

*Contributions to the Veneration of St. Eligius in Medieval England**

ISTVÁN PETROVICS



It can be stated without exaggeration that St. Eligius who was for a long time one of the most popular patron saints of medieval Europe, and whose feast was universally celebrated in western and north-western Europe, particularly in France and Flanders, is not today among the most well-known saints. His person and activity is often confused with that of St. Egidius/Aegidius (St. Giles), following from the simple fact that their Latin names resemble each other. Consequently, it is desirable, first, to refer briefly to the life of the latter. St. Egidius, whose feast-day is 1 September, was an abbot, said to have been born of illustrious Athenian parentage around the middle of the seventh century A. D. Having been touched by divine grace, as his legend says, he gave all his wealth to the poor and took ship for the west. After a long and exhausting voyage he landed at Marseilles. Having spent two years with St. Caesarius at Arles he withdrew to a dense forest near Nîmes. There he spent many years in the greatest solitude. He lived in a cave and his sole companion was a hind. One day the hind was discovered and pursued by a certain king of the Visigoths (Flavius or Wamba by name) who was hunting in the forest. Then, all of a sudden, the hind disappeared and took refuge with St. Giles in his cave. After a while one of the king's huntsmen shot an arrow at a gap into the bushes which sheltered the hermit's cave. Finally, when the king and his man had forced their way through the bushes they found Giles, wounded by the arrow, sitting with the hind between his knees. Having listened to the story of the injured hermit, Flavius begged his pardon, and the king – as compensation – wanted to press generous gifts upon Giles. The hermit refused all the gifts and asked the king to leave him alone. After this affair the king, deeply impressed by the behaviour of the hermit, often visited St. Giles, who eventually asked Flavius to devote his proffered alms to founding a monastery. King Flavius

* An earlier version of this paper was presented in Hungarian at the 1st Albion Conference on British History and Political Science held between 11–12 May 2001 in Debrecen.

agreed to do so, on condition that Giles would become the first abbot of the monastery. Since Giles did not protest this time, an abbey was soon built near the cave. Then, St. Giles went to Rome to obtain recognition from the pope for the monastery. The pope granted St. Giles and his monks several privileges and presented him with two carved doors of cedar-wood. Demonstrating his faith in divine providence St. Giles threw these doors into the Tiber. The doors sailed down the river, crossed the sea and sailed up the Rhône until finally they arrived at the saint's cave. In short, this is the story of the foundation of the famous monastery of Saint Gilles, located in Languedoc, France.¹

In contrast with Giles, Eligius – whose feastday falls on 1 December – was bishop of Noyon and Tournai, and died in 660 A. D., that is nearly half a century earlier than Egidius. The name of Eligius (Eloy/Eloi in French) derives from the Latin verb *eligo*. His name, apparently, refers to the fact that he was a chosen person. His birth and other events of his life are told by the *Vita Eligii episcopi Noviomagensis*. The *Vita* was long attributed to St. Audoenus (Dado), another holy man whom Eligius had met at the royal court of Dagobert I, and whose life was very similar to his own. Nevertheless, in the opinion of the majority of scholars the *Vita Eligii* was written, in fact, not by Audoenus but by a later monk of Noyon: consequently the author is referred to in recent literature as Pseudo-Audoenus.²

The *Vita* tells us that Eligius was a native of Limoges, born at Chaptelat probably around 558. His own name and those of his father, Eucherius, and his mother, Terrigia, show that he was of Roman-Gaulish descent. “By grace of divine prescience” – as his *Vita* continues – “he received the name Eligius, a fitting mirror of his mind. And as a foretaste of what he would do, or indeed what God would do through him, it is fitting to tell what happened before he was born. [...] For when the blessed man was still in his mother's womb, his genetrix had a vision ordained in this matter. She saw a splendid eagle wheeling above her bed crying out to her three times promising I don't know what. And when she awoke, terrified by the reverberating voice, she began to wonder much what the vision might mean. Meanwhile the hour of the birth approached and the mother was beginning to be endangered in the greatest pain. So they called a certain religious

¹ For St. Giles see A. Butler, *Lives of the Saints* (ed., rev., and supplemented by H. Thurston and D. Attwater. New York 1956, Vol. 3, 457–458; M. Zender-J. Wollasch, “Aegidius,” in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*. Band I, München–Zürich 1977, 176. For the monastery of Saint Gilles see W. S. Stoddard, “Saint-Gilles-du-Gard,” in W. W. Kibler-G. A. Zinn, eds., *Medieval France. An Encyclopedia*. New York 1995, 841–42.

