

Saint Beornwald of Bampton

By JOHN BLAIR

SUMMARY

Bampton parish church was an Anglo-Saxon 'old minster'. Scattered references show that St. Beornwald, described variously as 'confessor' and 'priest and martyr', was enshrined there from the mid 950s or earlier until the Reformation, and that the feast of his 'deposition' was celebrated on 21 December. A 14th-century gabled recess in the north transept may be part of his shrine; a monumental brass showing an ecclesiastic holding a crozier was possibly added in the early 15th century. It is suggested that Beornwald, who must have died between the mid 7th and mid 10th century, may have been head or founder of the minster community.

I

Few Anglo-Saxon saints can still have escaped all historical inquiry. The subject of this note, however, is such a saint, venerated though he was in his own area throughout the middle ages. If still largely mysterious, St. Beornwald of Bampton deserves rescuing from oblivion.

Bampton parish church seems to have been one of those collegiate churches, lesser than cathedrals but greater than the ordinary run of churches, which were known by the 10th century as the 'old minsters'.¹ In the 13th century it still controlled a huge parish covering nearly half of Bampton hundred and containing several daughter churches; it had a large 'rectory manor'; and it was served by a team of three vicars, perhaps the direct successors of pre-Conquest minster priests, whose houses stood around the churchyard. In the late Anglo-Saxon period this must have been the mother church of the whole low-lying region between the Thames, the Windrush, and the Cotswold foothills.²

Bampton church first appears in the hands of Leofric, bishop of Exeter, who had probably acquired it from Edward the Confessor during his years as a royal clerk (1042-6). Leofric gave it to Exeter Cathedral, and in 1069 William I confirmed this gift by a charter.³ The document includes an English boundary-clause to which the scribe has added an opening phrase: 'these are the bounds of the land which King Eadwig gave to the holy man at Bampton and the community' (*þis synd þa landgemæro þæs landes þe Eadwig cyning ageaf þam*

¹ For 'old minsters' see C.N.L. Brooke, 'Rural Ecclesiastical Institutions in England: the Search for their Origins', *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, xxviii (2) (Spoleto, 1982), 685-711; J. Blair, 'Secular Minster Churches in Domesday Book', in P.H. Sawyer (ed.), *Domesday Book: a Reassessment* (forthcoming).

² This paragraph is based on research in progress. The best published accounts are J.A. Giles, *History of the Parish and Town of Bampton* (1848), and A.H. Thompson, 'The "Portions" in Bampton Church', *Trans. Bristol and Glos. Arch. Soc.* liii (1931), 41-3.

³ J.B. Davidson, 'On Some Anglo-Saxon Charters at Exeter', *Jnl. of the Archaeol. Assoc.* xxxix (1883), 298-301; F. Barlow, *Leofric of Exeter* (1972), Pl. I. The church land appears in Domesday Book as 6 hides at Bampton held by the bishop of Exeter (*V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 402).

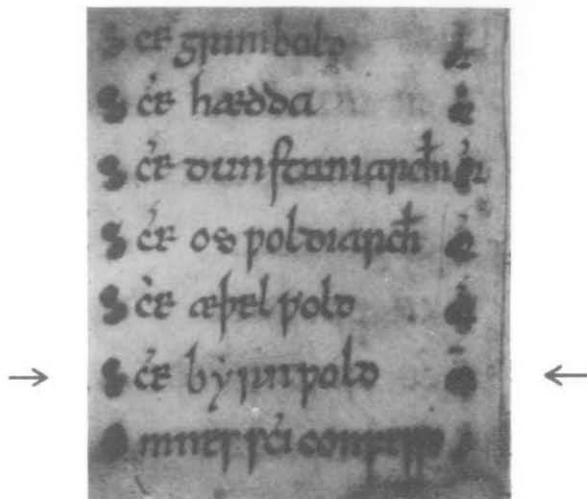


Plate 1. "St. Byrnwold pray for us": the last name in a group of English confessors in a late Anglo-Saxon Winchester litany. (MS Cotton Galba A xiv f. 77^v; reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Library. Actual size.)

halgan were æt Bemtune 7 þam hyrede). The original grant, perhaps ratified by a charter from which the 1069 bounds were copied, must have been made between Eadwig's accession in November 955 and his repudiation by the Mercians late in 957. If a little unusual, the reference to a 'holy man' merely expresses the common identification of relics with the living saint.⁴ Hence it shows that by the 950s a male saint was enshrined at Bampton in a community of minster-priests or possibly monks.

