

who could only paint one style of male features, and that these paintings therefore relate as suggested, but the story of Freomund could give clues as to the subject of these paintings.

The life and death of Saint Freomund is regarded by many as fictional, since there are few references to him and there are differing versions of the story.¹⁰ Reputedly a relative of Offa, king of the now Christian Mercia and also a relative of East Anglian royalty and as such, a possible claimant to the throne, he lived as a hermit but was murdered by an apostate kinsman with the help of the Danes around A.D. 866. He was buried at Offchurch, not far from Leamington Spa, and his body later removed to Cropredy near Banbury, where miracles attested to his saintliness, according to one source. Certainly around this time assassination of potential candidates to the throne was not uncommon in the struggle for power. Following the assassination near Tamworth of King Aethelbald, the Bretwalda or senior king amongst the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, probably on the orders of Offa of Mercia, civil war erupted. This was followed by the exiling of Beornred, heir to Aethelbald, to Northumbria, where he too soon met an uncomfortable end by being burnt to death. Offa had by now seized power in an expanding Mercia. As Offa's power and prestige grew, both in Anglo-Saxon England and on the Continent as well, he visited the Pope in Rome in A.D. 797. By now he was powerful enough to order the beheading of Aethelberht, King of the East Angles. Following this execution the cult of Saint Aethelberht arose. It has been suggested politics at this time was inextricably linked with local and regional identity, but so too was religion and royalty. Up to the time of the Danish invasions, Mercia managed to produce more royal saints than any other English kingdom. Not all these saints became patron saints of local churches, but all who were the subject of hagiography, those with a written account of their lives, were commemorated in Mercian churches in liturgy or in legend. According to legend Freomund was of royal blood and died at the hands of an apostate and the pagan Danes, and performed a miracle as we shall see: almost certainly sufficient guarantee for sainthood in those blood thirsty times.¹¹

¹⁰ See Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, re Freomund, p.195.

¹¹ *In Search of the Dark Ages*, by M. Ward, pp.80-81 and p.98, concerning power struggles etc in Mercia; also *Saints in the Landscape*, by G. Jones, p.154-155, concerning royal Mercian saints.