

SAINTS AND KINGS AT MEDIEVAL MELROSE ABBEY

The Museum in the Commendator's House at Melrose Abbey contains a large assortment of sculptured stones found during the clearing and excavation of the Abbey ruins in the 1920s.¹ One of the finest pieces of sculpture is also one of the most puzzling. It is part of a relief (l. 53 cm., h. 32 cm.) carved in pale buff sandstone, representing three draped figures seated and partly overlapping, the two in front grouped close to the knees and chest of the third slightly larger figure, who is seated between and behind the other two and rises a little above them, as if protecting and presiding over them (Pl. 1). The sculpture has been brutally battered, heads and arms having been smashed away, but it can still be admired as an elegant and distinctive work of art. The two foremost figures are slightly differentiated, the one on the left appearing to turn a little inwards, whereas the right figure is presented frontally. Both wear heavy mantles that are drawn forward to sweep in long sharply broken folds about their thighs and knees. The tunic of the central figure is smooth on the chest, and is then caught at the waist beneath a belt, forming straight incised pleats. His mantle is gathered over his knees, falling in deeply indented vertical folds. His mantle was held in place over the shoulders by a strap or cord, which still remains at the upper portion of the chest, its crisp angular loop echoing the broken folds of the drapery of the two other figures. These three intimate companions have a graceful courtly air, and the flavour of high life is enhanced by the presence of two dogs, hounds or lap-dogs, one seen sitting upright at the extreme left, and the other lying down with its paws on the knees of the right seated figure, its haunches on the bench on which its master (or mistress) is seated. The remains of curved edges to the composition, just beyond the dogs at the right and left, suggest that the whole group was bounded and boldly set off by a quatrefoil, of which only the left and right lobes partially survive.

This sculpture is unique, both in style and imagery, among the carvings preserved at Melrose. Apart from a few grotesques and decorative forms, the majority of the figure sculptures, dating mainly from the late Middle Ages, represent well-known saints with their symbols. The subject of the Melrose relief, on the other hand, is obscure, and distinctly secular. A striking parallel for this secular quality is found in a carved boss on the vault in the easternmost bay of the south aisle of Lincoln Cathedral's famous 'Angel Choir', which represents a smiling youth and a crowned queen seated side by side,

the queen patting a little dog that she cradles on her arm, while another perches on the bench beside her.²

The style of the Melrose sculpture suggests a date more or less contemporary with the Lincoln boss, that is late in the thirteenth century. The portraits of kings in the Scottish Great Seals of the period provide us with formal and stylistic analogies for the seated figures in the relief. The second Great Seal of King Alexander III, modelled on that of Henry III of England, shows the king sitting stiffly upright, his smooth tunic caught by a narrow belt at the waist, the mantle kept out of sight at the shoulders but drawn forward to swathe the thighs and knees, falling in deeply gouged folds between the legs. The king's left hand is placed on his breast, fingering a V-shaped cord that holds his mantle in position. King John Balliol's Great Seal is closely modelled on that of King Alexander and on its English prototype, but gives greater breadth and a broken three-cornered loop to the cord on the breast, a feature notably like the Melrose relief (Pl. 2). The first Great Seal of Robert the Bruce repeats the design of King John's, but King Robert's second Seal, issued very rapidly after his first, gives a different form to the royal image, based on French, not English, models, with trailing loose draperies and a slightly swaying pose not present in the trim upright figures in the Melrose relief.³

Although a clear general resemblance links the Melrose relief with the Scottish Great Seals immediately prior to the Second Seal of King Robert, the folds in the draperies in the relief are flatter and more angular than in the seals and the materials seems thicker. This same thickness and angularity are to be seen in the life-size tomb effigy of the Countess of Menteith at Inchmahome, dating probably to the 1290s.⁴ The diagonal drag of the draperies from the ankle of the right figure in the Melrose relief up to the knees, and the cascade of cloth spreading away from the leg outwards to the right, are familiar motifs around the turn of the century and early in the fourteenth century, for example in the Virgin enthroned in the Coronation scene in the great Vatican Cope, or in the figure of Christ in the initial to Psalm CIX in the Ormesby Psalter in Oxford.⁵ I shall return to the question of the date of the Melrose relief, after I have examined the problem of its subject, but for the moment we may accept as reasonable a date of around 1300. This is not a period which coincides with any large-scale building work at Melrose. The famous ruins of the abbey with their large crop of sculptured saints date from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The original twelfth-century church was extended with an elegant western narthex in the first half of the thirteenth century, and major portions of the domestic buildings, notably the chapter house, were erected about the same time. Donations were made to a building- or

repair-fund by Robert I, but nothing substantial seems to have been done in his reign or that of his successor.⁶ The circumstances that produced the relief, in a c. 1300 style, and with an overtly courtly theme, must have been specific and peculiar.

