

CONSTRUCTING A KING: WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY AND THE LIFE OF ÆTHELSTAN

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Abstract:

Gesta regum Anglorum, written by William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century, is a key source for the life of the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon king, Æthelstan (924–939). Contemporary narrative histories provide little detail relating to Æthelstan's kingship, and the account of *Gesta regum Anglorum* purports to grant an unparalleled insight into his life and reign. William's abbey at Malmesbury had a unique connection to Æthelstan—the Anglo-Saxon king had gifted the abbey lands and relics in life, and in death had been laid to rest there. Thus, two-centuries after his death, Malmesbury was perhaps the most likely region in England to retain an affection for Æthelstan. However, due to this regional affinity with the Anglo-Saxon king, William's narrative must be viewed with some suspicion, designed as it is to emphasise Æthelstan's connection to Malmesbury and eulogise the abbey's Anglo-Saxon benefactor. It is a complex literary construction that at times demonstrates an historian's concern for the veracity of sources and the integrity of their interpretation, while at others is wont to delve into hagiographical hyperbole. This paper undertakes to examine critically William's historiographical methodologies as identified within his life of Æthelstan, thereby exposing the intrinsic interrelation between source documents, local tradition, material history, and authorial invention in his construct of the Anglo-Saxon king.

Keywords:

Historiography, William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, Æthelstan, Anglo-Saxon history, Anglo-Saxon literature

Introduction

The abbeys of post-conquest England produced numerous histories and chronicles attempting to make sense of an Anglo-Saxon past alien to a rapidly evolving Anglo-Norman culture. It was in this milieu that William, a monk of Malmesbury Abbey, wrote *Gesta regum Anglorum* in the early twelfth century. William's history chronicles events between 449 and 1120 and provides the most significant extant account of the life of the Anglo-

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Saxon king Æthelstan (924–939). In this biography, William supplies unique information on the life and reign of Æthelstan not found in surviving sources predating *Gesta*; however, these innovative passages are not only distinguished for their content. Though William embedded this life of Æthelstan within his wider narrative and chronology of Anglo-Saxon history, these chapters are remarkable within the text for displaying intrinsically local historiographical influences. Though William was writing two centuries after Æthelstan's death, the king had a tangible connection with Malmesbury that would have been immediately accessible to the historian. Notably, and of primary importance, twelfth-century Malmesbury claimed its right to possession of certain territories as endowments from the tenth-century king. Perhaps the more immediate reminders of Æthelstan's favour to Malmesbury, however, were the relics the Anglo-Saxon king had gifted the abbey, and the tombs of Æthelstan and two of his royal cousins who had been interred there. As such, the material history of Æthelstan's kingship was likely more prevalent at Malmesbury than any other region in England, and the immediacy of the king's regional legacy in the form of land grants, relics, and tombs, encouraged the development of local oral traditions of Æthelstan's kingship and its relationship to Malmesbury. While William certainly claims to have accessed abbey charters and earlier chronicles to establish the provenance of the abbey's claims to lands and relics from the Anglo-Saxon king, William does not eschew these regional narratives in composing Æthelstan's biography. Thus, informed by local historical tradition, alongside clerical and narrative sources, and motivated to affirm the legitimacy of his abbey's grants from the king, William constructed a quasi-hagiographical narrative emphasising Æthelstan's link to Malmesbury, and eulogising his abbey's Anglo-Saxon benefactor.

However, it is not William's inspiration for writing his history of Æthelstan's reign that is the primary focus of this article, but rather the consideration of the methodologies that shaped its form. As such, this analysis will undertake to examine the sources that William drew upon for the biography—written, oral, and material—and investigate how William, as an historian, interpreted them.

It is fortunate to this endeavour that, what in part makes William's biography of Æthelstan of particular historical value, is the voice of the author. Throughout the narrative, William explicitly ties the kinds of

sources he is accessing—such as ‘popular songs,’ and ‘ancient volume[s]’ — to certain passages, giving his opinion of those sources and, at times, explaining how he intends to parse them, thereby exposing the framework of his historiographical processes.¹ In a broader context, this means that William’s passages on Æthelstan’s kingship as it related to Malmesbury Abbey provide a nuanced example of the transmission of late Anglo-Saxon history through the chronicles of post-conquest Anglo-Norman authors. However, some scepticism is necessary when interpreting these comments from William for, as his account drifts from established events to reported rumour to unsubstantiated hagiographical hyperbole, he is suspected of fabricating both his narrative and his evidence. It is with this suspicion in mind then that this article will critically examine William’s use of each identifiable category of source: narrative histories, oral histories, administrative records, and material history. William’s account of Æthelstan’s life may be a complex literary construction that demonstrates an intrinsic interrelation between source documents, local tradition, and material history, but this does not mean it is free of authorial invention.

William’s account of Æthelstan’s kingship has garnered significant scholarly attention, most notably from Rodney Thomson, Michael Lapidge, and Sarah Foot.² Each has approached the passages with a different focus: Thomson as a scholar of William of Malmesbury, Lapidge as a specialist in Anglo-Latin literature, and Sarah Foot as a biographer of Æthelstan. It is not surprising therefore to find that their analyses of William’s life of Æthelstan, each proposes different conclusions as to the purpose, sources, and veracity of the narrative put forth in *Gesta regum Anglorum*. Certainly, the existence or otherwise of textual sources that William claims to have accessed in authoring the Æthelstan narrative remains a matter open to debate. Historians are primarily divided as to the veracity of William’s statement

¹ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum* [= *G. Reg.*] 2.132 and 138 (R.A.B. Mynors, with R.M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom [eds and trans], *William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum. The History of the English Kings*, vol. 1, Oxford Medieval Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998], 210–211 and 224–225).

² S. Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 251–258; M. Lapidge, “Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of King Athelstan,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 10 (1981), 61–98; and R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, *William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum. The History of the English Kings*, vol. 2: *General Introduction and Commentary*, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 116–118.

that he was able to rely on ‘an ancient volume’—the content of which had since otherwise been lost—for the most innovative of his material.³ Lapidge proposes that the passages purported to rely upon this material are clear authorial fabrication, while Thomson and Foot both hold to the position that William’s source was written within living memory of Æthelstan’s reign, and adapted within *Gesta* for William’s audience.⁴ While this examination necessarily engages with the debate and assesses both sides of the argument, the historiographical controversy cannot be fully entered into without first some contextualisation of William’s subject, for this discussion is necessarily informed by historiography *and* history. This is to say that, while a primary focus is placed here upon William of Malmesbury as historian and his approach to the construction of *Gesta regum Anglorum*, it is the historical figure of Æthelstan that provides the lens for the analysis. An examination of the influences upon William’s portrayal of Æthelstan cannot be made, nor even understood, unless first grounded within contemporary accounts of Æthelstan’s reign and those events that can with some confidence be asserted to have occurred.

