

**King Æthelstan in the English, Continental and Scandinavian Traditions
Of the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries**

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ABSTRACT

Using close textual analysis, this thesis has identified similarities and differences in the ways in which the Anglo-Saxon king, Æthelstan, is depicted in narrative sources from England, the Continent and Scandinavia during the tenth to the thirteenth centuries; how historical, cultural, and literary contexts influenced their writers and their patrons and how literary analysis might contribute further to historical understandings of Æthelstan and his reign.

Central to my analysis are the concepts of the sources as textual and visual narratives, deriving contemporary meaning from their intertextuality with other sources and fulfilling a function of recording and creating social memories for their own time and for the future.

The thesis does not argue for the historical veracity of any one version over another but for the individual narrative ‘voices’ to be heard and understood as part of their own historical, national and contemporary backgrounds. Based on my literary analysis of the texts I have questioned some generally held historical interpretations, suggested some alternative interpretations of my own and identified further areas for research.

The thesis demonstrates that there are similarities but also significant differences in the way Æthelstan is depicted both between and within the English, Continental and Scandinavian traditions. It identifies a number of narratives within the sources that provide the basis for further research on Æthelstan: his Carolingian ambitions, his role as foster-father to Hákon of Norway, the possibility that he had a second coronation to confirm his claim to be King of all Britain and the depictions of him as a king-maker and a friend and ally of the Vikings.

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INTRODUCTION

Aethelstan deserves study. He was the opener of the door: he made much possible that he never lived to see. We must do our best to pick up such fragmentary notices of him as time has spared, and add them to the meagre chronicle of his victories in war.¹

This quotation from Joseph Armitage Robinson identifies one of the key contributions Robinson made to historical research methodology. Through his work Robinson provided an example of how a study across sources can provide a more rounded picture of a person or event. His footnotes bear clear witness to the care he gave to researching and bringing together material from different sources. Robinson's analysis proved seminal both in its methodology and its content. His challenge to others to research Aethelstan more fully was taken up by other historians, Frank Stenton in his *Anglo-Saxon England*, David Dumville in his chapter on 'Aethelstan, First King of England' in *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar* and, most recently, Sarah Foot in her biography of Aethelstan. Each of these works provides an example of how a cohesive and scholarly analysis of Aethelstan and his reign can be constructed from a wide range of apparently disparate sources.² In addition, the new interest in Aethelstan which Robinson helped establish resulted in a body of in-depth research into different aspects of his reign, his laws, charters, coins and books.³

Thesis Overview

In this thesis I take up Robinson's challenge in a different way. I have not attempted a historical study of Aethelstan's life and times, nor have I concentrated on analysis of individual sources for one aspect of his reign. Instead I have opted for a literary analysis

¹ Joseph Armitage Robinson, *The Times of St Dunstan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), p. 6.

² Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 339-56. David Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), pp. 141-71. Sarah Foot, *Aethelstan the First King of England* (London: Yale University Press, 2011).

³ This is admirably illustrated in *Anglo-Saxon England: A Bibliographic Handbook*, ed. by Simon Keynes (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2005), pp. 116-19.

of how Æthelstan is depicted in sources from three different traditions, the English, the Continental and the Scandinavian. Historical research into Æthelstan has been very dependent on the tenth-century sources from Anglo-Saxon England and the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman texts, with some acknowledgement of, but little detailed comment on, the textual sources from the Continent and from Scandinavia.⁴ I have given equal weighting to the sources from all three geographical areas and I have extended the time-frame to include written sources from the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. This has enabled me to include the later Anglo-Norman historians and the thirteenth-century written saga and history texts from Scandinavia. In this way I have been able to compare how Æthelstan was depicted across three different regions and take a longitudinal view of how he was depicted within each historiographical tradition. My analysis has identified that there were similarities in the ways in which the traditions depicted Æthelstan but also significant differences both between and within traditions. As a result, there is not one depiction of Æthelstan, but many.

In my research I have queried some of the generally accepted scholarly interpretations of individual sources for Æthelstan's life and suggested alternative ways of understanding them based on codicology, linguistics and literary style. By comparing texts across centuries and across traditions I have identified links between sources which suggest areas for further historical and literary research into tenth-century and later interpretations of Æthelstan as a pro-Carolingian King of all Britain, a king-maker, a foster-father and a friend of Vikings.

Review of Relevant Scholarship on Æthelstan

The thesis draws on an interdisciplinary range of scholarship to help interpret the sources and their contexts. In particular I have drawn on the researches of Simon

⁴ On the difficulties of accessing material on Æthelstan, see Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp.1-9.

Keynes into Æthelstan's books;⁵ Catherine Karkov on portrayals of Æthelstan;⁶ Michael Lapidge⁷ on the Æthelstan poems; the charter analyses by Peter Sawyer⁸ and Simon Keynes;⁹ the work on Æthelstan's coins of Marion Archibald and Christopher Blunt,¹⁰ and David Rollason's¹¹ research on Durham and St Cuthbert and Æthelstan's love of relics. In drawing together research from these different academic disciplines I have also identified interrelationships which were not immediately evident within the separate scholarly studies. For example, in Chapter 1 on the tenth-century English tradition, I demonstrate how the interrelationships between charter evidence, chronicle narratives and coin inscriptions suggest that Æthelstan underwent a second ceremony of coronation as King of all Britain.

My study of the background to Æthelstan in the Continental and Scandinavian traditions was greatly helped by the work of Philip Grierson on Flanders,¹² Karl Leyser¹³ on the Ottonians and Saxony, Rosamond McKitterick¹⁴ on the Carolingians

⁵ Simon Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 143-201.

⁶ Catherine, E. Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 53-83.

⁷ Michael Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athlestan', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 9 (1981), 61-98.

⁸ Peter Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society, 8 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968). Available electronically at: <http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwww/eSawyer.ga/eSawyer2.html>

⁹ Simon Keynes, *Register of the Charters of King Æthelstan*, unpublished paper from Toller Lecture (University of Manchester, 2001).

¹⁰ Marion M. Archibald and C. E. Blunt, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles, 34, British Museum Anglo-Saxon Coins V, Æthelstan to the Reform of Edgar 924-c.973* (London: British Museum, 1986).

¹¹ David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); 'Relic-Cults as an Instrument of Royal Policy c.900-c.1050', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 15 (1986), 91-103; 'St Cuthbert and Wessex: the Evidence of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 183', in *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200*, ed. by G. Bonner and others (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), pp. 413-24.

¹² Philip Grierson, 'The Relations between England and Flanders before the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 23 (1941), 71-112.

¹³ Karl Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an early Medieval Society* (London: Arnold, 1979); *The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians* (London: Longman, 1983).

and the Frankish kingdoms and Birgit Sawyer¹⁵ and Peter Sawyer¹⁶ on Scandinavia. From each I was able to derive a scholarly overview of the context of the primary sources I was studying.

As noted above, there are very few works providing a detailed account of Æthelstan and his reign as a whole. One of the first, and one of the most influential, is Frank Stenton's in his *Anglo-Saxon England*. The main focus of Stenton's work was on tracing how monarchy evolved in England from separate kingdoms into one, and was then transformed under William the Conqueror into a form of feudal sovereignty. Stenton interpreted Æthelstan's reign as a major step in this development, built on the foundations laid by Alfred the Great. His narrative is constructed by combining sources from across the tenth and later centuries into a seamless narrative. This provides a scholarly overview of the information available on Æthelstan but by omitting key aspects of the contextual background it gives the impression that the sources are all of equal status and value.

David Dumville also saw the reign of Æthelstan as deserving further detailed study and reiterated Robinson's argument for the need to bring together disparate information from a range of sources.¹⁷ His chapter on 'Æthelstan, First King of England' in *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar*, looks in particular at Æthelstan's military, political and administrative achievements but also includes aspects of his connections abroad and his ecclesiastical links. His analysis focuses particularly on secondary sources and his work provides both a helpful overview of relevant scholarship and a model for my own critical analysis of primary and secondary material.

¹⁵ Birgit Sawyer, 'Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo', *Revue Belge de Philologie et D'Histoire*, 63 (1985), 685-705.

¹⁶ Peter Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD 700-1100* (London: Methuen, 1982).

¹⁷ Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar*, pp. 141-43.

Most recently, Sarah Foot's work on Æthelstan has taken research into his reign into a new area of interpretative biography. In her *Prologue* Foot comments:

Choosing a biographical treatment (rather than an examination of Æthelstan's life in the context of his times) has enabled me to put Æthelstan the individual at the heart of a narrative of the making of the kingdom of England.¹⁸

Foot acknowledges that her version of Æthelstan's life and achievements will be her personal one, adding, 'the fact that the man whom my book will create is not a 'true' person does not render the project of writing his life invalid'.¹⁹ Although Foot refers to the Continental and Scandinavian sources she does not undertake any detailed source criticism of these. Her biographical study of Æthelstan as a tenth-century king in England draws on a wide range of scholarly research and her analyses and commentary illustrate how literary reconstruction can helpfully inform historical interpretation of the past.

The historical studies outlined above have provided a background for my own research and given pointers to other relevant sources. However, I found that secondary analyses often tended to see the primary source texts on Æthelstan as a 'given'. As a result, critical comment focused more on the reliability of the historical information they contained and did not necessarily take into account the implications of the linguistic and literary features of the sources for our understanding of the texts. As the focus in my thesis is on how and why the sources depict Æthelstan in the way they do, my emphasis is not on their historical accuracy but on how their depictions were influenced by the writer's selection of content, language, style and presentation.

Source Analysis

The primary sources used in the thesis include chronicles, annals, histories, charters, ecclesiastical texts, coin inscriptions and their accompanying images, book dedications,

¹⁸ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 7.

poetry and manuscript portraiture. The range of genre is wide but, through their different media, the sources all provide information and descriptions of Æthelstan and his actions as king. I have therefore opted to analyse them all as examples of forms of narrative. This includes the coin images and inscriptions and the manuscript paintings as examples of visual narratives on Æthelstan as king.²⁰

The written texts are variously described by their authors as *Annales*, *Chronicon*, *Gesta*, *Historia* and saga. All, however, claim, implicitly or explicitly, to depict accurately events from the tenth century. It is often unclear what sources the authors themselves have used. Some mention using written texts, most indicate only that they have drawn on reliable oral sources. The reticence of authors about their sources may be a useful reminder that they may have had very limited access to source material themselves.

The number of source materials which have survived from the tenth century is relatively small and it is often not possible to see what use an author has made of a source by comparing later texts with earlier ones. Comparing the content of the texts which have survived also has its problems. When a text makes no reference to a person or event mentioned elsewhere, the reader is left to consider whether the author had no access to that information, or did not think it important or deliberately ignored it because it did not fit the overall purpose of the work. Similarly, variations in the details given by writers for the same event may indicate that they were using different sources or that they were providing their own edited or individual version of events. As a result, the reader cannot be sure how far these narrative texts preserve tenth-century traditions

²⁰ *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. by Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). On authorial intent and problems of interpretation see the 'Introduction' in Jason Glenn, *Politics and History in the Tenth Century: The Work and World of Richer of Reims* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-16.

or represent the personal views of their authors about the tenth century or provide examples of how authors or their patrons wished the past to be perceived.

Authors' claims to have used trustworthy oral sources have generally been seen by scholars as a weakness given the fallibility of human memory and the creative nature of most oral transmissions. However, recent scholarship on the Scandinavian saga sources has proved particularly helpful in addressing this issue. The relationship between written saga and oral tradition has long been keenly debated.²¹ More recently Gareth Williams has advised a cautious, comparative approach to texts based on oral sources and characterised as 'overly simplistic' the view that because saga information cannot be assumed to be historically accurate, it should be discounted:

The fact that a source is not reliable does not necessarily mean that it is valueless, but that it should be used with caution, and the evidence it contains evaluated in the light of the overall picture of the period presented by all the material available.²²

Vésteinn Ólason has adopted a similar approach, arguing that sagas are always interrelated and defy simple categorisation into one genre or another:

It would be a serious methodological mistake to look at the Icelandic narratives from the Middle Ages that have been termed sagas as if they were static phenomena that could be clearly distinguished from other narratives and categorized unequivocally.²³

Using *Njáls saga* as an example he concluded that whether actual events are accurately reported or not is important but that the real significance of the sagas lies in the record they provide of social values, attitudes and responses to the past:

²¹ Historians have largely discounted the idea that saga as a literary form of writing can be treated as factual material. The following provide useful overviews of the different theories on saga and oral tradition: Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic literature* (New York: Johns Hopkins University, 1957), pp. 124-33. Diana Whaley, 'A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 161-202 (pp. 165-69).

²² Gareth Williams, 'Hákon *Aðalsteins fóstri*: Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Kingship in Tenth-Century Norway', in *The North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Thomas Litzka and Lorna Walker (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 108-26 (p. 109).