² The most reliable text of the *Vita Eligii episcopi Noviomagensis* is available in B. Krusch, ed., *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptorum rerum Merovingicarum. Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici*. Tomus IV, Hannoverae et Lipsiae MDCCCCLII, (Unveränderter nachdruck 1977), 669–741. It was translated into English by J. A. McNamara. *Medieval Sourcebook: The Life of St. Eligius, 558–660*; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/eligius.htm>; See also A. Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, op. cit. vol. 4, 455–458; I. Petrovics, “Was There an Ethnic Background to the Veneration of St. Eligius in Hungary?” In: L. Löb-I. Petrovics-Gy. E. Szőnyi, eds. *Forms of Identity. Definitions and Changes*. Attila József University, Szeged, 1994, 77–87.

priest, a man of good repute, that he might pray for her. When he came to her, prophetic words soon seized him and he assured her: "Do not be afraid, mother, for the Lord has deigned to bestow a blessed birth upon you. He will be a holy man and chosen from all his people he will be called a great priest in the church of Christ."³

Eligius's father was an artisan, who recognizing his son's unusual talent for engraving, apprenticed him to the famous goldsmith Abbo, master of the mint at Limoges. Soon after his apprenticeship Eligius went to Neustria and became known to Bobbo, treasurer to Clotaire II in Paris. Once Clotaire II, on his treasurer's recommendation, commissioned Eligius to make a royal throne adorned with gold and precious stones. Eligius managed to make two thrones out of the gold given to him, which turned out to be the origin of his good fortune.⁴ The king admired his skill and honesty and, in addition to taking him into his own household, appointed Eligius master of the mint. Eligius developed a close friendship with Clotaire II and his reputation as a prominent goldsmith soon became widespread. His skill as a craftsman, his official position and his close relationship with the king made Eligius a very important person, whose soul and virtue were not contaminated by the corruption of the court. He was very generous to the poor, distributing large sums in alms to them, and ransomed a number of Roman, Gallic, Breton, Saxon and Moorish slaves. Nor should one ignore the fact that Eligius founded several churches and monasteries, for instance in Solognac, Noyon and Paris. After the death of Clotaire II in 629 his son and succes-

³ J. A. McNamara, *Medieval Sourcebook: The Life of St. Eligius*, op. cit. 1.

⁴ "Volebat enim rex sellam urbane auro gemmisque fabricare; sed non inveniebatur in eius palatio, qui huiusmodi opus, sicut mente conceperat, posset opere perficere. Cum sciret ergo praefatus regis thesaurarius Eligi industriam, coepit eum explorare, si quo modo opus optatum possit perficere, et cum facile id apud eum fieri intellexisset, ingressus ad principem, indicat ei invenisse se artificem industrium, qui disposito sine cunctamine adgrederetur eius opere. Tunc rex mente gratissima tradidit ei copiosam auri impensam, sed et ipse nihilominus tradidit Eligio; et ille accepto opere cum celeritate inchoavit atque cum diligentia celeriter consummavit. Denique quod ad unius opificii acceperat usum, ita ex ea duo composuit, ut incredibile foret, omnia ex eodem pondere fieri potuisset; nam absque ulla fraude vel unius etiam siliquae inminutione commisso sibi patravit opere, non ceterorum fraudolentiam sectans, non mordacis limae fragmine culpans, non foci edacem flammam incusans, sed omnia gemina fideliter complens, feliciter meriut felix remunerationem. Opus ergo perfectum defert protinus ad palatium traditque regi quam donaverat sellam, alteram penes se, quam gratuito fecerat, reservatam. Coepit autem princeps mirari simul et efferri tantam operis elegantiam, iussitque ilico fabro tribuere mercedem laboris dignam. Tunc Eligius, alteram sellam in medio prolatam: 'Quod superfuit', inquit 'ex auro ne negligens perderem, huic opere abtavi.'" B. Krusch, *Vita Eligii episcopi Noviomagensis*, op. cit. 672. The author of the *Vita* uses the Latin word sella for throne. It is quite strange that medieval writers translated this Latin word as 'saddle'. It can be stated with a high degree of probability that this might have been the origin of St. Eligius being regarded as a farrier and the patron of farriers. Cf. F. Arnold-Forster, *Studies in Church Dedications or England's Patron Saints*. 3 vols. London 1899, Vol. 3, 472.