The Provenance of William’s Written Narrative Sources

Contemporary material providing historical narrative of Æthelstan’s reign is sparse, though a general timeline can be established from chronicle entries in the extant texts of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In 924 Æthelstan succeeded to the thrones of Mercia and Wessex, in 927 he conquered Scandinavian Northumbria by force, and in 934 he subjugated Scotland, claiming for himself the title *Rex totius Britanniae*.⁵ His dominance of Britain did not sit

³ *G. Reg.* 2.132 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.210–211).

⁴ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 253–255; Lapidge, “Some Latin Poems,” 62; and Thomson and Winterbottom, *The History of the English Kings*, 2.116–118. For further discussion supporting Lapidge’s argument see D.N. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), 142–143 and 146. For additional discussion supporting Thomson and Foot’s argument see M. Wood, “The Making of King Aethelstan’s Empire: An English Charlemagne?” in P. Wormald, D.A. Bullough, and R. Collins (eds), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 265–267.

⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [= *ASC*] A 924, D 926–934 (D. Whitelock [ed.], *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965), 68–70; for the inscription of *Rex totius Britanniae* see C.E. Blunt, “The Coinage of Athelstan, 924–939: A Survey,” *British Numismatic Journal* 44 (1974), 90–91.

well with the independently minded Scottish, Brythonic, and Scandinavian inhabitants of territories under his hegemony and, in 937, Æthelstan met a rebellious alliance of his northern enemies in a great battle in Brunanburh, emerging victorious.⁶ With his hegemony firmly established it can only be presumed that, granted the silence of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Æthelstan passed the subsequent three years in relative inactivity before dying in 940.⁷ These five events represent the extent of Æthelstan's sixteen year reign as narrated by *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Further, only six entries in *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mention Æthelstan by name throughout his kingship, and the detail provided within these entries vary depending upon the manuscript, with only the campaign in Scotland recounted in all extant texts.⁸ The majority of detailed entries for Æthelstan's reign within *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* manuscripts—and the most complete single narrative of his reign—reside in the D-text, thought to have been maintained in York, and events in the north dominate these records.⁹ If this northern oriented D-text is removed from consideration, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* narrative moves from the campaigns of Æthelstan's predecessor to those of his successor, Edmund (939–946), with only scant attention paid to Æthelstan's campaigns and his conquest of Northumbria entirely ignored. The detail of the D-text of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is thus critical to understanding Æthelstan's reign.

That the D-text retained a reasonably detailed, near-contemporary account of the events of Æthelstan's kingship—in contrast with the other *Chronicle* texts—is worth some consideration, as it facilitates an examination of the political milieu through which Æthelstan's reputation was interpreted. York of course, where the D-text was being maintained, was far from the intrigues of the southern kingdoms where, as William of Malmesbury details, the relationship between the independent-minded elites of Wessex and the Æthelstan-oriented Mercia was strained.¹⁰ This political isolation likely meant that the northern chronicler did not feel the same urgency as his southern counterparts to alter his narrative in line with

⁶ ASC A–D, 937 (Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 69–70).

⁷ ASC A–D, 940 (Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 70–71).

⁸ ASC A–F, 934 (Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 69).

⁹ Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, xv.

¹⁰ *G. Reg.* 2.131, 133, and 139 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.206–209, 210–213, and 224–227).

the political narrative. Indeed, Clare Downham has argued that the A–C-texts of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, maintained in the south, suffer from ‘political amnesia’ in their redaction; however, she suggests this was not as a result of political instability within Æthelstan’s reign, but as a result of his successor’s political mendacity.¹¹ It is a convincing argument based upon a careful reading of the silences within *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. There are no entries in any extant manuscript of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* between Æthelstan’s death in 940 and King Edmund’s own successful campaigns against the Scandinavian polities of northern England in 942.¹² That it was necessary for Edmund to campaign once more against the Anglo-Scandinavians, and that there is a historical lacuna between the two kings’ reigns, would seem to signify that, in the early years of his kingship, Edmund had lost control over Æthelstan’s northern hegemony. By expunging Æthelstan’s conquests in the north from the record, Edmund could gloss over his losses and give his own annexation of Northumbria the semblance of political and military innovation.¹³ Yet, with the D-text residing in a territory outside of Edmund’s control during his early reign, and with Æthelstan’s own achievements being of particular importance to Northumbria, it is of little surprise that the northern text did not subscribe to Edmund’s demands for history to be rewritten.

However, beyond the potential political reticence of the A–C-texts, or even the simple parochialism in the D-text, it is necessary that an historiographical analysis of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for Æthelstan’s reign consider the stability established in Wessex and English Mercia by his grandfather Alfred (871–899) and father Edward the Elder (899–924). Æthelstan’s victories and his claim to the title of *Rex totius Britanniae* must be understood to have been facilitated by the political, territorial, and military consolidation undertaken by the Wessex hegemony over the previous fifty years. Despite any latent tension among the governing elites regarding Æthelstan’s succession to the thrones of both Wessex and Mercia, the two southern kingdoms retained a political constancy.¹⁴ With this

¹¹ C. Downham, “The Chronology of the Last Scandinavian Kings of York, AD 937–954,” *Northern History* 40 (2003), 25–51, at 31–33.

¹² ASC C 942–946 (Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 71–72).

¹³ Downham, “Chronology of the Last Scandinavian Kings,” 31–33.

