

Devotion by Donation: the Alms-Giving and Religious Foundations of Henry III

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This paper will address a number of ways in which King Henry III of England displayed his piety. Although a far from comprehensive study of the subject, this examination of some of the king's most visible displays of charity and patronage permits some understanding of Henry's personal religion. In this paper, I will argue that Henry identified strongly with the values of the thirteenth-century mendicant orders, and that it was this influence that resulted in Henry's religious patronage being directed so significantly towards the poor and the sick.

Thirteenth-century writers rarely discussed Henry III's piety, thus the commentaries that do appear on this topic are worthy of attention. In Matthew Paris's *Chronica Maiora*, the most extensive chronicle of Henry's reign, Henry receives explicit praise for only one incident – the arrival of the Holy Blood relic at Westminster Abbey. Paris described Henry as *princeps Christianissimus*, the most Christian prince, after the king had spent the night fasting, and had then, wearing pauper's clothes, carried the relic from St Paul's Cathedral to Westminster.¹ Otherwise, Paris seldom praised Henry, and was frequently critical of his weakness and anger, his demands for money and his dealings with the papacy. Paris acknowledged the king's generous almsgiving, but offered little or no commendation for his charity.

The annals from the Cistercian Waverley Abbey record that in 1249 Henry, having heard rumours of the impending Day of Judgement, proceeded to spend the night in vigilance, 'praying with great fear and devotion.'² The same chronicle reported Henry's pilgrimage to the shrine of St Edmund of Abingdon at Pontigny, motivated by 'love and devotion.'³ The anti-royalist Waverley, thus recognised the sincerity of the king's behaviour and belief, but like

Matthew Paris, refrained from making any judgement, either positive or negative, about his piety or his character.⁴

Matthew Paris was unreserved in his admiration for Louis, frequently calling him the 'most devout', the 'most pious' and the 'most Christian' king, as well as praising his conduct, his moderation and his wisdom.²⁰ Likewise, the Waverley annals praise the French king's character, and his motive for joining the crusade (something that Henry promised, but failed, to do) and echo Paris's words, describing Louis as the 'most Christian', and 'illustrious' king.²¹

The Melrose chronicle, which had little to say about Henry's death except to state, oddly, that he had ruled 'peacefully and tranquilly', also described Louis as the 'most pious' king.²² This particular chronicle is especially significant for the devotion shown to Simon de Montfort. Henry's death merited only one sentence, and the scribe was scathing about the queen, blaming her for the discord between the barons and the king.²³ The summary of Simon de Montfort's life, however, extended to several pages, lauding his general conduct and his ascetic lifestyle. The earl wore a hair-shirt at all times, was temperate in his diet, frugal with his clothing, and, for a time, abstained from sexual relations with his wife.²⁴ There is no evidence to suggest that Henry ever adopted such practices; in this regard, de Montfort is far more comparable to Louis IX. The Waverley annals also lamented de Montfort far more than Henry. By their account, at

within the halls of his palaces.²⁹ While the practice itself was not unusual for a medieval king, the vast numbers were extraordinary.

In 1242, 50,000 poor were fed for the soul of Henry's sister Isabella, Holy Roman Empress, who died childless in her late twenties; in 1260, 20,000 were fed in honour of the soul of Henry's half-brother Aymer, bishop of Valence; in 1245, 10,000 were fed after the death of the king's father-in-law, the count of Provence.³⁰ Also honoured in this manner were Kings Richard and John, and Henry's sister Joan, queen of Scotland, who like Isabella had died at a young age, and for whom both halls at Westminster Palace were filled with paupers.³¹ These numbers sound unrealistic – even in London, finding 10,000 paupers may have been a challenge – but it is probable that the money provided would have been spent over a number of consecutive days in order to fulfil Henry's instructions.³²

Besides commemorating the dead, Henry also sought protection through this almsgiving for his own, and his family's, health and souls, on occasions ordering in advance for money to be sent to towns such as York, London and Canterbury, for paupers to be fed on the day of the king's arrival.³³ Even when visiting the French king and his family, Henry did not neglect his duty to the poor, being celebrated by the Parisians for his generosity towards them.³⁴ Henry also used these occasions to venerate saints; the halls at Westminster were filled with paupers for the celebration of the translation of the body of Saint Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey. This was repeated in subsequent years on the saint's feast day. The Confessor's wife, Edith, was also commemorated on several occasions, for example in 1243, when 10,000 paupers were fed in her name.³⁵

This type of almsgiving was, as Sally Dixon-Smith has convincingly argued, an important part of kingship.³⁶ The poor had a role to play; almsgiving led to spiritual reward, not only for Henry himself, but also for his kingdom, in the form of peace and harmony. The greater the numbers, the greater the expense, but the greater the

some were

anointed on earth, a part of which role was the duty to care for others, and which found parallels in the ideals of Franciscan charity. This appears to have been practised to an extent unequalled by his peers, even Louis, who by comparison in this regard emerges as far more 'conventional' of the two kings.

