

Abbess Athelitz (circa 1102)



Athelitz, created by The Mountbatten School

The case of Abbess Athelitz is rather intriguing. Much of our knowledge of the abbesses of Romsey Abbey is the result of extensive research undertaken by Henry G D Liveing at the dawn of the 20th century (and perhaps even at the end of the 19th) and published in 1906 in his book “Records of Romsey Abbey A. D. 907 – 1558”.

However, Athelitz is missing from the comprehensive list of abbesses in Liveing’s book and is completely devoid of any mention in any of the publication’s 342 pages – a search of the on-line copy of this book confirms this.

However, Diana K. Coldicott, in her 1989 publication Hampshire Nunneries, says “At Romsey . . . there was certainly an Abbess Athelitz around the turn of the [12th] century”. Her source is The Heads of Religious Houses by Knowles, Brooke & London first published in 1972 – not available to Liveing in 1906!

The earliest surviving letters to abbesses in Hampshire were written by Anselm, who held the office of Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109. These letters provide a glimpse of Romsey Abbey during Athelitz’s abbacy. The country was very unsettled following the Norman Conquest and there were two major revolts in the north, in which Waltheof, Earl of Northumbria, had been involved and had been captured. He was later decapitated on St Giles’ Hill in Winchester in 1076, the only high-ranking Saxon to be executed during William I’s reign. Many people believed him innocent and something of a cult had arisen over his body, especially at Croyland Abbey after the coffin was opened in 1092 and his body found to be intact, with the severed head miraculously re-joined to the trunk. Further miracles began to be reported and it would appear that Romsey had some sort of shrine to Waltheof, visited by pilgrims who considered him to be a martyr and a saint.

Abbess Athelitz was obviously somewhat concerned about this and wrote to her Bishop, William de Giffard, asking his advice. However, she then appears to have permitted the veneration of Waltheof to continue, and the Bishop wrote ‘to his dearest daughters, the Lady Abbess Athelitz and the nuns serving Christ under her’, saying ‘Did I not love you greatly I would not rebuke you strongly’ for ignoring his advice. He sent the Archdeacon of Winchester to the abbess to tell her that she and the nuns would be put under interdict unless they prevented any worship of the Earl, who had perhaps been their patron. Presumably they then did as requested!

Abbess Athelitz, as her name indicates, was presumably of French origin, although her dates in office are uncertain.

Reproduced from “Hampshire Nunneries” by Diana K Coldicott, published in 1989.