¹⁴ M. Wood, “‘Stand Strong against the Monsters’: Kingship and Learning in the Empire of King Æthelstan,” in P. Wormald and J.L. Nelson (eds), *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 199–120.

stability in mind, the explanation for the paucity of entries within the southern A–C-texts may be far simpler than Downham’s hypothesis that Edmund sought to rewrite the historical narrative. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the daily governance of stable territories was simply of little interest to the chroniclers. In the north, however, Æthelstan was militarily proactive and politically ascendant—the Anglo-Saxon king’s achievements were of great significance to the city of York and thus deemed worthy of record by the author of the D-text. Yet the influence of regional political interest does not preclude the north’s political isolation and the south’s political amnesia as influences upon the narrative formed from the combined texts of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The result is a confused and sparse narrative of a pivotal sixteen-year period in late Anglo-Saxon history, and it was an historiographical challenge that the Anglo-Norman historians also had to face.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was a significant source for William throughout *Gesta regum Anglorum*, with those passages relating to Æthelstan that follow the chronicle’s narrative augmented by local traditions and folklore.¹⁵ Chapter 131 is derived from conventional chronicle sources, and chapters 136–140 draw upon those alternative materials to enhance that narrative; Foot suggests that these chapters were conceived as a single biography and written at the same time.¹⁶ Yet William effectively provides two biographies of the Anglo-Saxon king, for chapters 132–135 represent an independent narrative—that drawn from the ‘ancient volume’. It is here where William’s account of Æthelstan’s life is at its most innovative, unique in its account of the king’s childhood and youth. In his 1992 essay on Æthelstan’s kingship, David Dumville repeatedly chides historians for lending any credence to these passages, or indeed allowing William any authority on the Æthelstan’s kingship.¹⁷ Yet despite his aggressive attacks upon William’s reliability—warning of the “dangerous pages” of *Gesta*, and declaring the influence of William upon the study of the Anglo-Saxon king as ‘unfortunate’—Dumville’s own study is

¹⁵ The long chapter, *G. Reg.* 2.131 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.206–209), most clearly parallels the text of *ASC*, while William notes his reliance upon local tradition to enhance his narrative at *G. Reg.* 2.132, 134.7, and 138 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.210–211, 216–217, and 224–225).

¹⁶ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 251–252.

¹⁷ Dumville, *Wessex and England*, 142, 163 (n. 148), and 168.

surprisingly lacking in any supporting evidence for his derision. It is Lapidge who provides the most comprehensive attack upon William's historical practices insofar as they relate to the material purported to originate from that ancient volume. Lapidge sets aside the prose portions of chapters 132–135—in so doing ignoring the implication of William's statement in his introduction that both verse *and* prose were drawn from his source text—and focuses his analysis on two verses quoted by William.¹⁸ Throughout this analysis, Lapidge asserts that historians' acceptance of the historical value of William's verses has been misplaced, “containing not a scrap of information which is not known from other sources.”¹⁹ Lapidge concentrates on the technical stylistic qualities of the meter and vocabulary used throughout the verses, and does argue convincingly that both are demonstrably derived from a time contemporary with William's authorship. Speaking most notably of the hexameter deployed in the poetry, Lapidge notes that “[t]o [his] knowledge there is no parallel for this practice in an Anglo-Latin poet of the tenth century,” thereby concluding that these verses are little more than twelfth-century fabrications with little by way of independent historical veracity.²⁰

However, in expecting William faithfully to quote his source without authorial intervention, Lapidge is quite possibly applying modern historiographical ideals and expectations anachronistically. His detailed study of William's Latin in these verses, and conclusion that it is contemporary with William's authorship in form, need not logically lead to a dismissal of the existence of the source William claimed to have accessed. William clearly indicates that, despite its difficult style, he was able to parse the dense Latin, and further states that the passages he reports from the document were rendered by him in ‘ordinary language’—that the Latin of the passage in question is morphologically twelfth-century can be read to support this claim.²¹ As Thomson has stated in regards to these chapters, “‘Ockham's Razor’ must surely apply”; though William claims to be quoting

¹⁸ Lapidge, “Some Latin Poems,” 61–71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

²¹ *G. Reg.* 2.132 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.210–211); and Foot, *Æthelstan*, 255–256.

the original poet, he gives no indication that by so doing he is setting aside his earlier commitment to render his source in plain language.²²

Indeed, that William dealt with his material as per his introduction, by supplying what Michael Wood has termed ‘twelfth-century translations’ of the ancient text, is the prevailing view of historians.²³ Wood notes that learning in the court of Æthelstan placed some importance upon the dense and ostentatious hermeneutic style of Latin that pervaded late Anglo-Saxon intellectual circles under the guidance of the future archbishop and saint, Dunstan.²⁴ To an Anglo-Norman author, it is likely that this difficult form of Latin composition would have created the effect of a ‘bombastic’ style, that ‘rambles beyond reason,’ where the writer “was at odds with the difficulty of his material,” which is how William describes this lost text.²⁵ With this in mind, Wood asserts that there seems little doubt that William was drawing on a now lost life of Æthelstan which was stylistically contextual with tenth-century Anglo-Latin prose.²⁶ Foot concludes likewise that, for both the prose and verse material in chapters 132–135, William was indeed drawing upon a single lost volume—though her caution to the historian that the extent William’s own ‘improvements’ will always remain an unknown quantity is well made.²⁷ It is thus logical to take William’s methodological statements at face value and understand that the Anglo-Norman historian was working with a now lost tenth-century volume and editing its contents in line with the expectations of his twelfth-century audience.

This discussion therefore takes the view that William did indeed have access to an unique tome for the purpose of authoring his passages on the life and kingship of Æthelstan. That such a text has been preserved through William within *Gesta* is of considerable importance. William alone among his contemporary Anglo-Norman historians provides an account of Æthelstan’s life prior to ascending the throne, and that narrative was drawn entirely from this unique source.²⁸ Through this lost book, William was able

²² *G. Reg.* 2.132 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.210–211); and Thomson and Winterbottom, *The History of the English Kings*, 2.116–118.

²³ Wood, “King Aethelstan’s Empire,” 265–266.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

²⁵ *G. Reg.* 2.132 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.210–211).

²⁶ Wood, “King Aethelstan’s Empire,” 265.

²⁷ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 257–258.

²⁸ *G. Reg.* 2.131–140 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.206–209).

to augment the sparse D-text narrative of Æthelstan's reign that otherwise dominates the historical record. While it remains true that either through political, regional, or social influence, genuine records of Æthelstan's kingship are few, William makes that reticence slightly less restraining.

