, proved to have stood on the site of the present, Norman, St Peter's.

In the Bodleian Library, Oxford, there is a Missal according to the use of Sarum. It was probably written and decorated in the late 1300s, somewhere in the Midlands. In the Calendar, a later hand has, probably in 1451, among other things inserted:

May 29th DEDICATIO ECCLESIE SANCTI PETRI NOR'HT

Oct 25th MEDIE LECTIONES DE FRONTONE

[This is the feast of St Crispin & St Crispinian. Frontone means beetle brow, and seems to be a contemporary nickname of cobblers.]

Nov 21st SANCTI REGENARII REGIS

[A still later hand changed "king" to "martyr", on the evidence of "Hys Servys in the olde masse boke". Nobody doubts that this Missal was acquired by, and used at, St Peter's, quite possibly until the time of the Commonwealth.

Records still available of the Wills of people who left money for the Altar and Fraternity of St Rgeinary (or Ruginary) mention bequests from 1496 to as late as 1535, in the reign of Henry VIII. We can assume that his Feast continued to be celebrated until the time of the Commonwealth.

The Missal was removed from St Peter's, and was lost to sight until a London bookseller sold it to Sir Thomas Phillips, a baronet famous as a collector of mediaeval documents. The Bodleian bought it from the Phillips estate in 1899. The brilliant historian, and Rector of St Peter's, R.M. Serjeantson, heard of it, and made enquiries. The Bodleian actually gave him

a photograph of a page of the Missal, and told him about the Dedication Festival, but did not mention St Ragner. So when in 1907, Serjeantson followed up a clue given to him by Sir Francis Hervey, and secured a copy of a German translation of the mediaeval legend of St Ragner, which he translated for his County Society, he was unaware that his Northampton church had been celebrating St Ragner for some centuries.

The saga of the rediscovery of St Ragner, as Northampton's own martyr, makes us realize how much we depend upon the "front-line" scholars who deal with original material to get things right.

What a boon it would have been had the scholar who transcribed the List of Resting Places of the Saints, drawn up by Hugh Candidus in 1155 (just about the time when the Norman St Peter's was being built) had known that Hamtun (or Hamtune) was the old name for Northampton, that Hugh was saying that the resting place of St Ragner, Rex, was in Northampton!

A scholar cataloguing the library of Archbishop Ussher in Dublin noted that an inscription inside the front cover showed that "our" volume belonged to St Peter's Westminster. It must have been a duff day for him. When it was brought in 1987 to Northampton for exhibition at the Museum, it was clear that the inscription said Peter Whalley. For a hundred years the scholar's note had ruled out a close connection with Northampton, where the Whalley family became one of the notable ones of the town, and which was nine miles from Croyland Abbey in Wellingborough, one of the few East Anglian religious houses which could have recruited craftsmen able to produce the top-quality writing and illustrations of the volume.

It was encouragement from John Williams, archaeologist of the Development Corporation, and now County Archaeologist for Kent, whose excavations to the east of St Peter's revealed the foundations of the stone Saxon palace there, together with the further enquiries into what could be known of St Ragner, made him and us begin to take seriously the possibility that St Ragner is an authentic historical person, not a fictional character, which led us to organize an exhibition in 1987 in the Guildhall Road Museum, and a Festival Eucharist in St Peter's on Saint Ragner's Day, November 21st. The day has been kept as his feast ever since.

There is still much to be sought out, and much to be considered. From the time in the Iron Age when the causewayed camp was built at Briar Hill, Northampton has been a strategic place for anyone aspiring to rule England. It would naturally be entrusted by a Saxon king to a close and loyal kinsman, who would take the army under his command to support the king against the Danish invaders. It would naturally make a lot of political sense for King Edward the Elder, when the Danish Earl surrendered the town in 917, to bring back as soon as possible the relics of the town's royal martyr to rest in St Peter's. This might well have been in a church which burned down and was not rebuilt for many years, allowing the memory of the saint and his feast to become blurred. We shall perhaps be a good deal, perhaps mostly ever, in the world of speculation and circumstantial evidence, but there are still plenty

of places to look. There is, for example, material about Croyland Abbey, and a great many books and scholarly papers about St Edmund.

Much to be done – but meanwhile we, who have been dealing with putting together the pieces of the saga, assure you who read this that Saint Ragener, prince, soldier, martyr, is a saint to be honoured in Northampton.