sor, Dagobert I, appointed his father's friend as his own first counsellor. It is also worth remarking that Eligius was an excellent diplomat, who later, on a mission for Dagobert, managed to persuade Judicael, prince of the Bretons to accept the authority of Dagobert.

On the death of Dagobert I in 639, Eligius and his friend, Audoenus (Dado) fulfilled their desire to serve God as priests. They left the court and devoted themselves in seclusion to theological studies, eventually entering the priesthood. On the death of Acarius, bishop of Noyon-Tournai, on 13 May 640, Eligius was elected his successor. His election took place at almost the same time as Audoenus was made bishop of Rouen. The new bishops were consecrated together in Rouen on 13 May 641. The apostolic zeal of Eligius led him to convert the inhabitants of his diocese, most of whom were pagans. Though the task of converting the Flemish, Antwerpians, Frisians, Suevi, and the barbarian tribes along the coast was very difficult, Eligius persevered. Since Eligius looked after their sick and protected them from oppression, the barbarians finally relented and many of them were baptized by him. Eligius was a great organizer and a zealous apostle, reputed for his wisdom and kindness, and as good a bishop as he had been a layman.⁵

During the Middle Ages his relics were the object of special veneration. Although he was the patron saint of goldsmiths and metalworkers, coach drivers and farriers had also placed themselves under his protection. In Christian art he is generally represented in the garb of a bishop, with a crosier in his right hand and a miniature church of chased gold on the palm of his open left. Since Eligius was also the patron saint of farriers, he is represented in some cases with a horse's leg. Given the fact that most of his relics have come down to posterity from the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries, as the iconographic analysis carried out by Karin von Etdorf demonstrates, it is now evident that the veneration of St. Eligius reached its peak in the western part of Europe in the late Middle Ages.⁶

In an earlier work by us we have collected and enumerated the relics that prove the veneration of St. Eligius in medieval Hungary.⁷ These relics could be categorised as follows:

- I. Town seals.
- II. Patron saint of a parish church.
- III. A decoratively painted codex containing the mass of St. Eligius.

⁵ Cf. *Vita Eligii episcopi Noviomagensis*, op. cit.; A. Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, op. cit. 455–458.

⁶ *The Catholic Encyclopedia. An International work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline and History of the Catholic Church*. New York 1909, vol. 5, s. v. Eligius; M. Buchberger, ed., *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. Zweite, Neubearbeitete Auflage des Kirchlichen Handlexikons. Freiburg im Breisgau 1931, vol. 3, s. v. Eligius; *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, München–Zürich 1986, vol. 3, s. v. Eligius. See also K. von Etdorf, *Der Heilige Eligius und die Typen seiner Darstellung als Patron der Goldschmiede und Schmiede*. München 1956. (Unpublished PhD dissertation).

⁷ I. Petrovics, "Was There an Ethnic Background to the Veneration of St Eligius in Hungary?", op. cit.

- IV. Panel paintings on the altars of a variety of churches.
- V. Wooden statues.
- VI. An altar.
- VII. Seals belonging to the guilds of goldsmiths.

