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The Hand of St James at Reading Abbey

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Reading Abbey was not one of those monasteries, like St Albans or Bury St Edmunds, which were built around the tomb of a saint, nor did it ever acquire, by fair means or foul, the complete body of a saint from elsewhere. It did, however, come to possess an important relic of one of the senior apostles of Christ, namely, a hand of St James the Great, around which a significant cult developed in the second half of the twelfth century. This paper aims to set out what can be known about this relic while it was in the abbey's possession and, in the process, to attempt to resolve certain problems about its history which, despite much that has been written on the subject, remain unsettled.

The hand of St James was one among a large and impressive collection of relics acquired by the abbey, mostly in the course of the twelfth century following its foundation in 1121. Two lists of Reading's relics have survived, one from the end of the twelfth century, the other from shortly before the abbey's dissolution in 1539. The first, and by far the more valuable on account of its length and early date, is contained in the late twelfth-century cartulary of Reading, British Library Egerton MS 3031, the original parts of which were written in 1191 x 1193.¹ Since the list of relics is in the original hand of the cartulary (apart from two later additions), it may be taken to represent the abbey's relic collection as it stood in the early 1190s. The list is arranged in categories, beginning with relics of the Cross and Our Lord (28) and continuing with those of the Virgin Mary (6), Patriarchs and Prophets (18), Apostles (12), Martyrs (73), Confessors (51) and, finally, Virgins (49). Among the relics of the apostles we find, after those of St Peter and St John the Evangelist, the following three items:²

'the hand of St James with flesh and bones;
the cloth in which the hand was wrapped;
item (part) of the cloth in which the hand of St James
was wrapped.'

The list includes nearly 240 relics, but that the abbey possessed in excess of this total at that time is clear from the final item, which reads: *Multe etiam alie reliquie quarum scripta desunt*, or, in translation, 'Also many other relics whose labels are missing.' Clearly the monks were already uncertain about the identity of many of their relics within a century of the abbey's foundation.

The two additions made to the Egerton list in an early thirteenth-century hand are both of considerable interest, and one has, as we shall see, an indirect bearing on the history of the hand of St James at Reading. It appears among the relics of apostles and reads:³

'John, king of England, gave us the head of Philip the apostle to venerate, and he allowed us to have a fair on that day.'

The head of St Philip was part of the loot from Constantinople brought to the West after the fall of the city in the Fourth Crusade in 1204.⁴ It, or a piece of it, was acquired by King John and given by him to Reading at the same time as he granted by charter a four-day annual fair at Reading to be held on the vigil and feast of St Philip and St James the Less (1 May) and on the two days following.⁵ Since there was no separate feast of St Philip alone in the Middle Ages, this is clearly the fair represented in the Egerton relic list as the fair of St Philip. The charter was given at Reading on the feast day, 1205, on which occasion the king also presented the relic in a solemn and well-attended ceremony.⁶ From a document of 1279, concerned with very different matters, we learn quite incidentally that the king also gave a precious reliquary to contain the head, described then as a *capsula aurea lapidibus preciosis ornata ... ad reponendum capud sancti Philippi apostoli*.⁷ From these facts arise two points which will be relevant to our consideration of the hand of St James: firstly, the association of the grant of a fair with the gift of a relic; and secondly, King John's interest in, and generosity to, the Reading monks. The other addition to the Egerton list records the gift by Duke (William IX) of Aquitaine to Henry I of a 'boy', or 'child' (*puer*),⁸ i.e., a statue

of the Christ Child, which was kept at Reading and known later as the 'Child of Grace'; miracles were worked in its chapel in the abbey, and a verse prayer addressed to it on behalf of Prince Arthur, elder son of Henry VII, is preserved in a Reading manuscript now in the Lambeth Palace Library.⁹

The second and only other surviving list of Reading's relics was made in 1538, just before the dissolution, by Henry VIII's visitor, Dr John London.¹⁰ It is very much shorter than the late twelfth-century list, running to no more than twenty-three items (or twenty-four in a variant copy), but this does not mean that the abbey's relic collection had shrunk so drastically by 1538, since the list concludes with the words 'withe many othere' and adds a note that 'ther be a multitude of small bonys, laces, stonys, and ermys, wiche wolde occupie iii. schetes of papyr to make particularly an inventory of every part therof.' It is clear that Dr London and his assistants, daunted (and perhaps shocked) by the sheer mass of relics in the abbey, chose to specify only those they considered to be the most important. It is interesting, therefore, that the list gives the hand of St James in second place after two pieces of the Holy Cross. Dr London also recorded that he had secured all the relics behind the High Altar under a lock whose key he retained, ready for the king's command.

Despite this wealth of relics, the only one of real and distinctive importance to the monks was the hand of St James. It was by far their most precious and prestigious relic. David Farmer has reminded us that the Apostle James the Great was one of the three apostles privileged to witness the Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and was the first apostle to be martyred for the Faith, being put to the sword by King Herod Agrippa in AD 44.¹¹ Moreover, as Hans Mayer has suggested, being the relic of so prominent an apostle, the hand of St James at Reading can have had little competition as an attraction to pilgrims in twelfth-century England before the death and canonization of Thomas Becket in 1170 and 1173, respectively.¹² It is true also that Reading's hand of St James would have benefited enormously from the prestige and popularity of the pilgrimage to the reputed body of the saint at Compostela in north-west Spain. It is a matter of some regret, therefore, that how the hand came to Reading and the details of its early history in England remain to some extent in doubt.

