

Material Remains: Plantagenet Corpses, Burial Sites, and Memorials

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Introduction

The Middle Ages was an era in which peculiar significance was placed upon dead human bodies. Granted, this was most intensely felt in cases of the ‘holy dead’, those for whom it was anticipated that after a short period of time canonisation would follow hard upon the heels of death, such as the murdered Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket (d. 1170). The prompt response of Pope Alexander III, who canonised Becket in 1173, and the rapturous embrace of the cult of Saint Thomas, seen in the pilgrimage from Southwark to Canterbury immortalised in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, is a particularly clear example, especially when the gruesome details of the relic-taking from the martyr’s corpse are known.¹ Yet the bodies of royalty could, under certain circumstances, be revered in like fashion: a phenomenon such as the rapid growth of Gloucester Abbey (now Cathedral) as a pilgrimage site, due to the burial of Edward II in December 1327 and the lavish gifts that his son Edward III made to the church testifies to this (as does Richard II’s formal request to the Papacy that his

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¹ On 29 December 1170 four knights murdered Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, believing they did Henry II’s will. The crown of his head was severed (hence the name of the Corona Chapel in which he was buried), and monks collected the brains and blood, into which townsfolk dipped rags which they took away as relics. These were later soaked in water, which was drunk to cure a range of ailments. John R. Butler, *The Quest for Becket’s Bones: The Mystery of the Relics of St Thomas Becket of Canterbury* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 13-17.

Material Remains

great-grandfather be canonised).² This article considers the deaths and interments of a range of Plantagenets, as well as monuments erected to their memory (for example, the twelve beautiful sculpted Eleanor Crosses erected by Edward I upon the death of Eleanor of Castile, three of which survive to this day at Hardingstone, Geddington, and Waltham Cross).³ The often-curious afterlife of their physical remains is also investigated, looking at, among a range of phenomena: the death mask of Edward III (d. 1377), said to be the earliest European death mask; the remarkable account by Samuel Pepys of his thirty-sixth birthday, 23 February 1669, on which he embraced and kissed the corpse of Catherine de Valois, who died in 1437; and the recent discovery of the lost remains of Richard III, now reinterred in Leicester Cathedral in 2015.

The Holy Dead and the Royal Dead

In the late Roman world the Christian veneration of the holy dead emerged as distinctive and powerful. Ancient pagans were deeply discomfited by corpses and cemeteries typically were situated outside the walls of cities, so that death and its pollution were kept at a safe distance. By contrast, the cult of martyrs and saints involved “the digging up, the moving, the dismemberment – quite apart from much avid touching and kissing – of the bones of the dead, and, frequently, the placing of these in areas from which the dead had once been excluded.”⁴ The Christian dead were buried in the catacombs in which living Christians met, and when they emerged in the fourth century into the public space, the holy dead were interred in churches within city walls. Medieval European villages, towns, and cities were thus filled with churches containing the tombs of the cherished dead, from local protector figures to the formally canonised ranks of the saints of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. The saints acted as guardians of community, conduits to intercede with God, and role models in the pursuit of Christian virtue. Martyrdom was initially a powerful way to assert sanctity; the emperors of late Rome slaughtered Christians both for sport,

² Roy Martin Haines, *King Edward II: Edward of Caernarfon, His Life, His Reign, and Its Aftermath, 1284-1330* (Montreal, Kingston, London and Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), pp. 237-238.

³ John Zukowsky, ‘Montjoies and Eleanor Crosses Reconsidered’, *Gesta*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1974), pp. 39-44.

⁴ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 4.

and in an attempt to contain the rapid spread of the faith.⁵ However, in the early fifth century the Christian ideal shifted to living a holy life and dying in a state of grace, according to the model of Saint Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier from Pannonia who embraced a life of ascetic self-denial as bishop of Tours, for example.⁶

As Christianity was adopted by the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms kings and royal families assumed a prominent role as champions of true religion, founding convents and monasteries, and swelling the ranks of the saints as a result.⁷ Christianity changed considerably; the pacifist stance of Martin of Tours gave way to a warrior Christianity, in which Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic aristocrats retained their secular lifestyle and sought to have it sanctified by the church. In Anglo-Saxon England, an important new phenomenon was the attribution of holiness to royal figures that had been murdered or assassinated for secular motives. One of the best-known candidates is Edward the Martyr, who was killed on a visit to Ethelred, his half-brother in approximately 978 or 979. Historian David Rollason wryly observed:

that Edward owed his status as a saint to the manner of his death is clear from the fact that the author of the *Vita Oswaldi* [probably Byrhtferth of Ramsey, and written between 995 and 1005] attributes no personal virtues to him but writes only of the terror which he inspired in all and of his readiness to inflict blows, even on his companions.⁸

This development was important for later medieval ideas about saintliness and murdered kings, as was the general perception of specialness that was attached to aristocratic and royal families. Violent death in the case of such special people was a violation of the God-ordained social order, and was often accompanied by spontaneous acts of devotion on the part of the common people.