It is not possible, however, to identify a definite reason for Henry's attachment to the saint.⁶⁹ Margaret Howell suggests that Henry's adoption of Edward as a role model reflects his perception of the 'exalted character of his own office as king'.⁷⁰ It is probable that Henry was influenced by his advisors to adopt Edward as role model.⁷¹ Edward's reputation was one of piety, and of 'consensual' and 'sacral' kingship – ideals that Henry aspired to in the face of his own rebellious barons – and this association offered Henry an element of 'moral authority' over those who disagreed with his way of ruling.⁷² The association of this grand project with his own kingship is no doubt fundamental to understanding Henry's interest; in need of assistance throughout his reign, he sought spiritual support from the confessor saint consistently. From the late 1230s onwards, Henry was almost always at Westminster for the anniversary of Edward's death, and also named his first son after this saint.⁷³ This association with the saint, as with the patronage of the abbey itself, began at the point in Henry's reign at which he began to face real political opposition.

There is an inextricable link between Henry's kingship and the long-running rebuilding of Westminster. Henry gave detailed instructions for the architecture and the decoration of the abbey – he directed huge sums of money to the project, and evidently expected the abbey to be striking and built to his own specifications.⁷⁴ In return for his patronage, Henry received political support from the monks and the abbot, located in close proximity to his own palace at Westminster; enjoyed the prestige of association with a site of a Holy Relic; and hoped to reap the reward of spiritual guidance from the confessor saint. It is debatable whether or not, without his difficulties, Henry would have taken such an interest, and it is the political climate that most likely encouraged this interest. In this context, despite Henry's genuine belief in the power of the confessor saint, it is possible to understand why Henry digressed from his usual pattern of patronage. The necessity of maintaining the authority of the crown in a turbulent atmosphere surpassed the king's desire to aid the poor and the sick.

It was perhaps the money and attention lavished on Westminster Abbey that prevented Henry from founding a new Cistercian abbey. Although conventional in his patronage of friars and hospitals, in this matter Henry proved himself exceptional amongst his peers. The

Conversorum to provide for converts, particularly widows and orphans.⁹⁰ In 1255, Henry freed the Jews of Lincoln after an accusation of ritual murder, and then 'sold' their protection to his brother, Richard.⁹¹ There is no suggestion that Henry inflicted violence upon Jews, as did his opponent, Simon de Montfort, who offered Jewish women the choice of 'baptism or death'.⁹² Louis IX apparently could not bear even to look at Jews; in 1240 he put the Talmud, the Jewish law book, on trial, and ordered all copies to be burnt after a guilty verdict was announced.⁹³ By contrast, Henry, despite imposing difficult financial demands on the Jews, took seriously his position as their protector, including safeguarding them against the bishops of England.⁹⁴

This paper has only been able to address a few aspects of Henry's piety – there is still scope for substantial study in this area. What is clear, however, is that the thirteenth-century writers who praised Henry did so with sincerity, despite any other shortcomings they may have attributed to him. Those who praised Louis IX and Simon de Montfort more effusively than they did Henry, nevertheless did not doubt the king's piety. Modern historians who have addressed individual aspects of Henry's religious practice, and who have labelled his piety as 'shallow' or 'conventional', however, have perhaps underrated his piety, and the ways in which he made his convictions manifest.

The difficulties of Henry's reign have for too long overshadowed his personal religion. Much of Henry's behaviour genuinely reflects mendicant teachings, particularly of the Franciscan order. The king proved himself exceptional by feeding, and performing the maundy, for so many paupers, thereby showing his reverence for the body of Christ. His support for the Franciscans, Dominicans and other mendicant orders further emphasises this aspect of Henry's piety. Louis' affinity with the friars has long been recognised; he has been described as a monk *manqué*, and was once tempted to renounce his kingship for the mendicant life, but Henry may have surpassed the French king in this regard.⁹⁵ His choices of patronage – particularly the hospital foundations – display a clear wish to provide relief for the poor and the sick, in preference to founding a new house for an already wealthy monastic order. The salvation of Henry's soul, and of those of his family, was secured through Henry's identification with the teachings of Saint Francis and his emulation of the ministrations of Jesus Christ.