From the relics the following conclusions could be drawn: 1) The veneration of St. Eligius reached its peak in Hungary more or less in the same period as in Western Europe, that is in the late Middle Ages. However, it must be stressed that one should not overlook the fact that due to wars and other disasters many relics have perished. 2) Eligius was venerated in Hungary primarily as the patron saint of goldsmiths. 3) It is the guild seals that form the majority of the surviving relics. 4) Despite the fact, that Eligius was a very popular saint in Hungary, only one parish church was placed under his protection. This church stood in the town of Temesvár (today Timișoara in Romania). 5) The veneration of Eligius seems to have emerged in connection with the economic reforms launched by Charles I of Anjou, king of Hungary (1301–1342). Due to the mining and monetary reforms of Charles I, the role of goldsmiths and silversmiths had become increasingly significant. Consequently, Hungarian goldsmiths and silversmiths found themselves in the mainstream of European Gothic art.⁸

Unfortunately, at least at the moment, we cannot give a similarly accurate account about the veneration of St. Eligius in medieval England. This is due, primarily, to the fact that we have just started our research into this vast and exciting topic. However, one striking similarity has become apparent already in the very first phase of our investigation: in England, just like in Hungary, there existed only one church that was placed under the protection of St. Eligius in the Middle Ages. This contention is based on the research of Frances Arnold-Forster. This outstanding scholar, in his book of three volumes, entitled *Studies in Church Dedications or England's Patron Saints*, collected the names of patron saints that could be associated with medieval parish churches.⁹ When examining and analysing the names of patron saints, Arnold-Forster dedicated a separate chapter to those French bishops under whose protection a church stood in England. They are as follows: St. Denys, St. Julian, St. Lucian, St. Enurchus (Evortius), St. Cassion, St. Firmin, St. Martin of Tours, St. Britius, St. German, St. Remigius, St. Vedast, St. Vigor, St. Aubin, St. Lo (Lau), St. Medardus, St. Eloy, St. Ouen (Audoenus), St. Genesisius, St. Leodegarius, St. Lambert and St. Hubert. The term "French bishops" needs a little explanation: Arnold-Forster, for the sake of simplicity and convenience, uses the word French in a very wide sense, in stead of the more correct terms "Gallican" and "Frankish". We can agree with his argumentation, namely that with the exception of St. Lambert and St. Hubert, Bishops of Maastricht and Liege, the sees of the aforesaid bishops were all within the borders of modern France, and roughly speaking, their names were introduced into England

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81–87.

⁹ F. Arnold-Forster, *Studies in Church Dedications*, op. cit.

after the Conquest of 1066 through Norman channels.¹⁰ The above list shows, on the one hand, that the number of French bishops under whose protection a church had been placed in medieval England was 20, including Eligius and Audoenus, and, on the other, that St. Martin of Tours was the most popular French bishop in England. He, as a patron saint, can be associated with 160 churches in England.¹¹

The list also reveals that in contrast with Eligius to whom only one church was dedicated, Audoenus was the patron saint of three churches.¹² The only church that to date bears the name of Eligius is in Great Smeaton.¹³ Today this is a small place with a few hundred inhabitants only, located in the North Riding of Yorkshire. In the Middle Ages Great Smeaton belonged to the archdiocese of York, but when, in 1836, the bishopric of Ripon was established it became a part of the latter. It also should be mentioned that the dedication of the church of Great Smeaton preserved not the Latin but the French form (St. Eloy) of the name of Eligius. In the opinion of Frances Arnold-Forster in the twelfth century, or perhaps a little earlier, Great Smeaton was donated by one Hardwin des Escalliers, landlord of the place, to St. Mary's Abbey in York. Unfortunately, it cannot be decided who chose the dedication: the Norman noble or the Benedictine Abbey.¹⁴