⁵ Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁶ Raymond Van Dam, 'Images of St Martin in Late Roman and Early Merovingian Gaul', *Viator*, vol. 19 (1988), pp. 1-28.

⁷ See Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1998) for details of Frankish saints such as (former Queen) Radegund of Poitiers, Anglo-Saxon saints including (Princess) Etheldreda of East Anglia, Scandinavian saints like (King) Olaf Haraldsson, and Irish royals including Columba of Iona.

⁸ David Rollason, 'The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, vol. 11 (1983), p. 2.

Material Remains

This popular piety, which manifested in pilgrimages to the tombs of the saints, in relic cults and miraculous tales, was often a significant factor in the canonisation of new saints. Thomas Becket was Archbishop of Canterbury and while alive had a reputation for piety; his murder resulted in him being canonised by Alexander III in 1173, very shortly after his death, and in a pilgrimage from the Tabard Inn in Southwark to Canterbury, which was immortalised in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.⁹ The blood relics of Becket were especially prized, and healing powers were attributed to them. Nicholas Vincent argued that the reasoning was that "in death as in life Thomas so imitated Christ that, just as the blood of Christ mixed with water leads to the nourishment of the soul, to drink the blood of Christ's servant Thomas, mixed with water, leads to the health of the body."¹⁰ This mixture of popular sentiment, belief in the specialness of royals, theological support for the cult of the saints, and near-exclusive focus of architecture and the arts on religious subject matter, created a heady context for the memorialisation of dead Plantagenets in high medieval England.

Tombs and Funerary Monuments

The Plantagenet dynasty of English monarchs traced its origin to Geoffrey, Count of Anjou (called 'Plantagenet' from the sprig of broom, botanical name *planta genista*, that he often sported on his helmet), who married Matilda of Normandy. Their son Henry II (1133-1189) became king of England in 1154 according to the terms of the Treaty of Wallingford, after the death of King Stephen.¹¹ His sons with Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard the Lionheart and John (often called Lackland or Softsword due to his lack of estates and martial prowess) reigned after him. The earliest Plantagenet rulers identified with the European continent rather than with England, and Henry II, Eleanor, and Richard I were all buried at the abbey of Fontevrault, founded by the spiritual teacher Robert d'Arbrissel (c. 1045-1115), in the Loire Valley. John (1166-1216), however, was buried near the shrine of Saint Wulfstan in Worcester Cathedral, and his son Henry III,

⁹ Robert E. Scully, 'The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation', *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 84, no. 4 (2000), p. 584.

¹⁰ Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 45.

¹¹ Richard Barber, *Henry Plantagenets* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), pp. 52-53.

who was devout, indissolubly linked the dynasty to Westminster Abbey, the Romanesque church built around the shrine of Saint (King) Edward the Confessor, which he lavishly rebuilt in the Gothic style, “as an ideologically charged image created to rival the powerful monarchical structures associated with the Capetian kings of France,”¹² in particular his brother-in-law, Saint Louis (Louis IX).

It was in this grand setting that the Plantagenet tradition of costly and imposing funerary monuments was inaugurated with Henry III’s own funeral and tomb. He died at the Palace of Westminster in November 1272, and was the recipient of an innovative funeral, being “the first monarch to be buried in a coffin (rather than the body being visible on a bier) with a wax effigy used in the procession.”¹³ He was temporarily laid to rest in the old grave of Edward the Confessor, a saint to whom he was devoted. Nineteen years later his heart was sent to Fontevrault to be interred with his ancestors, and his son Edward I built a Purbeck marble and porphyry tomb, on which was placed a fine gilt bronze effigy by William Torel (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Henry III gilt bronze tomb effigy by London goldsmith William Torel, Westminster Abbey.

An inscription in Norman French read: “Here lies Henry formerly King of England, Lord of Ireland and Duke of Aquitaine, son of King John

¹² Suzanne Lewis, ‘Henry III and the Gothic Rebuilding of Westminster Abbey: The Problematics of Context’, *Traditio*, vol. 50 (1995), p. 131.