The name of the 'holy man' is provided by versions of the late Anglo-Saxon catalogue of saints' resting-places.⁵ In the standard text Bampton finds no place; but two later versions, a Latin one seen by John Leland and a 14th-century French one, include respectively the entries *S. Brenwaldus apud Bamptonam* and *Saint Bernold en Bentone*.⁶ Both may derive from pre-Conquest originals, and the French version contains material which suggests Glastonbury influence.⁷ So evidently a Beornwald of Bampton (the true Anglo-Saxon form of the name is clear enough) could be numbered among the recognised English saints, though not among the well-known ones.

Three general compilations, all West Saxon and probably all of 11th-century origin, mention the Bampton saint. As *S. Byrnwold* he appears in both litanies in Cotton MS Galba

⁴ For the concept of the saint's physical presence (*praesentia*) in his relics, see M. Biddle, 'Archaeology, Architecture and the Cult of Saints in Anglo-Saxon England', in *op. cit.* note 32; A.T. Thacker, 'The Social and Continental Background to Early Anglo-Saxon Hagiography' (unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1976), 1-8. I am grateful to Dr. Thacker for his comments on the Bampton phrase. For the saint as a person capable of holding land, see F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *History of English Law* (2nd edn., 1923), i, 499-501.

⁵ For which see D.W. Rollason, 'Lists of Saints' Resting-Places in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* vii (1978), 61-93.

⁶ *Johannis Lelandi Antiquarii Collectanea*, ed. T. Hearne, iii (2nd edn., London, 1774), 408; *Lestorie des Engles Solum la Translacion Maistre Geffrei Gaimar*, ed. T.D. Hardy and C.T. Martin, i (Rolls Ser. 91a, 1888), p. xli. Mr. Hohler suggests to me that the French copy comes from Margam Abbey.

⁷ A. Bell, 'The Anglo-French "De Sanctis"', *Notes and Queries* 12th ser., v (1919), 281-3; Rollason, *op. cit.* note 5, 70n.

A xiv, a liturgical collection probably written at Winchester in c. 1025–50 (Pl. 1).⁸ An early 12th-century Exeter martyrology, evidently a transcript of Leofric's own, adds to the standard material for 21 December the note: 'in the place called Bemtona, [the feast] of St Beornuuald confessor'.⁹ The third source is a 15th-century martyrology of Syon Abbey, which notes, again under 21 December: 'in Britain, in the territory of Oxford, in the place [called] Bentona, the deposition of Saint Berenwald priest and martyr'.¹⁰

There is a discrepancy between 'priest and martyr' in the Syon text and 'confessor' in the Exeter one. The latter may be earlier in origin, perhaps going back to a note made by Leofric himself when he acquired Bampton church.¹¹ It also agrees with the shorter litany in Galba A xiv, which places Beornwald among the English confessors (Pl. I). On the other hand, the Syon martyrology is based on an older one which seems to have had links with Shaftesbury Abbey.¹² Significantly, its spelling 'Bentona' was usual in the 11th and 12th centuries but not thereafter.¹³ The Syon text is also the more specific, noting the feast as Beornwald's *depositio* and giving him the firmer designation. 'Confessor', the general term for an unmartyred saint, could be inference; 'priest and martyr' suggests some precise tradition. Whether or not he was martyred, 'priest' is compatible with both and should probably be accepted.

These general references are supplemented by traces of a local cult.¹⁴ That the post-Conquest Church never made much of St. Beornwald hardly needs saying: if it had, we would know more about him. Yet a saint neglected by the Church at large could still attract local affection and appeal to local pride. Three references have been found which, taken together, suggest that this was the case with St. Beornwald.

The first is in a charter of 1108–23, defining the status of a new chapel (now Alvescot parish church) within Bampton parish.¹⁵ Among other duties, the chaplain must visit the mother church on various feast-days including that of St. Beornwald (*in festo Sancti Bernewoldi*), presumably as the patronal festival. Nearly three centuries later, in 1406, the Dean and Chapter of Exeter assigned half of their income over two years from the common chest of Bampton parish 'to the mending and repairing of the shrine alias "schryne" and [sic] of the head of St Beornwald' (*ad emendacionem et reparacionem scrinii alias schryne et capituli Sancti Bernwaldi*).¹⁶ A century later the saint still had his local devotees: in 1516 Master

⁸ *The Leofric Collectar*, eds. E.S. Dewick and W.H. Frere, ii (Henry Bradshaw Soc. lvi, 1918), 619, 623. The Byrnwold references in the MS (which is being edited by Dr. B. Muir for the Henry Bradshaw Society) are on f. 77^v and f. 94. The book belonged to Winchester Nunnaminster: N.R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (1964), 202. I owe this reference to Mr. Hohler.

