

Chapter Two

Quantitative Analysis of Bishop-Saints

The statistical study of general sainthood in the Middle Ages is an area which has attracted much scholarly work,¹ but which has often yielded disappointing results, littered with the errors and inaccuracies which inevitably arise from the variable nature of its textual base.² One explanation could be the generous use of the word *sanctus* throughout the Middle Ages in order to represent holiness, or a position within the Church. Vauchez notes that ‘in pagan Antiquity, this title was automatically accorded to all those who exercised the priest-hood and were, as a result, in close contact with the supernatural world’.³ In adopting this term the Christian Church at first branded many people who had held episcopal office as *sanctus* as ‘it was simply a functional epithet, conferring a sort of honour which was refused only to those who had showed themselves truly unworthy of it’.⁴ Thus, until the middle of the thirteenth century, no line could be drawn between those who were actually saintly and those who were merely good clergy in the eyes of the Church; but eventually a distinction was made, as Vauchez describes:

The crucial fact was the gradual establishment of two sectors in the sphere of the cult of the saints: on the one hand, a tiny band of the privileged, who had been lucky enough to emerge unscathed from the pitfalls of canonization; on the other, a throng of the obscure and the failed, who continued nevertheless to be venerated. The existence of juridical

¹ Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 105-7, 250; P. A. Sorokin, *Altruistic Love: A Study of American ‘Good Neighbour’ and Christian Saints* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950); M. Goodich, ‘A Profile of Thirteenth-Century Sainthood’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17 (1976), 429-437.

² Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 250.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

distinction between the canonized *sancti* and the uncanonized *beati* was now more or less understood, even if it was little respected'.⁵

Pitrim Sorokin, Pierre Delooz, and Michael Goodich have all tried to quantify the number of saints venerated as *sanctus* or *sancta* by their *fama sanctitatis*, or popular devotion, in the Universal Church during the Middle Ages, yet all differ in their results; for example, Goodich claims that the number of saints venerated, through both local cults and actual canonization and 'attested by at least two contemporary (or nearly contemporary) sources', reaches a total of 518 saints or persons considered saintly.⁶ Even if we look solely at Sorokin's and Delooz's data for the medieval period we find some stark differences:⁷

	Sorokin	Delooz
Eleventh Century	120	226
Twelfth Century	152	291
Thirteenth Century	188	312
Fourteenth Century	144	195

Such works do show however, inconsistencies aside, that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were periods of significant growth in the number of saints and their cults, becoming 'one of the principal expressions of popular devotion',⁸ whether local or global, and that by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries sanctity was losing its appeal and was in decline. The apparent revival was noticeable on local, national and international scales, and was remarked upon by contemporaries, such as Matthew Paris, as a time of apparent renewal and saintly spirituality.⁹ Saints such as Thomas Becket exhibited traits that could be compared directly with Anglo-Saxon saints, the early

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 100.

⁶ Goodich, 'A Profile of Thirteenth-Century Sainthood', p. 430.

⁷ Taken from Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 106.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 106.

⁹ Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora* V, 195.

Church martyrs, and Christ himself.¹⁰ Truly, ‘in the religious as in the cultural sphere, the people of the twelfth century saw themselves, to borrow the famous expression from Bernard of Chartres, as ‘dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants’.’¹¹

Table 1: English Bishop-Saints in order of canonization by date.