¹³ Anon, ‘Henry III’, *Westminster Abbey: Faith at the Heart of the Nation* (2016), at <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/our-history/royals/henry-iii>. Accessed 13/12/2016.

Material Remains

formerly King of England, to whom God grant mercy. Amen.”¹⁴ The purpose of effigies may have been to keep alive the memory of the dead, and (as royals and saints celebrities of the era) to give their images an iconic form, evoking popular sentiment.

Edward I, an affectionate son and loving husband, was also responsible for a series of twelve crosses marking the resting places of the corpse of his wife Eleanor of Castile on its journey from Lincoln to London in 1290. Eleanor and Edward were married in 1254 when he was fifteen and she thirteen, and were crowned King and Queen in 1274. They had approximately sixteen children, of which six lived to adulthood, and were a devoted couple who were together whenever possible. Eleanor died at Harby, Nottinghamshire en route to meet Edward in the north of England. Edward took her body to be embalmed at the Gilbertine Priory of Saint Catherine, Lincoln. In the first instance of a triple burial recorded in England, her viscera were interred at Lincoln Cathedral and her heart was buried with that of her son Alfonso (d. 1284) at the Dominican Priory at Blackfriars, while after the funeral in December 1290, her body rested in a temporary grave while Edward I constructed a great marble tomb.¹⁵ Eleanor’s ‘Heart Tomb’ was destroyed in Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries, and Oliver Cromwell’s army destroyed the ‘Viscera Tomb’ during the English Civil War. These three tombs, along with the ‘Eleanor Crosses’ that Edward had erected between 1291 and 1294 at Lincoln, Grantham, Stamford, Geddington, Northampton, Stony Stratford, Woburn, Dunstable, St Albans, Waltham, Cheapside, and Charing, at that time a small village near Westminster, represent an enormous expense and testify to the importance of royal memorials. They are also evidence that Edward I continued his father Henry III’s interest in patronage of architecture and the arts. The Eleanor Crosses, of which three still stand (with Charing Cross a Victorian replica), were built by important masons including Richard of Crundale and John of Battle, and Edward I employed his father’s painter Walter of Durham to ornament chapels at Westminster Abbey (Figures 2-

¹⁴ Anon, ‘King Henry III (d. 1272)’, *Westminster Abbey: Collegiate Church of St Peter Westminster* (2016), at [http://www.churchmonumentsociety.org/London_Westminster.html#King_Henry_III_\(d._1272\)](http://www.churchmonumentsociety.org/London_Westminster.html#King_Henry_III_(d._1272)). Accessed 13/12/2016.

¹⁵ See Sara Cockerill, *Eleanor of Castile: The Shadow Queen* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2014).

4).¹⁶ The London master carpenter Thomas de Houghton worked on Eleanor of Castile's tomb for a number of years, too.¹⁷ The similarity of these royal monuments to shrines and tombs of saints cannot be underestimated. Eleanor's beauty and goodness were attested by the multiple elegant sculpted images of the queen found on the crosses, on Lincoln Cathedral (partnered by Edward I), and on her tomb. These images served to keep Eleanor's memory alive, and also as effective propaganda for the virtue and Godliness of the Plantagenet dynasty. Edward I mandated that two candles were to burn at Eleanor's tomb in Westminster for eternity, a devotional practice that recalled the veneration of the holy dead, and that ceased only with the English Reformation.¹⁸



Figure 2 – Geddington Eleanor Cross.

¹⁶ Michael Prestwich, *Edward I* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 118-119.

¹⁷ A. J. Taylor, 'Thomas de Houghton: A Royal Carpenter of the Later Thirteenth Century', *The Antiquaries Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1-2 (1950), pp. 28-33.

¹⁸ Ben Johnson, 'The Eleanor Crosses', *History Magazine* (2015), at <http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/The-Eleanor-Crosses>. Accessed 13/12/2016.

Material Remains

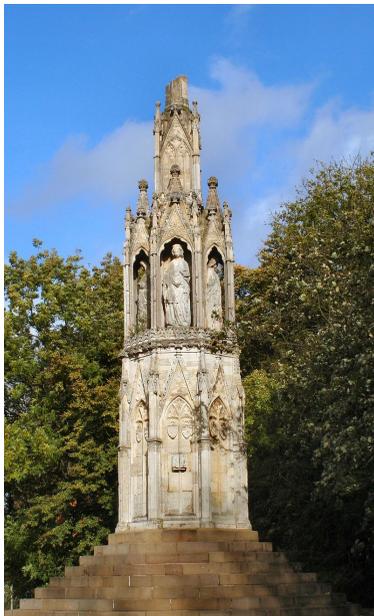


Figure 3 – Hardingstone (Northampton) Eleanor Cross.