Before examining these questions, however, it will be helpful to set out certain relevant facts about the foundation of Reading Abbey,

which bear directly on the problem of how the relic came into the monks' possession. Reading Abbey was founded by King Henry I in 1121, although it did not receive its first abbot until 1123. It owed its origins to the king's desire to establish a rich and highly privileged monastic house, befitting the royal dignity, embracing the principles of monastic reform and charged with special charitable obligations to the poor and to pilgrims and guests. All this is clear from the foundation charter, dated 1125,¹³ but it seems equally certain that the king intended the new monastery to be his mausoleum, to receive his own body for burial after his death; and, indeed, the king was in due course to be buried within the abbey in January, 1136.¹⁴ For so important an enterprise Henry turned to the Cluniac Order of reformed Benedictine monasticism, which at this time continued to enjoy a high reputation in the Anglo-Norman world and which evidently represented the particular combination of respectability, reform and splendour that the king required. The new house was accordingly settled by Cluniac monks in 1121, some from Cluny itself, others from the priory of St Pancras at Lewes;¹⁵ it received as its first abbot in 1123 the prior of Lewes, Hugh of Amiens; two more of its abbots, Anscher and Hugh II, were also former priors of Lewes; and the abbey remained closely linked with the Cluniac Order throughout the twelfth century - indeed, in 1199 the then abbot of Reading, Hugh II, became abbot of Cluny itself.¹⁶ However, having been elevated to abbatial status in 1123, Reading was not juridically a member of the Order of Cluny, but rather an independent house following the Cluniac way of life,¹⁷ a circumstance which was nevertheless in time to result in its gravitation away from Cluniac to what one might call ordinary Black Benedictine connections.¹⁸ In spite of this, however, at its foundation and for several decades afterwards the Cluniac influence was paramount and can be demonstrated in many different ways. The relevance of this to the question of Reading's acquisition of the hand of St James becomes clear when it is recalled that the development of the cult of St James in western Christendom, and in particular of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, owed an immense amount to the patronage and active involvement of the monks of Cluny from the later eleventh century onwards. Not only did a Cluniac monk become bishop of Santiago in 1094, but the organization of the pilgrim routes in northern Spain and France was much in Cluniac hands, many of the shrines and monasteries along the routes being Cluniac dependencies, and Cluny was deeply involved in the production of

promotional literature associated with the shrine of Santiago, especially parts of the *Liber Sancti Jacobi*.¹⁹ In the light of this, given Henry I's devotion to the Cluniac Order and his evident desire to endow his new foundation on a grand scale, the link between Cluny and Santiago would naturally suggest to the king that Reading Abbey was a most appropriate house in which to place the hand of St James if he had it to dispose of.

One other point needs to be made before turning to the history of the relic in England. It concerns the apparent lack of evidence on the hand emanating from the abbey itself. Such historical writing as has survived from Reading Abbey in the twelfth century (or later, for that matter) yields no information on the hand of St James. In fact, very little such writing has come down to us at all. What we have essentially are two sets of jejune and far from continuous annals, one dating from the twelfth century, the other running from 1135 to 1264.²⁰ Neither set mentions the relic. We know, however, that the monks had, and presumably wrote, a twelfth-century history of the abbey, which is now lost but which appears in the late twelfth-century library list as *Gesta regis Henrici et ystoria Rading' in uno volumine*.²¹ Although the work as a whole is lost, it is possible, even likely, that some fragments of it are preserved in the *Chronica Majora* and *Flores Historiarum* of Matthew Paris, the thirteenth-century chronicler of St Albans. This writer supplies certain otherwise unrecorded information about Reading, which he would almost certainly have obtained from a Reading source and which arguably came from the abbey's *ystoria*, since, apart from the sets of annals, no other historical writing in the abbey is known to have existed.²² Some of the information given by Matthew Paris relates to the hand of St James and is crucial in reconstructing the early history of the relic in England.

It is time now to turn to this issue. The main points in the rather complicated story appear to be these. The hand was removed from the German imperial treasury by Matilda, daughter of Henry I, on the death of her husband, the Emperor Henry V, in 1125. It had formed part of the German royal treasury since 1072, when it had been acquired by Henry IV from the possessions of the recently deceased Archbishop Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen, who had obtained it in the 1040s from Vitalis, bishop of Torcello in the Venetia, where an arm of St James had been since 640.²³ (It is difficult, then, to establish a link between this hand and the Spanish 'body' of the saint at

Compostela.)²⁴ The precise terms on which the Empress Matilda removed the hand in 1125 are uncertain; she may have been allowed to take it with other imperial treasure in partial compensation for surrendering her right to dower lands, to which she could have been entitled as widow of the late Emperor, but, on the other hand, as Professor Karl Leyser has shown, the Annals of Disibodenberg, a monastery in the diocese of Mainz, display considerable resentment in recording her taking of the hand, which implies that she may not have had full authority to do so.²⁵ Be that as it may, she joined her father Henry I in Normandy and in the following year returned with him and the precious relic to England, landing at Portsmouth in September, 1126.²⁶

So far historians are in agreement on the history of the hand, but dispute has arisen as to what happened to it after its arrival in England. Did the king immediately place it in Reading Abbey, or did it remain in the royal treasury until some years later? The Reading cartularies preserve the text of a supposed charter of Henry I by which he allegedly gave the relic to the monks, and which, despite its undoubtedly spurious nature, is usually dated to September 1126 on the assumption that it is based on a genuine original issued by the king soon after his landing with the Empress at Portsmouth.²⁷ If this interpretation of the text is accepted, one would have to conclude that the hand went to Reading in 1126, but, against this, the text is so patently forged that no argument based solely on its evidence can be convincing, while, even if a genuine original did indeed lie behind it, there is no compelling reason why that should be dated to 1126. In fact, there are good grounds for supposing that the hand did not come to Reading until 1133 and that any charter recording its gift to the monks should belong to that year. The evidence is contained in the works of Matthew Paris, who, as noted above, was almost certainly making use of a twelfth-century Reading source. He states that Henry sent the hand to Reading in 1133 on the occasion of what was to be his last crossing from England to Normandy.²⁸ The fact that Paris does not record a 'gift' of the hand to Reading in 1126 must surely mean that his source contained no such reference, for it is scarcely conceivable that he would have omitted the abbey's original acquisition of a relic that had acquired widespread fame by the thirteenth century. Equally, if his source did not record a 'gift' under the year 1126, but did refer to an acquisition in 1133, the conclusion is difficult to avoid that no 'gift' was made in 1126. In short, the

