

Winchester Cathedral's forgotten relic of St Philip the apostle

The relic of an apostle was, in many parts of medieval Europe, a major attraction for pilgrims who would have travelled large distances to witness it and seek intercession from such an important saint. For centuries, pilgrims travelled across Europe to the tomb of the apostle James the Great at Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain. Others travelled to Rome which was the last resting place of St Peter and possibly of St Paul.

In Winchester, pilgrims came to the shrine of St Swithun, an important local saint, from the late tenth century until 1538 when the saint's silver shrine was taken away in parts by Henry VIII's commissioners. That is a story and an event that is both well-known and well-recorded. Yet, in the same cathedral, there was also the relic of the apostle, St Philip, which claimed to be the saint's foot 'which was covered in plate of gold and with stones (jewels)'.¹

This article investigates the story of St Philip's foot and what happened to it in 1538 and subsequently. This relic was first written about by local Catholic historian, the late Peter Bogan, in *Winchester Cathedral Record* 61 (1992). He traced it from Winchester to Bruges in Belgium and considered it likely to have gone to Spain.² Recent research has now confirmed that the relic was presented to Philip II of Spain in 1592 for his immense collection of relics at the Escorial monastery-palace near Madrid where it remained until the early nineteenth century.

Relics, that is saints' bones, fabric, related wood and even dust, held a 'fundamental place in the fabric of medieval life ... (and were) accepted as unquestioningly, in fact, as life itself'.³ For believers, the vast majority of medieval and later people, especially of the Roman Catholic tradition, relics worked miracles⁴ and proximity to them was an act of devout communication with a saint who was their chosen patron in heaven.

As to how this relic arrived in Winchester, there are no sources that explain when it arrived or where it had come from. It may have been acquired by a previous bishop, with

¹ John Strype, *Memorials of the Most Reverend Father in God, Thomas Cranmer, Sometime Lord Archbishop of Canterbury: Wherein the History of the Church and the Reformation of It, During the Primacy of the Said Archbishop, are Greatly Illustrated*, Volume, II. London: George Routledge, 1853, p. 710. [The Strype books were first published in 1694].

² Peter Bogan, "Dom Thomas Figg and the Foot of St Philip", *Winchester Cathedral Record* 61 (1992), p. 25.

³ Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra – Theft of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1990), p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

some faint suggestions pointing to the very wealthy and political powerful Bishop Henry of Blois (1129-1171) who amassed a great collection of art and probably commissioned the Winchester Bible. His most relevant gift, however, was a major relic of the Sicilian martyr, St Agatha, which came to Winchester shortly before his death.⁵ Bishop Henry also took a hand relic of St James away from Reading Abbey in 1136 until forced by Henry II to return it in 1155.⁶

As with many relics, there was a question about validity. There were many cases, notably wood from the True Cross of Calvary, in which there were over-abundant examples. In the case of St Philip, it is claimed that some of his relics have been at the Basilica dei Santi XII Apostoli in Rome since the sixth century (c. 560) when they were placed beneath the high altar with those of Saint James the Less, having been translated from Constantinople by Pope Pelagius I (d. 561).⁷ They are now kept in the crypt of this famous Rome church, having been unearthed during excavations in 1873. The most important relics found at the Basilica were fragments of the tibia (shinbone) and a foot of St Philip (including mummified soft tissue) and the femur (thighbone) of St James.⁸ Of course, St Philip had two feet, which may give credence to Winchester Cathedral gaining the other foot. Another relic of St Philip, part of his skull, was recorded at the Benedictine abbey of Reading in the early thirteenth century. It appears to have come to Europe as loot from the sack of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade (1204) and was given to the abbey by King John (1199-1216) along with a gold reliquary to hold and display it.⁹ Its fate is unknown.

Other relics of St Philip were recorded in Florence, where the city acquired one of the saint's arms in 1215.¹⁰ Perhaps the grandest example was the elaborate gold and silver reliquary 'containing the head of our lord St Philip', owned by the Duc de Berry, which was recorded in the inventory of the treasure of Notre Dame, Paris in 1416.¹¹

⁵ William Kynan-Wilson and John Munns, "Introduction: Approaches to Henry of Blois", in William Kynan-Wilson and John Munns (editors), *Henry of Blois: New Interpretations*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press (2021), p. 23.

⁶ Brian Taylor, "St James's Left Hand", *Winchester Cathedral Record*, Vol. 62 (1993), p. 24.