²³ Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature with Special Reference to its Representation of Reality', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. by Judy Quinn and others (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 27-47 (p. 29).

the saga's more general relation to lived history is much more important. What it tells us about particular persons and events may be exaggerated, misunderstood, or invented, but the stories told are a response to something real, to words and feelings, to memories and fantasies; they are stories with roots in real life.²⁴

Vésteinn's conceptualizing of the sagas as lived history provides a useful model which I have applied to all the sources with which I have been working. It encapsulates a number of concepts equally applicable to written texts and the visual narratives of Æthelstan's coins and portraits. First, narratives do not exist in isolation but are linked intertextually to other narratives; secondly, narrative, even when recording the past, is a creative activity which reflects the attitudes and values of a particular author, time or context; thirdly, narrative becomes a statement of historic record in its own right of how events were to be remembered, both at the time and in the future.

Social Memory, Narrative and Intertextuality

Recent studies of the relationship between history and memory have highlighted how writing about the past involves using memory creatively. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes have brought together a range of essays highlighting this creative role of historians.²⁵ In their introduction, they comment

Those who recorded the past in written form emerge as adaptors and editors of memory but also as the authors of 'texts of identity' which in turn inform that memory.²⁶

Geoffrey Cubitt, exploring the role of memory in establishing personal and collective identity, has noted that, 'the collective past is always a constructed past (and continually under construction).'²⁷ These observations raise questions as to the extent to which any

²⁴ Vésteinn, 'The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. by Quinn and others, p. 47.

²⁵ *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Yitzak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁶ Hen and Innes, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 7.

²⁷ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 230-31.

history narrative can be regarded as a reliable record of the past and this has been succinctly expressed by Monika Otter as the fundamental problem of how a text can represent a past which cannot be directly accessed.²⁸ The problem has led Gabrielle Spiegel even to query why we continue to hold to a wish ‘for an empirically verifiable, recoverable past’.²⁹

Awareness of the importance of memories for recreating the past and establishing a sense of shared identity can be found in the source texts on Æthelstan. In the tenth century, Æthelweard in the English tradition wrote his *Chronicon* so his cousin Matilda could learn about her family identity and connections with the royal house of Wessex; Dudo provided a dynastic history for the Dukes of Normandy and Widukind, in his *Res Gestae Saxonicae*, wished to help create a sense of regional identity for the recently formed kingdom of East Saxony. As a result, they selected certain memories for inclusion, omitted others, whether deliberately or not, and presented their material in a way designed to meet the overall aim of their work.³⁰

William of Malmesbury is one Anglo-Norman historian who directly addresses this question of reliability and veracity in history texts. He resolves it by taking no responsibility for events before his own time, apart from trying to find trustworthy sources. The responsibility for the truthfulness of the sources, he says, rests with the sources themselves and those who provided them. But William goes further and assigns to his readers responsibility for finally deciding on the trustworthiness and most

²⁸ Monika Otter, ‘Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing’, in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Nancy Partner (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), pp.109-130 (p. 114). See also, Monika Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-century Historical Writing* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 10-18.

²⁹ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: the Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (London: Johns Hopkins University, 1997), p. xxi.

³⁰ Examples are provided and discussed in the following chapters as part of my textual analyses. For other examples of authorial selective use of memory see Matthew Townend, ‘Whatever Happened to York Viking Poetry? Memory, Tradition and the Transmission of Skaldic Verse’, *Saga-Book*, 27 (2003), 48-90. On the writing of dynastic histories in the twelfth century see Peter Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Inventing Vernacular Authority* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 43-67.

reasonable interpretation of the events he narrates.³¹ William clearly sees the writing of history as a literary activity and his views on the relationship between reader and writer seem to anticipate later literary theories of reader-reception and reader-response.

Antonia Gransden has shown that medieval historians tended to use a number of traditional literary *topoi* in their Prologues, derived from those used by Roman historians, firmly siting their texts within the framework of classical literature.³² Monika Otter has pointed out that this was in line with current educational and literary practice which regarded history as a branch of rhetoric.³³ The choice of genres used by medieval historians for their works of history further confirms that they regarded their work as primarily one of literature. Thus Hrotsvit and Gaimar write in verse with all the demands that metre imposed on their choice of vocabulary and forms of expression; Dudo and Richer include dramatic speeches as part of their historical narrative; Henry of Huntingdon organises his text around a moral theme, providing an image of England being scourged five times by invasions as a punishment for its faults.

The prologues and dedications of works of medieval history repeatedly claim that the author will seek to give pleasure by making his narrative interesting and avoiding unnecessary detail.³⁴ While historical scholarship has tended to concentrate on separating fact from fiction in these texts, literary analyses have concentrated on how writers communicated their version of events through their choice of language and imagery. This difference is evident in the range of interpretations of history texts

³¹ As will be seen in Section 3 of Chapter 2 on William of Malmesbury, the picture he gives of contemporary historians is not complimentary. Too many, he says, over-emphasize the good and play down the bad in order to win praise and avoid blame.

³² Antonia Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), pp. 125-26.

³³ Otter, 'Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, p. 109.

³⁴ See Chapter 2, Section 3 on William of Malmesbury, for an analysis of medieval history prologues.

provided by secondary scholarship.³⁵ It can be said that the individuality of the author is complemented by the individuality of the scholarly reader's response. Clearly this does not mean that a shared understanding of texts is impossible but it highlights the differences in background, context and culture which exist between writers and readers from different centuries. An important factor in developing this shared understanding is an awareness of the intertextuality of narrative forms.

Robert Stein has commented on the importance of recognizing the intertextuality of sources in three different ways, texts in the culture of the writer's time, texts used by the writer and knowledge of texts brought by the reader.³⁶ Medieval writers on the whole give very little information about their sources and with the passage of time texts have been lost. The reader today, however, can draw on a very wide range of textual material and make connections across many centuries and genres. It is therefore important to read primary sources as far as possible as part of their own contemporary context, although as Hen and Innes point out, we only have partial data on which to reconstruct this.³⁷

As part of this debate, James Fentress and Chris Wickham have argued strongly that historical analysis needs to be based on 'an understanding of the rules of narrative

³⁵ Rosamond McKitterick has argued in relation to the Royal Frankish Annals that the construction of a cohesive narrative of the past to form collective memory was more relevant to writers and readers than its relation to reality. Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 118. Elizabeth Tyler and Ross Balzaretto have described narrative as the 'principle means by which coherence or order is given to events in the act of shaping an account of them'. Elizabeth M. Tyler and Ross Balzaretto, *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), p. 1. Nancy Partner, commenting on the Canterbury Tales, has described narrative as full of 'polyvalent meanings', and 'complexly related strata of meaning, compressed and shadowed significations, endless ways of conveying more than literal meaning' which are 'understood as 'really there' [...] not merely the clever invention of modern readers'. Nancy Partner, 'The Hidden Self: Psychoanalysis and the textual unconscious', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, pp. 42-64 (p. 58).

³⁶ Robert M. Stein, 'Literary Criticism and the Evidence for History', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, pp. 67-87 (pp. 79-80).

³⁷ Hen and Innes, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 4.

through which the text was written' in its own time, whatever the genre.³⁸ Sarah Foot has helped develop this idea further through her work on annals and charters as narrative.³⁹ As noted above, my own analysis of the sources on Æthelstan takes Foot's wider definition of narrative and adds to it visual narrative in order to include the dialogue provided with the viewer by Æthelstan's coins and portraits.

Thesis Structure

I have preserved the distinctiveness of the regional historiographical traditions about Æthelstan by dividing the thesis into four chapters. The first two analyse respectively how Æthelstan is depicted in the English tradition in the tenth century and in the Anglo-Norman period. The third chapter analyses the sources from the Continent and the fourth the sources from Scandinavia. The primary textual sources and associated scholarly research are described and commented on at the beginning of each chapter. By analysing the sources for each tradition by century, I have been able to identify where narratives of Æthelstan changed over time and how certain texts became dominant and exerted considerable influence on the work of later authors. I have used cross-referencing to note similarities, differences and possible links between the traditions while preserving what is specific to each.

In analysing texts I have considered any reasons authors have given for undertaking their work and how far this is evident in their depiction of Æthelstan. This has included considering how an author's depiction of Æthelstan compares with that provided in the same text for other kings; the choice of literary, biblical and historical images; the emphasis given to specific achievements or attributes and whether an event

³⁸ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 162-63.

³⁹ Sarah Foot, 'Finding the Meaning of Form: Narrative in Annals and Chronicles', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, pp. 88-108.

is presented as central to the narrative or as marginal. In Chapter 1, I have used tenth-century numismatic and iconographic sources for Æthelstan and his reign to see to what extent they provide independent evidence which supports or challenges the textual accounts. This use of comparative, interdisciplinary material is not intended to prove or disprove the factual accuracy of the written texts but to help identify further whether sources provide a representative or a more idiosyncratic view of Æthelstan and his reign, where they complement, extend or contradict each other or where they indicate the existence of separate viewpoints and traditions.

Of the textual sources, the *Gesta Regum* of William of Malmesbury and the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus stand out as different from the other narrative histories. In his *Gesta Regum* William of Malmesbury provides a detailed commentary on the writing of history and the approaches he has adopted in his own work. In his section on Æthelstan he identifies and comments analytically on the range of sources he claims to have used. His narrative is clearly pro-Æthelstan and includes information not found elsewhere on Æthelstan's childhood and military achievements and on his physical appearance, personality and character. By contrast, Saxo Grammaticus gives a very negative account of Æthelstan which is completely different from the other surviving sources. Its negativity gains in clarity and assumes more significance when it is read as part of Saxo's whole narrative on the history of the Danish people from the earliest times to his own day. Both of these authors make a very individual, a very important, and in William's case a very influential, contribution to any scholarly analysis of Æthelstan and his reign. I have therefore provided more in-depth analyses of their work, for William at the end of Chapter 2 on the Anglo-Norman Texts and for Saxo at the end of the Chapter 4 on the Scandinavian Tradition. These two more in-depth studies enable issues relevant to the whole thesis to be explored in greater detail.

Some Methodological Issues

Textual Transmission

In analysing the written sources, I have acknowledged the difficulties and uncertainties underlying my own and others' analyses of the texts. The conjectured dates of composition often post-date the events they describe by up to a century or more, while the surviving manuscripts may post-date composition by several centuries. Because of rewritings, redactions, scribal emendations and copyist additions and omissions, the texts we now have may be significantly different from those they claim to reproduce. I have therefore relied on accepted scholarly theories on questions of text transmission where these are germane to my analyses. However, my purpose is not to reconstruct an 'original' text for any of my sources but to explore the textual content as it survives in existing manuscripts and as edited by modern scholars.

Translation

The textual sources used for this thesis are in Latin, Old English and Old Icelandic/Norse. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations from the source texts are my own. The problems of translating and interpreting from one language and culture to another are challenging and complex. Stenton, in the 'Preface' to *Anglo-Saxon England*, has commented on the subtle difficulties inherent in translating terms from Old English noting that on some occasions 'the significance to be attached to an episode turns on the interpretation that is given to a particular Old English word or phrase'.⁴⁰ I found that this was equally true when translating the Old Icelandic/Norse and the Latin texts. Where necessary I have discussed alternative translations for texts and the implications of these for a source's depiction of Æthelstan. The Latin texts are the most numerous and pose their own particular linguistic challenges. Latin vocabulary, which had evolved to meet the needs of a medieval world and Church, could still retain many of its

⁴⁰ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. ix.

original classical meanings. An example which illustrates this is the translation of the Latin *diadema*. In classical Latin it is used to describe the ribboned headdress worn as a badge of honour. Imperial coins showing the head of the emperor with a *diadema* were widely copied and both Edward and Æthelstan are depicted on their coins in this way. However, by the twelfth century *diadema* was being used of a king's crown. Failure in both twelfth-century and later translations to distinguish between the two meanings of *diadema* has helped blur the distinction between a ceremony of royal consecration and one of coronation. As will be seen in Chapter 1, this has particular significance for Æthelstan's claim to have become King of all Britain.

Peter Fisher, describing his own approach to translating the Latin of Saxo Grammaticus, argues for the importance of readability in a translation. Fisher suggests that the translator needs 'to chop up' long Latin sentences, 'while still trying to preserve something of their elegant variation and balance', and should avoid being 'too colloquial in an attempt to render the original into modern English idiom'.⁴¹ In making my own translations of the texts for this thesis, I have tried to represent the original language and style as faithfully as possible while providing a version which does not distort Standard English. I have not attempted to translate poetry into verse but have tried to retain the poetic vocabulary and match the content by line wherever possible. The translation of the idioms and phraseology of skaldic verse clearly poses its own particular problems. I have therefore set my translation as nearly as possible to mirror the original text and, following the model used by Kari Ellen Gade, included an explanation of the more difficult skaldic expressions as part of my commentary.⁴²

⁴¹ Peter Fisher, 'On Translating Saxo', in *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author between Norse and Latin Culture*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1981), pp. 53-64 (p. 54).