Figure 4 – Waltham Eleanor Cross.

Martyrdom, Death Masks, Effigies and Portraits

Edward I died seventeen years after his beloved first wife, at Burgh-by-Sands in Cumbria, and was succeeded by his fourth son Edward II, who married Isabella of France in 1308. Edward II was a controversial monarch, and his marriage was troubled, in part due to his relationship (which arguably was sexual) with his ‘favourite’ Piers Gaveston (c. 1284-1312). After Gaveston’s execution Edward II adopted Hugh le Despenser the Younger as a favourite, and endured disgrace as the Scots under Robert the Bruce comprehensively defeated the English at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Isabella, a disappointed wife and queen, took Roger Mortimer as a lover and they returned to England from France in 1326 at the head of an army. Edward II’s reign ended; he fled to Wales, and Despenser was beheaded. Edward II was captured and made to hand the throne to his son, Edward III (1312-1377). He was then held prisoner at Kenilworth Castle, then was moved to Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire in April 1327. His death is a contested fact; the official version is that he was murdered on 21 September 1327 at the order of Isabella and Mortimer. Three months elapsed between this report and the burial of the king at Gloucester Abbey, which was not unusual for the era (as corpses often lay in state for the people to view), but which invites questions (Figure 5).¹⁹ These arise because in the 1970s

a French archivist found the text of the Fieschi letter, which purports to account for the movements of Edward II between 1326 and about 1335, [which] started a contentious – and... slow-moving – debate. Although some early twentieth-century Italian writers... pursued the idea that Edward II died in Italy, no serious scholarly contribution was made from a revisionist perspective until Cuttino and Lyman published an article in 1978. In this they pointed to a number of features of the Fieschi narrative which can be verified, and several aspects of the traditional narrative that are doubtful, and implied that they believe that the document was written in good faith... The revisionist camp has failed to answer how and why so much evidence for the death was created if Edward II escaped from Berkeley Castle, and the traditionalists have failed convincingly to answer the question of how and why the Fieschi letter (which is surprisingly detailed) came to be written or forged, and why Lord Berkeley claimed in 1330 not to have heard of the ex-king’s death in his custody.²⁰

¹⁹ Ian Mortimer, *Medieval Intrigue: Decoding Royal Conspiracies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 93.

²⁰ Ian Mortimer, ‘The Death of Edward II in Berkeley Castle’, *English Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 489 (2005), p. 1175.

Material Remains



Figure 5 – Tomb of Edward II, Gloucester Cathedral.

Revisionist historian Ian Mortimer (b. 1967) thinks the Fieschi Letter is genuine, whereas Roy Martin Haines (b. 1924) argues that it is deliberate propaganda in a campaign to have Edward II canonised on account of his being an anointed royal who was deposed (and murdered), rather in the manner of the Anglo-Saxon royals discussed above. The letter sketches an ‘afterlife’ for Edward II as a pious hermit, a ‘fact’ that of proven would advance the case for canonisation.

The case for Edward II’s martyrdom and posthumous canonisation is partly based on the spontaneous cult that sprang up after he was buried at Gloucester Abbey (now Cathedral), which was in no way discouraged by the monks. Edward III loved and honoured his father, and in 1330 moved against his mother and Mortimer, whom he executed at Tyburn on 29 November that year.²¹ There is no documentary proof that Edward III requested his father’s canonisation, but

the gifts that he bestowed on the abbey were certainly taken as official markers of royal patronage, and the visits to Gloucester that we know him to have undertaken in person (and arranged for his sons) suggests the cult was given some prominence at court. The absence of canonization petitions... before Richard II’s time is not, then, to be taken as necessarily marking the

²¹ Ian Mortimer, *The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III, Father of the English Nation* (London: Vintage, 2008 [2006]), pp. 83ff.

reluctance of Edward III's regime to be associated with the cult of Edward of Caernarfon.²²

Edward III's grandson, Richard II, another troubled and misunderstood monarch, made persistent and unavailing attempts to get his great-grandfather canonised, a campaign that makes sense in the light of his pursuit of the divine right of kings, a principle that rendered the murder of an anointed ruler especially repugnant, an act against God and against His holy representatives on earth.²³