A Tradition of Virtuous Kingship

Whatever its genesis, the silence of the contemporary historical record on the kingship of Æthelstan has left a legacy, and the king is one of the most poorly-served late Anglo-Saxon monarchs in the chronicles of the British Isles, both before and after the arrival of the Normans. Yet, while tenth-century narrative sources for Æthelstan's reign are scarce, there is evidence of an endemic tradition of Æthelstan's upstanding character as king. This tends to be represented by chronicle entries that extol his virtues without detailing any actions that demonstrate them. For example, the contemporary entries contained within *Annals of Ulster* mention Æthelstan twice. The first reference is to the Anglo-Saxon victory at Brunanburh, while the second reference is to Æthelstan's death, upon which he is declared to be "the pillar of the dignity of the western world."²⁹ Why he was deserving of the accolade is not explained by the annalist. John of Worcester, writing in the early twelfth century and contemporary with William of Malmesbury, twice refers to Æthelstan as "the most vigorous and glorious king," though otherwise follows the sparse narrative of the northern D-text of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, or a genetically related manuscript, with very little deviation.³⁰ *Estoire des Engleis* of Geffrei Gaimar is similarly dependent on the sparse *Chronicle* narrative, departing from the received narrative only insofar as Geffrei editorialises in order to extoll the comprehensive nature of the victory at Brunanburh.³¹ He does not dwell on the personal virtues of the Anglo-Saxon king. Henry of Huntingdon, also writing in the early twelfth century, describes Æthelstan as "splendidly famous in his deeds" while

²⁹ *Annála Uladh* 937.6 and 939.6 (S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill [eds and trans], *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131)* [Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983], 385–387).

³⁰ John of Worcester, *Chronicle* 925 and 940 (R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk [eds] and J. Bray and P. McGurk [trans], *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, vol. 2: *The Annals from 450–1066*, Oxford Medieval Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], 387).

³¹ G. Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis* 3513–3529 (I. Short [ed. and trans.], *Geffrei Gaimar: Estoire des Engleis/History of the English* [Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009], 193).

similarly going on to say little about them.³² Despite the loss of historical detail for Æthelstan's rule, all of these texts—which either predate or are near-contemporary with William's *Gesta regum Anglorum*—clearly display that there was an indigenous tradition of ideal kingship surrounding the Anglo-Saxon king that permeated the two centuries between his rule and the histories of the early Anglo-Norman historians. While these texts do not comprise an exhaustive list of chronicles that note the key events of Æthelstan's reign, they are certainly indicative of the treatment Æthelstan received in narrative history into the twelfth century.

After this period, narrative traditions regarding Æthelstan do begin to shift, and later historians, such as Roger of Wendover, who wrote in the early thirteenth century, expand the Æthelstan narrative and provide a more detailed account of his reign.³³ However, the additional material provided owes more to developing regional mythologies of the long-dead Anglo-Saxon king than to historical reality.³⁴ This is not to say that there is no historical value to these narratives, or some orally transmitted memory of an event at their core. Indeed, these developing regional mythologies, recorded at a point a century after *Gesta*, demonstrate the continued evolution of traditions surrounding Æthelstan's kingship. As noted above, William drew upon the oral traditions of his own community to construct his biography

³² Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum* 5.18–19 (D. Greenway [ed. and trans.], *Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon: Historia Anglorum (History of the English People)*, Oxford Medieval Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], 310–315).

³³ See for example Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 924–940 (J.A. Giles [ed. and trans.], *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History: Comprising The History of England from the Descent of the Saxons to A.D. 1235 Formerly Ascribed to Matthew Paris*, vol. 1 [London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849], 244–250); and John of Fordun, *Chronica gentes Scotorum* 21–23 (W. Skene [ed.], *John of Fordun's Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, The Historians of Scotland, vol. 4 [Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1872], 155–158).

³⁴ Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 929 (Giles, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 246–247), for example, recounts that during a visit to Glastonbury Æthelstan's company was divinely provided with an unlimited supply of mead, and that in 934 he “conceived the darkest hatred for his brother Eadwin,” and had the prince drowned at sea (Giles, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 247–248). The stories have little by way of contemporary correlation and, particularly in the case of the miracle in 929, are highly implausible, taking on an almost-hagiographic character. This is also reflected in Roger's account that the 926 annexation of Northumbria was foretold by “fiery rays” in the sky (Giles, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 245)—a direct borrowing of a literary flourish in the entry in *ASC* for that same year (Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 68–69). It is a passage eschewed by William.

of Æthelstan. In so doing, William preserved those narratives at a point in their evolution; however, it is important to remember that this textual record did not halt their ongoing oral transmission and development. For example, William and Roger both access a tradition of Æthelstan as a collector of relics which finds unique expression in each narrative—William describes how this pursuit benefited Malmesbury, Roger emphasises that Æthelstan sought relics throughout the kingdom.³⁵ Nonetheless, in Roger's most significant departures from *Gesta*, notably where Æthelstan's reputation is called into question, there is little evidence that Roger is operating from the same narrative traditions that run through William's life of Æthelstan.³⁶ There are likely two reasons for this. Firstly, Roger reports regionally specific narratives that likely evolved in isolation as traditions entirely independent of those in Malmesbury.³⁷ Secondly, Roger, writing a century after William, was recording narratives that may have altered beyond recognition within a society for which the Anglo-Saxon kings and culture were but a distant memory. This ongoing transmission and evolution of oral narrative regarding Æthelstan is a topic worthy of analysis; however, such narrative development as exemplified in Roger's history, due to its temporal and geographical remove from William and Malmesbury, sits outside the scope of this discussion.

History or Hagiography? William's Oral Narrative Sources

The unique character of William's account of Æthelstan's reign, when contrasted with those of his contemporaries John of Worcester, Geffrei Gaimar, and Henry of Huntingdon, is not entirely reliant on his access to a unique narrative history. Further augmenting the broad framework provided by *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, William relies on charters, material history, and he specifies that he draws upon oral traditions and popular

³⁵ *G. Reg.* 2.140 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.228–229); Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 929 (Giles, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 246–247); and Wood, 'Stand strong against the monsters,' 202.

³⁶ Significantly divergent traditions can be seen in the account of Æthelstan's drowned brother. William, *G. Reg.* 2.139. 3–5 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.226–227), describes the event as the result of a tragic misunderstanding after which Æthelstan undertook seven years' penance for his involvement, while Roger, *Flores historiarum* 929 (Giles, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 246–247), reports the death as the deliberate act of a hateful and vengeance-driven brother.