arguments against the coming of the hand to Reading in 1126 are fatally effective, but other less direct evidence can be adduced to strengthen further the case against 1126. When the cult of St James's hand was fully developed in Henry II's reign, it was aided by the grant of a fair for the feast of St James.²⁹ No such fair was allowed by Henry I. On the contrary, that king granted a fair for the feast of St Laurence in a charter, moreover, which is undoubtedly genuine and which can be dated c. 1129 x 1133, i.e., some years after 1126 and before the king's final crossing to Normandy.³⁰ Among the relics of martyrs appearing in the abbey's late twelfth-century relic list are relics of the body and blood of St Laurence with coals (in reference to the traditional form of his martyrdom).³¹ Although there is no proof that they were in the abbey's possession by the late 1120s, it is highly likely that this was the case, and possible also that they had been given by Henry I himself,³² since, as we have seen, King John later granted a fair in association with the gift of a relic, while a fair of St James followed the restoration of St James's hand probably by order of Henry II. Moreover, it cannot be purely coincidental that the chapel built at the main gate of the newly founded abbey, a chapel which had become a parish church by the end of the twelfth century, should be dedicated to St Laurence. Although it is not recorded in documentary sources before the late twelfth century, earlier architectural evidence preserved in the present fabric of the church leaves little doubt that the original building was co-eval with the foundation of the abbey.³³ The coincidence of the grant of a fair of St Laurence and the chapel's dedication to that saint suggests, therefore, a particular devotion to St Laurence at Reading before 1133, implying that his relics were held in special esteem at that time and, in particular, that the monks did not yet have what would have been the eminently more prestigious hand of St James.

Although one historian, Hans Mayer, has discounted the claim that the relic reached Reading at all in Henry I's reign because no cult developed at that time,³⁴ the case for its arrival there in 1133 is very strong.³⁵ The reference to 1133 in Matthew Paris, and presumably therefore in the Reading 'history', should be read in conjunction with two other statements made by Paris, also presumably taken from the Reading source, one of which indicates that the hand must have been in the abbey by the end of Henry I's reign. He states that in 1136 the hand was removed from the abbey by Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester, brother of the new king, Stephen, and not restored until

1155.³⁶ In other words, Paris records the presence of the relic at Reading between 1133 and 1136. There remains, however, the problem of the terms on which it came to Reading in the first place. The only certain Reading source which refers to Henry's gift of the hand to the monks is the spurious charter to which I have referred, but even here the phraseology may be highly significant, since, if the text is based on a genuine original (and it is a big 'if'), the reference to a gift could be a later insertion. Henry addresses the monks as follows: *Sciatis quod gloriosam manum sancti Iacobi apostoli, quam Matillis imperatrix filia mea, de Alemannia rediens, mihi dedit, ipsius petitione vobis transmittit et in perpetuum ecclesie de Rading(ia) dono.*³⁷ Here the verb *transmittit* sits very oddly with *dono in perpetuum*, but, if we omit the latter, it becomes much less strange and finds, moreover, a parallel in the *misit* of Matthew Paris's reference to the sending of the hand to Reading in 1133. It may well be, therefore, that Henry I did no more than entrust the hand to the custody of the Reading monks, and that this was later misrepresented as a gift in perpetuity. It is worth noting, too, that in the later twelfth century Roger of Howden actually attributed the foundation of Reading to Henry's great joy on receiving the precious relic, which he placed (*posuit*) there,³⁸ for, although this was certainly not the reason for the abbey's foundation, the chronicler's association of Henry I with the monks' initial acquisition of the relic was clearly not wide of the mark.

The later history of the hand can be simply stated. According to Matthew Paris, it was removed from the abbey by Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester (himself, interestingly, a Cluniac), in 1136, probably at or soon after Henry I's funeral on 5th January, at a time when the abbacy was vacant.³⁹ It was not returned until 1155, and then almost certainly at the insistence of Henry II, who, as later evidence shows, held the relic in high regard and who, when requested by Frederick Barbarossa to return the hand to the imperial treasury in 1157, politely but firmly refused.⁴⁰ The restoration of the hand to Reading in 1155 was no doubt facilitated by the self-imposed exile of the bishop of Winchester at Cluny for some years after Henry II's accession. The relic remained thereafter at Reading until the dissolution, apart from occasional short excursions in the later twelfth century. Whatever had been the situation under Henry I, however, it is clear that the cult of the hand of St James at Reading did not develop until after the restoration of the relic to the monks in 1155. Thereafter

they made a deliberate effort to exploit their possession of the hand by promoting a pilgrimage, largely with the aid of a clutch of indulgences for the feast of St James (25th July) obtained from English and Welsh archbishops and bishops,⁴¹ and the grant of a fair at Reading on the same feast from Henry II.⁴² In a mutually dependent way both the indulgences and the fair would attract people to the town and to the abbey, and both would benefit. In a similar way early thirteenth-century indulgences for the feast of St Philip⁴³ were to follow King John's grant of a fair in connection with his gift of the saint's head.