B.R.M

SAINT RAGENER REVIVED

Presumably the Editor of the Oxford Book of Saints needs to be a bit of a sceptic. For RAGENER (Ragenerius) – died about 870 – he writes:

Soldier and martyr of Northampton. The only witness is a single manuscript of Nova Legenda Angliae. According to this, Bruning, the wealthy and devout parish priest of St Peter, Northampton, in the mid-11th century, had a simple-minded manservant of Viking family, who set out on pilgrimage for Rome in honour of St Peter, whom he called Drotinum (i.e. 'lord'). But he was repeatedly admonished in visions to return. Once back, he saw the same celestial visitor as before, who now told him that the body of a friend of God lay buried under the floor of the church, and that the parish priest should be told where to find him. Bruning set about digging and found a grave just where he had been told. The news was made public but nobody knew who was buried there.

Alfgiva of Abingdon, who was severely crippled, was cured at the tomb during the Vigil on Easter Eve after seeing a miraculous light, and walked as she never walked before. After three days of fasting, Bruning opened the tomb. In it he found bones with a scroll. This identified the body as that of Ragener, martyr of Christ, the nephew of Edmund of Bury; both had suffered for Christ in the same persecution.

Other miracles of healing followed; Edward the Confessor enriched Northampton with many gifts; a fine shrine was made for the saint; Alfgiva became a nun in Northampton.

To this charmingly circumstantial tale the Editor adds a heavily dismissive comment.

This account stands alone without any supporting evidence of a cult or a feast; the initial identification is entirely uncorroborated.

In this booklet Bazil Marsh has revealed the evidence now available for the saint's feast being regularly observed and celebrated over long periods of time. There is also certain evidence of a cult of Ragener at St Peter's, with an altar dedicated to him, with or without a shrine. The carved grave-slab now in the church has been possibly identified with St Ragener, and indeed could be the lid of his reliquary.

We must therefore hope that the learned Editor will be prepared to modify his harsh attitude towards the continuing vigour of this saint's tradition.

Accounts of Ragner's martyrdom agree that he fought beside his uncle, Edmund, king of the east anglians, in a final attempt to hold back the Danish horde and prevent them from conquering England, as they intended. As the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records this:

"In this year [870] the host went across Mercia into East Anglia, and took winter-quarters at Thetford; and the same winter St Edmund the king fought against them, and the Danes won the victory, and they slew the king and overran the entire kingdom, and destroyed all the monasteries to which they came. At the same time they came to the monastery at Medeshamstede [Peterborough] and burned and demolished it, and slew the abbot and monks and all that they found there, reducing to nothing what had been a very rich foundation."

Tradition has it that King Edmund and Prince Ragner were among the prisoners taken by the Danes in this great battle. The Danes killed all their prisoners, either tying them to a tree and using them for target practice, or by staking them out on the ground, leaving them as a sacrifice to their gods. As the Danes' main weapon was the longsword or the axe, their bowmanship may well have needed practice, but this was the method they chose to kill the King, as may be seen in the engraving on our cover. This is from a drawing by Richard Doyle, a famous Victorian artist, an illustration from a book by Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. This book, published in 1859, was entitled "The Scouring of the White Horse".

There was a code among warriors of that time, that each would choose to die in just the same way as their leader in battle. It would have been a deep disgrace to survive. We may therefore be certain that Ragner, as witness to the Christian faith that the Danes were fighting to wipe out, would have submitted to the same slow death as his King also suffered. Hence their subsequent martyrdom and the adjacent dates of their feasts: Saint Edmund on November 20th, and Ragner on November 21st.

It seems to me more likely that the Missal of St Peter's was removed from the church when it came under the control of Edmund Snape during the time of the puritan ascendancy in Northampton in Queen Elizabeth's time. Everything that they would have regarded as papistry was swept away at that time, and this goes a long way towards explaining the stark condition of this church in the 18th century, and the state of neglect in which the Victorian restorers found it. Had Scott not been able to restore St. Peter's, it would have had to be rebuilt in red brick, as one commentator said at the time.

Archbishop Ussher died in 1656, having bequeathed his books and manuscripts to Trinity College Dublin. His *Lives of the Saints* was inscribed by Peter Whalley, a mayor of Northampton who died in office in 1656. There were other Peter Whalleys among his descendants, in particular the Reverend Peter Whalley, (1722-1791) educated at Merchant Taylors' School and St John's College, Oxford, and was Vicar of St Sepulchre, Northampton, from 1748 to 1762. He was a man of letters, most remembered as editor of Bridges' *History of the County of Northampton*. It remains an enigma how any of these Whalleys came to possess the book in time for it to join the rest of Archbishop Ussher's library on its way to Trinity, Dublin.

There certainly is a great deal yet to be revealed about St Ragner throughout the 1,200 or so years since his birth. But knowledge of him no longer depends upon a single manuscript. We will have to be sure that a copy of this booklet comes to the attention of the Editor of the Oxford Book of Saints.

D.G.S.