³⁷ As exemplified by the miracle at Glastonbury in n. 34 above.

songs.³⁸ It is through these latter, regional oral compositions, that the idea of Æthelstan as the archetype of moral kingship is seen entering William's narrative. Unlike his contemporary Anglo-Norman historians, William does not simply state that Æthelstan was a virtuous king—he specifies the deeds which fostered that reputation. However, that William is alone among his contemporaries in recording such detail does mean these recorded deeds must be interrogated, the reliability of the historian questioned, and his sources examined. For it is not only the prevalent tradition of virtuous kingship that becomes evident where William engages with oral tradition, but an apparent understanding, unique to Malmesbury, that Æthelstan was a king of saintly standing.

Included among the deeds that William attributes to Æthelstan are miraculous tales of dubious historical value which, while avoiding some of the excesses seen in later chronicles, are still clearly designed to demonstrate the king's favour in the sight of God.³⁹ That William at times drifts into hagiographical hyperbole can be attributed to the aforementioned indigenous tradition of ideal kingship as characterised by the 'popular songs' he refers to: regional oral narratives introduced a folkloric element into the tales of a king who had died two centuries before William put quill to vellum.⁴⁰ Indeed, at the beginning of the material redacted from the lost volume, William verifies that "there is a vigorous tradition in England that [this king] was the most law-abiding and best educated ruler they ever had."⁴¹ His most explicit acknowledgement of the rich oral traditions attached to the Malmesbury area, however, comes toward the end of those same passages: "Numerous reminders of Æthelstan are to be seen both in the city and in the country round, of which the native gives a better account by word of mouth than I can with my pen."⁴² It is a curiously dichotomous statement considered in the light of his introduction to chapters 139 and 140:

³⁸ *G. Reg.* 2.132, 134.7, and 138 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.210–211, 216–217, and 224–225); Foot, *Æthelstan*, 251–252; and R.M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1987), 15–16.

³⁹ See for example: *G. Reg.* 2.131.7 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.208–209), in which Æthelstan is miraculously granted a new sword in the middle of battle.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.138 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.224–225).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.132 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.210–211).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.134.7 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.216–217).

What I have written of the king so far is perfectly trustworthy; what follows I have learnt more from popular songs which have suffered in transmission than from scholarly books written for the information of posterity.⁴³

William is right to be dubious about the material records in chapter 139. The two redemption narratives presented conform to folkloric archetypes. The first tells of Æthelstan's humble beginnings and bastard origins, rising to obtain the kingship; the second of his erroneous execution of a supposedly treacherous brother, and Æthelstan's self-imposed penance for the crime.⁴⁴ There is little reason to doubt that these were indeed tales being told throughout the Malmesbury region and further afield, and there is little, in what records we do have, that can confirm either narrative. However, while at first glance it seems that William is performing the historian's duty in indicating the problematic nature of his sources, his statement also aids his ultimate aim of eulogising the king. William takes two existing negative rumours about Æthelstan, ensures to record them as tales of redemption and remorse, while also casting doubt upon any legitimacy they may have. When considered in this light, the seemingly self-deprecating comment that the "native gives a better account by word of mouth than I can with my pen," becomes less problematic—it is a devious statement that allows William to avoid reporting those 'word of mouth' accounts.⁴⁵ Though clearly drawing upon oral tradition where he deems it necessary and can control its effect, William implies a distrust for such accounts which inevitably 'suffer in transmission'.

It must then be considered that the material that is either legendary or hagiographical in nature need have no other provenance than William's imagination and motivations.⁴⁶ Certainly, beyond any desire as an historian to record local tradition, William had incentive to eulogise the royal benefactor interred in his abbey. The result is a narrative that is at once detailed, yet also contains testimony to events that are not otherwise verifiable. Such testimony is necessarily suspect, yet cannot be entirely discounted. William at least provides detail that could lend credence to the otherwise vague tradition of Æthelstan as a paradigm of virtuous kingship;

⁴³ Ibid., 2.138.2 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.224–225).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2.139 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.224–227).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.138.2 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.224–225).

⁴⁶ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 251–252.

though it is also true that William simply might have been leveraging that tradition to align Æthelstan with the cults of royal saints. In many senses, all the elements for the development of a royal cult were present at Malmesbury: the king's tomb, the material evidence of his patronage, and a hagiographer in William who was willing to extol Æthelstan's virtues in a *uita*.

Anglo-Saxon England had a rich tradition of royal saints that Anglo-Norman writers exploited, creating hagiographies that benefitted the cults associated with specific ecclesiastical institutions. For example, the twelfth-century *Passio S. Æthelberhti*, which records the martyrdom of King Æthelberht of East Anglia (c. 779–794), was written in Hereford to accompany the cult associated with the king's tomb in Hereford Cathedral.⁴⁷ In turn, *Vita et miracula S. Kenelmi*, also written in the twelfth century, recounts the martyrdom of Kenelm of Mercia (c. 819–disputed) and is intrinsically linked to his cult in Winchcombe.⁴⁸ In both cases, the textual recording of the hagiographies was near-contemporaneous with William's histories, and places any effort by William to portray Æthelstan as a regional royal saint within an Anglo-Norman historiographical trend. However, Æthelstan's life cannot be seen as parallel to that of either Kenelm or Æthelberht. Both were young men, lacking in temporal agency within their own kingship, who met a martyr's fate with a divinely granted alacrity. It is a framework prevalent among Anglo-Saxon royal saints, seen also in the *uitae* of Edmund the Martyr (c. 855–869), and Edward the Martyr (975–978). Æthelstan, in contrast, was a conqueror, a warrior-king, and a patron who certainly had full control of his throne. This meant that, while the Anglo-Saxon king was in a better position than the saintly boy-kings to gift land and resources to institutions like Malmesbury, his narrative did not fit the mould of a royal saint. A parallel may be seen in King Offa of Mercia, the founder of St Albans' Abbey. In *Vitae duorum Offarum*, authored at St Albans and written in the tradition of hagiography, Offa is portrayed as a

⁴⁷ *Passio S. Æthelberhti* (M.R. James, "Two Lives of St. Ethelbert, King and Martyr," *English Historical Review* 32 [1917], 236–241); and A. Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midlands History* 10 (1985), 1–25, at 16–17.

⁴⁸ *Vita et miracula S. Kenelmi* (R.C. Love [ed. and trans.], *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives: Vita S. Birini, Vita et Miracula S. Kenelmi, Vita S. Rumwoldi*, Oxford Medieval Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], 50–89; and Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries," 8.

king whose temporal authority was outstripped only by his piety.⁴⁹ Here the *uitae* are performing a similar function for Offa as William's biography performs for Æthelstan. The narratives eulogise the benefactors of their respective abbeys, ascribing to them divine favour in life and secular power. They do not, however, narrate miracles or cults associated with their tombs in death. Æthelstan might have been a faithful patron of the church, yet he was a paradigm of virtuous temporal kingship, not a saintly figure who humbly accepted death in defence of his faith.