All the twelfth-century indulgences for St James at Reading refer to the presence of the hand, or of 'relics', of St James in the abbey, and all are for the feast and its octave, except one, which is for the feast day alone, and another, which runs from the vigil to the octave of the feast day. The earliest was granted by Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury in 1155 x 1161 (probably in 1155 or shortly afterwards), and allows what was for the date a very generous indulgence of forty days.⁴⁴ A second indulgence, for twenty days, was obtained from Gilbert Foliot, bishop of Hereford, who was translated to the see of London in 1163.⁴⁵ The remainder, fourteen in all, were granted on the occasion of the dedication of the abbey church on 19th April, 1164. Archbishop Thomas Becket, who performed the ceremony, himself granted an indulgence of twenty days, while the English and Welsh bishops who attended the dedication or supported the cause granted numbers of days varying from ten to twenty-five.⁴⁶ Most of the indulgences stipulate an offering from the faithful as a condition of benefiting from the remission. The annual fair of St James was granted by Henry II, certainly between 1163 and 1165, and probably in the early part of 1164, perhaps in anticipation of the dedication of the abbey, which the king and many of the nobility attended. The fair was to be held on four days, the feast day itself and the three days following.⁴⁷ Finally, between 1173 and 1181 papal backing for the cult was secured in the form of an exhortation from Pope Alexander III to all the faithful of the province of Canterbury to visit Reading on the feast of St James in order to avail themselves of the indulgence established by the glorious martyr, blessed Thomas, with the advice of his suffragans, when with them he dedicated the abbey.⁴⁸ Further indulgences were to follow in the thirteenth century, bringing the total of days' remission listed for the feast of St James in the middle of the century to 386.⁴⁹

A number of interesting consequences flowed from the rise of the cult in the second half of the twelfth century. The name of St James came to be added to those of St Mary the Virgin and St John the Evangelist as tutelary saints of the abbey.⁵⁰ In due course the abbey adopted as its heraldic arms three scallop-shells, the scallop being particularly associated with St James from the end of the twelfth century,⁵¹ while in the thirteenth century allusions to St James began to appear on the abbey's seals.⁵² Already by the 1220s and 1230s a counterseal, used both by the abbot and by the convent, depicted a hand in a gesture of blessing between two scallop shells, with the legend, *Ora pro nobis, sancte Iacobe*. A similar hand, accompanied by scallops and other emblematic references to St James, began to be depicted on abbatial seals from the end of the thirteenth century, while from a few years later dates a small circular seal used by the abbot and convent as sub-collectors of clerical taxation, which shows the abbey's heraldic shield of three scallops. Finally, in 1328 a magnificent new common seal of the abbot and convent was made, the obverse of which has a legend stating that the abbey had been founded in honour of St Mary and the Apostles John and James (which, as far as James was concerned, was untrue) and depicts these three saints seated or standing in canopied niches.

The hand itself was normally kept in a reliquary. We know of three reliquaries which were successively used for this purpose in the twelfth century. The first two are referred to in one of the accounts of miracles worked by the hand, to be discussed below, according to which Gilbert Foliot, bishop of London (1163-87), solemnly translated the hand from its old reliquary into a new one. He performed the ceremony on the screen (*pulpitum*) and, as he did so, held the relic aloft and blessed the people with it, as a result of which a blind man in the assembled company miraculously recovered his sight.⁵³ On this occasion the hand was clearly directly visible, but it seems normally to have been concealed within the reliquary, even when miracles were being performed. The fact that Gilbert Foliot was chosen to carry out this translation suggests a certain bond between the bishop and Reading Abbey, in which connection it is worth noting that Abbot William I of Reading was one of the English ecclesiastics who sent to the pope testimonials on Foliot's behalf in 1169, when the bishop feared action against him by Thomas Becket.⁵⁴ Moreover, as bishop of Hereford (1148-63), Foliot has been of considerable help to Reading Abbey in the maintenance of its

spiritual rights in the *parochia* of Leominster in Herefordshire.⁵⁵ He was also, of course, a Cluniac by profession. Within a generation of the bishop's translation of the relic, however, the new reliquary (but not the hand itself) was removed by King Richard I in 1189 as part of his fund-raising preparations for the Third Crusade,⁵⁶ and this was no doubt done with the consent and even the encouragement of the then abbot, Hugh II, who, as we know from other sources, was a supporter of Richard I.⁵⁷ It is not so evident, however, that the whole convent had agreed to this 'denuding' of their pre-eminent relic. A few years later Reading's geographical position gave it a strategic significance between Richard's government, later headed by Archbishop Hubert Walter, and Count John's main sphere of power when the latter rebelled against his brother. There is arguably the possibility that in these circumstances John sought to exploit internal differences within the monastic community and to lure Reading over to his support. Among other favours to the monks, Count John gave a gold cup worth 5 marks in 1191,⁵⁸ and in 1192 one mark of gold annually for ever from his exchequer *intuitu manus beati Iacobi apostoli*.⁵⁹ He charged this obligation first on the revenues of Tewkesbury and later on those of his manor of Faringdon (Berkshire).⁶⁰ In 1200, after becoming king, John confirmed this annual payment of one mark of gold, and in his charter made it quite clear why the grant had originally been made, namely, *intuitu manus beati Jacobi apostoli quam Ricardus rex frater noster in itinere peregrinationis sue denudavit*.⁶¹ Whether John's efforts to win the Reading monks over to his side in the 1190s (if that was indeed his intention) succeeded is very doubtful, for certainly in 1194 the abbey lent Hubert Walter its carts to transport a catapult for use in the siege of Marlborough Castle (Wilts), held by one of John's men.⁶² The entire suggestion may, in any case, be quite unfair to John, for he may well have had a genuine devotion to the hand of St James, as is especially implied by his confirmation of the annual mark of gold as king, when it was clearly unnecessary on political grounds. The grant was confirmed by Henry III in 1218,⁶³ but at least from 1200 it operated in practice normally at the rate of 10 marks of silver either allowed or paid annually at the king's exchequer.⁶⁴ In the later years of Henry III the payment became intermittent⁶⁵ and eventually, in 1292, the abbey's rights were bought out by Edward I for £100.⁶⁶ As to the reliquary, we may take it that John's annual grant enabled a new one to be provided; certainly by 1250 at the latest the annual 10 marks of silver

were being used for 'the making of a large wax candle',⁶⁷ presumably to burn before the reliquary. As far as is known, this third reliquary continued to house the relic until the dissolution. Nothing is known of its form, nor for that matter of those of the earlier reliquaries. There cannot be much doubt, however, that it was plated in gold or silver-gilt, and, to judge from analogies elsewhere, it was possibly shaped like a hand with or without an arm attached. It may even be that the hand depicted on the abbey's seals represented the reliquary rather than the relic itself.