⁴² *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c.1035 to c.1300*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

Overview

In my following analysis of the narrative sources for *Æthelstan*, I have taken account of both the definition of written history as literature and Vésteinn's description of orally based texts as 'lived history'. Both have in common the concept of accounts of the past as constructs in narrative form which provide memories of the past for their own time and for future generations. Central to my thesis, therefore, are the concepts of the primary sources as literary narrative, deriving contemporary meaning from their intertextuality with other sources and fulfilling a function of recording and creating social memories. My research addresses the extent to which narrative depictions of *Æthelstan* were similar across traditions during the tenth to the thirteenth centuries; whether there were significant differences both within and between traditions; how these similarities and differences reflected historical, cultural, contextual and literary influences of the writers and their texts and how a comparative, literary analysis of this kind might contribute to historical understandings of *Æthelstan* and his reign.

Chapter One

Æthelstan in the English Tradition

The Tenth Century

Introduction

Contemporary, or near contemporary, depictions of Æthelstan are relatively few in number and are found in a variety of sources—chronicles, charters, coins, book dedications, letters, poems and saints’ lives. As it was not possible to cover the full range of source material within the thesis, I decided to concentrate on three contrasting groups of sources—chronicles, documentary and numismatic records and verse representations of Æthelstan. I have therefore divided this chapter into three main sections based on the following tenth-century sources:

the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Chronicon Æthelweardi*;

Æthelstan’s charters, coins and book dedications;

poetry celebrating Æthelstan and his achievements.

Together, these groupings provide ecclesiastical, royal and verse depictions of Æthelstan through narrative and diplomatic texts, coin inscriptions, book dedications and Old English and Latin poetry.

The depictions of Æthelstan in these sources are the result of the choices made by their authors, or those who commissioned them, either as individuals or as representatives of a community. These choices include the genre and style of composition, the actions and events recorded, the descriptors and formal designations used and any authorial comment added. The written texts are further extended by pictorial representations of Æthelstan on his coins and in two manuscripts,¹ reflecting

¹ One manuscript painting survives together with a recorded description of the other. These are considered in detail in the section on Æthelstan’s Book Dedications.

further choices in terms of design and imagery. My critical analysis examines how these sources provide a record of the ways in which their authors depicted Æthelstan as king in his own time and in the later tenth century.

In this chapter my analysis of the texts from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* concentrates on Versions A and B. Their earliest manuscripts have been confidently assigned to the tenth century but they record Æthelstan's succession differently, their details reflecting alternative points of view. The *Chronicon Æthelweardi* provides another perspective. Æthelweard as a descendant of Æthelstan's great-grandfather, Æthelwulf, gives his own personal narrative of events. He draws on previous texts but he also states that he is using family memories and traditions as his source.

The depictions of Æthelstan through the coins and charters issued in his name provide formal statements on how he was depicted at different times in his reign. Their use in diplomatic documents and on the royal currency gives them a legal standing and a more authoritative status than other sources. The influence of their wording can be traced in tenth-century book dedications and in later charters which claimed to record donations made by Æthelstan.

The verse sources of poetry, and possibly song, provide a variety of celebratory depictions of Æthelstan which are influenced by the traditions of the verse forms they use. These depictions are enriched by the linguistic links they make with other texts, literary and biblical. While intertextuality is part of the analysis of all the sources for this chapter, it is most clearly evident in the verse depictions where it is an integral part of their composition.

The division of the chapter into three sections enables each set of sources to be analysed as a group—chronicles; charters, coins and book dedications; poetry and verse. The final section draws together the main findings and suggests some areas for further

research. To provide a pathway through the chapter, each section begins with an overview of the main primary sources which form the basis of my analysis.

The Tenth-Century Chronicles: *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Versions A and B and the *Chronicon Æthelweardi*

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ASC)

In his overview of the ASC, Simon Keynes has described its title as

a term of convenience applied by modern scholars to a composite set of annals which provides the basis for the greater part of our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon history. The understanding of the *Chronicle* as a literary text is, however, a matter of great complexity.²

Keynes's linking of 'history' and 'literary text' identifies a central difficulty in studying the ASC as source material. He develops this by pointing out the lack of uniformity and homogeneity in the surviving ASC texts arising from the copying and continuation of the manuscripts at different times and at different centres. This means that the ASC as it survives today cannot be read as a single historical document. Rather it is a compendium of records and memories gathered together from different sources and at different times. Keynes has also warned that 'the reader should not be deceived by the literary style of the *Chronicle* by which the author can give the impression of objectively reporting events'. He added that the chroniclers were 'neither objective nor necessarily authoritative' but recorded events from their own particular point of view and that as a result, 'the reliability of any part of the *Chronicle* as a record of events cannot be taken for granted'.³ Keynes has qualified these statements by suggesting that some of the information in the *Chronicle* could be tested against other statements from

² Simon Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes and Donald Scragg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 35.

³ Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 35-36.

independent sources.⁴ He leaves open how sources are to be identified as independent and, as will be seen in this thesis, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to discount the influence of some version of the *ASC* on individual texts, or the use of a shared, common source.

Literary studies, through analysis of similarities and differences, have identified ways in which the separate versions of the *Chronicle* were textually interlinked through a common core onto which regional variations were built. Janet Bately has summarized contemporary scholarly agreement on the complex theories of the relationships between the surviving versions of the *ASC*:

that the bilingual MS F draws its vernacular material from MS A and an ancestor of E, that there is a very close relationship between MSS B and C, that MSS D and E contain what is in effect a revision of the ‘first compilation’ of the *Chronicle* as we know it from MSS A, B and C, and that this compilation has been extended by a number of continuations, some of which are shared by two or more manuscripts, are matters not open to question.⁵

The revisions and continuations to which Bately refers include the insertion of Mercian and/or northern material in versions B, C and D and of northern material in versions E and F. Thomas Bredehoft has argued that the research into the complex intertextual relationships of the *ASC* has so far not been able to separate the different sources with any confidence.⁶ However, the account of Æthelstan’s reign in the *Chronicle* does provide an example of the interrelationships of the different versions identified by Bately, with B/C/D providing a Mercian focus lacking in Version A, and Versions E and F showing access to northern material. The following Table illustrates the variation in content for Æthelstan’s reign across the different versions of the *ASC*:

⁴ Keynes, ‘*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*’, in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 35-36.

⁵ Janet Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Texts and Textual Relationships*, Reading Medieval Studies: Monograph, 3 (Reading: University of Reading, 1991), p. 1.

⁶ Thomas A. Bredehoft, *Textual Histories: Readings in the ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001), pp. 4-7, 63-71.

Table 1. Entries on Æthelstan's Reign in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* A-F

Æthelstan's Succession	Death of Ælfweard. Mercian Election	Sihtric. Eamont	Guthfrith	Edwin	Expedition to Scotland	Brunanburh
A, B, C, D, E, F	B, C, D	D	E, F	E	A, B, C, D, E, F	A, B, C, D, E, F

The Table shows a close relationship between Versions A and F and Versions B, C and D of the *Chronicle* texts for Æthelstan's reign, illustrating the pattern Bately identified within the *Chronicle* as a whole.⁷

Bately's analysis of Version A has confirmed the views of previous scholars that the manuscript was produced at Winchester. This is based on the evidence of the ecclesiastical information it contains and on the identification of the scribal hand with that of other Winchester-related manuscripts.⁸ She has agreed with N. R. Ker that the section on Æthelstan's reign was most likely written in the mid-tenth century, commenting that its square minuscule script was 'typical of the 940s and 950s in general and the charters of Eadred and Eadwig in particular', and noting that the hand for the annals of 924-955 suggests they were written as a continuous entry by a single scribe.⁹ Simon Taylor has drawn similar conclusions for Version B. His analysis assigns the copying of all the entries for the years 60-977 to a single scribe working in the last quarter of the tenth century. His conclusion is based on the evidence provided by the scribal hand and on his own identification that the last dated entry of 977 was originally followed by a blank folio ruled for further entries but never used. The place of composition is debatable but Taylor supports the argument that the most likely centre

⁷ The earliest surviving manuscripts of Versions C, D, E and F have been dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries and their contribution to depictions of Æthelstan is considered in Chapter 2 on Anglo-Norman Texts. As will be seen in that chapter, the Anglo-Norman writers drew on Versions A-F of the *Chronicle* and it is their later accounts which have exerted the greatest influence on English historical studies of Æthelstan and his reign.

⁸ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, 3, *MS A*, ed. by Janet Bately (Cambridge: Brewer, 1986), p. xiii.

⁹ Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *MS A*, p. xxxv.

was Abingdon, near the border between Wessex and Mercia.¹⁰ Later tradition identified Abingdon as a royal ‘vill’ established by Alfred and used as a royal centre during the tenth century. Abingdon’s position may well have ensured monastic access to records from both Winchester and Mercia, enabling the scribes to make choices on which text to adopt or use as a basis for their *Chronicle* narrative.¹¹

It is not known what textual sources or social memories, oral or written, the scribes of Versions A and B used for their *Chronicle* accounts of Æthelstan’s reign, or whether their narratives were newly created at the time of writing. As will be seen later, it is possible to trace regional preferences in the way Æthelstan is depicted in these two texts which reflect traditional and contemporary rivalries between Wessex and Mercia. The brevity of the entries compared with those for Edward and Alfred is also noticeable and has given the impression that Æthelstan and his reign were of little historical significance.¹² However, the work of Bately and Taylor provides a possible explanation for this. The date 955, for Version A, coincides with the death of Eadred, and the entries for 924-955 record as one unit the reigns of Edward’s three sons, Æthelstan, Edmund and Eadred. Although Version A’s entries on Æthelstan’s reign are brief, the entries for Edmund and Eadred are even briefer. Version B up to 977 is equally brief on the kings from Edward to Edgar. This suggests that the entries for 924-955 represented a routine update of the *Chronicle* as the throne passed from Edward’s sons to his grandsons. As will be seen below, the differences and similarities between the two tenth-century versions of the *Chronicle* provide an example of the lack of continuity and homogeneity noted by Keynes and illustrate how scriptorial centres could influence the selection and dissemination of information.

¹⁰ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, 4, MS B, ed. by Simon Taylor (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. xi, xliv-xlvi.

¹¹ John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 325.

¹² Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 2.

While historical studies have tended to emphasize the brevity of the *ASC* entries on Æthelstan's reign, literary scholarship has deepened our understanding of the nature of those entries, providing valuable insights into the ways in which the formulaic structure and the paratactic style of the *Chronicle* influence the interpretation of its information.¹³ For example, Jacqueline Stodnick has demonstrated how the formulaic structure used to record deaths, successions, appointments, victories or defeats in battle was a useful convention in helping to create a sense of order across the *Chronicle* as a whole, enabling later events to be interpreted within the context of earlier ones.¹⁴ Thus royal succession could be presented as an orderly progression, while the similarity in the language for royal and episcopal elections identified them as being of equal status. As will be seen later, this has implications for how Æthelstan's succession has been interpreted both by the Anglo-Norman writers and by scholars in the nineteenth and later centuries. The use of this formulaic structure within a common chronological framework has given the *Chronicle* an appearance of overall unity. This is challenged by the variations in the content and detail included in the separate versions of the *Chronicle* and becomes even more apparent when the *Chronicle's* paratactic style is taken into account.

Janet Thormann's analysis of the use of parataxis in the *Chronicle* has illustrated how precise interpretation of the relationship between items is often difficult to establish with any certainty. Thormann has shown how the apparently simple recording of events in sequence leaves the reader unsure whether the text is merely providing a chronological account of events or implying cause and effect or some other hidden

¹³ For a useful overview of the *Chronicle* narratives and forms of interpretation, see Alice Jorgensen, *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 1-28.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Stodnick, 'Sentence to Story: Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as Formulary', in *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. by Jorgensen, pp. 91-111 (pp. 110-11). For an overview of the relevance of narrative form, ritual formulae and convention in providing coherence, order and meaning in medieval historical texts, see *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Tyler and Balzaretta, pp. 1-9.

relationship.¹⁵ This lack of clarity is particularly evident in the account of Æthelstan's succession in Version B and, as will be seen below, has given rise to very different interpretations on Æthelstan's status as Edward's heir and his relationship with the royal centre at Winchester.

The *Chronicle* has traditionally been seen as an annalistic list of events. Foot has argued that the *Chronicle* should more appropriately be read as a continuous and 'multi-textured' narrative text.¹⁶ As a result of studying the *Chronicle* as narrative, scholars have identified a number of subtexts: the story of West Saxon dynastic continuity; the forging of a sense of national unity and the recording of territorial possession and expansion.¹⁷ The accounts of Æthelstan's reign in both Versions A and B of the *ASC* can be interpreted from each of these different perspectives. For example, both Versions support the subtext of dynastic continuity, using traditional formulae to depict Æthelstan as Edward's successor as king and celebrating his success at Brunanburh as a dynastic victory worthy of a son of Edward; his military expedition to Scotland records his success in extending his territorial power, while at Brunanburh he is represented as securing a national victory over hostile invaders from abroad. My textual analysis below will examine these aspects in greater detail and show how awareness of the formulaic structure and paratactic style of the *Chronicle* text are central to understanding its narrative on Æthelstan and his reign.

