SAINT ELOI AND KING CLOTHAR

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A popular saint held somewhat the same position in the lives of the people of the Middle Ages as a household god in ancient Rome; for he was the protector of the hearth, the family, and the guild, and acted as intercessor before the heavenly throne. So intimately were the saints associated with the round of daily life that many legends about their deeds and characters arose, and these became part of the folklore of Europe. The wealth of legend centering about Saint Eloi, or Eligius, has caused one writer to surmise that some of the incidents are drawn from old folk tales about Wayland the Smith. Eloi, the patron saint of metalworkers, blacksmiths, and kindred trades, was known as “the artist without reproach.” Among the blacksmiths the story was told of how Christ gave him a lesson in humility. He apprenticed himself to Eloi in the guise of a humble workman, and when he was given an unruly horse to shoe, he cut off the legs one by one, shod them, and replaced them. Eloi, not to be outdone by his mysterious subordinate, tried the same thing, but without success, until Christ came to his rescue and replaced the legs.

Born near Limoges in A.D. 588, Saint Eloi attained prominence under Clothar II, King of the Franks, and became the king’s chief coiner and a person of great importance in the realm. Later he was treasurer to Clothar’s successor, the good King Dagobert. The close dependence of this king on the saint is the subject of the well-known French nursery rhyme that begins:

Le bon roi Dagobert
Avait sa culotte à l’envers.
Le grand Saint Eloi
Lui dit, “O mon roi,
Votre Majesté est mal culottée.”
“C’est vrai,” lui dit le roi,
“Je vais la remettre à l’endroit.”

Eventually the saint relinquished worldly fame and fortune to become Bishop of Noyon, although he continued to be chief coiner to Dagobert. In his labors to convert the heathen in his diocese he was the European counterpart of our American pioneer preachers and Jesuit explorers. He died after 650.

King Clothar and an attendant. Relief from a retable of painted oak. French, early xvi century. Gift of George Blumenthal, 1941. For the complete scene see page 144.

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angelic countenance, and a frank expression. According to one of the stories told about him, he was given just enough gold by Clothar to make a *sella regis*, or king’s throne. With it, by amazing skill and ingenuity, Eloi produced two. This episode is recounted in the hymn sung at matins on the saint’s feast day, December 1. It is also depicted in a relief given to the Metropolitan Museum by George Blumenthal in 1941. Here Clothar is shown, accompanied by an attendant. That the wood carver who made this relief followed a version of the story in which the Latin word *sella* was confused with the French word *selle* is indicated by another fragment of the same panel which shows the king receiving, not thrones, but two gold saddles (see the casts of the fragments illustrated below). This mistake also occurs in representations of the scene in at least four stained-glass windows and in Caxton’s translation of the story in *The Golden Legend*.

The Museum’s relief is one of at least nine parts of a dismantled retable that were kept for a number of years, until 1889, in the parish church of Recloses, a hamlet on the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau, where they were placed haphazardly around a modern statue of the Virgin and Child. Presumably the retable was made for the church and was dismantled in the eighteenth century, possibly at the time of the French Revolution. Before its acquisition by Mr. Blumenthal, our relief was in the collection of Philip and Rita Lydig of New York.

The name Jacques Ségogne and the date 1351 are said to be written on the back of various pieces of the retable, although they do not appear on ours. Since the writing is in an eighteenth-century hand, the name is probably that of a previous owner and not that of the sculptor, as has been supposed. The date is obviously wrong; for the piece is carved in the quiet, well-mannered style characteristic of French late Gothic sculpture and the king is portrayed in royal robes of Louis XII’s time (1498-1515).

Casts of fragments from a retable in the church at Recloses, France, showing King Clothar receiving two gold saddles from Saint Eloi. Height 21½ in.