Finally, there is the question of how the hand of St James was used in the working of miraculous healings and other miracles. Information on this point comes exclusively from a unique source contained in a manuscript volume of saints' lives and related material now in the possession of the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester, but deriving originally from Reading's dependent priory at Leominster in Herefordshire. On five folios of this manuscript are written in a hand of c. 1200 the accounts of twenty-nine miracles wrought by, or in connection with, the hand of St James at Reading or, in one case, by St James without reference to Reading.⁶⁸ Of these, thirteen (or possibly fourteen) can be dated on internal evidence and yield dates ranging from 1127 to before 1189, a number being said to have occurred during Henry II's reign. The date 1127 for the earliest miracle is problematical, however, for it is given rather suspiciously as the date of the last miracle to be written up in the collection, while no other miracle is so precisely dated in the manuscript and no other can be dated certainly before 1155, when the hand was restored to Reading. It would be unsafe to rely on this date alone as proof that the hand was already then in the abbey's possession.

All but two of the recorded miracles were healing miracles, the two exceptions being the miraculous moving of timber which had formerly resisted all efforts to move it, and the vengeance taken by St James on a man who failed properly to observe his feast.⁶⁹ The majority of the cures involved the use of 'water of St James', that is, water into which the hand had been dipped.⁷⁰ In some cases the sufferer drank from the water and was cured, in others affected parts of the body were bathed with the water and healed. A withered arm, for instance, was bathed in this way, and in another miracle a monk of Reading's head tumour was cured by signing his head with the reliquary and then binding it with a cloth dipped in water of St James.⁷¹ An outbreak of plague in Bucklebury, near Reading, was

brought to an end when the area was sprinkled with the water, and, when it was decided to erect a wooden cross in commemoration of this miracle, the timber could only be moved to the appointed spot when the yoke of oxen, ropes, cart and timber had been sprinkled with the same water, whereupon the oxen transported the load to the exact site without any human agency whatsoever.⁷² Water of St James was not involved in all the recorded healings, however, for mere sight of the reliquary, or indeed on two occasions of the hand itself, was sufficient.⁷³ Yet again, the presence of the sufferer in the abbey church on the saint's feast was enough for some cures to occur, and in some other instances the sick were healed away from Reading after taking a vow to visit Reading to honour St James. For example, Osbert, abbot of Notley, suffering from severe and painful eye trouble, took such a vow and, as we are told, 'no sooner had he uttered this vow with his lips than his anguish started to ease and the pain began to go down, so that within three days he was able to sing Mass, and so came to Reading as he had vowed, fit and well.'⁷⁴ However, if such a vow was not fulfilled following a cure, vengeance might be taken by the saint, as a young man discovered in 1185: as he was setting out with Count John for Ireland, he broke an arm, whereupon he made a vow of this kind and the arm was healed, but, when he failed to fulfil his vow, he broke his other arm; he then realised the error of his ways and all was well in the end, for he penitently hastened to Reading, presented a wax arm and received his cure.⁷⁵ Rather different, and certainly not a healing miracle, is the case of Matthew, count of Boulogne, who, in the rebellion of the Young King against his father Henry II in 1173, persisted in attacking a castle on St James's day and was fatally wounded by an arrow 'shot as it were from Heaven'.⁷⁶

As Sister Benedicta Ward has commented, the miracles of the hand of St James reveal what was mainly a local healing shrine at Reading.⁷⁷ Eighteen of the twenty-nine miracles, all of them cures, were effected in Reading, mostly in the abbey itself, while eleven occurred away from Reading. Even the latter, however, with the exception of the fatal wounding of the count of Boulogne, were restricted to the southern half of England. The geographical appeal of the cult in England can be gauged from the fact that, according to these accounts, people came from, or were healed at, places in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and, in single cases, Essex, Herefordshire, Suffolk, Surrey, Sussex (or Kent), Wiltshire and 'the north of England'.

The classes of persons revealed as devotees of St James or as receiving miraculous healing range from the humblest to the greatest. A shepherd girl, a servant in the guest-house of Barking Abbey, a keeper of hounds, the wife of a knight, a sheriff, a knight, an abbot, a noblewoman, an earl and countess of Gloucester - all figure in the accounts, but the greatest of all was the king, Henry II, whose apparently real devotion to, and respect for, the hand of St James stand out. We have already noted the king's refusal to return the relic to Frederick Barbarossa in 1157. The miracle stories reveal two occasions, each mentioned merely circumstantially, on which the hand was sent to the king. The account of the first miracle at Bucklebury states that immediately before it Abbot Roger of Reading had taken the hand to Henry II and was bringing it back to Reading, while in another account we learn that the king had had the relic brought to him 'as he was about to cross the Channel, that he might adore it in votive devotion and be fortified by the protection and blessing of the apostle's hand before he went upon the sea.'⁷⁸ It is not without interest in this connection that Ralph de Diceto's account of the death of Matthew, count of Boulogne, states that the reason for St James's vengeance on the count was that he had previously sworn fealty to Henry II in the presence of, and having touched, relics which included the hand of St James.⁷⁹

The miracle stories also contain two instances of aggressive rivalry with other shrines. One concerns a sick woman from Wiltshire who was told by St James in a vision not to take a candle to Salisbury, as she had vowed, but to Reading, where she would be healed. In the other an appallingly crippled girl, who had gone to Canterbury, was ordered by St James in a dream not to wait around at the shrine of St Thomas (Becket), where she certainly would not be healed, but to go to Reading, where alone she would find a cure. When both these sufferers obeyed the saint's injunctions, tardily in the latter case, they were indeed healed.⁸⁰ This sort of rivalry, particularly with the newly popular shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury, is not uncommon in English miracle collections of the later twelfth century, but even so, according to Jonathan Sumption, the Reading author was 'much the most aggressive of the group'.⁸¹