Unfortunately no record appears to survive about where precisely in the abbey ruins it was found. However, the fact that it was discovered within the precincts is sufficient evidence for its belonging to the fabric, and its artistic distinction strongly suggests that it must have been prominently displayed in a place of importance. The apparently quatrefoil format of the relief and the flat frontal pose of at least two of the figures suggest that it was not an architectural member like a boss but part of a proper sculptured relief viewed at eye-level, forming perhaps a frieze of scenes, since the quatrefoil, a familiar decorative device in the late thirteenth, early fourteenth centuries, is frequently employed to frame and unify sequences of narrative scenes in sculpture, painting, stained glass and embroidered textiles.

The Melrose relief seems to me likely to represent a definite subject, as recognizable by a contemporary spectator as, say, the old and the young king who sit side by side in the magnificent twelfth-century Kelso charter.⁷ The two foremost figures are clearly dependent upon the third larger figure who frames them. They are presumably the children or the descendants of the principal figure. The composition is reminiscent of devotional images of St. Anne, represented as a large figure on whose knees the Virgin is enthroned, holding in her turn the Christ Child, together forming a monumental effigy of three generations of sanctity. Alternatively, the proximity and dependence of the two foremost figures offer a rough parallel to Byzantine and, later, German coronation imagery, where the dominant figure of Christ or of some great ecclesiastic, stands between and above the monarchs whom he has elevated to power.⁸ The presence of the dogs in the Melrose relief introduces or confirms, as I have said, a secular element in the scene. If this is a biblical subject, such as Lot entertaining and being entertained by his daughters (Genesis 19), it is secularized in treatment well beyond the normal standards of 1300, though by the second half of the fourteenth century such courtly handling of biblical narratives was common enough, for example in the cycle of Job scenes in St. Stephen's Chapel in the Palace of Westminster.⁹ The Melrose relief seems unlikely to represent a scene from a Romance proper. I have compared it with the sculptured boss at Lincoln. A scene generally reflecting the charms of court life or illustrating some event in fashionable Romance literature is to be expected in the sumptuous decoration of a great secular cathedral like Lincoln. Although the Scottish aristocracy shared with their English and French contemporaries a taste for stories of Alexander

the Great or Tristan, such subjects would be out of place in a Cistercian church or chapter-house. By the early thirteenth century, pleasure in lavish artistic display had encroached very far upon the original austerity of the Order, but there were still definite limits about what subjects were thought fit for depiction within the walls of an abbey.

The early Cistercian statutes are firmly opposed to any show of sculpture and painting within the churches and other buildings of the Order.¹⁰ Such things were regarded by St. Bernard and his disciples as a distraction from the introspective spirituality of the monks. At the same time rich ornaments, vestments and vessels of gold and jewels were forbidden: '... all these are not required for practical needs but for the concupiscence of the eyes'.¹¹ The high opinion which lay society had of the merits of the Cistercians gave rise to a demand for burial within the churches of the Order. This was early established as a privilege extended only to kings, queens and bishops. In 1194 the General Chapter ordered that the stones covering the graves in the cloisters should all be flat to the ground, in part a practical measure, but involving also a total lack of embossed figurative sculpture. During the twelfth century the sepulchral monuments, even of notables, will have been restrained by the general mind of the Order on matters of art. The abbots of the Cistercian Order were by custom buried in the chapter-house. The dramatic tomb effigy of an apparently assassinated abbot that survives at the Cistercian Abbey of Dundrennan¹² dates from the late Middle Ages and even then is likely to have been exceptional, the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century tomb slabs that cover the floor of the Dundrennan chapter-house being inscribed but not sculptured with figure work. It is improbable, therefore, that the tombs of the abbots of Melrose in the twelfth century were sculptured or engraved with their effigies.