Name	Date of Episcopate	Year of Process	Date of Canonization
Thomas Becket	1162-1170	1173	1173
Wulfstan of Worcester	1062-1095	1202	1203
Hugh of Lincoln	1186-1200	1219	1220
William of York	1141-1154	1223	1226
Lawrence O'Toole of Dublin	1162-1180	1225	1226
Edmund of Abingdon	1233-1240	1244/5	1247
Richard of Chichester	1244-1253	1256	1262
Thomas de Cantilupe	1275-1287	1307	1320

Table 1 shows the marked revival in the fortunes of England’s bishops, many of whom were canonized during the thirteenth century. Naturally, episcopal sanctity was not a new phenomenon in Western Europe by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In fact, the popularity of this type of saint rose and fell like all forms of sainthood throughout the medieval period; first rising to prominence early in the Church’s history, before falling and then rising again in the fifth and eighth centuries with the transition from Roman imperial power to Germanic kingship.¹² This transitory period allowed bishops not only to exert power over the administration of their diocese but, in some cases, to become ‘the supreme *defensores civitatis*’.¹³ And so it was that many bishops

¹⁰ Edward Grim, in *Lives*, ‘Here you have a martyr beloved of God and a true saint, Elphege’, p. 199; ‘O worthy shepherd who, lest the sheep be torn to pieces, so bravely presented himself to the jaws of the wolves’, p. 202; ‘It was quite fitting that the soldier martyr should follow in the footsteps of his Captain and Saviour’, p. 201.

¹¹ Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 106.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 17.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 17.

established holy reputations and became patrons of their cities within their lifetimes. Some even garnered enough support in life to continue serving as spiritual protectors and patrons after their deaths – a trend which continued right through the fourteenth and fifteen centuries.¹⁴

England’s role in this revival can be seen clearly in the work of Vauchez, shown in Tables 2 and 3.¹⁵ The number of bishops subject to the process of canonization during the period he studies is markedly greater in England than the rest of Europe. In fact, as Table 3 shows, episcopal sanctity became the preponderant model in England during the period.

Table 2: Percentage of Saint-Bishops who underwent a ‘processus informativus’ for canonization.

Years	England & Ireland	France	Italy	Scandinavia	Germanic Countries	Eastern Europe
1198-1431	32.2%	25%	14.3%	14.3%	7.1%	7.1%
1198-1304	35%	25%	10%	10%	10%	10%
1305-1431	25%	25%	25%	25%	-	-

Table 3: Percentage of Saint-Bishops by country actually canonized between 1198 and 1431.

England & Ireland	France	Italy	Scandinavia	Germanic Countries	Eastern Europe
61.5%	15.4%	7.7%	0%	7.7%	7.7%

It seems likely that the low number of episcopal saints canonized in the Germanic countries during this period is a reaction to the sharp rise of this phenomenon there during the fifth to eighth centuries. Moreover it can be seen clearly that outside

¹⁴ For example, Thomas de Cantilupe was such a defender of Herefordshire in life, that even three centuries after his death his bones went on procession through the streets in order to avert a coming plague; see, D. I. Barret, ‘The Relics of St Thomas Cantilupe’, in *St Thomas Cantilupe: Bishop of Hereford*, 181-185 (p. 182).

¹⁵ Both taken from Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 259.

England, and France too, episcopal sanctity was in decline until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Italy and Scandinavia experienced an increase in bishops postulated and receiving a process of canonization. However, it is interesting to note that none of the bishops who underwent a *processus informativus* in Scandinavia were canonized successfully. In fact, with such a large number of saint-bishops actually canonized during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, England had become unique within Europe; though some of the other continental countries did follow with a similar, later rises in the fourteenth century. During the period examined by Vauchez nine out of the fourteen canonization processes held in England were for bishops, and fully eight of the eleven English saints canonized during his period were bishops.¹⁶ Twelfth and thirteenth century England clearly needed those who would be both *defensores civitatis*, and fight for the *libertas ecclesiae* against the prerogatives of the crown.

The exceptional rate at which England sought the canonization of its bishops began immediately after the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170. Josiah Cox Russell calls this the ‘Becket Model’ of sanctity, and it will be examined further in the following chapter.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 259.

¹⁷ J. C. Russell, ‘The Canonization of the Opposition in Angevin England’, in *Anniversary Essays in Mediaeval History*, ed. C. H. Taylor (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), 279-290 (p. 281).