Chronicon Æthelwardi

Æthelward's *Chronicon* was written towards the end of the tenth century with the earliest manuscript fragments being dated to the early eleventh century. Æthelward provides an example of a well-educated layman who could produce a readable Latin

¹⁵ Janet Thormann, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Poems and the Making of the English Nation', in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. by Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 60-85 (pp. 74-75).

¹⁶ Foot, 'Finding the Meaning of Form: Narrative in Annals and Chronicles', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, pp. 88-108.

¹⁷ Jorgensen, *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, pp. 14-15.

narrative which provides an overview of the history of England from the time of its settlement by the Saxons and the Angles down to his own day. In his *Prologus* he describes himself as a son of Æthelred, one of Æthelwulf's sons and brother of King Alfred.¹⁸ He is writing his account of the history of England for his cousin Matilda, abbess of Essen and great-granddaughter of Edward the Elder. The work, he claims is based on memory and what he had been taught by his parents and this makes it very much a personal and family narrative.¹⁹ His account of the West Saxon marriage links with leading families on the Continent reflect this. He is an independent source for the marriage of Alfred's daughter Ælfthryth to Baldwin II of Flanders and the marriages between Edward's daughters and Charles the Simple, Hugh the Great and Otto of Saxony.

The *Chronicon* has been described as a Latin translation of the *ASC*,²⁰ but A. Campbell, in his detailed analysis of the text, has identified a wider range of sources. These include Bede for Books I and II, knowledge of West Saxon marriages which are in line with Continental sources, access to material which matches entries in the *Annals of Ulster*, or occurs later in Symeon of Durham and Versions E and F of the *ASC*, and some information which appears to be from Anglo-Scandinavian material now lost.²¹ Campbell has commented that the dates which Æthelweard ascribes to Æthelstan's succession (926), Brunanburh (939), and Æthelstan's death (941), are not in line with Version A or B of the *ASC* and he has suggested that Æthelweard was using a West Saxon source now lost. This could explain why Æthelweard's account omits any reference to Æthelstan's expedition to Scotland found in both Versions A and B.

¹⁸ *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, ed. by Alistair Campbell (London: Nelson, 1962), 'Prologus', p. 2.

¹⁹ 'in quantum memoria nostra argumentatur, et sicut docuere parentes', 'as much as our memory provides evidence for and just as our parents taught us'. *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, 'Prologus', p. 1. For a discussion of Æthelweard's life and work see Campbell, *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, pp. xii-xvi, xxxvi-xxxvii.

²⁰ Sean Miller, 'Æthelweard', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, p. 18.

²¹ Campbell, *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, pp. xxix-xxx.

Campbell's theory is further supported by the adjustment Æthelweard makes in the dates and length of Edmund's reign, which brings his text back into alignment with the *ASC*.²² However, as will be seen later, although Æthelweard places Æthelstan's accession in 926, two years later than the earliest date in the *ASC*, it is by no means clear that he is referring to Æthelstan's initial succession to the throne on the death of his father Edward. As will be discussed later, Æthelweard's choice of language suggests that he may have been referring to Æthelstan becoming King of all Britain, which later versions of the *ASC* record as occurring after his capture of York in 926/7. Alternatively, it is possible that Æthelweard is recounting traditional family memories of dates rather than using a written source.

Æthelweard gives a high profile to Edward's achievements.²³ His comment on Edward's death is particularly unusual within the *Chronicon* as a whole:

Nono etiam anno post transacto migrat et Eaduerd, rex Anglorum. Hic finis, hic nomen nec non pertinacia cessit eiusdem.²⁴

When the ninth year afterwards had also been completed, Edward too, King of the English, passed away. This was the (his) end, here departed his name and also his achievement.

Despite the difficulties in translating Æthelweard's Latin, there is a clear implication in his words that Edward's death ended all that had gone before and this is reinforced by the very brief accounts which follow of the reigns of Æthelstan, Edmund, Eadred, Eadwig and Edgar. Æthelweard's comment on Edward's death and his wish to give special praise to Edward may be in recognition of Matilda's direct descent from him; it may also reflect family tradition or a Winchester version of events. Version A of the *ASC* includes a full and very complimentary account of Edward's achievements. As Michael Swanton has noted, there is a significant break in the manuscript at the year 924 and half a page is left blank. Swanton offers no suggestions as to why the

²² Campbell, *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, pp. xlii-xliii.

²³ Campbell, *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, iv, 4, pp. 51-54 and Introduction p. xviii.

²⁴ *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, iv, 4, p. 54.

manuscript should apparently break off at the end of Edward's reign. The half page would have allowed information on Æthelstan to be added but instead a copy of the laws of Ine and Alfred was inserted.²⁵ This gives an appearance of closure which adds emphasis to the reigns of Alfred and Edward. It may be that Æthelweard modelled his own narrative on this.

Æthelweard's account of Æthelstan's reign is very brief. Restricted to one short paragraph, it places the main emphasis on Æthelstan's victory at Brunanburh. This is highlighted as a major achievement of great significance, giving Æthelstan mastery of both land and sea and establishing an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity in England. Despite its brevity, the *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, together with Versions A and B of the *ASC*, provides the only surviving chronicle text from the tenth century. In my textual analysis below, I draw on both long-established and more recent scholarship to examine how different interpretations of these narratives have influenced our understanding of the ways in which Æthelstan was depicted as king. I have structured my analysis around the three events recorded for Æthelstan's reign in Versions A and B of the *Chronicle* under the section headings: Æthelstan as Edward's Heir, Æthelstan's Expedition to Scotland and The Battle of Brunanburh.

Æthelstan as Edward's Heir

In this section I analyse the similarities and differences in the way Æthelstan's succession is depicted in Versions A and B of the *Chronicle*. As a result, I question historical interpretations that Ælfweard, not Æthelstan, was Edward's intended heir on the grounds that these do not take sufficient account of the literary style and political purpose of the *ASC* texts. In order to test this, I examine other evidence for Ælfweard as Edward's heir and suggest an alternative interpretation: that the depictions of

²⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. and trans. by Michael Swanton, rev. edn (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), p. xxi.

Æthelstan's succession in Versions A and B of the *ASC* reflect political tensions between Mercia and Wessex over kingship and the rights of election.

Æthelstan's Succession in Versions A and B of the *ASC*

The texts below can immediately be seen as differing in terms of the amount and type of information they provide on Æthelstan's succession:

Version A	Version B
Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 173, fols 1 ^v -32 ^f	London, British Library, Cotton MS, Tiberius A III, fol. 178 + A IV, fols 1-34
924/925 Her Eadweard cing forþferde, 7 Æþelstan his sunu feng to rice. ²⁶	924 Her Eadweard cing gefor on Myrcum æt Fearndune, 7 Ælfweard his sunu swiþe hraþe þæs gefor on Oxnaforda, 7 heora lic licgað on Wintanceastre; 7 Æþestan wæs of Myrcum gecoren to cinge. ²⁷
Here King Edward died and Æthelstan his son succeeded to the throne.	Here king Edward died in Mercia at Farndon, and Ælfweard his son soon after this died at Oxford, and their bodies were placed at Winchester and Æthelstan was elected king by the Mercians.

The Winchester Version A, by using the standard formula 'feng to rice', depicts the succession from Edward to Æthelstan as straightforward and in line with custom and practice. There is no indication that Æthelstan was other than Edward's intended heir. Version B places Æthelstan's succession within a Mercian context. Edward dies in Mercia and the Mercians elect Æthelstan as king. In between these two events Version B includes Ælfweard's death and his burial with his father at the royal centre of Winchester. This ordering of events in Version B is capable of different interpretations. The paratactic style of the text can be read as a simple chronological sequence of events. More usually it has been interpreted as implying causation, that Æthelstan only succeeded to the throne because of Ælfweard's death and that Ælfweard was Edward's

²⁶ Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, p. 69.

²⁷ Taylor, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS B*, pp. 50-51.

intended choice as king.²⁸ Such an interpretation is questionable on two grounds—it does not take account of the alternative, chronological, interpretation of the text and, as I argue below, it lacks reliable and independent supporting evidence for Ælfweard as heir to the throne.

The recording of a king's death in the *Chronicle* is usually followed immediately by the name of his successor. Ælfweard is recorded in Version B as dying shortly after his father and, if he had been Edward's intended heir, it would be reasonable to expect his succession to have been noted in both Versions A and B. While it could be argued that the recording of Ælfweard's death in Version B supplanted mention of his succession, such an argument could not be used of Version A. The fact that Version A makes no mention of Ælfweard's succession, or, more importantly, of his death, suggests that at least by 955 there was no strong tradition at Winchester of Ælfweard as Edward's successor. Evidence for Ælfweard having been named as king is hard to find and I would argue that the evidence which does exist is insufficiently conclusive.

An important aspect of Taylor's analysis of Version B is his identification of the tenth-century regnal list, folio 178, as originally part of the manuscript text. This list, written in 977/8 or slightly later,²⁹ was also copied into the *Liber Vitae* of New Minster and makes no mention of Ælfweard. Similarly the two lists of West Saxon kings contained in the Hyde Register name Æthelstan as king immediately after Edward. The only specific reference to Ælfweard ruling as king is in the twelfth-century *Textus Roffensis*. This records that he reigned for four weeks.³⁰ On the surface this appears to

²⁸ This interpretation has been widely adopted. Sean Miller, 'Æthelstan' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp.16-17. Paul Hill, *The Age of Athelstan* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004), pp. 101-02. Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 39.

²⁹ David Dumville, 'The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List: Manuscripts and Texts', *Anglia*, 104 (1986), 1-32 (p. 9).

³⁰ Dumville, 'The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List', p. 29. *Textus Roffensis*, ed. by P. Sawyer (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1957-62), fol. 8. This length of reign is almost

provide the kind of independent evidence that Keynes suggested should be used to confirm information in the *ASC*. However, the fact that the earlier regnal lists do not record Ælfweard as king raises a question as to the reliability of the entry in this late text. One possible explanation is that the scribe of the *Textus Roffensis*, or his source, also interpreted the record of Ælfweard's death in Version B as identifying him as Edward's intended heir. As a result his name was included in the regnal list despite there being no independent record of his election as king. The ambiguity of the textual material in Version B and the lack of secure evidence for Ælfweard as Edward's intended heir, challenge the view that Æthelstan was only appointed king because of his younger half-brother's death. The silence of the Winchester Version A on Ælfweard's succession and the omission of any reference to his death, is also compelling evidence for Æthelstan's position as direct heir.

A separate argument has been put forward for Ælfweard as Edward's heir based on the record in the *Liber Vitae* of New Minster of the burial of two of Edward's sons shortly after Edward's own interment:

Quem etiam egregium patrem duo pignora filiorum Æðeluuerdus . scilicet atque . Ælfuuerdus . haud dispari gloria . in sepulturae consortio secuti sunt . quorum unus clito . alter uero regalibus infulis redimitus.³¹

This excellent father also, two dear sons, Ætheluuerdus (Æthelweard) namely, and also Ælfuuerdus (Ælfweard) of no less glory, followed in fellowship of burial, of whom one was ætheling, the other, indeed, wreathed with royal fillets.

In his analysis of the *Liber* text, Keynes took the phrase 'regalibus infulis redimitus' in strict sequence applying it to Ælfuuerdus, commenting that it implied he was royal in status but not yet a crowned king.³² He assigned to Ætheluuerdus the title of 'ætheling' a term frequently used to designate the son of a king but without implying he was heir

twice as long as the space of sixteen days between Edward's death and Ælfweard's recorded in the eleventh-century Version D of the *ASC* suggesting the scribe of the *Textus Roffensis* used a different source or was working from a badly copied *ASC* manuscript.

³¹ *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester*, ed. by Simon Keynes (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1996), p. 82.

³² Keynes, *The Liber Vitae*, p. 82.

to the throne.³³ However, the Latin use of ‘unus’ and ‘alter’ is open to different interpretations. Keynes assumed ‘unus’ referred to Ætheluuerdus because he is named first, and ‘alter’ to Ælfuuerdus as ‘the other’. But when two (duo) people or things are further defined as ‘the one’ and ‘the other’, Latin does not necessarily keep to the strict order of sequence.³⁴ The description of one as ætheling and the other as ‘wreathed with royal fillets’ could, therefore, apply to either Ætheluuerdus or Ælfuuerdus.

It is possible that the *Liber* text intended to record that two of Edward’s sons were already helping rule their father’s kingdom in the same way as Æthelwulf’s sons are recorded as helping their father in the ninth century. However, Ætheluuerdus is not recorded elsewhere as the name of one of Edward’s sons and Foot suggested that the Ætheluuerdus mentioned in the *Liber Vitae* was in fact Edward’s younger brother, who died in 922.³⁵ This earlier date for Ætheluuerdus’s death conflicts with the Latin, ‘in sepulturae consortio secuti sunt’, unless the entry is recording his later internment alongside Edward and Ælfuuerdus in a family tomb. If the entry is referring to Edward’s brother, then it is possible that he had exercised some royal power on Edward’s behalf further justifying his being described as ‘regalibus infulis’. One possible explanation of these ambiguities in the *Liber* text is that an alternative spelling of Ælfweard’s name as Ætheluuerdus for Ælfuuerdus had confused the scribe of the *Liber Vitae* so that he recorded both forms as referring to different sons of Edward.