The most distinguished of these abbots was Waltheof, who died in 1159. He rapidly attained the status of a major saint. Miracles of healing took place at his tomb, as is recounted by his biographer Jocelin.¹³ In a useful survey of Jocelin's *Vita* the Rev. Dr. James Bulloch remarks that a familiar element in the narrative of these miracles is 'the placing of the afflicted part near to the sculptured image of the same part of Waltheof's body'.¹⁴ He visualizes an effigy of Waltheof as present in the chapter-house before 1171, when Jocelin records that a polished marble slab was ceremonially laid on the Saint's resting-place. When Jocelin's text refers to pious sufferers stretching themselves out on the grave or laying head or limbs beside the feet of the Saint, proximity to the incorrupt body within its sarcophagus rather than actual contact with a sculptured effigy should be inferred.¹⁵ Waltheof in his own day was a shining

example of the self-abnegation and austerity of his Order, and it seems improbable that the imbargo of the Order on artistic display should be broken in his case, at any rate during the twelfth century. Even the polished marble slab, put in place as an improvement on the presumably plain slab used before, is likely to have been unadorned other than by its own colour and texture. Just such a slab marks a grave in the choir of Melrose Abbey, probably that of William de Bondington, Bishop of Glasgow, who died in 1258, and a fragment of another similar slab is preserved in the Abbey Museum. The same vividly mottled fossil limestone was used in the mid-thirteenth century to form the massive base of the shrine of St. Margaret at Dunfermline. The unweathered beauty of this type of stone can be judged from the gleaming shafts of Frosterley marble which are a prominent feature of the east end of Durham Cathedral. Waltheof's tomb slab, although unlikely to be sculptured in 1171, was probably a little raised above the floor, since one pilgrim found support for his head upon it, before falling asleep and receiving his cure.¹⁶

Involvement in the expansion of agriculture and the textile trade, and steadily increasing wealth, distracted the Cistercian Order from its austerity towards the visual arts. Regulations were still passed in 1218 forbidding the use of coloured tiles on the floors of chapter-houses, but Melrose Abbey chapter-house was an outstanding example of the flouting of these rules.¹⁷ As extended to the east and given a new façade on the cloister around 1240, the chapter-house must have been a stately and colourful apartment. A motive for the beautification of the chapter-house must have been the devotion both of the Melrose community and of local and other leading lay people to St. Waltheof. The fame of Waltheof was assured by the existence of the full-scale *Vita* of Jocelin, crammed with anecdote and at the same time elevated in tone, which solemnly equates the body of St. Waltheof with that of St. Cuthbert of Durham as one of the great thaumaturgical relics of Britain, likening 'his virtues to precious stones, his body to a vase of solid gold'.

The Melrose Chronicle reports the opening of the grave in 1240, and some rearrangement of other abbots' remains took place, leaving St. Waltheof's grave isolated near the entrance of the chapter-house.¹⁸ The date 1240 may coincide with the erection of a proper shrine base and shrine, of the sort set up in the thirteenth century at Canterbury for St. Thomas, at Dunfermline for St. Margaret, and at Westminster for St. Edward the Confessor. In the 1921 excavations, five fragments of carved and polished local conglomerate stone, evidently bearing traces of gilding on a gesso ground, were found in or near the chapter-house. They are displayed in the Melrose Museum. They form portions of the upper and lower moulded edges of the

shrine base, and their principal feature is a series of quatrefoils, alternately blind and pierced. These quatrefoils are partly decorative but partly functional, the open ones allowing the faithful to reach in their hands to touch the coffin of the saint. The late Dr. James Richardson who pieced together the fragments of St. Waltheof's shrine base rightly saw analogies between it and the form of base drawn by a c. mid-thirteenth-century artist in the illustrated *Life* of St. Edward the Confessor, preserved in Cambridge University Library (Pl. 3). The shrine itself will have stood on top of the base, and will have taken the shape of a gabled sarcophagus of gilded metal. The erection of a shrine in the chapter-house, magnificent in design and resplendent with patterned and coloured tiles, was at once a response and a stimulus to the popularization of the cult. In the mid-thirteenth century the community at Reivaulx, the famous Cistercian monastery in Yorkshire, faced with the problem of popular devotion to the sainted Abbot William, gave partial access to the shrine by lodging it within the space of the north window of the chapter-house,¹⁹ where it could be seen and touched by lay-people without their intrusion into the chapter-house itself. At Melrose, however, free access was allowed to the shrine actually within the chapter-house. The early statutes of the Cistercian Order forbade women to enter the churches and building, of the Order, but at Melrose in 1241 a woman, Christiana Corbet,²⁰ was granted burial beside the tomb of St. Waltheof, and this presumably reflects a strong tradition of public access to the shrine-area.