Nevertheless, says Arnold-Forster, there are scattered traces of various forgotten dedications with the name of Eligius. This fact cautions us that originally not one but more churches might have been placed under the protection of St. Eligius. Let it suffice here to mention just a few examples: around the middle of the seventeenth century in the parish of Tottenham there stood a little chapel known as "The Offertory (i. e. chapel) of St. Loy" and close beside it was a well called "St. Loy's Well". Kingston-upon-Thames also had a chapel whose patron saint was St. Loy. The case of Weedon-Lois in Northamptonshire is also interesting: the existing church of this locality has SS. Mary and Peter as its patron saints, but it is very probable that originally the church had a different dedication. It should be recalled that there was in the parish a mineral spring known as "St. Loy's Well". This well provides us with the key to the name of the parish, which in the early nineteenth century was still written Weedon Loys. This name expresses very clearly the connection of the parish with St. Eligius and shows that the church was re-dedicated later.¹⁵

The next category of relics contain literary works. We used the expression in the plural, though, at the moment, we know only one work that can be associated with St. Eligius. However, it is, undoubtedly, of primary importance, since this is *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer's greatest work, designed about 1387,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 434-487.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 434.

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 434.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 257, 475.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 472, 475.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 475.

and written for the greater part in heroic couplets.¹⁶ The whole work, and the main Prologue in particular, is very interesting for the vivid picture it presents of contemporary life. A party of twenty-nine – or in other opinion thirty-one, including Chaucer himself – pilgrims are assembled at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, and they want to travel to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury. Among the pilgrims we find a prioress, Madame Eglentyne by name, who was well-educated, polite, and whose French was “after the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe”.¹⁷ This last statement certainly refers to the fact that Madame Eglentyne spoke the Norman or English version of the French language that was used in the royal court in England. Chaucer tells us concerning Madame Eglentyne that “Hir gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy” (Her greatest oath was but by Seinte Loy). This sentence proved to be a mystery for a long time, since nobody understood why the gentle lady had preferred to swear by St. Eligius rather than by any other saint. Finally, Professor Hales who wrote a work on Chaucer in the late nineteenth century discovered that on one occasion St. Eligius positively refused to take an oath demanded by his master, the king himself. St. Eligius at length convinced the king that, at least in his case, an oath was needless. St. Eligius’s *Vita* tells this story in the following way: “For some reason unknown to me, unless it were to obtain greater proof of his fidelity, one day at Rueil in the fields, in my presence, while I was living among the king’s boys, the king ordered some relics of saints brought to Eligius and ordered that he place his hands upon the sacred tokens and take an oath. But moved by divine intuition, he humbly refused all attempted inducements. And when he was more urgently pressed, he soon burst into anxious tears fearing to offend the king but trembling sevenfold to impose his hands on the sacred tokens. Then the king, feeling his fear, and simultaneously marvelling at the man’s great devotion, desisted from forcing him but sent him away with a kinder and gentler manner. His face beaming, he declared him more worthy to be believed than if he had given his oath many times.”¹⁸ Hence,

¹⁶ We used the electronically processed version of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in our study; <http://www.librarius.com/cantels.html>.

¹⁷ G. Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, op. cit., the main Prologue, lines 118–162. “And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,/After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,/For Frenssh of Parys was to hir unknowe.”

¹⁸ “Me presente, nescio quam ob causam, nisi quod facile datur intellegi fidelitatis obtento, dum apud regem puerulus habitarem, quadam die Rotoilo in agro accito rex Eligio quorum reliquias sanctorum praecipiebat ei, ut inpositione manuum sacris pignoribus donaret sacramentum; sed ille divino intuitu verens, recusare humiliter omni nisu temptabat. Cumque instantius id facere compelleretur, anxius valde coepit mox ubertim lacrimas profundere, metuens scilicet regem offendere septuplumque pavens sanctis pignoribus manus inponere. Intuens itaque rex eius timorem simulque mirans tantam viri devotionem, desiit ultra eum cogere, sed magis blande liniterque demulcens laetissimo illum vultu dimisit, pollicens se plus eum ex hoc iam crediturum, quam si multimoda tunc dedisset iuramenta.” *Vita Eligii episcopi Noviomagensis*, op. cit. 673.

stated Professor Hales, an oath by St. Loy would naturally be no oath at all, a simple protestation.¹⁹