The textual evidence considered above challenges historical claims that Æthelstan was not Edward’s intended heir but leaves unresolved a further, closely related historical theory that Edward intended Æthelstan only to hold power in Mercia

³³ Sean Miller, ‘Ætheling’, in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 13-14.

³⁴ Benjamin Hall Kennedy, *Revised Latin Primer* (Harlow: Longman, 1994), p. 150, n. 2.

³⁵ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 39, n. 35.

with Ælfweard as king of the West Saxons.³⁶ This theory also derives from interpreting the account of Ælfweard's death in Version B of the *ASC* as causative. It assumes that Æthelstan would have ruled as regent under Ælfweard and that he only assumed overall kingship because of his brother's death. Both earlier and later textual evidence exists to support such an arrangement. King Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd and her husband Æthelred are described by Asser as ruling Mercia in his name while Edgar is recorded in Version B of the *ASC* as first succeeding to the kingdom of Mercia under his elder brother Eadwig and then, on Eadwig's death, to the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia.³⁷ The silence of *ASC* Version A on both Æthelstan's election as king by the Mercians and Ælfweard's death, casts doubt on this theory of Æthelstan as Ælfweard's regent. The omission of both these events in Version A suggests that the scribe deliberately chose not to include them, perhaps because by the mid-tenth century they were no longer seen as relevant. Alternatively, I suggest that a clue to their omission in Version A and inclusion in Version B may lie in the *Chronicle* accounts of the relationship which existed between Wessex and Mercia.

Mercia versus Wessex

Version A records that, after the death of his sister Æthelflæd in 922 [918], Edward assumed overall control in Mercia as a result of the whole of Mercia voluntarily turning to him as their Lord. Version B records it rather differently stating that in 919 Edward took control in Mercia, depriving Æthelflæd's daughter Ælfwynn of all power and taking her away into Wessex. The tone of the Mercian material suggests antagonism towards Edward and Wessex and this is further supported by the omission from Version

³⁶ Ian Walker, *Mercia and the Making of England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), pp. 126-27. Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 38-39.

³⁷ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ed. by W. H. Stevenson, rev. edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 75, 83, pp. 57-58, 69. *ASC*, B, 957, 959.

B of any mention of Edward winning over-lordship of the North, something which is described in some detail for the year 924 in Version A. That there was antipathy between Wessex and Mercia is also conveyed by the omission in Version A of any reference to the military successes of Edward's sister Æthelflæd following the death in 912 of her husband Æthelred. These examples of apparently selective use of information support the idea that Mercia and Wessex deliberately used the *ASC* to record and disseminate their own interpretation of shared events. Set against this background, it is possible to interpret Version B's depiction of Æthelstan being elected king by the Mercians as a deliberate challenge to Wessex claims of the right to appoint the king of both Mercia and Wessex. This suggests that the different way in which Versions A and B depict Æthelstan's succession reflects rivalry between Mercia and Wessex over political status and kingly power.

Rivalry between Mercia and Wessex can be traced back to the eighth century and the reigns of Penda, Offa and Æthelbald when Mercian kings are said to have exercised overlordship of Wessex.³⁸ In the ninth century the *ASC* depicts Mercia as a semi-independent kingdom linked to Wessex by marriage agreements but ruled by its own king or Lord. Although Æthelred and Æthelflæd are described in Versions C and D of the *ASC* as the Lord and Lady of the Mercians, their actual status is far from clear. They issued charters and their position is represented as royal in a number of sources, including the *Chronicon* of Æthelweard.³⁹ It is also noticeable that Mercian troops are often identified separately in the *ASC* as fighting alongside those led by Wessex and, as will be seen later, the poem on the Battle of Brunanburh specifically identifies and celebrates their military prowess. These textual recognitions of the Mercians as a

³⁸ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 202-25.

³⁹ *ASC*, C, 912, 913; D, 910. For the charters see Electronic Sawyer, S 217-225. Views on the authenticity of the charters vary as do the designations used. The strongest evidence is provided by S 221 and S 224. *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, iv, 3, p. 50. For further details and discussion see Simon Keynes, 'Edward, King of the Anglo-Saxons', in *Edward the Elder 829-924*, ed. by N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 40-66 (pp. 43-44).

separate people indicate that during the tenth century the Mercians still retained a sense of their original independent identity.

Nicola Cumberledge's work on relations between Mercia and Wessex has identified how Mercia's semi-independent status was a constant feature of the relationship between Wessex and Mercia during the ninth to the eleventh centuries and was particularly evident at times of royal succession.⁴⁰ She has suggested that it would have been in West Saxon interests for the *ASC* to promote a view of a unified Wessex-Mercian kingdom but that this view would not necessarily be shared in Mercia.⁴¹ Her study provides a reason why the author of the Winchester Version A of the *ASC* might wish to omit any reference to Æthelstan's election as king in Mercia while the Mercians would have every incentive to assert their claim of having decided who should be king of both Wessex and Mercia. The entry on Æthelstan's succession in Version B of the *ASC* can thus be seen as not only challenging Wessex rights to decide the overall kingship but as reasserting the Mercian rights of independent identity which had been overridden by Edward when he seized power in Mercia for himself. The fact that this is the only entry on Æthelstan where Versions A and B differ from each other, adds further weight to this argument. If the text of Version B of the *ASC* is read in this light, it is possible to argue that the entry is deliberately formulated to claim that the Mercians were of equal status with the West Saxons: Edward dies in Mercia and the Mercians ensure that they elect his successor as king.

I suggest, therefore, that the accounts of Æthelstan's succession in Versions A and B of the *ASC* are more accurately read as statements of power, reflecting deep-seated and continuing political rivalry between Wessex and Mercia. As such they challenge some traditional historical interpretations of Æthelstan's status as Edward's

⁴⁰ Nicola Cumberledge, 'Reading between the lines: The place of Mercia within an expanding Wessex', *Midland History*, 27-28 (2002-03), 1-15 (pp. 12-13).

⁴¹ Cumberledge, 'Reading between the lines', p. 13.

heir and support later depictions of him as a king who was able to unite England into one kingdom and one people.

Æthelstan's Consecration as King

Versions A and B of the *ASC* initially dated Æthelstan's succession to the year of Edward's death in 924. Version B also records his consecration at 'Cingestune' in that same year. Sometime later the date of Æthelstan's succession in Version A was changed to 925 by another hand but with no reference to his consecration.⁴² The date given in Versions A and B for Æthelstan's death (27 October 939) and the details of the length of his rule (14 years and 10 weeks) also support 925 as the start of his reign but it is not clear whether this refers to his succession on Edward's death or to his consecration as king. This discrepancy of a year in the dates for Æthelstan's succession and consecration in Versions A and B has resulted in speculation that the texts depict Æthelstan facing serious opposition to his becoming king. It is possible, however, that the difference in the dates stem from variations in the way years were recorded in Anglo-Saxon times. Swanton has commented on the difficulties of establishing firm dates for events recorded in the *ASC*:

In the absence of any uniform system, chronological discrepancies between and even within manuscript recensions were inevitable. Clearly, events ascribed to a year beginning either in September or March might well be dated a year too early or a year too late by modern reckoning beginning 1 January.⁴³

This suggests that the dating of Æthelstan's accession to 924 or 925 could have resulted from a scribe using September as the start of the year. Edward's death in July would then be recorded as occurring in 924 and Æthelstan's consecration in September in 925.

It is also noticeable that neither Version A or B of the *ASC* suggest any opposition to Æthelstan's succession and consecration. Their silence on rival claims to

⁴² Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, p. 69.

⁴³ Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, p. xvi.

the throne, unrest or rebellion is in stark contrast to their accounts of events at the beginning of the reigns of Æthelstan's predecessors and successors. Alfred, Edward the Elder, Edmund and his brothers are all described in the *ASC* as facing opposition at the beginning of their reigns. Accounts of unrest at the beginning of Æthelstan's reign are found only in William of Malmesbury's twelfth-century *Gesta Regum* and the thirteenth-century *Egils saga*.⁴⁴ Finally, as there does not appear to have been any set timescale within which the king's consecration ceremony had to be held, a gap of a year was not necessarily extraordinary for the time.⁴⁵

These problems and uncertainties over how to read the information provided by Versions A and B of the *ASC* are also evident in Æthelweard's account of Æthelstan's accession and the dates for his reign. Following immediately after the entry recording the death of Edward, Æthelweard sums up Æthelstan's reign in one fairly short paragraph. Most of the paragraph describes Æthelstan's achievements at Brunanburh but it opens with a somewhat enigmatic reference to Æthelstan's coronation as king:⁴⁶

Anno etiam in quo imperii functus fuerat stefos Æthelstan rex robustissimus, transacti sunt anni a gloriosa incarnatione saluataris nostri D C C C C, supraque uiginti et sex.

In the year also in which the very strong king Æthelstan had undertaken the crown of overall rule, there had passed 900, and in addition twenty six years from the glorious incarnation of our saviour.

The lack of alignment between Æthelweard's date of 926 for Æthelstan's coronation and the dates in the *ASC* is noted in the section on primary sources above. However, his way of depicting Æthelstan's coronation merits careful analysis. While the use of periphrasis is typical of Æthelweard's style, his choice of language gives a particular

⁴⁴ *ASC* A, 871, 901, 942, 946. Details and analysis of the account in *Gesta Regum* are provided in Chapter 2, 'The Anglo-Norman Texts', and for *Egils saga* in Chapter 4, 'Æthelstan in the Scandinavian Tradition'.

⁴⁵ George Garnett, 'Coronation and Propaganda: Some Implications of the Norman Claim to the Throne of England in 1066', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 36 (1986), 92.

⁴⁶ *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, iv, 5, p. 54.

prominence to the event. Æthelstan's reign is dated by reference to Christ's birth, making it part of universal Christian history. The Greek word, 'stefos' is chosen to describe his coronation suggesting Byzantine traditions and his kingdom has become 'imperium' instead of the usual 'regnum' used by Æthelweard of his predecessors and successors. These words associate Æthelstan with both imperial Rome and Byzantium, depicting him more as an emperor than a king and Æthelweard may be deliberately recalling by his words some of the designations used to describe Æthelstan in his charters. As will be seen later, these depict Æthelstan as progressing from *Rex Anglorum* to *Rex totius Britanniae* and later *Basileus*. By his choice of the date 926, Æthelweard links Æthelstan's succession with the date given in the later versions of the ASC for Æthelstan taking control of Northumbria and beginning the extension of his power to include Britain as a whole. Æthelweard provides no other details apart from his account of Brunnaburh and he makes no reference to Æthelstan's expedition to Scotland although this is recorded in all the surviving versions of the ASC. Unless he was depicting Æthelstan as an exceptionally high status king from the beginning of his reign, it would seem that Æthelweard may have been reflecting Wessex family traditions of Æthelstan as a king of considerable standing based on the claim that he was *Rex totius Britanniae*.

Æthelstan's Expedition to Scotland

Versions A and B of the ASC describe Æthelstan's expedition into Scotland in identical terms, dating it to 933:⁴⁷

Her for Æþelstan cyning in on Scotland, ægþer ge mid landhere ge mid
scyphere, 7 his micel oferhergade.

Here King Æthelstan went into Scotland both with a raiding land-army and with
a raiding ship-army and ravaged much of it.

⁴⁷ Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, p. 70. Dated 933 in Versions A-C of the ASC, the eleventh- and twelfth-century Versions D, E and F dated it to 934.

Æthelstan is described as carrying out a successful raid using a traditional *Chronicle* formula ‘mycel oferhergode’. The expedition is included in all six versions of the *Chronicle* indicating that it was considered an event worthy of memory. The twelfth-century writers, John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon and Symeon of Durham, extend this brief narrative, enhancing their account of Æthelstan’s achievement either by drawing on other sources now lost or by providing their own version of events.⁴⁸ As will be seen in Chapter Four on the Scandinavian Tradition, it may also be remembered in the Kings’ Sagas as an expedition to support Æthelstan’s foster-son Hákon returning to Norway to become king.

The *Chronicle* records that Æthelstan used a combined land and naval force for his expedition but gives no further details. This is the first surviving record of an Anglo-Saxon joint force being used to confront the enemy, suggesting that, militarily, this was an ambitious move on Æthelstan’s part. The extreme brevity of the *Chronicle* entry has meant that historical research into the expedition has been based on the more detailed accounts provided by the Anglo-Norman writers. However, as will be seen below, the scholarly commentaries provided on these are equally applicable to the entries in the *ASC*.