⁹ Exeter Dean and Chapter, MS 3518, under xii. kal. Jan.: 'In Britannia maiori, vico qui dicitur Bemtona, sancti Beornuualdi confessoris'. I am grateful to Mrs. Erskine for checking this reading, which is edited incompletely in *Ordinale Exon* iv, ed. G.H. Doble (Henry Bradshaw Soc. lxxix, 1940), 29. Bishop Grandisson's 14th-century Exeter martyrology transcribes this entry, reading the name as 'Brenwaldus' (*Ordinale Exon* ii, ed. J.N. Dalton (Henry Bradshaw Soc. xxxviii, 1909), 456). The surviving fragment of Leofric's English martyrology (Cambridge C.C.C. MS 196) breaks off a few lines before the point at which the Beornwald entry, if present, would have occurred (*An Old English Martyrology*, ed. G. Herzfeld (E.E.T.S. cxvi, 1900), 222–3).

¹⁰ R. Whytford, *The Martiloge in Englysshe*, eds. F. Proctor and E.S. Dewick (Henry Bradshaw Soc. iii, 1891), 235: 'In Britannia territorio Oxoniensi vico Bentone: depositio Sancti Berenwaldi presbiteri et martiris.' Whytford's English Martyrology of 1526 simply translates this entry (*Ibid.*, 196).

¹¹ *Ordinale Exon* iv, 40–1, 103, 105.

¹² Whytford, *Martiloge in Englysshe*, p. xi.

¹³ M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, ii (E.P.N.S. xxiv, 1954), 304.

¹⁴ The dedication of Bampton church, first recorded in 1292, was to St. John the Baptist (*Calendars of Papal Registers: Papal Letters*, i, 544). It is impossible to say whether this was the original dedication of the minster, or had replaced an 'unfashionable' dedication to St. Beornwald since the Conquest.

¹⁵ Exeter Dean and Chapter, MS 3672, p. 33. I am grateful to the Dean and Chapter for permission to quote this document and the other cited below.

¹⁶ Exeter Dean and Chapter, MS 3550, f. 101. (This is the Chapter minute-book; the minute quoted here was evidently taken down at some speed, which may explain its odd phrasing.)

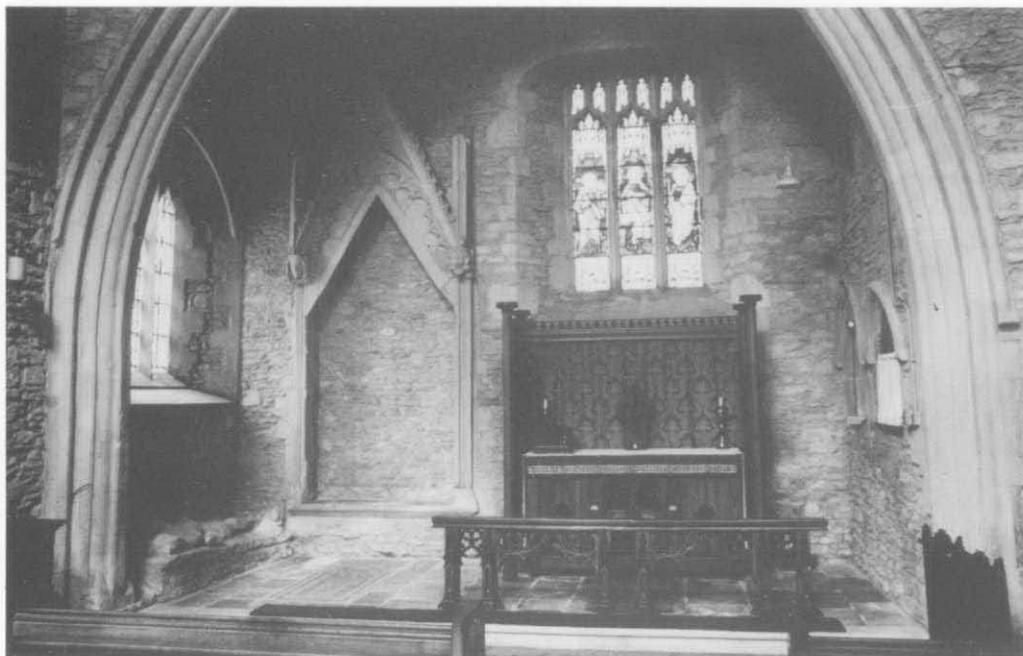


Plate 2. Bampton parish church: chapel on the east side of the north transept, looking east (1984). The monumental brass indent can be seen on the floor in front of the tabernacle. Ph. Sebastian Rahtz.