Edward III had a stroke at Sheen Palace and died on 21 June 1377, and his coffin was taken by torchlit procession to Westminster Abbey, where he was buried beside his wife Philippa of Hainault (d. 1369) on 5 July. Philippa's effigy is important in that it expresses a new naturalism in the depiction of royals, which was still largely dominated by conventions. John Steane states that, "this is no idealized woman but the realistic portrayal of a plain, rather stout, middle-aged lady, whose alabaster image still succeeds in arousing our sympathies."²⁴ Edward III himself contributed an innovation in memorialising and imaging royal persons, though it is unclear whether he was the originator of the concept. The wooden effigy of the king, which was carried at his funeral, is in Westminster Abbey, and "the face (a plaster mask fixed to the wood, slightly distorted on the left side of the mouth) is thought to be taken from a death mask."²⁵ This is claimed to be the earliest death mask surviving from Europe, at the fountainhead of an important imaging tradition for monarchs, public figures, and saints alike.

The Plantagenet habit of investing in images of monarchs has thus far been discussed mainly in terms of monumental funerary sculpture. Other media, such as stained-glass windows, manuscript illustrations and portraits on coins also exist. However, Richard II (1367-1400), crowned at

²² W. M. Ormrod, 'Monarchy, Martyrdom, and Masculinity', in P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (eds), *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 179.

²³ Robert N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215-c.1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 149-150.

²⁴ John Steane, *The Archaeology of the Medieval English Monarchy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 15.

²⁵ Anon, 'Edward III and Philippa of Hainault', *Westminster Abbey: Faith at the Heart of the Nation* (2016), at <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/our-history/royals/edward-iii>. Accessed 13/12/2016.

Material Remains

ten when his grandfather Edward III died, had a particular interest in a European custom that was new to England, the commissioning of paintings on panels. Two survive from the last decade of his life, the Westminster Portrait (possibly an imagined coronation portrait as he is depicted face on as a young child – see Figure 6) and the Wilton Diptych, a complex religious artwork that he used as his personal altarpiece.²⁶



Figure 6 – The ‘Westminster Portrait’ of Richard II.

A third image is the tomb effigy commissioned in 1395 with that of his wife Anne of Bohemia (1366-1394). Richard II, an unpopular king whose reign was marked by turmoil (the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the seizure of Parliament by the Lords Appellant in 1387, and his bloody revenge against the Appellants ten years later), was ultimately deposed and murdered by or on the orders of his first cousin, Henry Bolingbroke (1366-1413), who

²⁶ Nigel Saul, ‘Richard II and the Vocabulary of Kingship’, *The English Historical Review*, vol. 110, no. 438 (1995), pp. 854-877. See also Dillian Gordon, Caroline M. Barron, Ashok Roy, and Martin Wyld, *Making and Meaning: The Wilton Diptych* (London: The National Gallery, 1993).

reigned as Henry IV.²⁷ It is impossible not to conclude that Richard II was interested in projecting a particular image of himself as king, as a pious and God-ordained monarch who merited reverence if not worship and had been treated with contempt by a court and Parliament that should have known better. His demand that courtiers treat him with absolute deference is noted by the author of the *Continuatio Eulogii* (Continuation of the Eulogium Historiarum), who stated that

on solemn festivals when by custom [Richard II] performed kingly rituals, he would order a throne to be prepared for him in his chamber on which he liked to sit ostentatiously from after dinner until vespers, talking to noone but watching everyone; and when his eye fell on anyone, regardless of rank, that person had to bend his knee towards the king...²⁸

Richard II has long been regarded as an incompetent king whose success as a teenager in dispersing the Peasants' Revolt in London gave him an inflated sense of his capability, whose isolation from *realpolitik* made him both irrelevant and vulnerable, and whose lack of an heir rendered him, ultimately, a king without a future. Revisionist historians have of late attempted to understand him as an English Renaissance prince, with a cultured court that looked to Europe.²⁹ His images thus may have functioned something like icons in the Orthodox Church, intended to evoke awe, reverence and veneration. In England, a country where conquest, usurpation and manipulation of the monarchy were commonplace since William of Normandy's accession to the throne in 1066, Richard II's views on the divine right of kings and the monarch's absolute power were radically out of step with political pragmatism, however harmonious they were with broader medieval ideas of the "king's two bodies," the body natural and the body politic.³⁰ Thus, despite his piety, royal anointment, and programme of dissemination lofty images of himself for the realm to revere, he was deposed and murdered, buried in obscurity in Kings Langley church, Hertfordshire, and was only interred with Anne of Bohemia in

²⁷ Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 104.