⁷ Kaare Lund Rasmussen et al, "Investigations of the relics and altar materials relating to the apostles St James and St Philip at the Basilica dei Santi XII Apostoli in Rome", *Heritage Science*, Vol. 9, No. 14 (2021).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Taylor, "St James's Left Hand", p. 23. Taylor draws this reference from *Reading Abbey Cartularies*, Fourth Series, London: Camden Society (1986), pp. 76, 190.

¹⁰ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press (2013), p. 123.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 281 and n. 207, p. 281.

The Winchester Cathedral relic of St Philip was listed in an audit 'as it was given in, by the Prior and Convent to [Thomas] Cromwell Secretary of State and the Kings Vicar General' in 1539.¹² Included in the audit was 'S. Swithens shrine, being of plate silver and gilt and garnished with stones'. It had been placed behind the high altar. In a section, titled Jewels of Gold, three shrines were listed as 'Items'. One of them was 'S. Philips foot, covered with plate of gold, and with stones'.¹³ The others included two unnamed 'Saints armes of plate with gold, garnished with stone'.¹⁴ More unnamed relics were listed in the Jewels of Silver section, including seven decorated tables with relics fixed on them, five saints' heads, and three saints' arms.¹⁵ There were also 'five little shrines' in the Lady Chapel.¹⁶

Since Peter Bogan's 1992 article was published, a complete new catalogue of the relics historically held at the Escorial has been published which reveals a more complete story of how the Benedictine monk, Thomas Figg, brought the relic from Winchester to the English recusant community in Bruges. It also confirms that the relic was received by Philip II of Spain. Titled *Las Reliquias de Real Monasterio del Escorial*, the first volume of more than 1000 pages includes a complete section, A. VI. 21, on the Spanish interest in the foot of St Philip.

Starting on 3 September 1585 in Bruges, the document trail continued until 3 January 1593 in Madrid when the relic was recorded as having been delivered to the Spanish king at Nájera in northern Spain in the previous autumn. It has eight testimonies and records of the relic's journey from Winchester in 1538 to its inclusion in Philip II's massive relic collection.

Thomas Figg¹⁷ entered the Priory of St Swithun as a youth. He had been appointed as one of three guardians of the monastery's relics, including the foot of St Philip for which he was responsible:

... the said foot of Saint Philip the Apostle was kept in a vestry, adorned with pure gold and precious stones ... once a year, namely on the day of St Philip [1 May], lying on a cushion of red leather, with two kindling torches, was carried solemnly and reverently to the high altar, to be venerated by the people ...¹⁸

¹² Strype, *Memorials*, p. 709. No relics were listed in audit of 'Church Goods of the Churches within the City of Winchester' led by Bishop John Ponet in 1552.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 710.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 711.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 712.

¹⁷ Thomas Figg is recorded as being seventy-six years old when giving testimony in Bruges in 1585, which gives him an approximate birth date of 1509. If he entered the priory in "his youth", say 1524 for mid-teens, it can be taken that he was a mature monk with important responsibilities when the events of 1538 took place.

¹⁸ Benito Mediavilla Martin and Jose Rodriguez Diez, *Las Reliquias de Real Monasterio del Escorial*, Volume I. Madrid: Ediciones Escorial (2004), p. 493. [Translated from Latin]

Figg's testimony described the violence of King Henry's Commissioners when they despoiled the Cathedral for its treasures. The building was closed to all the monks other than the vestryman who was forced to open chests of ornaments and the repository of jewels. He, presumably not Figg, 'saw them [the Commissioners' men] in a mad frenzy seizing, tearing and violently taking away the gold and silver; but throwing away the remains of saints to be burned on the ground'.¹⁹

This principal custodian of relics 'secretly took the said foot of Saint Philip, took it away and kept it faithfully until his death'.²⁰ After he died, the relic was passed to a layman, William Benyan, for safekeeping. Benyan left the foot to his wife Margaret in his will and she passed it to Thomas Figg which 'he received with joy and kept faithfully in a kind of box'.²¹ Figg fled from England 'for fear of heretics'²² and left it with 'a certain youth, Ambrose Edmons' with the purpose of Edmons sending the box to him in exile 'at first convenience'.²³ The box indirectly reached Figg in 1567, who was noted as living in the Benedictine monastery of St Andrew in Bruges, along with other English recusants.