It is in the context of the new and fashionable grandeur of the thirteenth-century Abbey of Melrose, with its handsome shrine of the saint whose virtues, visions and miracles must have been enthusiastically proclaimed by the Melrose monks for the edification of important visitors and patrons,²¹ that we might see a possible meaning of the relief sculpture with its three seated figures. Two alternative interpretations of this problematic sculpture suggest themselves. Its courtly imagery would be natural enough if we regard it as alluding in some way to St. Waltheof, either as a direct illustration of some event in his life, or as some more general illustration of his place in the royal family of Scotland. St. Waltheof was the son of King David I's wife Mathilda by her former marriage to Simon of Senlis, Earl of Huntingdon.²² By her marriage to King David she bore another son, Prince Henry. Henry predeceased his father David, but was himself the father of two kings, Malcolm and William. According to Jocelin, King David did not behave like a mere stepfather to Waltheof but like a father, and loved and nurtured him as if Waltheof were his own son.²³ It seems not impossible that our relief, showing a pair of smaller figures in elegant costumes seated on the knees of a larger figure, might represent in a flattering

and succinct form the closeness of Waltheof to the throne, set beside Prince Henry in equal esteem by King David, himself a revered saint, patron of monks. Or again the central figure might represent the Queen Mathilda with her two sons, Waltheof and Henry,²⁴ again emphasizing the aristocratic connections of the saint, an important consideration in the period which saw the apotheosis in High Gothic shrines and churches of the royal saints Margaret at Dunfermline and Edward at Westminster. Without pressing any specific subject-interpretation too far, it would seem reasonable to suppose that the little scene of court life in the Melrose relief illustrates no irrelevant Romance but highly relevant local hagiography. Scenes from the *Vita* might well be displayed on the shrine itself, or on some upper stage of the base (which is the case with the shrine base of St. Alban still extant in St. Albans Cathedral), or on some nearby skirting wall or enclosure. The quatrefoil that I have suggested was the original format of the Melrose relief echoes the blind and open quatrefoils on the shrine base of St. Waltheof. On the other hand the sculpture's quatrefoil is much larger than those on the base and would be visually unhappy if placed directly above them. Nor does the relief agree with the probable date of the shrine base, c. 1240. The relief, as we have seen, looks late thirteenth, very early fourteenth century in style, and should perhaps be regarded as an addition to the decoration of the chapter-house in some unrecorded embellishment of the shrine-area around 1300.

A second possible interpretation of the Melrose relief is suggested by the well-known attachment to Melrose of King Robert I. He was a liberal benefactor of the abbey, and is recorded as having expressed his special relation to it by bequeathing his heart for burial in the abbey. After being taken on Crusade to Spain by Sir James Douglas, the heart of King Robert seems to have been returned to Scotland and interred at Melrose. It is tempting to identify as Bruce's the heart burial discovered at the entrance of the chapter-house in 1921.²⁵ Wherever it rested in the abbey, the heart burial of King Robert was presumably marked by a monument, decorated with sculpture. The courtly imagery of the Melrose relief might be explained if it formed part of such a monument. If the history depicted on it is that of King Robert, then the central presiding figure might, for example, be interpreted as David, Earl of Huntingdon, the common ancestor from whom the Competitors for the throne of Scotland in 1296 traced their claims. In that case, however, the two youthful figures are not so easily interpreted. The sculpture's style, as I have suggested, is close to that of the Seal of King John Balliol and the first Great Seal of King Robert. The second Seal of Robert breaks radically with his first Seal in style and every particular of design. For lack of specifically dated sculp-

ture, and indeed for lack of sculpture, of the period, we cannot argue that the stylistic shift marked by the second Seal was conscious, and typical of all work done under the patronage of King Robert and his son. English art style was still a powerful force in Scotland in the fourteenth century, as is proved by the impressive fragment of a sculptured figure in Frosterley marble – the so-called William the Lion at Arbroath Abbey. The vigorous decorative handling of this sculpture, and above all the playful contrast between the scale of the figure itself and that of its diminutive clambering attendants, have parallels in the most sumptuous and mature East Anglian manuscripts and textiles. While the style of the Arbroath figure is of a highly sophisticated and progressive fourteenth-century kind, the Melrose relief falls more naturally into the c. 1300 period. If it comes from a monument erected some time after the death of King Robert I in 1329 then it was designed in a fine but rather backward-looking style.