William Wode, clerk of Bampton, bequeathed his soul 'to God, to our lady, Sent Barnwald, and to all the seintes of hevyn'.¹⁷ If the evidence is sparse, its message is clear: the cult was quietly observed, and the shrine maintained, until the eve of the Reformation.

II

The accepted place for displaying a major relic was the chancel. But in England there seems to have been a tradition of housing local saints (perhaps especially founder-saints) in the north transept;¹⁸ this was the case with Birinus at Dorchester, Frideswide at Oxford and White at Whitchurch Canonorum. Surviving remains of shrines also suggest a fashion for rebuilding them between 1270 and 1350.¹⁹ Guided by these parallels, a search of Bampton church reveals structures which can be probably be identified as the chapel and shrine of St. Beornwald.

The oldest remaining work is the eastern part of the pre-Conquest nave. In the late 12th century a crossing-tower, chancel and transepts, the latter with east-facing apses, were added to this early core.²⁰ From the first stage of the tower an original two-light opening overlooks the north transept,²¹ presumably as the entrance to a gallery of which all other

¹⁷ P.R.O., PROB 11/18, f. 211. (This is the only such reference in the ten pre-Reformation Bampton wills in the registers of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and the Oxford Archdeaconry Court.)

¹⁸ I owe this idea to Dr. Brian Golding. Cf. the burial of St. Augustine and his successors in the north *porticus* at Canterbury (H.M. and Joan Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, i (1965), 139).

¹⁹ See N. Coldstream, 'English Decorated Shrine Bases', *Jnl. of the British Archaeol. Assoc.*, cxxix (1976), 15-34.

²⁰ Survey in progress. The church is fully described and illustrated (though inaccurately analysed) by C.E. Keyser, 'An Architectural Description of Bampton Church, Oxfordshire', *Jnl. of the British Archaeol. Assoc.* n.s. xxii (1916), 1-12, 113-22. The blocked arch of the south transept apse is still visible.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Figs. 12-13. The opening was approached from the stair-turret through a small wall-passage. There is no trace of similar openings on the south, west or east sides.



Plate 3. Bampton parish church: tabernacle against the east wall of the north transept chapel, interpreted as the remains of St. Beornwald's shrine (1984). *Ph. Sebastian Rahtz.*

trace has disappeared. This unusual arrangement recalls the 'watching-chambers' above certain major shrines.²²

In the early 14th century the north transept apse was replaced by a narrow chapel running the full length of the transept, to which it opens through a single broad arch (Pl. 2). In the southern half of this chapel is an altar-space under a large east window, with a piscina and aumbry in the adjacent south wall. North of the altar, a tall tabernacle-like structure of the early 14th century occupies the east wall (Pl. 3). A steep crocketed canopy springs from corbel-heads of a king and queen attached to pinnacled side-shafts. The canopy encloses a plain and rather rough lower gable, the space between the two being filled with blind cusping.

The recess can hardly have been a tomb or Easter Sepulchre, placed as it is against an east wall.²³ The oddly plain lower gable looks like the stub of something which projected forwards and has been cut back. The silhouette recalls the normal outline of a late medieval shrine: a gable-topped feretory elevated on shafts or arcades over a stone base.²⁴ Usually it is the base that survives, but the Bampton recess could be interpreted as a 'reredos' framing the whole structure. It seems a fair inference that this was St. Beornwald's shrine, set up in its own chapel with an altar beside it. Unfortunately it is not entirely clear whether the 1406 passage should be translated as 'the shrine of St. Beornwald's head' or 'the shrine and head of St. Beornwald'. In either case the head could have been in an elevated reliquary, and in the latter the other bones could have been entombed below.²⁵

On the chapel floor, abutting the foot of the gabled recess,²⁶ is a Purbeck marble slab bearing the indent for a monumental brass of the early or mid 15th century (Fig. 1).²⁷ It shows an ecclesiastic under a canopy, with an inscription-plate below his feet and a longer inscription on a marginal fillet. He is bare-headed and tonsured; he wears a chasuble over a tunicle or dalmatic, and the head of a crozier projects above his right shoulder. A prayer-scroll issues from his mouth, and above the canopy are four shields.²⁸