²⁸ Cited in John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), p. 133.

²⁹ Nigel Saul, 'The Kingship of Richard II', in Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (eds), *Richard II: The Art of Kingship* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 37-58.

³⁰ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1957]), pp. 24-41.

Material Remains

Westminster Abbey in 1413, when Henry V made symbolic amends for his father's usurpation.

Bodies, Archaeology, and Genetics

This section is focused on the physical remains of certain Plantagenets, and the 'afterlife' of these corpses. It has already been noted that it was customary for royal bodies to be eviscerated and embalmed. There were three main reasons for these practices: first, the preservation of physical remains can be traced back to mummification in Ancient Egypt, where it was linked to the ruler's attainment of immortality; second, the physical relics of saints were understood to be powerful in curative and protective ways, and the bodies of the monarchs, who in life were believed to be able to cure scrofula, or "the King's evil" simply by touch, might prove similarly powerful in death; and third, the practical but undeniable fact that bodies decomposed quickly if they were not embalmed, and it was generally understood that corpses were moved from the place of death to the church of interment as quickly as possible.³¹ Interest in the physical bodies of Plantagenets has been stimulated by the discovery of Richard III's remains in 2012, but many of the monarchs of the dynasty had been exhumed for various reasons over the centuries. For example, Edward I's tomb was opened on 2 May 1774 by the Dean of the Cathedral and a team of antiquarians. Michael Prestwich describes it thus:

The investigators seem to have been overawed by what they were doing, for although they pulled back the outer wrapper of the corpse, and removed the covering over the face, they did not carry out a full investigation of the remains. The corpse was evidently in excellent condition, the flesh shrunken but intact. The chin and lips were entire, but without any beard; and a sinking, or dip between the chin and under-lip, was very conspicuous. Both the lips were prominent; the nose short, as if shrunken; but the apertures of the nostrils were visible. There was an unusual fall, or cavity, on that part of the bridge of the nose, which separates the orbits of the eyes; and some globular substance, possibly the fleshy part of the eye-balls, was moveable in their sockets under the envelope. The corpse was richly dressed, with a red silk tunic, and an elaborately decorated stole. There was also a mantle of red satin, and the lower part of the body was covered with cloth of gold. In the right hand there was a scepter with a cross, in the left, one surmounted by a dove. On the head was an open crown. The only measurement taken proved that Edward was indeed a tall man, precisely six feet two inches in height.

³¹ Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 44.

The solemnity of the occasion was somewhat marred by the fact that it proved necessary that one noted antiquary present should undergo ‘a search for the embezzlement of a finger of the great Plantagenet’.³²

With Edward I, there was no intention of removing the corpse or doing any in-depth investigation, and medical and scientific knowledge were not sufficient to establish the presence of disease or other interesting facts. Yet the theft of a finger exhibits the existence of a more morbid desire to possess a souvenir of the royal corpse, or (relevant to this article) a quasi-relic from the ‘special’ dead.

The remarkable account by Samuel Pepys of his thirty-sixth birthday, 23 February 1669, on which he embraced and kissed the corpse of Catherine de Valois, suggests a less respectful attitude to the corpses of deceased royals. Catherine, the wife of Henry V and mother of Henry VI, had a brief tenure as Queen; she married Henry V in 1420 and was widowed at twenty-one on his death in 1422. The queen, unable to re-marry without the king’s consent, formed a relationship with Owen Tudor (it is often claimed they were married, though no evidence exists to prove this claim), with whom she had at least six children.³³ She died at Bermondsey Abbey and was buried in the Lady Chapel Westminster Abbey. An important relic of her funeral still exists; the painted wooden funeral effigy that adorned her coffin.³⁴ No tomb effigy was sculpted for Catherine. She was later moved from her tomb by Henry VII, who demolished the Lady Chapel to build a new chapel that bears his name, where he and his wife Elizabeth of York are buried.

Catherine was put in a temporary wooden tomb beside her husband Henry V, and for two centuries she was exhibited to visitors for a fee. Pepys wrote of meeting friends and taking them to the Abbey:

But I do find them staying at my tailor’s, the play not being to-day, and therefore I now took them to Westminster Abbey, and there did show them all the tombs very finely, having one with us alone, there being other company this day to see the tombs, it being Shrove Tuesday, and here we did see, by particular favour, the body of Queen Katherine of Valois; and I had the upper part of her body in my hands, and I did kiss her mouth,

³² Prestwich, *Edward I*, p. 566.