Nonetheless, to William and to Malmesbury, Æthelstan fulfilled the role of a spiritual patron and, in *Gesta regum Anglorum*, William records an event early in Æthelstan's reign reminiscent of the betrayal narratives of royal hagiographies, in which an attempt was made to blind the newly appointed king.⁵⁰ William is more focused on the repercussions of the conspiracy than providing details of the scheme itself, yet the plot may have some historical veracity. It was allegedly promulgated by Alfred, a noble of Wessex, and there is evidence that Æthelstan experienced some resistance in taking the throne of that kingdom. It is in many ways unfortunate that the main source for Æthelstan's youth is *Gesta regum Anglorum*, as it does deny the opportunity of independent verification of William's claims. However, William states that most of Æthelstan's education and upbringing took place in the Mercian court under the tutelage of his aunt Æthelflaed.⁵¹ It is possible that Æthelstan was either born out of wedlock, or within an undesirable marriage (from his father, Edward's, point of view), a rumour not only reported by William, but also put forward by John of Worcester.⁵² By sending the young prince to the Mercian court, it certainly seems that Edward was denying him the inheritance of the crown. Indeed, Æthelstan's younger brother Ælfweard was given precedence in charter witness lists and there is some evidence that he took on the mantle of kingship upon Edward's death in 924.⁵³ However, Ælfweard died less than three weeks after Edward,

⁴⁹ M. Swanton, *The Lives of Two Offas: Vitae Offarum Duorum, Introduced, Translated and Edited* (Crediton: Medieval Press, 2010).

⁵⁰ *G. Reg.* 2.137 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.222–225).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.131.2 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.206–207).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.126.1 and 139.1–2 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.198–199 and 224–227); and John of Worcester, *Chronicle* 901 (Darlington and McGurk, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 352–357).

⁵³ For charter witness lists see for example S 365 and 366, King's College London (*The Electronic Sawyer: Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters* [= *ES*], accessed 08 April

and Æthelstan stepped into the void.⁵⁴ Yet Æthelstan was initially only accepted as king in Mercia in 924, with his coronation as the king of Wessex not occurring until September 925.⁵⁵ Wessex was clearly wary of subjecting themselves to the rule of a king whose personal associations and affinity were with the kingdom of Mercia.

In detail, the story of the attempted blinding by the Wessex noble is clearly a fabrication. Blinding fits into the literary tropes of late Anglo-Saxon political and hagiographical narratives. In political discourse, blinding was a tool designed to disempower a rival; the victim's mutilated body remained a didactic exemplar deterring future opposition, while the perpetrator stopped short of defying God's commandment against murder. However, the trope was reversed in Anglo-Saxon saints' lives, in which the subject's ability to vitiate an attempted blinding displayed divine favour and bestowed power and authority in the face of violent opposition.⁵⁶ Thus, from the outset of this tale, Æthelstan is being cast in the mould of a royal saint whose deeds demonstrate a righteousness of action and divine approval. William goes on to tell his reader that upon the exposure of the plot, the malefactor fled to Rome to declare his innocence before the pope, yet at the very moment he swore that oath, he was struck down, dying two days later in *Schola Anglorum*.⁵⁷ The good king Æthelstan magnanimously allowed the traitor a Christian burial, while demonstrating his reputation for juridical rectitude in declaring Alfred's lands forfeit. According to William,

2017, <http://esawyer.org.uk/about/index.html>). For a full discussion of the evidence for Ælfweard's possible kingship see Foot, *Æthelstan*, 38–40.

⁵⁴ ASCD 924 (Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 68), states that Ælfweard died 16 days after Edward.

⁵⁵ *G. Reg.* 2.131.1–2 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.206–207); John of Worcester, *Chronicle* 924 (Darlington and McGurk, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 384–385); and Foot, *Æthelstan*, 17, 38, and 73–74. Though Æthelstan is known to have been crowned king of Wessex and Mercia at Kingston-upon-Thames in September 925, ASC MR 924 (Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 68), notably declares that the Mercians chose Æthelstan and no text of ASC makes any note of a further coronation in Wessex. Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum* 5.18 (Greenway, *Henry*, 308–311), similarly notes only the acceptance of the Mercians.

⁵⁶ M. Firth, "Allegories of Sight: Blinding and Power in Late Anglo-Saxon England," *Cerae: An Australasian Journal of Medieval Studies* 3 (2016), 1–33, at 2–3, and 24–25.

⁵⁷ *G. Reg.* 2.137.2 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.222–223).

Malmesbury Abbey was one of the main benefactors of this policy, gaining a significant portion of Alfred's seized territories.⁵⁸

Fabricating Legitimacy? William's Administrative Sources

The tale of Alfred's treachery and forfeiture of land is unique to William's *Gesta regum Anglorum*, finding correlation only within the spurious charters that either informed William's narrative, or were potentially born of William's narrative. Certainly, the charter that William quotes in his *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, which provides a somewhat less detailed account of the plot, was a document of his own creation.⁵⁹ Though the charter 'quoted' is not directly relevant as a source for the narrative as presented in *Gesta regum Anglorum*, in its construction it is instructive of William's use of charter sources, and therefore worth some brief consideration. The charter (S 436) may appear to have a legitimate tone, mirroring as it does, in form and style, three other charters in which Æthelstan granted lands to Malmesbury Abbey.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the stylistic conformity of S 436 does not stem from a contemporaneity with these related charters. Rather, it stems from William's use of the three pre-existing charters as templates to create a document in S 436 that held a semblance of legitimacy.

Of the three charters used by William to create the specious S 436, two are undoubtedly forgeries (S 434 and S 435), while the earliest dated charter (S 415) contains a witness list that is anachronistic with its purported date.⁶¹ All appear to be based upon authentic progenitors. S 434 and S 435 can be rapidly dealt with: they are near identical. These two charters evidently draw upon a non-extant document from *c.* 935 and are comparable in structure to charters from that period of Æthelstan's reign.⁶² Yet the charters are dated 937, by which time the formulae of such documents had altered under new

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2.136 and 138 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.222–223 and 224–225).