A crozier is unequivocally the mark of a prelate, but a bishop (even a suffragan) would be shown wearing his mitre. So the identity of the man depicted seems to narrow itself to an unmitred abbot or ruling prior. Bampton church was not in monastic hands, nor was there a monastery nearby; there is no obvious reason why a religious head should choose to be buried there. Cases are known of tombs transferred from monasteries to parish churches at the Dissolution, and we could be dealing with an abbatial brass from Eynsham or Oseney. But in view of the slab's location on the presumed site of the shrine, the possibility remains that it depicts none other than St. Beornwald. Brasses were sometimes made for long-dead saints and notables: King Ine had a 14th-century brass at Wells, and St. Æthelred had a 15th-century one in Wimborne Minster.²⁹ On St. Thomas Cantilupe's tomb at Hereford, a brass was sandwiched between the tomb-chest and the open arcade

²² Cf. C. Oman, 'Security in English Churches', *Archaeol. Jnl.* cxxxvi (1979), 94-5.

²³ The niche was not moved during Victorian restorations, for it is noted in its present position in 1813 (Bodl. MS. Don. c.90, p. 368).

²⁴ Coldstream, *op. cit.* note 19, 16-17, 27.

²⁵ For the separation of one saint's relics between different reliquaries in the same church, cf. *Ibid.*, 19, 22.

²⁶ The slab was found, exactly in its present position, when the chapel was paved in c. 1960; it formed part of an earth floor concealed by later joists and planks. (For this information I am grateful to Mr. H.W. Lock of Bampton, one of the builders who carried out the work.) The surface has undergone many years' wear underfoot.

²⁷ The brass was London work, probably of pattern-series 'B' or 'D'. Compare for instance M. Norris, *Monumental Brasses: the Craft* (1978), Fig. 63.

²⁸ This use of heraldry need not be an obstacle to the present interpretation; St. Eadburh's shrine at Bicester bore the arms of several families associated with Bicester Priory (E.A. Greening Lamborn, 'The Shrine of St Eadburh', *Oxon. Arch. Soc. Repts.* 1934, 43-52).

²⁹ A.B. Connor, *Monumental Brasses in Somerset* (1970), 104-5; Norris *op. cit.* note 27, Fig. 39.