Taking a political perspective, Sarah Foot has suggested that the expedition could have been a response to uncertainty in the North caused either by the death of Guthfrith of Dublin and Eadred of Bamburgh, or by the potential of rebellion under Æthelstan’s half-brother Edwin.⁴⁹ She also saw the fleet’s action as indicating there was a threat of a possible future alliance between the Scots and the Vikings as occurred at Brunanburh.⁵⁰ Foot, therefore, interpreted the texts as depicting Æthelstan acting prudently and taking preventative action in order to forestall future hostilities. Alex

⁴⁸ See Chapter 2.

⁴⁹ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 165.

⁵⁰ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 166.

Woolf has also linked the expedition to the death of Ealdred but suggested the cause was a power struggle between Constantine and Æthelstan as to who should take over control in Bernicia. He therefore interpreted Æthelstan's action as being more immediately pre-emptive and designed to secure his own hold on Northumbria.⁵¹

Woolf has also commented on the considerable planning and far-sighted strategy needed to ensure a viable route and the safe passage of a large, combined force travelling great distances into enemy territory.⁵² Using charter evidence to support his analysis, he has calculated that the expedition was successfully completed in three months between the Witans at Winchester on 28 May and Buckingham on 13 September of 934.⁵³ Constantine heads the witness list to the Buckingham charter as *subregulus*, and Woolf used this as evidence that he had been brought back south by Æthelstan with his army, supporting his theory that the expedition was to check Constantine's growing power in the north.⁵⁴ Woolf's analysis is heavily dependent on the reliability of the Æthelstan charters. Although the Buckingham charter is considered a genuine charter of 'Æthelstan A' type it only survives in an eleventh-century cartulary copy from Glastonbury and the witness list is abbreviated and notes only that Constantine and many others were present. It may be that Constantine's standing made retention of his name important. It is also possible that Constantine witnessed other charters now lost and that his alleged presence on this occasion was not of any special significance.

These scholarly analyses of Æthelstan's expedition suggest that the brief ASC entry credits him with a remarkable achievement. Rather than defending his kingdom Æthelstan is depicted as invading his enemy's territory and using, possibly for the first

⁵¹ Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789-1070* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 164-66.

⁵² Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, p. 165.

⁵³ Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, pp. 160, 166.

⁵⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. by Peter Sawyer: Electronic Sawyer, S 425, S 426.

time, a joint land and sea force. It is not clear whether the land army was separate from the fleet or whether Æthelstan was following Viking military practice with the fleet providing transport and the soldiers disembarking to fight on foot or commandeer horses to raid more widely.⁵⁵ Politically, he is depicted as so confident in his position as king that he was able to leave his own kingdom and travel beyond Northumbria into enemy territory in Scotland. Militarily, he is depicted as a leader who showed exceptional skills of strategic planning, organisation and implementation.⁵⁶ Although the *ASC* entry is very brief, it has ensured that a memory of his success in Scotland was handed down. The fact that it is recorded as one of only three entries on Æthelstan in the *ASC* gives it added importance but its significance has been overshadowed by the length and quality of the following entry on Æthelstan's victory at the battle of Brunanburh.

The Battle of Brunanburh

The Brunanburh poem, by celebrating Æthelstan's victory as being the greatest since the Angles and Saxons first came to Britain, depicts Æthelstan's achievement as the outstanding event, not only of his reign, but of the whole of the previous history of England. In its composition the poem draws on both Old English and Scandinavian traditions of poetry. As a result there is considerable scholarly debate as to whether the poem was originally a separate poem or whether it was composed specifically as a *Chronicle* entry. Bredehoft, based on his analysis of these debates and his own most recent research, has argued a strong case for assuming that the poem was written specifically for the *ASC*. He has argued that the poem was intended to show Æthelstan

⁵⁵ P. Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995). See also R. H. C. Davis, 'Did the Anglo-Saxons have Warhorses?' in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford, Oxbow, 1989), pp. 141-44.

⁵⁶ Alfred is credited with fighting a ship battle against the Vikings and Edward with using his fleet to transport his troops. *ASC*, A 896/97, 910/11. Æthelstan's expedition to Scotland appears to be the first recorded combined operation.

and Edmund as part of the heroic tradition of the Germanic kings of the Saxon race by depicting their actions and genealogy in heroic verse. The choice of genre, he suggests, was designed to provide a nostalgic view of the past.⁵⁷ Certainly, Bredehoft's interpretation would be in keeping with the analogy in the poem of the battle being the fiercest since the first Saxon invasion of Britain. Æthelstan's achievement at Brunanburh could then be seen as placing him within a long heroic tradition of warrior kings.

The fact that *Brunanburh* is apparently the first example of poetry being incorporated into the *ASC* prose text, gives Æthelstan a pre-eminence within the *Chronicle* as a whole. This is in direct contrast to the preceding, meagre account of his achievements and ensured that memories of Æthelstan were dominated by his success at Brunanburh. References to Brunanburh are found in a wide range of texts from the tenth to the seventeenth century, although many do so without going into detail.⁵⁸ As detailed consideration of the *ASC* poem rightly belongs alongside other examples of poetic depictions of Æthelstan, my analysis of the text of the poem is included in the section on Æthelstan in poetry. The following section looks at Æthelweard's account of Brunanburh. Although he is one of the authors who gives only a brief mention of the battle, he adds his own comments on its importance, its aftermath and the advantages it brought to England. This forms the major part of his otherwise very brief narrative of Æthelstan and it is possible that his personal evaluation of the battle's importance may also reflect family traditions.

Brunanburh in Æthelweard's *Chronicon*

⁵⁷ Thomas Bredehoft, 'The Battle of Brunanburh' in Old English Studies', in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Michael Livingston (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2011), pp. 285-94 (pp. 285-87, 291, 293).

⁵⁸ Robert Rouse, 'Romancing the Past: The Middle English Tradition', in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Livingston, pp. 315-23. Joanne Parker, 'Brunanburh and the Victorian Imagination', in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Livingston, pp. 385-407.

Æthelweard gives prominence to the battle at Brunanburh by making it the major part of his paragraph on Æthelstan and his reign. Instead of describing the battle details Æthelweard provides a commentary. The huge battle ('pugna immanis') fought against the barbarians ('barbaros contra'), was still in his day popularly known as the great war ('bellum magnum'). He then adds some details which describe the political outcome of the battle and depict Æthelstan as supreme on land and sea:⁵⁹

Tum superantur barbaræ passim turbæ, nec ultra dominari; post quos ultra pellit
oceanis oris, nec non colla subdunt Scoti, pariterque Picti; uno solidantur
Britannidis arua, undique pax, omniumque foecundia rerum, nec usque ad istas
motus adhæsit sine littora Anglorum foedere classicus.

Then are the barbarian troops vanquished on all sides, nor do they lord it any longer; afterwards, he [Æthelstan] drives them [the barbarian troops] beyond the shores of the ocean, nor do the Scots fail to bend their necks in submission, and the Picts as well; the fields of the British islands are united in one, on all sides there is peace, and plentiful supplies of all things, nor, ever since, has a fleet which has sailed to those islands of ours anchored to its shores without the agreement of the English.

Æthelweard's text contains several Roman allusions. He does not name the enemy leaders, Anlaf of Dublin and Constantine of the Scots, but depicts their forces as foreign and uncivilized barbarians who had previously lorded it over others. Æthelstan is depicted as pursuing his defeated enemies and driving them beyond the shores of the ocean. It is not clear what is meant by 'oceanus' but as it is the name traditionally given to the ocean surrounding the world it has overtones of Æthelstan driving his enemies to the ends of the earth. The phrase 'colla subdunt' describes the Scots and Picts showing submission using a traditional expression of servitude and military defeat found both in biblical and Roman texts. By these linguistic associations, Æthelstan is depicted as an equal of the successful kings of the Old Testament and the military leaders and emperors of ancient Rome. Unlike the ASC poem, no mention is made of the part played in the battle by Æthelstan's brother Edmund and Æthelstan is depicted as solely responsible for the victory and for the peace and prosperity which flowed from it. This

⁵⁹ *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, iv, 5, p. 54.

peace extends over the sea as well as the land, brings both unity and plenty and gives an impression of a golden age in England's history. Perhaps most importantly, Æthelstan is depicted as establishing total dominion over the land and seas of the island of Britain, so that still in Æthelweard's day ships could only come to anchor with the agreement of the English.

Æthelweard describes Æthelstan as 'rex uenerandus', a king to be revered. This term has ecclesiastical and hagiographic overtones which reflect Æthelstan's reputation as 'pius rex', a pious king.⁶⁰ This image of Æthelstan as a king righteous before God is also found in the ecclesiastical writings of Ælfric of Eynsham. In the epilogue to his translation of the *Book of Judges*, Ælfric refers to the battle at Brunanburh and depicts Æthelstan, alongside Alfred and Edgar, as one of the three Anglo-Saxon kings who were militarily successful because they had God's support, 'sigefæste þurh God':

Swa gelice Æðestan, þe wið Anlaf gefeagt 7 his firde ofsloh 7 aflimde hine sylfne, 7 he on sibbe wunode siþþan mid his leode.⁶¹

so also Æthelstan, who fought with Anlaf and destroyed his army and put him, himself, to flight and afterwards lived in peace with his people.

Ælfric, like Æthelweard, emphasizes Brunanburh as bringing peace to the people. As Æthelweard was a literary patron of Ælfric and commissioned several of his works, it is possible that Ælfric drew on Æthelweard's account for his own. However, his depiction of Æthelstan as a victorious king because he was pleasing to God is not unique. The tenth-century charters, book dedications and coin inscriptions produced during Æthelstan's reign provide, or imply, similar depictions of him as king.

Æthelstan's Charters, Coins and Book Dedications

Sarah Foot has argued persuasively for charters to be read as historical narratives which

⁶⁰ See the tenth-century poem *Rex Pius Æðelstan* in the section below on Æthelstan in Poetry.

⁶¹ *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. by S. J. Crawford, Early English Text Society, 160 (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 416.

reflect a structuralized knowledge of the past, even while copying a record of a past event from one piece of parchment to another. The texts of charters create a time-space located in relation both to past and future. One way to read them would be as historical narratives.⁶²

Foot's analysis concentrates on the narrative function of royal land charters recording donations to ecclesiastical foundations. She has commented that the charters held by an individual church or monastery were not just 'a' record of legal land tenure, but 'the' record, designed to avoid any rival claims and ensure 'that of all the plural memories and recollections available, only this one story was, and could be, told'.⁶³ Foot also commented that when read as a group of texts, the charters provided their own narrative version of the foundation's history.⁶⁴ This concept of charter as narrative designed to provide the incontrovertible version of events can equally be applied to Æthelstan's charters. But, as will be seen below, when Æthelstan's charters are read as a collective group they provide a number of different narratives.

As legal records of gifts and their named recipients, the charters depict Æthelstan as a generous donor of land to individuals and to ecclesiastical foundations. When read as complete documents, each charter gives a much fuller picture of Æthelstan as king, and when the charters are read in sequence they provide a narrative for his reign as a whole. For example, through their donor designations of Æthelstan the charters trace how his status changed during his reign; the florid Latin of the proems and curses modelled on Aldhelm, depict Æthelstan and his court as well-educated and learned; the content of the proems and curses show Æthelstan as a Christian king promoting the religious and moral teaching of the Church; the long witness lists record the depth of support shown by the Church and the loyalty of his nobles and those

⁶² Sarah Foot, 'Reading Anglo-Saxon Charters: Memory, Record or Story?', in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Tyler and Balzaretto, pp. 39-65 (p. 64).

⁶³ Foot, 'Reading Anglo-Saxon Charters', in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Tyler and Balzaretto, p. 63.

⁶⁴ Foot, 'Reading Anglo-Saxon Charters', in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Tyler and Balzaretto, p. 45.

designated as *sub-reguli* as a result of his military successes; the details of date and place tell how Æthelstan made himself visible to his people through the great councils held in different places across his kingdom.⁶⁵ The legal status of the charters gives added endorsement to these depictions of Æthelstan and helped embed them into social memory as ‘the’ version of his kingship while the extended use and copying of Æthelstan’s charters ensured that these depictions of him were perpetuated well into the thirteenth century and later.⁶⁶

I found that the arguments Foot advanced for treating charter as narrative can equally be applied to Æthelstan’s coin inscriptions and book dedications. As with the charters, the designs and the circumscriptions on Æthelstan’s coins provide a narrative describing Æthelstan’s progress from King of the English to King of all Britain. Initially they depict Æthelstan linking his rule with that of his father by retaining the same designs as are found on the Edward the Elder coins. Later they become distinctive of Æthelstan’s reign, using the text *Rex totius Britanniae* and finally introducing his image as crowned king. Similarly, the book dedications track the story of Æthelstan’s pious generosity to the Church through his donations made at different times throughout his reign. These three different sources, charters, coins and book dedications, when taken together, provide a cohesive narrative depicting Æthelstan as raised by God to be King of all Britain and achieving a position of royal power which exceeded that of his predecessors. It is not possible to state definitively that these depictions were devised as self-presentation by Æthelstan himself. However, their existence as official designations of him as king imply either his authorization or at least his agreement to their use. In the following sections I explore these depictions of Æthelstan in greater detail and argue that their narrative reveals aspects of him as king which have previously been overlooked.