Despite the Reading writer's claims for the power of St James, however, the appeal of the hand seems to have declined in the course of the thirteenth century. The cult probably remained buoyant in the early decades of that century - witness, for instance, King John's

continued devotion and the granting of new episcopal indulgences for the feast of St James - but, on the other hand, we know of no miracles after the twelfth century and, when Edward I passed through Reading in 1289 with his queen and six of his children and a niece, offerings were made of 7s for each of them 'to the relics in the abbey of Reading' without specific reference to the hand of St James.⁸² On the same occasion the king and his family gave precisely the same sums to the image of the Virgin Mary at Caversham.⁸³ What other offerings may have been made, either to the hand of St James or to the abbey's other relics, in the later Middle Ages is impossible now to tell owing to the loss of account rolls which might have recorded such information. The cartularies of Reading give precious little indication of the strength of St James's cult after the early thirteenth century. Roger de Cressy gave the abbey an annual rent of 13d in Chearsley (Bucks) on the feast of St James to provide a light annually before the relics of St James - this was probably in the early thirteenth century - and, before 1238, a certain Thomas of Herewardsley, west of Reading, in effect sold some land to the monks to provide money for a pilgrimage to Compostela for the soul of his father; and that is all.⁸⁴ Sister Benedicta Ward has rightly cautioned us against assuming that silence in the records means that a cult had faded or even that miracles had ceased to occur,⁸⁵ but nevertheless all the indications are that the cult of the hand of St James at Reading had its heyday in the second half of the twelfth century and the early thirteenth century, and gradually yielded in popularity to other new or newly fashionable cults thereafter.

NOTES

¹ *Reading Abbey Cartularies*, ed. B.R. Kemp, 2 vols., Royal Historical Society, Camden 4th ser., xxxi, xxxiii, 1986-7, [hereafter *Reading Cartularies*], i, p.3.

² British Library, Egerton MS 3031, fol. 7r, col. 1.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See the references in C. Riant, *Exuviae Sacrae Constantinopolitanae* (Geneva, 1878), cited by D. Bethell, 'The Making of a Twelfth-century Relic Collection', *Studies in Church History*, viii (1971), p.64, n.1.

⁵ *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.75-76.

⁶ M.R. James and C. Jenkins, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the*

Manuscripts in the Library of Lambeth Palace (Cambridge, 1932), p.503.

⁷ *Reading Cartularies*, i, p.189.

⁸ Egerton 3031, fol. 8r, col. 2.

⁹ M.R. James and C. Jenkins, *op. cit.* pp.503, 513. See also *Giraldi Cambrensis Topographia Hibernica et Expugnatio Hibernica*, ed. J.F. Dimock (Rolls Ser., *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, v, 1867), pp.xxix-xxxi.

¹⁰ *Three Chapters of Letters relating to the Suppression of Monasteries*, ed. T. Wright, Camden Soc., xxvi (1843), pp.226-27; J.B. Hurry, *Reading Abbey* (London, 1901), p.129. A variant copy of this list, with one extra relic, is in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 607, fol. 279r - see M.R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Gonville and Caius College*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1907-8), ii, p.638.

¹¹ D.H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1987), p.222. The biblical account of St James's martyrdom is in Acts of the Apostles, 12, vv 1-2.

¹² H.E. Mayer, 'Staufische Weltherrschaft? Zum Brief Heinrichs II. von England an Friedrich Barbarossa von 1157', in *Festschrift Karl Pivec*, ed. A. Haidacher und H.E. Mayer (Innsbruck, 1966), p.277.

¹³ *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.33-35; for comment, see *ibid.* p.18.

¹⁴ Henry I died at Lyons-la-Forêt, in Normandy, on 1 December, 1135, but, mainly owing to contrary winds, his body could not be brought across the Channel until the new year and he was not buried at Reading until 5 January, 1136 (see *Reading Cartularies*, i, p.14, n. 1.).

¹⁵ 'Annales Radingenses', in *Ungedruckte anglo-normannische Geschichtsquellen*, ed. F. Liebermann (Strassburg, 1879), p.10.

¹⁶ For these abbots, see *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.26-27. For the abbey's close links with Cluny in the twelfth century, see *ibid.*, pp.180-82.

¹⁷ This is clear from the documents recording the independence secured by King Stephen for his new abbey at Faversham in 1148, also settled by Cluniac monks, in this case from Bermondsey, a dependency of La Charité-sur-Loire. Both Cluny and La Charité granted Faversham freedom from all obedience and subjection to either house, La Charité adding that it was to enjoy the same freedom as Reading Abbey already had (A. Saltman, *Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London, 1956), pp.82-83; W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, rev. edn., J. Caley et al, 6 vols. in 8 (London, 1817-30), iv, p.575).

¹⁸ Following the imposition of a visitatorial and legislative structure of provincial chapters on the Black Benedictines at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Reading Abbey was in due course drawn into that system and thereby for this purpose classed with the non-Cluniac Black Benedictines. The abbot of Reading was selected as one of the presidents

for the chapter of the Canterbury province in 1225, although, since he neither attended nor sent the prior as his representative, the abbey may still have wished to stand aloof. By the middle of the century, however, the pull towards the older Black Benedictines had become irresistible; the abbot of Reading was present in the chapter of 1253, and in 1277 the chapter actually met in Reading Abbey (*Documents illustrating the activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks 1215-1540*, ed. W.A. Pantin, 3 vols., Royal Historical Society, Camden 3rd ser., xlv, xlvii, liv (1931-7), i, pp.18, 52, 59).