Soon after, Figg was approached by Lady Ann or Anna Hungerford, sister to the widow of the Duke of Feria, for the relic, which by now was described as being adorned with silver. [The matter of rightful possession of the relic was later contested by Lady Hungerford. She claimed to have had custody of it for two years and to have arranged for a servant to bring it from England to safety in Flanders]. Soon after, a rebellion in Flanders against the Spanish (1572-76) led to the relic being placed for safety by Figg with an English Augustinian nun, Elisabet (or Isabel) Exmyo, who was living with Dominican nuns in Bruges.²⁴ In 1585, the elderly Thomas Figg retrieved the relic and gave it to Peter Aymerich (or Aymeric), the abbot of St Andrew's monastery, Bruges.

The history of the relic's path from Winchester in 1538 to Bruges in 1585 was thus recorded. Obtained over the next three years, there followed notarized statements by Dominican nuns vouchsafing Figg's story that the relic had been held by the now-dead English nun. Other English witnesses, the Carthusian William Gillard and the priest Valentine Tauler,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* Ambrose Edmons (Edmonds?) is said to have 'afterwards died in prison for his Catholic faith'.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 495-496.

supported Figg's personal piety and honesty.²⁵ Gillard also testified that many years before that Figg had shown the relic to Maurice Chase (Chauncy), the prior of the English Carthusians in exile.²⁶ He added that the nuns who had been caring for the relic had removed two toes from it, an omission which the elderly and ailing Thomas Figg had noticed on his deathbed when the 'holy foot' was brought to him.²⁷

Further depositions discussed the claim by Lady Hungerford (recorded as Hongonford in phonetic Latin), some of which supported her claim. One of her servants, Stephen Coyart, brought a more human touch to testimony when he described the relic as 'a bare foot, and that it appeared to be rotten, owing to some apparent blackness'.²⁸ He was the last recorded witness at hearings held at Bruges in 1585 and Namur in 1586 and 1588.

The final two documents in the Escorial series, A. VI. 21. 07 and 08, recorded the reception of the relic and its inclusion into Philip II's collection at the Escorial. The 07 document, signed by Abbot Peter Aymerich of Bruges, summarises the story of the relic's travel from Winchester [where Philip married Mary I in 1554] to its offering to the king at Nájera on 8 November 1592. He is fulsome in the reasoning for the gift:

Desiring therefore to satisfy the heart and will of the aforesaid priest, so that such a great treasure may be magnified by the faithful and Christian people, and may be more devoutly venerated and worshiped, we thought that it should never be handed down and given more rightly and securely, than to the most powerful and most Catholic Philip the Second, King of Spain; in no way doubting that he will take care to place that most holy foot in that place, where it will be religiously preserved and also honored, visited and worshiped by the faithful.²⁹

The relic was presented to Philip of Austria (the king's son and future Philip III), in the presence of the king and his daughter Isabella, archduchess of Austria. Its placement in the Escorial collection was recorded in document 08 signed by Martin de Idiáquez, who was secretary of state of (royal) council from 1587 and became a prince in 1597:

This very precious relic, like an incomparable treasure, was devoutly received by the same King, which was to be reverently deposited in the royal convent of the Divine Lawrence [the Escorial], which he himself had founded in a wonderful structure.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 499. Theft of saints' relics (or parts of them) was rife. See Geary, *Furta Sacra*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 505

Philip II had continued the kingly tradition, founded by Charlemagne, and followed by many devout rulers, of accumulating a relics collection. It was housed in the Escorial, a vast and austere royal palace-monastery dedicated to St Lawrence outside Madrid which was started in 1563 and completed in 1584. As soon as it began to take shape, Philip began searching for relics. The first to arrive, at great cost, was a tooth of St Lawrence from Montpellier. Later, he acquired a larger piece of St Lawrence from the John Lateran church in Rome.³⁰ He also wanted the bones of St James the Great transferred from Compostela to the Escorial but was rebuffed by the shrine's guardians.³¹ His next major expedition was to salvage relics from Protestant iconoclasm in Germany and the Low Countries. These were gathered at Cologne and shipped via Italy to Madrid, 'where they were greeted with ecstasy by Philip who was now seriously ill. His collection now numbered between seven and eight thousand relics'.³²



El Escorial monastery-palace

In his dying days spent in the Escorial, 'one of his few comforts was his relics. Every day part of the collection was brought to him ... He was meticulous in ensuring that each relic was properly tagged as if terrified he might misplace his veneration'. As Philip neared death, a specific relic, a rib of St Alban, was brought forward. It had a special indulgence from Pope Clement VIII that would release his soul from purgatory and was revealed at the king's last moments for maximum effectiveness.³³

Although Philip occasionally loaned relics to Spanish cities to reinforce civic pride, his collection, which was contained in 570 golden reliquaries, 'was never meant to be seen by his subjects, except on St Lawrence's feast day'. Access was very limited and during the rest of the

³⁰ Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press (2012), pp. 260-261.