⁶⁵ Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 128-36 and Appendix II, pp. 259-265.

⁶⁶ This is explored further in Chapter 2, ‘The Anglo-Norman Texts’.

The Charter Narratives: Æthelstan's Growth in Royal Power and Status

Some seventy charters still survive in Æthelstan's name, more than for any other Anglo-Saxon king. Scholarly analysis initially identified a large number as spurious, doubtful or forgeries. More recent research by Keynes has revealed that once spurious texts and later additions have been removed, thirty-nine of Æthelstan's charters can be accepted as authentic or trustworthy.⁶⁷ These he has classified into three groups based on scribal hand, layout, the content of the proems and curses and the witness lists:

A: Charters of King Æthelstan, 925-26

B: Charters of *Æthelstan A*, 928-35

Group 1 (928)

Group II (930)

Group III (931-33)

Group IV (934-35)

C: Charters of King Æthelstan, 935-39

Four of these charters survive in manuscripts dated to the first half of the tenth century:

London, British Library, Cotton MS, Ch. viii. 16A. s. x¹: Original: Old Minster Winchester. 12 Nov. 931 Lifton Devon. S 416.

London, British Library, Cotton MS, Aug. ii. 65 s. x¹: Original: Archives, Christ Church Canterbury. 28 May 934 Winchester. S 425.

London, British Library, Cotton MS, Aug. ii. 23 s. x¹: Original: Archives, Old Minster, Winchester. Dated 939. S 447.

London, British library, Cotton MS, Ch. viii. 22 s. x¹: Original: Archives, Christ Church Canterbury. Dated 939. S 449.

The first two of these, S 416 and S 425, belong to Keynes's Group B of the charters, written by the one scribe *Æthelstan A* and dated from the middle of Æthelstan's reign to around the time of his expedition to Scotland in 933/4. The two later charters in Group C, S 447, S 449, are written by different scribes and dated to 939, two years after the ASC date for the Battle of Brunanburh in 937. These four charters therefore span the

⁶⁷ Simon Keynes, *Register of the Charters of King Æthelstan*, Toller Lecture (2001), pp. 1-4. References to specific charters are from Electronic Sawyer.

greater part of Æthelstan's reign and provide contemporary accounts of Æthelstan's reign, predating the earliest manuscripts of Versions A and B of the *ASC* by approximately twenty years. Of special significance is the evidence they provide on how Æthelstan's designation as king altered during his reign. In his earliest charters Æthelstan is named as 'rex Anglorum' or 'rex Saxonum et Anglorum', 'King of the English' or 'King of the Saxons and the English'; in the charters for 931 and 934 he is described as 'totius Britanniae regni solio sublimatus', 'raised to the throne of the whole of Britain'; in the later two, he is given the designations of 'basileus Anglorum et eque totius Britanniae orbis curagulus (or gubernator)', 'supreme ruler of the English and guardian (or governor) equally of the whole of the territory of Britain'. Both *curagulus* and *gubernator*, like *basileus*, are derived from Greek. While *gubernator* (helmsman) is commonly used of kingship, *curagulus* is an unusual word in western Latin texts. It is etymologically derived from Justinian's *κουρακτενω* and used in the *Codex of Theodosius* to describe those responsible for legal and administrative matters in the Byzantine Empire.⁶⁸ The adoption of this title depicts Æthelstan as a Byzantine emperor but one who personally controls how the state and its laws are administered.

In the Table below, I show how this pattern in Æthelstan's designations is replicated across the charters listed as trustworthy by Keynes. By aligning the changes in Æthelstan's designation with the events recorded for his reign in Versions A and B of the *ASC*, I identify links between the narrative provided by the *Chronicle* and the narrative account in the charters. Through close analysis of the formulae used in the charters I identify links with parts of the *Second English Coronation Ordo* and suggest that these formulae reveal another narrative of Æthelstan as divinely ordained by God to be King of all Britain. I argue that the significant changes in the designations of the

⁶⁸ 'curago (curagente)' 'take charge, manage'. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968-1982). 'Ii quos curagenda[ri]os [...] provincialium consuetudo appellat', 'those whom provincial custom names as exercising care'. *Theodosiani*, ed. by Thomas Mommsen (Berlin: Weidmann, 1954), p. 290.

charters and in the portraiture on the coins, in both cases evident by the early 930's, provide strong support for Æthelstan having undergone a second coronation ceremony as King of Britain. I support my argument by reference to later textual evidence and to the Carolingian precedents set by Charlemagne and Charles the Bald with whom Æthelstan could claim to be related through the marriages of Æthelwulf and Eadgifu.⁶⁹

Table 2. Donor and Signature Designations in Æthelstan's Charters 925-939⁷⁰

DATE ON CHARTER	DONOR DESIGNATION	SIGNATURE
Group A: 925-26. ASC A and B: thelstan's Accession 924/925	Ego Adelstan: 925 rex Saxonum et Anglorum S 394. 925 rex Anglorum S 395. 926 Angulsaxonum rex S 396, 397.	
Group B: 928-35. ASC A and B: Æthelstan's Expedition to Scotland 933/4.	Ego Adelstan: 928 rex Anglorum S 399, S 400. 930-935 per eiusdem ^a omnipatrantis ^b dextram ^c totius Britanniae regni solio sublimatus: through the right hand of the same all accomplishing God raised to the throne of the kingdom of all Britain. S 379, 403, 405, 407, 412, 413, 416, 417, 418a, 418, 419, 422, 423 (totius Albionis), 425, 426, 434, 458, 1604.	930-935 singularis privilegii monarchia ^e praeditus rex: king endowed (or enriched) with the sole rule of outstanding privilege.
Group C: 935-39. ASC A and B: Battle of Brunanburh 937.	Ego Adelstan: 935-939 nodante Dei gratia basileus Anglorum et equae totius Britanniae orbis curagulus (or gubernator): by God's binding grace King of the English and guardian (or governor) equally of the territory of the whole of Britain. S 411, 429, 430, 431, 438, 440, 441, 442, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449. 938 S 441 basileus industrius Anglorum cunctarumque gentium in circuitu persistentium: diligent King of the English and of all the peoples established in the surrounding lands. 939 S 445 totius Britanniae privatum [primatum?] regalis regiminis obtinens: holding the primacy of the kingly rule of the whole of Britain.	Charters S 429 and S 430, both dated 935 and the earliest charters in this group, retain, only for the signatory designation, the terms rex Anglorum (S 429) or totius gentis Anglorum rex (S 430). All the others in Group C use rex totius Britanniae , king of the whole of Britain.

The minor differences in wording noted above suggest scribal choice or miscopying:

⁶⁹ Æthelstan's great-grandfather, Æthelwulf, married the daughter of Charles the Bald and his half-sister, Eadgifu, married Charles' grandson, Charles the Simple. These family relationships are considered further below and more fully in Chapter 3 on the Continental Tradition.

⁷⁰ Charter references are to the entries in the Electronic Sawyer collection.

930-935 Donor Designations:

^a *eiusdem* omitted: S 412, 413, 1604, 416, 418, 419, 379. ^b *omnitenentis*, S 417, 418a; *omnitonantis*, S 422, 423; *omnipotentis*, S 407, 434. (The similarity of these variants with ‘omnipatrantis’ suggests scribal miscopying or choice of a more familiar word.) ^c *quae Christus est* added S 407.

930-935 Signature Designations:

^e *florentis Brytanniae monarchia*, S 416; *totius florentis Brytanniae rex*, S 422; *(h)ierachia*, S 379, 407, 417, 423, 425, 426; *ierachia florentis Albionis*, S 434; *gerarchia* (a neo-compound or possibly a miscopying of *hierachia*), S 413, 1604.

935-939 Variations in the introductory phrase: ‘*nodante Dei gratia*’: *divina mihi adridente gratia*: divine grace smiling on me, S 411, 447, 449; *divina favente clementia/gratia*: by favour of divine mercy/grace, S 440, 445; *desiderio regni coelistis exardens favente superno numine*: burning with a fervent desire of the heavenly kingdom with the favour of God above, S 441, S 442.

The Table shows there is a remarkable consistency within each of the three charter groupings in the wording of the designations for Æthelstan, both as donor and as signatory, and in the accompanying religious formulae. Æthelstan’s donor designations across the three groups change progressively from a simple ‘*rex Anglorum*’ early in his reign to claims from *c.* 930 that he was ‘*totius Brittanniae regni solio sublimatus*’ and finally, from 935, ‘*basileus Anglorum*’ and ‘*curagulus*’ or ‘*gubernator totius Britanniae orbis*’. The change from ‘*totius Brittanniae regni solio sublimatus*’ to ‘*basileus*’ is supported by the four tenth-century manuscript charters, S 416, S 425, S 447, S 449. Charter S 449 in Group C also retains Æthelstan’s earliest title, ‘*rex Anglorum*’, as the signatory designation while others in the Group use ‘*rex totius Brittanniae*’ based on Æthelstan’s designation in Group B. This use of previous designations for Æthelstan’s signature serves as a reminder that, however much his official status had changed, he was still King of the English and King of all Britain.

The change in royal designation in the charters from *c.* 930 is accompanied by other changes in the composition of Æthelstan’s charters. A new style of proems and curses is introduced which draw heavily on Aldhelm’s Latin works. Michael Lapidge has commented that ‘certain of the most ostentatious of the royal charters from this

period are virtual centos of Aldhelm'.⁷¹ The effect is to depict Æthelstan as a king who is well-educated in Latin and his court as a place of some learning. In addition, the identification of a single hand, scribe 'Æthelstan A', supports the idea that some form of central administration was established at this time to ensure commonality of presentation and style. While Keynes disagreed with Pierre Chaplais's theory of a single ecclesiastical scriptorium based at Winchester,⁷² he did agree that a number of aspects indicated some form of centralized provision: the use of the same scribal hand; uniformity in proems and curses; similarity in the witness lists and the use of a similar style and layout in later charters.⁷³ He preferred, however, to argue for a scriptorial agency attached to the king's household which was mobile and able to draw up charters at any of the centres where the king and his councillors met. He suggested that the variations in the proems and curses of the later charters could be the result of scribes choosing their texts from earlier charters or perhaps from a set of model texts.⁷⁴ Whatever the administrative arrangements for the systematic production of Æthelstan's charters, it is clear that by c 930 both Æthelstan's designation as king and the format of his charters had been radically changed.⁷⁵

Historical research has tended to assume that these changes followed Æthelstan's taking power in Northumbria in 926/7 following the death of Sihtric, the Norse king of York, and the peace agreement at Eamont. The earliest surviving textual records for these events are the mid-eleventh-century MS of Version D of the *ASC* and the twelfth-century MS of Version E. Neither the tenth-century Versions A and B of the *ASC* nor the charters make any direct reference to Northumbria. However, the extended

⁷¹ Michael Lapidge, 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 4 (1975), 67-111 (pp. 73-74).

⁷² Pierre Chaplais, 'The Origin and Authenticity of the Royal Anglo-Saxon Diploma', in *Prisca Munimenta*, ed. by F. Ranger (London: London University Press, 1973), pp. 28-42 (40-42).

⁷³ Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'The Unready' 978-1016* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 24, 42-44.

⁷⁴ Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 39-42, 79-83.

⁷⁵ It is always possible that earlier charters using this new designation have been lost.

form of expression used in the charters to introduce Æthelstan's designation tells the reader that some event had occurred which was felt to justify a significant change in how Æthelstan's royal status was depicted. The wording of the new designation is also significant.

Charter Narratives: A Second Coronation

From c 930 Æthelstan's charters describe him as 'rex Anglorum, per omnipatrantis dexteram totius Britanniae regni solio sublimatus', 'king of the English, through the right hand of the all-accomplishing God raised to the throne of the kingdom of the whole of Britain'. The phrase, 'regni solio sublimatus', recalls the phrases, 'in solio regni', and 'in solium sublimatus', in the *Second English Coronation Ordo* preserved in the Ratold Sacramentary. Similarly the charter phrase, 'per omnipatrantis dexteram', echoes the opening of the *Benedictio* in the Ratold coronation ceremony, 'extendat omnipotens deus dexteram suae benedictionis', 'may the almighty God extend to you the right hand of his blessing'.⁷⁶ The simplicity of these formulaic phrases in contrast to the very florid Latin of the proems of the *Æthelstan A* charters suggests that they were intended to be recognized as ecclesiastical quotations from the coronation *Ordo*. It is also significant that Æthelstan is first described as, King of the English, and then as, raised to the throne of the kingdom of all Britain, implying that this wider sovereignty came later.