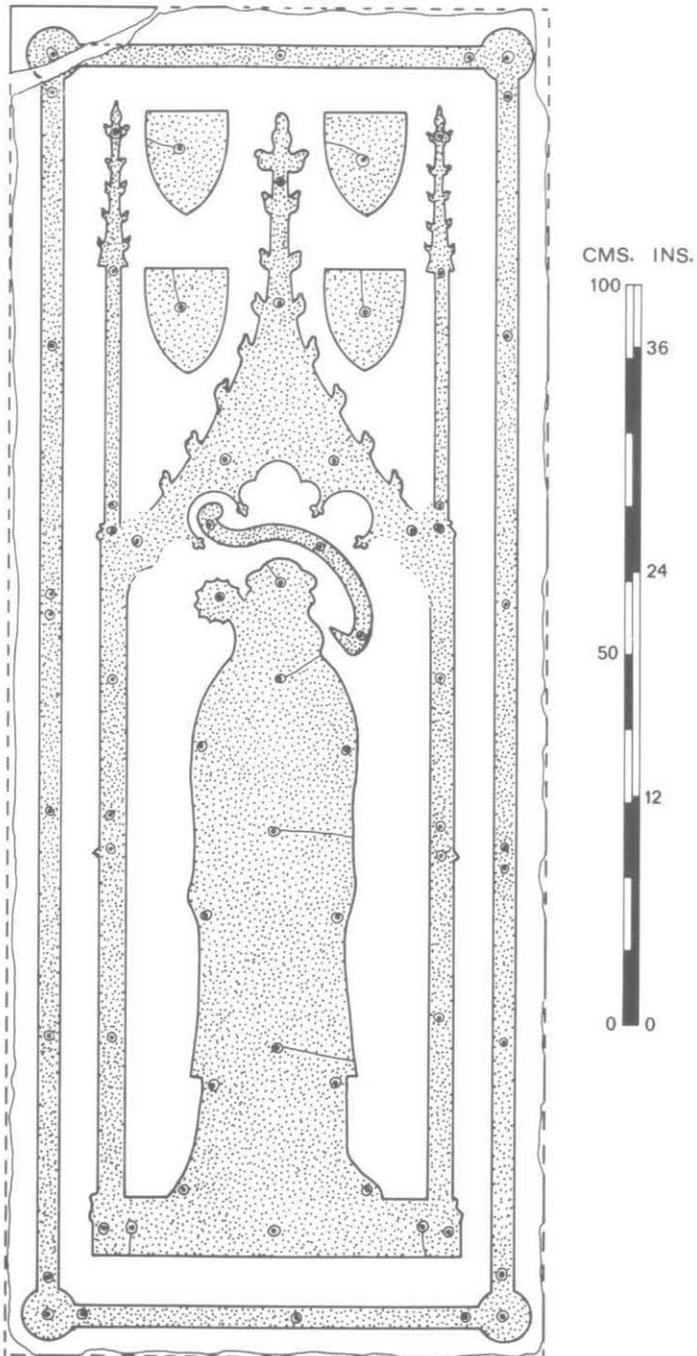


Fig. 1. Bampton parish church: indent of monumental brass on the suggested site of St. Beornwald's shrine.

which supported the feretory.³⁰ The Bampton slab could have occupied a similar position on the shrine, and may even have been one of the works paid for in 1406.

If so, its careful re-location requires comment. At the Reformation, saints' bones were normally buried on the sites of their former shrines.³¹ It may well be that this was the case with Beornwald, and that his brass was accepted as an image made for commemoration rather than for idolatry. The demolition of the shrine, the burial of the bones and the replacement of the slab in the floor above them would then be the likely sequence of events. This is mere conjecture; perhaps one day it can be tested by excavation.

III

The hardest question remains: who was he? It is certain that Beornwald was venerated at Bampton by the mid 10th century, and that his entombment or 'deposition' was commemorated on 21 December. It is likely that he was a priest, and possible that his late medieval devotees pictured him as an ecclesiastic bearing a crozier. This is all we have to go on.

Whether Bampton possessed the whole body or just the head, we are clearly dealing with the main, if not only, relic of St Beornwald. It cannot automatically be assumed that the shrine was always at Bampton, since 10th-century kings sometimes moved saints and their cults from one minster to another.³² On the other hand, such translations often had political overtones and tended to favour big houses at the expense of small ones. The relative obscurity of both Bampton and its saint suggest that Beornwald's interest was essentially local, and strongest for the actual community which preserved his bones.

Saints of this character were often founders or rulers of their houses, and such an identity for Beornwald may be implied by the phrase used in 1069, 'the holy man and the community'. So far as we know, there was never a true monastery at Bampton. The monastic reform had made little headway by the mid 950s, and although King Eadwig issued charters for Abingdon he was no great enthusiast for the reformers. Conceivably there was a short-lived regular house, defunct before Leofric acquired the church. But it seems much more likely that Bampton had a secular minster on the old pattern: a group of priests based on a central church, but following a way of life more clerical than monastic.³³

King Alfred's laws (c. 885–899) seem to assume that a priest will normally live in a community, ruled by an 'elder' (*þære cirican ealdor*) whose status must have resembled that of dean in a later secular college.³⁴ Was Beornwald such a man? If the brass is indeed his, the idea becomes an attractive one. How the 15th century would have conceived a pre-Conquest clerical 'elder' is hard to say, but a priest in vestments with a staff of pastoral office seems as likely an image as any. If, on the other hand, he ruled a true monastery, the brass would have shown him correctly as an abbot.

When did he live? The saints honoured in some other South Mercian minsters

³⁰ Admittedly this tomb dates from before Thomas's canonisation, but 'the promoters of the cult at Hereford evidently took the opportunity of making the tomb . . . look as much like a shrine as possible' (R. Emmerson, 'St. Thomas Cantilupe's Tomb and Brass of 1287', *Bulletin of the International Society for the Study of Church Monuments*, ii (1980), 41–5).

³¹ For this practice generally, see C.F. Battiscombe (ed.), *The Relics of St. Cuthbert* (1956), 86–7 and n. 3.

³² See A.T. Thacker, 'Chester and Gloucester', *Northern History*, xviii (1982), 199–211; D.W. Rollason, 'The Shrines of Saints in Anglo-Saxon England: Distribution and Significance', in *The Anglo-Saxon Church: Papers on History, Architecture and Archaeology in honour of Dr H.M. Taylor*, C.B.A. Research Rep. (forthcoming).

³³ See Blair *op. cit.* note 1.

³⁴ *Councils and Synods* I, eds. D. Whitelock, M. Brett and C.N.L. Brooke, i (1981), 24–5.