³¹ Guy Lazure, "Possessing the Sacred: Monarchy and Identity in Philip II's Relic Collection at the Escorial", *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2007), p. 67.

³² Freeman, *Holy Bones*, p. 261

³³ *Ibid.*

year only members of the extended Habsburg royal family, princes, courtiers, bishops, diplomats and foreign dignitaries were allowed privileged access.³⁴

As for the relic of St Philip's foot, it remained in the Escorial collection until 1808 when the great monastery-palace was captured by Napoleon's troops during the Peninsular War. Sadly, it was lost at that time.³⁵ Thus ended another sixteenth century connection between Winchester Cathedral and Philip II of Spain.

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- Aerial photo of El Escorial (Public Domain)

St Philip the Apostle

Philip was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. He is listed in three Gospels (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14) along with the other apostles.³⁶ It is in John, however, that he gains more importance. That gospel recounts Philip's calling to be one of the Twelve (John 1:43.44.45.46.48). He was from the city of Bethsaida at the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me'. Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter (John 1: 43-44).

It is likely that he was a follower of John the Baptist as he was among those with the prophet when the latter nominated Jesus as the Lamb of God.³⁷ It was Philip who introduced

³⁴ Lazure, "Possessing the Sacred", p. 67.

³⁵ Personal communication, 26 August 2024, from Almudena Perez de Tudela, Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid.

³⁶ St Philip the Apostle is not to be confused with St Philip of Agira (d. 103), who has been called the 'apostle of the Sicilians', and the later St Philip Benizi (d. 1285) and St Philip Neri (d. 1595), both from Florence.

³⁷ Kaare Lund Rasmussen et al, "Investigations of the relics and altar materials relating to the apostles St James and St Philip at the Basilica dei Santi XII Apostoli in Rome", *Heritage Science*, Vol. 9, No. 14 (2021), p. 3.

Nathanael (sometimes identified with Bartholomew) to Jesus. Philip was probably among those attending the wedding at Cana which came soon after his first encounter with Jesus.

At what became known as the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus tests Philip (John 6:6) when he asks him how they would buy bread to all these people. Philip's reply was 'Six months wages would not buy enough bread for these people' (John 6:7), but Jesus took five barley loaves and two fish and fed the vast crowd, with enough left over to fill twelve baskets (John 6:8-13).

Later in John (12:21-22), the apostle was shown to be a link with the Greek community. Philip (*Phillippos*) bore a Greek name, possibly spoke their language as he was from Bethsaida which was a predominantly Greek area. With Andrew's assistance, he introduced some Greeks, who were celebrating Passover, to Jesus.

During the Last Supper, when Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father (John 14:8), he provides Jesus the opportunity, known as the Final Disclosure, to teach his disciples about the unity of the Father and the Son (John 14:9-14).

After the Crucifixion, Philip is listed among the disciples who were waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room (Acts 1:13). This is the last reference to Philip in the Bible, although he appears in the apocryphal *Acts of Philip*. His later life and death are the subject of debate as there are events which may have confused him with Philip the Evangelist, another early follower of Jesus who is mentioned in the book of Acts.

Later legends suggested that he had four virgin daughters, but this story also applied to Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21: 8-9). There is also confusion about the place and manner of his death, which may have been crucifixion upside down (alongside the apostle Bartholomew) in the Hellenic city of Hierapolis in Asia Minor (near Pamukkale in modern Turkey).³⁸ Earlier testimonies indicate that he wasn't a martyr but had preached the Gospel in Phrygia (west-central Anatolia) and had died at Hierapolis where he was buried.³⁹ His relics were later translated to Rome and placed in the Basilica dei Santi XII Apostoli (Basilica of the Twelve Apostles) in the sixth century during the reign of Pope Pelagius 1 (556-61).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁹ David Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of the Saints*, 5th edition, revised. London: Penguin (2011), p. 360; and Rasmussen *et al*, "Investigations", pp. 3-4.

In art, Philip is represented either by an inverted cross or by loaves of bread to recall his part in the feeding of the 5,000.⁴⁰ He is the patron saint of tailors and his festival date in the Book of Common Prayer is May 1 and on May 3 in the Roman Catholic calendar. There are 92 Church of England churches dedicated to St Philip, some jointly with St James. The most prominent is Birmingham Cathedral.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ Farmer, *Saints*, p. 360.

⁴¹ Data drawn from Church of England Saint dedications at www.blanchflower.org,