¹⁹ See J. Sumption, *Pilgrimage: an Image of Medieval Religion* (London, 1975), pp.119-120.

²⁰ Respectively, 'Annales Radingenses' (see n. 15) and 'Annales Radingenses Posteriores, 1135-1264', ed. C.W. Previté-Orton, *English Historical Review*, xxxvii (1922), pp.400-403.

²¹ The abbey's library list is to be found in Egerton 3031, fols. 8v-10v, printed, S. Barfield, 'Lord Fingall's cartulary of Reading Abbey', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, iii (1888), pp.117-123. However, the latter prints the item cited above inaccurately (see K. Leyser, 'Frederick Barbarossa, Henry II and the Hand of St James', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xc (1975), p.464, n. 1).

²² The suggestion that Matthew Paris used a lost Reading source was first made by H.R. Luard in the 19th century and has been generally accepted since then (see R. Vaughan, *Matthew Paris* (Cambridge, 1958), p.104), but credit for identifying the source as probably the *ystoria* belongs to Professor Leyser in *art. cit.*, p.494. For Matthew Paris's authorship of the original portion of *Flores Historiarum*, see Vaughan, pp.37-41.

²³ K. Leyser, *art. cit.*, p.489.

²⁴ The alleged tomb of St James at Compostela was not rediscovered until the early ninth century (T.D. Kendrick, *St James in Spain* (London, 1960), pp.18, 32-33).

²⁵ K. Leyser, *art. cit.*, p.491.

²⁶ W. Farrer, *An Outline Itinerary of King Henry I* (Oxford, 1919), p.114.

²⁷ *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.39-40.

²⁸ *Matthaei Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora*, ed. H.R. Luard, 7 vols. (Rolls Ser., 1872-83), ii, p.159; *Flores Historiarum*, ed. *idem*, 3 vols. (Rolls Ser., 1890), ii, p.56.

²⁹ *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp. 56-57.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp.40-41.

³¹ Egerton 3031, fol. 7r, col. 1.

³² That some of Reading's relics, though not specifically those of St Laurence, were certainly or possibly given by Henry I is shown by D. Bethell, *art. cit.* (see n. 4), p.69.

³³ St Laurence's first occurs as a chapel (*capella*), the earliest closely dateable reference being in 1189 x 90 (*Reading Cartularies*, i, p.157), but in a deed that cannot be dated more narrowly than 1186 x 1213 it appears as a church (*ecclesia*), as it does also in an archiepiscopal act of 1195 x 98 (*ibid.*, ii, p.119; i, p.163). In papal documents, on the other hand, it continues to be described as a chapel down to 1215 (*ibid.*, i, pp.135-36, 138). For earlier twelfth-century evidence preserved in the church's fabric, see C. Kerry, *A History of the Municipal Church of St Lawrence, Reading* (Reading, 1883), pp.10-11.

³⁴ H.E. Mayer, *art. cit.*, pp.273-74.

³⁵ This represents a modification of my earlier view that the hand may have come to Reading in 1126 (B. Kemp, 'The Miracles of the Hand of St James', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, lxx (1970), p.3; *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.39-40), and coincides with Professor Leyser's conclusion in favour of 1133 (K. Leyser, *art. cit.*, p.494).

³⁶ *Chronica Majora*, ii, pp.164, 210; *Flores Historiarum*, ii, pp.58, 72.

³⁷ *Reading Cartularies*, i, p.40.

³⁸ *Chronica Rogeri de Hovedene*, ed. W. Stubbs, 4 vols. (Rolls Ser., 1868-71), i, p.181.

³⁹ Abbot Anscher died 27 January, 1135, and his successor, Edward, was not appointed until 1136 after Henry I's funeral, which took place on 5 January ('*Annales Radingenses*', p.11; *Reading Cartularies*, i, p.14, n. 1). For Henry of Blois' presence with King Stephen at the time of the funeral, see *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, iii, ed. H.A. Cronne and R.H.C. Davis (Oxford, 1968), p.148, no. 386.

⁴⁰ K. Leyser, *art. cit.*, esp. pp.482-83, 499.

⁴¹ *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.148-155.

⁴² *Ibid.*, i, pp.56-57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, i, p.174; James and Jenkins, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in ... Lambeth Palace* (see n. 6), p.503.

⁴⁴ *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.148-49; Saltman, *Theobald*, p.436.

⁴⁵ *Reading Cartularies*, i, p.149; *The Letters and Charters of Gilbert Foliot*, ed. A. Morey and C.N.L. Brooke (Cambridge, 1967), p.390.

⁴⁶ Hugh du Puiset, bishop of the distant see of Durham, granted 10 days (*Reading Cartularies*, i, p.151; G.V. Scammell, *Hugh du Puiset, Bishop of Durham* (Cambridge, 1956), pp.263-64), while Jocelin de Bohun, the local diocesan of Salisbury, granted 25 days (*Reading Cartularies*, i, p.155). Most of the other bishops gave 20 days.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, i, pp.56-57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, i, p.133; *Papsturkunden in England*, ed. W. Holtzmann, iii (Göttingen, 1952), p.429.

⁴⁹ *Reading Cartularies*, i, p.175.

⁵⁰ B. Kemp, 'The Seals of Reading Abbey', *Reading Medieval Studies*, xiv (1988), pp.144, 148.

⁵¹ C. Hohler, 'The Badge of St James', in *The Scallop: Studies of a Shell and its influences on humankind*, ed. I. Cox (London, 1957), esp. pp.56-61, 63, 67.

⁵² For the remainder of this paragraph, see Kemp, 'Seals of Reading Abbey', pp.142ff. (See also my 'Additional note on Reading Abbey Seals', below.)

⁵³ B. Kemp, 'The Miracles of the Hand of St James' (see n. 35), pp.13-14, miracle xviii.