³³ Mary McGrigor, *The Sister Queens: Isabella and Catherine de Valois* (Stroud: History Press Limited, 2016).

³⁴ Philip Lindley, ‘The Funeral and Tomb Effigies of Queen Katherine of Valois and King Henry V’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 160, no. 1 (2007), pp. 165-177.

Material Remains

reflecting upon it that I did kiss a Queen, and that this was my birth-day, thirty-six years old, that I did first kiss a Queen. But here this man, who seems to understand well, tells me that the saying is not true that says she was never buried, for she was buried; only, when Henry the Seventh built his chapel, it was taken up and laid in this wooden coffin; but I did there see that, in it, the body was buried in a leaden one, which remains under the body to this day.³⁵

Pepys' account is clear that what made it worthwhile kissing the corpse was that when alive, Catherine de Valois had been a queen, the anointed spouse of a king, and was thus an example of the 'special' dead, contact with which was a privilege for ordinary living people in the seventeenth century.

In the twentieth century, the mysteries attendant upon the reign of Richard III (1452-1485), chiefly the absence of a grave for the monarch after he was killed in battle at Bosworth and the disappearance of his nephews Edward and Richard (the 'Princes in the Tower') in the summer of 1483, attracted renewed attention due to scientific advances and archaeological discoveries. In 1674 two skeletons found in the Tower of London were buried in an urn designed by Sir Christopher Wren in Westminster Abbey.³⁶ In 1933 George V allowed the exhumation of the skeletons, and a team of three, Lawrence Tanner MD, OBE (Westminster Abbey archivist), Professor William Wright (President of the Anatomical Society of Great Britain), and Dr George Northcroft (President of the Dental Association), examined them. It was concluded that:

these were the bones of two children, the eldest aged twelve to thirteen and the younger nine to eleven. The heights of the two children were calculated to be four feet nine and a half inches and four feet six and a half inches respectively, somewhat taller than their age estimates suggested... a large red stain on the skull of the elder child reaching from below the orbits to the angles of the lower jaw was consistent with death by suffocation, and that congenital missing teeth and certain bilateral Wormian bones (islands of bone) of unusual size and similar shape on both crania were evidence of consanguinity... Dr Northcroft, after an examination of the teeth (the most reliable method for determining age), was in agreement with Wright's findings. Both sides of the lower jaw of the elder child, presumed to be Edward V, exhibited extensive evidence of the bone disease, osteomyelitis, a chronic and in medieval times incurable condition.³⁷

³⁵ Samuel Pepys, *Diary of Samuel Pepys: Selected Passages*, edited by Richard le Gallienne (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2004 [1921]), p. 253.

³⁶ Anon, 'Edward V', *English Monarchs*, at http://www.englishmonarchs.co.uk/plantagenet_13.htm. Accessed 13/12/2016.

³⁷ Anon, 'Edward V', *English Monarchs*.

These conclusions have been interrogated, with doubt being cast on the red stain being evidence of suffocation, and ongoing refusal on the part of Elizabeth II and Westminster Abbey to permit further examination and DNA testing has made positive identification as Edward V and Richard, Duke of York impossible.

However, the discovery of the body of Anne Mowbray, who married the younger Prince, Richard of York on 15 January 1478 when she was five and he was four, made significant additional material available in 1964.³⁸ Anne was the daughter of John de Mowbray, the fourth Duke of Norfolk, and was a great heiress. When she died, aged eight, her estates were to go to her cousins, but Edward IV intervened and her husband Prince Richard became her heir. Richard III thus acquired the Dukedom of Norfolk and half the Mowbray estates. Anne was initially buried in Westminster Abbey's Lady Chapel, and her body was moved when Henry VII demolished it in 1502. She was re-buried in the crypt of the Minors of Saint Clare in Stepney. In 1964 the Victorian warehouses on the site of the long-gone church were being demolished, and workmen located Anne's lead coffin in the crypt. A Latin inscription confirmed her identity:

Here lies Anne, Duchess of York, daughter and heir of John, late Duke of Norfolk, Earl Marshal, Nottingham and Warenne, and Marshal of England, Lord of Mowbray, Segrave and Gower; late the wife of Richard, Duke of York, second son of the most illustrious prince Edward IV, King of England and France, and Lord of Ireland; who died at Greenwich on the 19th day of November. A.D. 1481 and in the twenty-first year of the reign of the said King.³⁹

Anne's body was taken to the Museum of London where it was examined. She was finally interred in Westminster Abbey on 31 May 1965. Importantly, Anne Mowbray's skull also displayed the congenital missing teeth observed in the putative bodies of the Princes in the Tower. As she was a cousin of Richard, her husband, despite the absence of DNA tests, this offers confirmatory evidence.