The nature of the imagery of the Melrose relief makes it necessary to associate it either with the shrine and cult of St. Waltheof, the royally connected saint and abbot, or with his best-known royal devotee. I favour the former alternative, but the latter has the advantage of a definite royal interest in Melrose to explain the sculpture. Either way, and, quite apart from these speculations, in its own graceful and sensitive design, the Melrose relief is a remarkable and tantalizing survivor from a high moment in the history of Scottish medieval civilization.

NOTES

1. *Roxburghshire*, Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland, II (Edinburgh, 1956), 288-9.
2. C. J. P. Cave, *The Roof Bosses of Lincoln Minister*, Lincoln Minister Pamphlets, No. 3 (1949), 9 and pl. opp. 5.
3. For descriptions of these seals, see W. de G. Birch, *Catalogue of Seals in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, IV (London, 1895), 6-12; also J. H. Stevenson and M. Wood, *Scottish Heraldic Seals* (Glasgow, 1940), I, Public Seals, 5-7.
4. A. Geddes, 'A Unique Mediaeval Tomb at Inchmahome', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, LXXXIV (1949-50), 223 and pl. xxviii, 1.
5. M. Rickert, *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 2nd ed., 1965), pls. 142(B) and 130.
6. For the building history of Melrose Abbey, see Royal Commission Volume, 265-87.
7. Charter of 1159 on loan to the National Library of Scotland, reproduced in T. S. R. Boase, *English Art 1100-1216* (Oxford, 1953), pl. 50a.
8. See D. Talbot Rice, *Byzantine Art*, revised ed. (Harmondsworth, 1968), 445, pl. 413, and J. Baum, *German Cathedrals* (London, 1956), pl. 24.
9. See E. W. Tristram, *English Wallpainting in the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1955), 206-19.

10. *Statuta capitulorum generalium ordinis cisterciensis ab anno 1116 ad annum 1786* . . . ed. D. J.-M. Canivez, I, Louvain, 1933, passim.
11. See M. Schapiro, 'On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art', *Essays in Honor of A. K. Coomaraswamy* (London, 1947), 135 and note 8.
12. J. S. Richardson, *Dundrennan Abbey*, Official Guide, Ministry of Works (1947), 8.
13. 'Vita S. Waltheni abbatis', *Acta Sanctorum*, August, I; the author is Jocelin of Furness, c. 1210. For other material on Waltheof see H. Farmer, 'A letter of St. Waldef concerning a recent vision', *Studia Anselmiana*, for which see Rome - The City, Pontificium Institutum Sancti Anselmi, 43 (1958), 99-101; also O. Lehmann-Brockhaus, *Lateinische Schriftquellen zur Kunst in England, Wales und Schottland vom Jahre 901 bis zum Jahre 1307* (Munich, 1958-60), Vol. 5, 507.
14. J. P. B. Bulloch, 'Saint Waltheof', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 11 (1951-53), 128.
15. *Vita*, 274, ' . . . expandit et extendit se super tumbam, implorans auxilium'. *Vita*, 274, ' . . . tandem fatigatus, caput super tumbam circa pedes Sancti reclinans, somnum cepit'. *Vita*, 277, ' . . . ad Sancti tumbam accessit, preces profudit, tibiam et pedem languentes lapidi circa pedes Sancti supposuit . . . '
16. *Vita*, 276, ' . . . et prae lassitudine caput sepulchrum Sancti reclinavit'.
17. See J. S. Richardson, 'A Thirteenth-Century Tile Kiln at North Berwick, East Lothian, and Scottish Mediaeval Ornamental Floor Tiles', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, LXIII (1928-9), esp. 293-7.
18. *The Chronicle of Melrose*, facsimile, intr. A. O. and M. O. Anderson (London, 1936), 87; *Chronica de Mailros*, Bannatyne Club, No. 49 (Edinburgh, 1835), 151.
19. For St. William's shrine see Sir C. R. Peers, *Archaeological Journal*, LXXXVI (1929), 20ff.
20. See *Chronicle*, 89; *Chronica*, 153.
21. The Melrose chronicler was aware of the miracles at the shrine of Edmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, at the Cistercian Monastery of Pontigny, which were the envy of Europe and a standard of thaumaturgical wonders in the thirteenth century. Reference to St. Edmund in the Melrose chronicle occurs immediately beside the reference to the opening of St. Waltheof's tomb.
22. See also A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 to 1286*, II (Edinburgh, 1922), 145-52.
23. *Vita*, 252, 'Rex autem se illi, non vitricum, sed patrem exhibens, quasi propriam prolem dilexit et excoluit . . . '
24. Waltheof witnessed a charter of King David of 1124 x 1134 as 'son of the Queen'. The Chronicle of Melrose in 1148 refers to him as 'Waltheof the brother of Henry, Earl of the Northumbrians . . . '
25. J. S. Richardson and M. Wood, *Melrose Abbey, Roxburghshire*, Official Guide, (Edinburgh, Stationery Office, 1949), 19.