The third category of St. Eligius's relics is represented by mural paintings. Let us refer first to the church of Broughton, Buckinghamshire. St. Eloy's figure can be discovered on the south wall of the nave together with that of St. Helena and St. George. The fifteenth century painting also shows blacksmith's tools.²⁰ Next, we would like to call the attention to the memorably intimate, unspoiled church of Slapton, Northamptonshire. The mural painting on the south wall of the south aisle preserved the rare subject of St. Eloy with a horse being shod. The figures were incised with firm lines before being coloured.²¹ The most famous of all mural paintings is the one that can be found on the wall of the church of Shorthampton, Oxfordshire. This small and humble church is of Norman origin, and it was dedicated to All Saints. The figure of St. Eligius can be seen on the south wall of the nave. The painting shows a strange episode from the life of St. Eligius: one day as he was shoeing a horse, the animal, for some reason, became restive and plunged violently. St. Eligius then quietly took off his leg at the first joint, nailed on the shoe and put the leg on again. The horse before the bishop seems to be standing in a sort of crate or wooden frame that gave him support while he was minus a leg. The figure of the horse and his master are fairly perfect on the wall-painting, but unfortunately St. Eligius has lost his head. It is supposed that the guild of farriers have had this picture painted in honour of their saint.²²

This is how we arrive at our next category of relics. All over Europe several bas-reliefs exist that have preserved the above mentioned incident from St. Eligius's legend. The most famous can be seen in the church of Or San Michele, Florence, Italy. In England there is a bas-relief at Durweston, Dorset, now placed over the south doorway. Surprisingly enough, as this bas-relief shows, the person bringing the horse to be shod is a lady of gay appearance and dressed in a fashionable way. The details of the forge and figures are quaint and very interesting.²³ St. Eloy is also represented on a Suffolk bas-relief and on several screens of East Anglia and Devon. Mention should be made of the bas-relief that exists at Win-

¹⁹ F. Arnold Forster, *Studies in Church Dedications*, op. cit. vol. 3, 474-475.

²⁰ A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings*, Oxford, 1963, 132. I am gratefully indebted to Prof. Andrew Ayton (Department of History, University of Hull, England) for his generous help in collecting the most important pieces of medieval English visual sources concerning St. Eligius.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 164; N. Pevsner, *Northamptonshire*, In: *The Buildings of England*, Harmondsworth, 1973, 2nd edn, (Revised by B. Cherry), 404.

²² A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings*, op. cit. 168; J. Sherwood-N. Pevsner, "Oxfordshire," in *The Buildings of England*. Harmondsworth, 1974; 763; P. M. Johnston, "Shorthampton Chapel and its Wall-Paintings," *The Archaeological Journal* 62 (1905) 170-171.

²³ *Ibid.*, 170-171; J. Newman-N. Pevsner, "Dorset," in *The Buildings of England*, Harmondsworth 1972, 191; *An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset*, Vol. III, *Central Dorset*, Part 1. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), 1970, plate 13.

canton church, Somerset, on which also it appears to be a fine lady that has brought the horse to be shod at St. Eloy's forge.²⁴

To sum up we can say that St. Eligius is a good example of a famous saint of antiquity whose cult attained its widest popular diffusion in the later Middle Ages. Despite the fact that in England only one ancient church was dedicated to him – to be more precise: we have unquestionable evidence only in one case – Eligius was a very well known saint. It is partly due to the situation that he was reputed both as an apostolic bishop and a distinguished craftsman.²⁵ The Norman Conquest of England, and consequent Anglo-Norman contacts also played an important role in the diffusion of his cult there. It is not by chance that the English dedications and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* preserved the French form of his name in preference to the formal Latin Eligius. Finally, and it also should be stressed: our research concerning the cult of St. Eligius in medieval Hungary and England prove that a true picture of the extent of his veneration cannot be given exclusively on the basis of the number of churches that were dedicated to the bishop of Noyon.

²⁴ P. M. Johnston, *Shorthampton Chapel and its Wall-Paintings*, op. cit. 171.

²⁵ D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. 2nd edn., Oxford 1988, 140–141.