⁵⁴ *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. J.C. Robertson, 7 vols. (Rolls Ser., 1875-85), vi, pp.628-30.

⁵⁵ See B. Kemp, 'Some aspects of the *parochia* of Leominster in the 12th century', in *Minsters and Parish Churches: the local church in transition 950-1200*, ed. J. Blair (Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988), esp. pp.86-87.

⁵⁶ The evidence is contained in King John's charter of reparation for his brother's action (see below).

⁵⁷ See G. Constable, 'An unpublished letter by Abbot Hugh II of Reading concerning Archbishop Hubert Walter', in *Essays in Medieval History presented to Bertie Wilkinson*, ed. T.A. Sandquist and M.R. Powicke (Toronto, 1969), esp. p.23.

⁵⁸ 'Annales Radingenses Posteriores' (see n. 20), p.401.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.68-69.

⁶⁰ *Reading Cartularies*, i, p.69 (nos. 43, 44).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, i, pp.71-72.

⁶² *Ibid.*, i, p.161; *Memoranda Roll 1 John*, ed. H.G. Richardson (Pipe Roll Soc., new ser., xxi, 1943), p.lxxiv.

⁶³ *Rot(uli) Lit(terarum) Claus(arum in Turri Londinensi asservati)*, ed. T.D. Hardy, 2 vols. (Record Commission, 1833-4), i, p.381.

⁶⁴ The pipe roll for 1200 includes, among payments from Faringdon in the Honour of Gloucester, 10 marks for Reading *ad operationem capsule manus sancti Iacobi* (Pipe Roll 2 John, ed. D.M. Stenton (Pipe Roll Soc., 1934), p.128. In 1219 Henry II ordered payment of 10 marks at the exchequer (*Rot. Lit. Claus.*, i, p.390) and, although in 1226, 1228 and 1229 the writs to the exchequer were for 9 marks (*ibid.*, ii, p.143; *Calendar of Liberate Rolls 1226-40*, pp.109, 149), payment of 10 marks was again ordered in 1230 and 1250 (*Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.81-82; *Close Rolls 1247-51*, p.389).

⁶⁵ *Reading Cartularies*, i, pp.89-90.

⁶⁶ *Extracts from the Issue Rolls of the Exchequer, Henry III to Henry VI*, ed. F. Devon (Record Commission, 1837), p.104.

⁶⁷ *Close Rolls 1247-51*, p.389.

⁶⁸ Gloucester, Dean and Chapter, MS 1, fols. 171v-175v. For a description of this manuscript, see N.R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, ii (Oxford, 1977), pp.934-39; the attribution to Leominster is given on p.939. The miracle stories in question are translated by B. Kemp, 'The Miracles of the Hand of St James' (see n. 35), pp.6-19. The manuscript numbers the stories as I-XXVII, but one brief story is not separately numbered and another story in fact contains two miracles.

⁶⁹ Kemp, 'Miracles of the Hand of St James', nos. xv, xxv.

⁷⁰ See *ibid.*, nos. xiv, xv.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, nos. i, vii, ix, x.

⁷² *Ibid.*, no. xv.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, nos. iv, xi, xviii.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, no. xix.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, no. xxii.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, no. xxv.

⁷⁷ B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (London, 1982), pp.116-17.

⁷⁸ Kemp, 'Miracles of the Hand of St James', nos. xiv, xxvi.

⁷⁹ *Radulfi de Diceto Decani Londoniensis Opera Historica*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols. (Rolls Ser., 1876), i, p.373.

⁸⁰ Kemp, 'Miracles of the Hand of St James', nos. xi, xx.

⁸¹ J. Sumption, *op. cit.*, p.152.

⁸² *Records of the Wardrobe and Household, 1286-1289*, ed. B.F. and C.R. Byerly (London, 1986), p.300.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Reading Cartularies*, i, p. 205; ii, pp. 222-23.

⁸⁵ B. Ward, *op. cit.*, pp.34, 125-26.

Additional note on Reading Abbey seals

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Since the writing of my article on 'The Seals of Reading Abbey', *Reading Medieval Studies*, xiv (1988), I have found an incomplete impression of the abbey's first common seal which is earlier in date than any I there cited. It is appended to an act of Abbot William I, 1165-73 (Oxford, Brasenose College, Ivington deed 2), the text of which is entered in the Leominster Cartulary, B.L. Cotton MS Domitian A iii, fol. 119v. The seal is broken away at the edges all round, but the impression preserves the seated figure of the Virgin, from neck to ankles, and encompasses both of her outstretched arms, her right hand holding the flowering rod, her left holding a particularly distinct 'model' of the abbey church; equally clear is the Christ Child with crossed nimbus seated upon her lap (see *art. cit.*, p. 140 and plate 1a).

Brasenose College also possesses a partially preserved example of the personal seal of Abbot Edward, 1136-1151/4, which is earlier than the first abbatial seal cited in my article (Brasenose College, Ivington deed 1; *Facsimiles of Early Charters in Oxford Muniment Rooms*, ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford, 1929), no. 55). Although the deed to which it is appended concerns Ivington and Yarpole in Herefordshire, and mentions the monks of Leominster, it was not entered in the Leominster Cartulary. The seal impression is fragmentary only, comprising perhaps about a third of the whole, and is very worn, but enough remains to show that the complete seal was pointed oval in shape and depicted the frontally standing figure of the abbot (though only the portion from his chest downwards survives), vested to the ankles and apparently holding in his right hand a long staff held diagonally across his body to his bottom left. The existence of this seal probably indicates that, at least from Edward onwards, the abbots

of Reading had their own personal seals, although the next known to survive is for Abbot Joseph, 1173-86 (*art. cit.*, p.141), and none has yet been found for any of the intervening abbots, Reginald, Roger and William I.

I am grateful to the Librarian of Brasenose College for kindly allowing me to inspect the deeds to which these seals are appended.