Notes

- 1 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, 7 vols. (London, Longman, 1872), iv, 641.
- 2 *Annales Monastici*, ed. by Henry Richards Luard (London, Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864), ii, 341-2.
- 3 Ibid, 346.
- 4 Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England* (London, Routledge, 1974), p. 414.
- 5 D. A. Carpenter, *The Reign of Henry III* (London, Hambledon Press, 1996), p. 260.
- 6 *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, ed. by Richard Howlett, (London, Longman etc, 1885), p. 563. '...fuitque in Anglia omnibus diebus vitae ejus abundantia pacis atque laetitiae.'
- 7 *Annales Monastici*, iv, p. 254.
- 8 Gransden, pp. 430-1.
- 9 Hilda Johnstone, 'Poor-Relief in the Royal Households of Thirteenth Century England', *Speculum*, 4/2 (1929): 149-67 (153).
- 10 Suzanne Lewis, 'Henry III and the Gothic Rebuilding of Westminster Abbey: the Problematics of Context', *Traditio*, Vol. 50 (1995): 129-72 (146).
- 11 Margaret Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 85.
- 12 Michael Prestwich, 'The Piety of Edward I, in W. M. Ormrod (ed.), *England in the Thirteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1984 Harlaxton Symposium* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 1985), pp. 120-8; Paul Webster, *King John and Religion* (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2014), p. 120.
- 13 M. Penman, 'Royal Piety in Thirteenth-century Scotland: The Religion and Religiosity of Alexander II (1214-49) and Alexander III (1249-86)', *Thirteenth Century England: Thirteenth Century England XII*, 12 (2009): 13-30 (13).
- 14 D. A. Carpenter, 'The Meetings of Kings Henry III and Louis IX', in Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell, and Robin Frame (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England X: Proceedings of the Durham Conference, 2003* (Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2005), pp. 1-30, 29.
- 15 D. A. Carpenter, 'The Household Rolls of King Henry III of England (1216-72)', *Historical Research*, 80/207 (2007a): 22-46 (41).
- 16 S. Dixon-Smith, 'The Image and Reality of Alms-Giving in the Great Halls of Henry III', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, CLII (1999): 79-96; Lewis, 'Henry III'; D. A. Carpenter, 'King Henry III and

Saint Edward the Confessor: the Origins of the Cult', *The English Historical Review*, 122 (Sept. 2007 2007b): 865-91; Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); Robert C. Stacey, 'The English Jews under Henry III', in Patricia Skinner (ed.), *The Jews in Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives* (Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2003), pp. 41-54.

- 17 Michael Prestwich, *Edward I* (London, Methuen London, 1988), p. 559.
- 18 Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton; Chichester, Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 87.
- 19 Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. by John Edward Anderson (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 39.
- 20 Matthew Paris, v, 391;

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- 75 Christopher Holdsworth, 'Royal Cistercians - Beaulieu, her Daughters and Rewley', in P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd. (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England IV: Proceedings of the Newcastle Upon Tyne Conference, 1991* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 1992), pp. 139-50 (143); Wilson, p. 64.
 - 76 Guillaume de Saint-Pathus, 40; Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis* (Paris, Gallimard, 1996), p. 418.
 - 77 Jean Dunbabin, *Charles I of Anjou: Power, Kingship and State-making in Thirteenth-century Europe* (London, Longman, 1998), p. 229.
 - 78 Jean de Joinville, p. 359; *Annales Monastici*, ii, p. 337; *ibid*, ii, p. 397; Prestwich, 'The Piety of Edward I': 120.
 - 79 C.A.F. Meekings, 'The Early Years of Netley Abbey', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 30/01 (1979): 1-37 (1-2); Nicholas Vincent, *Peter des Roches: an Alien in English Politics, 1205-1238* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).
 - 80 Meekings, p. 25.
 - 81 Matthew Paris, iv, p. 257.
 - 82 Holdsworth, p. 144.
 - 83 *Annales Monastici*, ii, p. 348.
 - 84 Robert C. Stacey, 'The Conversion of Jews to Christianity in Thirteenth-Century England', *Speculum*, 67/2 (Apr., 1992): 263-83 (267).
 - 85 *Ibid*, 269.
 - 86 Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: the Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca; London, Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 14.
 - 87 Marjorie Reeves, 'The Originality and Influence of Joachim of Fiore', *Traditio*, 36 (1980): 269-316 (298).
 - 88 Stacey, 'The Conversion of Jews': 267; *ibid*, 268.
 - 89 Stacey, 'The English Jews under Henry III': 44.
 - 90 Matthew Paris, v0 Tf1 0 8E .625 208a5 208a5 208a5 2088(s)-5(s)14(,)8(1)-7(90 G]ET4