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PLATE 1 Relief sculpture, Melrose Abbey Museum



PLATE 2 Great Seal of King John Balliol

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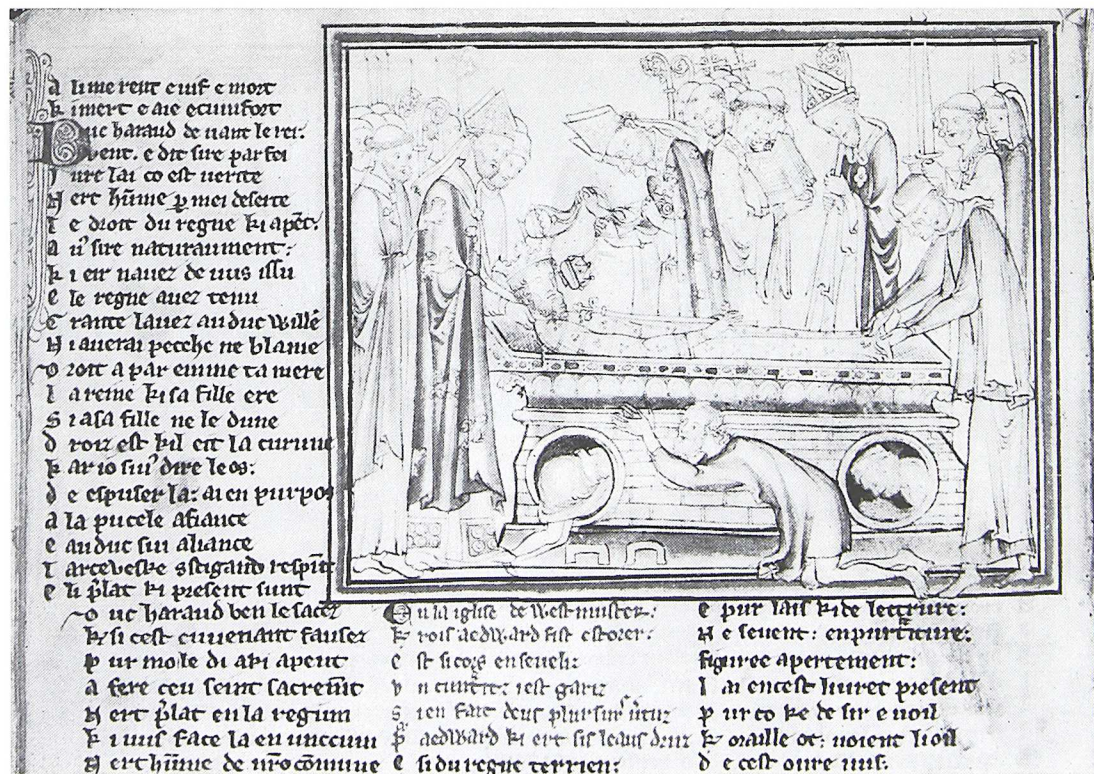


PLATE 3 Cambridge University Library Ms. Es. 3.59, f. 29^{ro}.

(Courtesy Cambridge University Library)