⁵⁹ S 436 (ES); William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum* [= *G. Pont.*] 250 (M. Winterbottom [ed. and trans.], *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum. The History of the English Bishops*, vol. 1: *Text and Translation*, Oxford Medieval Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007], 600–601); and P. Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 307.

⁶⁰ S.E. Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 226–227.

⁶¹ S 415, 434, and 435 (ES); and Kelly, *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*, 214–218, 220–222, and 224.

⁶² Kelly, *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*, 220–222.

scribal procedures. Further incongruities appear in uncharacteristic alterations to the standard structure, and witness lists out of place with the year 937, providing additional confirmation that the documents are forgeries.⁶³ While no reliable date for their production can be ascertained, they were in place by the time William wrote *Gestae* in the early twelfth century, and there is no clear evidence that William was aware of their counterfeit nature. For William, they simply formed a part of the corpus of evidence for Æthelstan's generosity to the abbey throughout his reign.

Providing a greater puzzle than S 434 and S 435 is William's source for the account of Alfred's treachery in the *Gesta regum Anglorum*, S 415. This charter grants fifteen hides of land to the abbey and, in order to explain how that land was the king's to grant, provides an account of Alfred's treachery and the subsequent seizure of his lands. As a document purported to originate in Æthelstan's reign, it is problematic. The witness list is not compatible with its issue date of 931, and it is not the only charter dated to that year to narrate Alfred's downfall—a near identical charter grants lands seized from Alfred to Bath Abbey.⁶⁴ In her study of these charters, S.E. Kelly notes that the witness lists date them to *c.* 941, but that this only indicates the date of the template document, and the charters were more likely composed between *c.* 950 and 1066.⁶⁵ That the forgeries were undoubtedly created by the abbeys in response to attempts by Alfred's family to reclaim their inheritance, and that such a move is unlikely to have occurred over a century after the forfeiture, a date closer to 950 is plausible. For William, writing two centuries later, the origins of S 415 as a forgery were likely obscured and, as textual confirmation of the abbey's own traditions of Æthelstan's largesse, it seems he took its contents at face-value. As such, S 415 informed every narrative William presents relating to Malmesbury's ownership of lands traditionally held by Alfred's family, with the Alfred plot made central to his histories of Æthelstan's reign. This does raise the question as to whether there remained some question as to the abbey's legitimate right to the lands to which William was responding. If William is understood to have been writing within a tradition that saw the forged charters as legitimate documents confirming the abbey's rights to lands, then William's blended charter was not intended to deceive, but to summarise the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 220–224.

⁶⁴ S 414 (*ES*); and Kelly, *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*, 214–216.

⁶⁵ Kelly, *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*, 214–216.

evidence. In this, it seems clear that William still felt the need to justify Malmesbury's claim to the grant even two centuries after it allegedly occurred.

It would be too cynical to assert that what can be seen here in either the charters or William's narratives is an attempt by Malmesbury Abbey to make opportunistic claims on property by use of forgery. In their conception, these charters—and the passages in William's histories—exist to provide formal validation of Malmesbury Abbey's claims to territories that local tradition identified as gifts from Æthelstan. Yet some cynicism must be retained and, though the abbey may have believed these claims to be well founded in local lore, it cannot be entirely exonerated from the charge of forgery. Indeed, for the purpose of establishing retroactive legitimacy to land rights, William must be understood to have chosen his subject well. A regional tradition of Æthelstan as a quasi-saintly figure, coupled with the paucity of narrative evidence of Æthelstan's reign, allowed William to cast the story of Alfred's plot as a demonstration of the divine intention behind Malmesbury's acquisitions. By casting Æthelstan in the mould of a saint, William is establishing the king's divine favour; the death of Alfred upon swearing his oath of innocence both enhances that sanctity and proves Alfred as a traitor and perjurer.⁶⁶ It is naturally just that Æthelstan seized the worldly effects of the criminal, yet his concern for the man's immortal soul is manifested in his magnanimity in allowing him a Christian burial. This wisdom and concern for spiritual welfare is then further demonstrated by Æthelstan's refusal to retain Alfred's lands for temporal gain, instead turning them over to the 'family of Meidulf: the monks of Malmesbury.'⁶⁷

The Presence of the King—William's Material Sources

Lands were not the only riches Æthelstan bestowed on Malmesbury Abbey; Æthelstan was known to be an avid acquirer of relics, with some notable artefacts entrusted to Malmesbury, inscribed with the king's name as donor.⁶⁸ In a passage that opens by telling the reader that "the whole of Europe sang [Æthelstan's] praises and extolled his presence to the sky," William details negotiations in 926 by Hugh, the king of the Franks, who

⁶⁶ *G. Reg.* 2.137 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.222–225); S 415 (*ES*); and Wormald, *English Law*, 307–308.

⁶⁷ *G. Pont.* 250.3 (Winterbottom, *The History of the English Bishops*, 1.600–601).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.3 (Winterbottom, *The History of the English Bishops*, 1.596–597).

sought the hand of Æthelstan's sister to establish an alliance.⁶⁹ The alliance and marriage is of limited interest to this discussion; however, the rich selection of relics that Hugh's envoys brought to entice the king are of great interest. While Æthelstan retained almost all of these rare gifts for his successors, William records that a "precious crown of solid gold," and 'a small piece of the holy and wonderful Cross enclosed in crystal,' were granted to the abbey at Malmesbury.⁷⁰ This account of the gifts and negotiations of the Frankish king forms a part of that section of William's biography of Æthelstan that he declared was sourced from 'an ancient volume,' 'bombastic' in style. While this material on the provenance of the relics is likely sourced from the lost document, rendered by William in Latin more appropriate to a twelfth-century audience, this does not mean William hesitated to editorialise.⁷¹ Of the crown and piece of the cross bestowed upon Malmesbury, William declares that, "their support still, I believe, gives that place fresh life, after the shipwreck of its liberty and all the unjust claims it has to meet."⁷² Though the crown and holy cross do appear to be the most likely of the relics to have a genuine provenance traceable through Frankish ownership, such editorialising does bring the veracity of the list of relics into doubt.⁷³ Certainly William's assertion points to such relics being present at the time of his writing—the passage is in the present tense and William is speaking of the effect these items continued to have in his own time. However, this praise for the relics held by Malmesbury Abbey does raise the suspicion that the ancestry William ascribes to the items was designed—much like hagiographical *translation* and *passio* narratives—to promote the provenance of the relics held within regional cult centres.⁷⁴ The intrusion of William's own voice at this point seems to evidence that, similar to his use of the plot to blind Æthelstan to validate land grants to Malmesbury, William was utilising a legitimising narrative to defend the abbey's temporal possessions against its detractors.