Without doubt the most remarkable find regarding Plantagenet bodies was the 2012 discovery of Richard III's remains. At the end of Richard III's brief reign, at the battle of Bosworth Field, Sir William

³⁸ Francis Celoria, 'Burials and Archaeology: A Survey of Attitudes to Research', *Folklore*, vol. 77, no. 3 (1966), pp. 161-183.

³⁹ Wendy Moorhen, 'Anne Mowbray in Life and in Death', *Ricardian Bulletin* (Spring 2005), pp. 24-26.

Material Remains

Stanley and his men shifted allegiance from the King to Henry Tudor, Stanley's step-nephew. This shifted the balance of power decisively. Richard's army was defeated; his corpse was stripped of its armour and taken to the Franciscan Priory of the Grey Friars, Leicester where it was exhibited for two days to demonstrate that the king was in fact dead. Richard III was interred in the Priory and Henry VII later erected a tombstone; it was destroyed when the Priory was dissolved in 1538.⁴⁰ In 1965 Leicester City Council moved into a building that was rumoured to be on the site of Grey Friars. In 2007 a council building was demolished and archaeologists began speculating about the possibility of identifying Richard's burial site. The excavation began on 25 August 2012, and in early 2013 the body that was recovered from the Council car park was identified as that of Richard III, after comparison of the features of the corpse with written and visual descriptions of the last Plantagenet king. The body was a man in his early to mid-30s with many injuries to the skull, jawbone, ribs and pelvis. DNA samples were compared and matched to two descendants of Richard's elder sister Anne of York, Wendy Duldig and Michael Ibsen.⁴¹ The long-cherished belief that calling Richard III as a hunchback was Tudor propaganda was overturned by the physical evidence; his spine manifested extreme scoliosis. Richard III was buried in Leicester Cathedral on 26 March 2015 (Figures 7-8).



Figure 7 – Leicester Cathedral.

⁴⁰ David Baldwin, 'King Richard's Grave in Leicester', *Transactions of the Leicester Archaeological and Historical Society*, vol. 60 (1986), p. 22.

⁴¹ Ian Sample, 'Richard III DNA Tests Uncover Evidence of Further Royal Scandal', *The Guardian*, at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/mar/25/richard-iii-dna-tests-uncover-evidence-of-further-royal-scandal>. Accessed 13/12/2016.



Figure 8 – Tomb of Richard III.

Conclusion

This brief survey of the material remains of a range of Plantagenet monarchs has argued that medieval royal bodies were often treated in the same way as the holy corpses of saints. Theological ideas regarding burial abounded; for example, the dead were expected to resurrect at the age of 33 (the supposed age of Christ when he was crucified). For example, Edward III when he buried his offspring Blanche of the Tower and William of Windsor instructed that the effigies be of well-grown children of the age of ten, though they had died as infants.⁴² The twentieth and twenty-first century interest in corpses and the information that new sciences such as DNA testing and forensic archaeology can supply is of necessity limited; the identity of the putative Princes in the Tower has been put on hold by Queen Elizabeth II's refusal to permit further testing, which illustrates the general principle that for free and disinterested investigation to take place the body must be found in a place that does not belong to the Church of England or the Royal family. Anne Mowbray and Richard III were both found on land that had belonged to the Church but passed from its control centuries ago.⁴³ Physical evidence has become important to the historical

⁴² Steane, *The Archaeology of the Medieval English Monarchy*, p. 15.

⁴³ Richard Buckley, Mathew Morris, Jo Appleby, Turi King, Deirdre O'Sullivan, and Lin Foxhall, "'The King in the Carpark': New Life on the Death and Burial of Richard III in the Grey Friars Church, Leicester in 1485', *Antiquity*, vol. 87 (2013), pp. 519-538.

Material Remains

record since the development of the new academic discipline of archaeology in the second half of the nineteenth century. Bodies in particular can tell us about disease, diet, battle wounds and medical treatments, and act to authenticate history for interested parties (which is somewhat akin to how relics of saints' bodies authenticated religion and the supernatural for medieval Christians).