PART FIVE

THE POPULAR CONTEXT

5.1. The “Pagan Hypothesis”

In recent decades scholars have primarily concentrated on the political dimension to the royal saints’ cults, more specifically their promotion by the secular and ecclesiastical authorities. This is the approach adopted, for instance, by Susan Ridyard, Alan Thacker and David Rollason in relation to the Anglo-Saxon cults, and by Carsten Breengaard, Erich Hoffmann and Tore Nyberg regarding the Scandinavian scene.1 From a variety of perspectives these scholars have highlighted the diverse roles of such cults in medieval society. Particular emphasis has been placed on the manner in which princely cults were promoted in order to bestow divine sanction on dynasties or separate branches of ruling houses. It has also been pointed out that the cults had the potential to enhance both the secular and the ecclesiastical power in relatively newly christianized lands.2 Finally it has been stressed that the literature on the royal saints was an ideal platform for ecclesiastics to promote “not just a model but a yardstick of kingly conduct and performance in office”.

If secular and ecclesiastical patronage was of pivotal importance in the establishment of the princely cults, the third factor, the role of the general population, is difficult to leave out of the equation. This aspect, however, constitutes a problem of considerable magnitude for although the sources may allow the historian to reconstruct, however inadequately, the involvement of regnum and sacerdotium in the establishment of such cults, they are at best vague when it comes to the participation of the population at large in the same process.

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3 Nelson 1973, pp. 43–44.
Not surprisingly therefore some scholars have tended to downplay the importance of this dimension or even ignore it altogether.⁴

Miracle accounts aside, on occasion the participation of ordinary people in the emergence of the princely cults is noted in the Scandinavian sources. Thus we are told that the people of Orkney spoke amongst themselves that Earl Magnús was a saint, while according to Snorri the Trønder were the first to believe in King Ólafí’s sanctity. Similarly, the clergy of Odense are said to have elevated the relics of the Danish king in response to a popular belief in the sanctity of Knud IV. Naturally, claims of this sort must be approached with a degree of caution for hagiographers were undoubtedly conscious that a cult needed to incorporate a popular dimension from the beginning.⁵ Still, it is noteworthy that in the case of the most blatantly “manufactured” dynastic cult, that of St Knud Lavard, the enthusiasm of ordinary people is conspicuous by its absence.

In the Middle Ages veneration of princely martyrs represents only one facet of the immensely popular phenomenon of martyrdom. As André Vauchez has pointed out the model of the holy sufferer, “remained the archetype of sainthood in the popular mind”.⁶ From the first centuries of Christianity the simple fact that someone met a violent end provided a seed from which a potential martyr-cult could grow. An illustrative case of this appears in Sulpicius Severus’ Life of St Martin of Tours, which he composed at the end of the fourth century. It tells that during one of the saint’s frequent pastoral excursions into the countryside, he came across people who considered a certain location holy because there a martyr had laid down his life. Inquiring into the case, St Martin discovered that the

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⁴ For instance, speaking of the Mercian princely cults, Alan Thacker confidently states that there “is no evidence that they stemmed from a royal or clerical response to popular devotion”. Thacker 1985, p. 20. See, however, Catherine Cubitt’s argument for the popular origins of some of the Anglo-Saxon princely cults, Cubitt 2000.

⁵ “The hagiographic texts depict the typical medieval story of a “popular” cult emerging from the grass roots. In this model the saint’s body lies unknown and neglected; it is safeguarded by God until it is found, having been revealed by miraculous signs; it is then buried with appropriate honors and, suitably enshrined, attracts the veneration of believers; miracles happen to “people”, who then report them to the authorities; initially disbelieving they are awe-struck, but ultimately praise God and officially recognise the saint’s holiness and standing with God. Of course, events may indeed have unfolded in just this way, but even if we are skeptical, there is no way of getting “behind” the sources”. The Hagiography of Kievan Rus’, p. xxviii. On the “reluctant bishop” topos see footnote no. 28 on pp. 75–76.