⁶⁹ *G. Reg.* 2.135.1–6 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.216–221).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.135.5–6 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.218–221).

⁷¹ Wood, "King Aethelstan's Empire," 265–267; Foot, *Æthelstan*, 254–255; and Thomson and Winterbottom, *The History of the English Kings*, 2.116–118.

⁷² *G. Reg.* 2.135.6 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.220–221).

⁷³ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 196–198.

⁷⁴ For discussion of the interrelation of hagiography, relics and cultic centres see R. Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 67–70.

In describing Æthelstan's largesse toward Malmesbury in his *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, William declares that "[Æthelstan's] services to the monastery are crowned by his bringing there the relics of numerous saints."⁷⁵ William uses this passage as an introduction to the translation of St Paternus from Brittany to Malmesbury at the behest of the prior of St Samson's Abbey in Brittany. Both the event and the relics may have a historical verisimilitude that the crown and holy cross do not; Thomson suggests that the prior of St Samson was seeking Æthelstan's support against Viking raiders.⁷⁶ While the passage contains accounts of numerous miracles and reflects the hagiographical tropes that should be expected in a *translatio* narrative, it also provides hints of both local tradition and material history extant in the twelfth century. William describes a miracle relating to the theft of a gold screen from the shrine of St Paternus, an event that the abbey elders 'remembered well' and were 'fond of telling.'⁷⁷ Upon the righting of the wrong perpetrated by this thief, the shrine was repaired and William notes its inscription: "This work King Æthelstan, ruler of all Britain ... ordered to be made in honour of St Paternus."⁷⁸ That William was both hearing of the miracles performed by the relics Æthelstan bestowed upon the abbey, and had a visual correlation of the king's involvement, both informs, and further explains, William's interest in the Anglo-Saxon king and his relationship to Malmesbury.

It is clear that Æthelstan's favour for the monks of Malmesbury should not be doubted, and it was not only the bones of saints he entrusted to them. Æthelstan was reputed to have instructed his two royal cousins who had fallen in battle be interred at the abbey; three years later Æthelstan himself would be interred at Malmesbury.⁷⁹ He was the only king resident in the abbey's mausolea. This provides further evidence of Æthelstan's difficult relationship with Wessex and the likelihood that an attempt to deprive him of his kingship came from that quarter. Both Æthelstan's father and grandfather had been buried in Winchester, the royal city of Wessex, as were

⁷⁵ *G. Pont.* 247.1 (Winterbottom, *The History of the English Bishops*, 1.594–595).

⁷⁶ R.M. Thomson, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum. The History of the English Bishops*, vol. 2: *Introduction and Commentary*, Oxford Medieval Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007], 297.

⁷⁷ *G. Pont.* 248.1 (Winterbottom, *The History of the English Bishops*, 1.596–597).

⁷⁸ *G. Pont.* 248.3 (Winterbottom, *The History of the English Bishops*, 1.596–597).

⁷⁹ *G. Reg.* 2.135.6 (Mynors et al., *The History of the English Kings*, 1.220–221); and *G. Pont.* 246.3 (Winterbottom, *The History of the English Bishops*, 1.592–595).

the majority of his successors. Those other members of the house of Wessex who were not interred in the royal city were almost invariably buried at Glastonbury, also deep within Wessex territory and the religious centre of the kingdom. However, Malmesbury sat near the traditional border of Mercia and Wessex. By virtue of his personal connections to the Mercian court, and that territory's proximity to his expanding northern hegemony Mercia had likely remained Æthelstan's power-base and, while it may have been impolitic to be buried in a Mercian royal centre, this did not mean that Æthelstan could not differentiate himself from the Wessex kingship. Unlike his predecessors, Æthelstan had been king of both *Wessex and Mercia*, a fact that seems tacitly acknowledged in the choice of an abbey that lay upon the border. Further, the king's noted generosity to Malmesbury Abbey meant that here was a place that, for a devout king, he likely felt prayers would be reliably offered up for him after death. For William, two centuries later, the presence of Æthelstan's tomb gave Malmesbury a unique and tangible connection to the king who seemed to have so favoured the Abbey.

William was certainly aware of the king's presence in the abbey. In a passage describing Æthelstan's appearance, he even notes the king's hair colour from the personal experience of having viewed the king's remains.⁸⁰ Indeed, as with the plot to blind the king and the redistribution of Alfred's lands, William proves the key source for most of our information for both the king's donation of relics and interment of members of the royal family. This is not to say that these are fabrications; the provenance of material artefacts is more widely attested than the conferring of Alfred's lands on the abbey. The saturation of these material artefacts relating to the Anglo-Saxon king was most likely a further contributing factor to William's interest in Æthelstan rather than an invention of that interest. Moreover, the regional concentration of this material history likely facilitated the perpetuation of local tradition over the intervening centuries between Æthelstan and William, allowing the king to transition from the pre-Norman to post-Norman political milieu with an untarnished reputation.

Conclusion

William's history reflects the Anglo-Norman historian's struggle to make sense of an Anglo-Saxon past that was both chronologically and culturally alien. In this context, William's interest in Æthelstan is understandable, as

⁸⁰ *G. Reg.* 2.134.5 (Mynors et al., *A History of the English Kings*, 1.216–217).

is his portrayal of the Anglo-Saxon king, Æthelstan, the giver of lands and relics, the royal resident of Malmesbury Abbey, was uniquely accessible to William. Within this context, William was able to construct an exceptionally detailed, if often suspect and somewhat disjointed, biography of the king. Drawing upon histories, charters, and regional traditions exclusive to Malmesbury Abbey, William constructed a pseudo-hagiographical narrative emphasising Æthelstan's link to the abbey. Moreover, in his interpretation and redaction of his sources, William was able to defend both the rights of his abbey, and the reputation of its benefactor, establishing a narrative that legitimised the king's gifts, while negating rumours about the king's legitimacy. Skilfully drawing upon various and disparate sources, with a healthy dose of his own imagination, William created in *Gesta regum Anglorum* biography of Æthelstan, a complex narrative demonstrating an intrinsic interrelation between source documents, local tradition and material history.