Recently, scholarly support has grown for the *Second English Coronation Ordo* to be accepted as the *Ordo* used for Æthelstan's consecration as king in 925.⁷⁷ The Ratold references to the king ruling Saxons, Mercians, Northumbrians and the whole of

⁷⁶ For detailed analysis see: P. L. Ward, 'An early Version of the Anglo-Saxon Coronation Ceremony', *English Historical Review*, 57 (1942), 345-61. *The Claudius Pontificals*, ed. by D. H. Turner, Henry Bradshaw Society, 97 (Chichester: Regnum Press, 1971), pp. xxx-xxxiii. Nicholas Orchard, 'Second Anglo-Saxon Coronation *Ordo*', in *The Sacramentary of Ratoldus*, Henry Bradshaw Society, 116 (Cranbrook: Boydell Press, 2005), pp. cxxix-cxxxvi.

⁷⁷ Janet Nelson, 'The First Use of the Second Anglo-Saxon *Ordo*', in *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters*, ed. by Julia Barrow and Andrew Wareham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 117-26. For a summary overview see Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 75-77.

Albion, clearly belong to an English context.⁷⁸ While this designation as king does not accurately describe Æthelstan's position at his accession in 924/925, it would be applicable following Æthelstan's becoming king over Northumbria in 926/7. The earliest surviving charter describing Æthelstan as 'totius Britanniae regni solio sublimatus' is dated to c 930, some three or four years later, although it is always possible that earlier charters using this designation have been lost. I suggest that the new wording of the charters depict Æthelstan undergoing a second ceremony of consecration as King of all Britain. This is also supported by changes in the inscriptions and designs of the coins produced during Æthelstan's reign.

Æthelstan's Coins

The earliest coins of Æthelstan's reign are similar to those of Edward's reign, with the king's name around the edge of the obverse and in the centre either a cross or the head of the king wearing a wreath or helmet (diadem). These were followed by coins of a new design, the Circumscription Cross and Circumscription Rosette. The circumscription on these coins included the designation of Æthelstan as 'Rex totius Britanniae' but usually abbreviated to 'REX TO BRI' or something similar. The final group of coins introduced a further innovation, retaining the REX TO BRI circumscription and showing Æthelstan as a crowned king, the first Anglo-Saxon king to be depicted on his coins in this way.⁷⁹ The design of the crown is unusual, a simple

⁷⁸ MSS K, P₁, 'regnum N. albionis totius', 'saxonum merciorum nordanhunbrorum scepra'. These references in the Ratold *Ordo* led Ward to suggest that the manuscripts preserved elements of an Anglo-Saxon coronation ceremony which was the basis for Edgar's coronation. Ward, 'An Early Version of the Anglo-Saxon Coronation Ceremony', pp. 345-50, 352. Nelson has suggested the English *Ordo* had both been influenced by, and contributed to, Continental *ordos*. Richard A. Jackson has noted that the *Benedictio* in the Ratold *Ordo* asks for the king to be protected by the prayers of Saint Gregory, apostle of the angels, a reference Jackson claims is unparalleled in the manuscripts of other Continental *ordos*. He assumes that *angelorum* was a misreading for *Anglorum*, but it is equally possible it was a direct reference to Bede's story of Pope Gregory describing the young slaves in Rome's market-place as angels not Angles. Richard A. Jackson, ed., *Ordines Coronationis Franciae* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1995), p. 169. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. by G. P. Goold, 2 vols (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), ii, 1, I, 200-01.

⁷⁹ Archibald and Blunt, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* 34, pp. xiv-xviii. Plates, I-XII.

band with three stems each surmounted by a small orb. The nearest equivalent identified so far is in the portrait of Lothar I in London, British Library, Additional MS 37768, fols 3^v-4^r. The band on Lothar's crown is shown as bejewelled but otherwise it provides a possible model for Æthelstan's.⁸⁰

Such a link would not be out of keeping with what is known of Æthelstan's Carolingian links. Lothar was half-brother to Charles the Bald whose daughter, Judith, married Æthelstan's great-grandfather, Æthelwulf, and whose grandson, Charles the Simple, was married to Æthelstan's half-sister, Eadgifu; the manuscript painting of Lothar is in a psalter which also links him with Byzantium through a visit from Byzantine ambassadors in 842; Lothar ruled Lotharingia from his centre at Metz. Æthelstan is reputed to have sent Otto of Saxony a Metz Gospel Book around the time of his marriage to Æthelstan's half-sister Eadgytha and later to have supported his nephew, Louis IV of West Francia, in retaining the territory of Lotharingia against Otto's attempts to seize it.⁸¹ The choice of Lothar's crown as a model for Æthelstan's would be in line with these Carolingian connections.

Dating of the coins has been difficult. Mostly it has been based on the evidence provided by the names of the moneymen or from the analysis of coin hoards containing Æthelstan coins. Because historically the eleventh-century *ASC* date of 926/7 has been accepted as the date from which Æthelstan took possession of York, the coins carrying the designation REX TO BRI have generally been dated to this time but there is clearly a danger of circularity in this, with the *ASC* and the coins being used to validate each other. Foot, in her recent analysis of the coins, has revisited this aspect and dated the coinage with the crowned head to sometime after 930, and thus in line with the charter designations from 930 onwards.⁸² The introduction of the crowned head of Æthelstan on

⁸⁰ Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 221-22.

⁸¹ For details see Chapter 3, 'Æthelstan in the Continental Tradition'.

⁸² Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 151-57.

his coins after the title, ‘Rex totius Britanniae’, was already being used on his charters, strongly suggests that Æthelstan underwent a second ceremony of kingship which went beyond the previous ceremony of kingly consecration and included a full coronation of the kind described in the *Second English Coronation Ordo*.

Other Evidence

Two other pieces of text seem to support this theory of a second ceremony which included coronation. The first is in the Old English manumission statement written in the eighth-century Gospel Book British Library Royal 1. B. VII :

Æðelstan cyng gefreode Eadelm forraðe þæs ðe he æræst cyng wæs . ðæs wæs on gewitnesse Ælfheah mæssepreost 7 se hired 7 Ælfric se gerefa 7 Wulfnoð hwita 7 Eanstan prafost 7 Byrnstan mæssepreost . se þe ðæt onwende hæbbe he Godes unmiltse 7 ealles ðæs haligdomes ðe ic on Angelcyn begeat mid Godes miltse 7 ic an ðan bearnan þæs ilcan ðæs ic þan fæder an :

King Æthelstan manumitted Eadelm very soon after he first was king. The witnesses of that were Ælfheah mass-priest and the household (or community), Ælfric the reeve, Wulfnoth the white, Eanstan the provost, and Byrnstan mass-priest. May he who changes that, have the anger of God and of all the relics which I, with God’s benevolence, have bestowed copiously on the people of England and I grant the children the same as I grant the father.

Commenting on the text, Keynes notes the unusual use of, ‘æræst’:

If *æræst cyng wæs* means, literally, ‘*first* became king’, it would imply that a distinction was understood between that occasion and a later event in the process by which Athelstan came to power, and thus that the manumission was associated with the earlier event but drafted after the later one (or in anticipation of it); but the words could be translated simply, ‘became king’, leaving it uncertain what stage in the process was intended.⁸³

Keynes did not elaborate further on the nature of the first and later events and he made no reference to Æthelstan’s claim of having given ‘copious’ donations of relics to the people of England, although this too implies the entry was made some time after Æthelstan, ‘first’, became king. The ambiguity of *æræst* leaves open, as Keynes has

⁸³ Keynes, ‘King Athelstan’s Books’, p. 186, n. 205. Keynes dismisses the idea that the manumission entry identifies the book as the one on which Æthelstan took his oath as king in 925, suggesting instead that the book may have belonged to Æthelstan and the entry made as a personal record of the manumission perhaps made at his accession in 924. Keynes, ‘King Athelstan’s Books’, p. 186-89.

commented, the possibility that it merely distinguishes Æthelstan's action of manumission on becoming king in 924/5 and its later recording in the Gospel Book. The transition from third person to first person in the text is also confusing. While it may be intended to replicate the terms of Æthelstan's original manumission, it may also, as Keynes suggests, be a contemporary record of his actions to mark a later event, perhaps by extending the terms of the manumission to Eadelm's children. If so, the contrast made with his first becoming king suggests that this short text may record an act of manumission to mark Æthelstan's later coronation as king of all Britain.

The second piece of evidence for a second ceremony lies in a thirteenth-century manuscript of a charter from Abingdon recording Æthelstan's donation to Abbot Cynath of land at Dumbleton in Gloucestershire. The charter is described in the *Historia Monasterii de Abingdon* and Joseph Stevenson has noted that despite the late date of the manuscript the author could have had access to tenth-century material at Abingdon.⁸⁴ Stenton's work on the Abingdon records suggested that the Æthelstan charters could not be accepted without qualification and Keynes, commenting on the complex history of the Dumbleton estate, noted that the charter might well be a forgery from the tenth or eleventh century.⁸⁵ Whatever the charter's basis, however, the author clearly wished to distinguish between Æthelstan's initial consecration as king and his later taking power in Northumbria and Cumbria:

v anno ex quo nobilissime gloriosus rex Anglosaxones regaliter gubernabat, tertioque postquam authentice Northanhimbrorum Cumborumque, blanda mirifici Conditoris benevolentia, patrocinando sceptrinæ gubernaculum perceperat virgæ⁸⁶

in the fifth year from which the glorious king was with the greatest nobility ruling the Anglo-Saxons as king and the third after, with the pleasing favour of

⁸⁴ Joseph Stevenson, *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1858), I, pp. xiii-xiv, 60-64.

⁸⁵ Frank Stenton, *The Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon* (Reading: University College, 1913), p. 38. Keynes, *Register of the Charters of King Æthelstan*, Toller Lecture (2001), p. 7.

⁸⁶ Electronic Sawyer, S 404.

the wondrous Creator, he legally had taken governance of the Northumbrians and Cumbrians with the protection of his sceptral staff

Taking 924 as the date of Æthelstan's consecration as king, the fifth year of his reign would be 929. His assuming rule over Northumbria and Cumbria three years before, gives a date of 926, the date in the mid-eleventh-century Version D of the *ASC* for his taking possession of York after the peace agreement at Eamont. The charter, by using 926 as a second regnal date, defines it as a key event in Æthelstan's reign and gives it equal status with Æthelstan's initial accession in 924.

Examples of a second coronation already existed on the Continent with Charlemagne, Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald, and occurred later in England with Edgar. All reflected a significant change in status or ratified the acquisition of additional territory. Given Æthelstan's Carolingian connections, a second coronation ceremony would certainly be a powerful way of depicting Æthelstan as a king of equal standing with his Carolingian relatives.

Charter Narratives: Æthelstan as 'Basileus'

The Charter Table above showed how after Æthelstan's expedition to Scotland in 933/4 his charter designation changed again. From 935 the imperial Byzantine term *basileus*, emperor, was used as part of the donor designation together with the titles of *curagulus*, guardian, or *gubernator* governor, of all the territories and peoples of Britain. This accumulation of titles seems designed to depict Æthelstan as having consolidated his position over his previous *sub-reguli*, Constantine and his allies, the kings of Cumbria and North Wales. The change to the more imperial style of designation assigns Æthelstan a status similar to Charlemagne's who was designated *basileus* by Byzantium in 812 but also retained his title of King of the Franks and Lombards.⁸⁷ The extent of Æthelstan's power is spelled out in more detail in the designations found in charter

⁸⁷ Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 17, 96.

S441, ‘*basileus Anglorum cunctarumque gentium in circuitu persistentium*’,⁸⁸ and S445, ‘*totius Britanniae primatum<?> regalis regiminis obtinens*’.⁸⁹ In these phrases Æthelstan is depicted as also exercising primacy of kingship as *basileus* over neighbouring peoples around the whole of Britain.

It is possible that the use of the title *basileus*, with its links to Charlemagne, may have been intended both to reflect Æthelstan’s family connections with the Carolingians and to emphasize the role he was currently fulfilling as guardian of his nephew, Louis, sole heir to the Carolingian kingdom of West Francia. Flodoard and Richer, writing on the Continent in the tenth century, both give accounts of Æthelstan’s care in securing Louis’s safe return in 936 to be crowned as Louis IV.⁹⁰ None of the surviving English tenth-century sources mention this but it is possible that Æthelstan’s adoption of the title *basileus* after 935 may be intended to signify his position as sole protector of Charlemagne’s line to the Frankish throne. As *basileus* he would also be able to claim precedence in his negotiations with continental rulers for Louis’s safe return as king.

Charter Narratives: Æthelstan as *Pius Rex*

The repetition of religious formulae which form part of all Æthelstan’s charter designations reinforces the depiction of Æthelstan as a king who claimed that his position did not rest solely on his election by the nobles or on his military achievements. He had been raised by God to be ‘*Rex totius Britanniae*’ and ‘*basileus totius Britanniae orbis*’.⁹¹ The charters continue this religious theme, their proems and curses depicting Æthelstan actively supporting the teaching of scripture and the practice of Christian values. Warning against worldliness and the loss of eternal happiness in heaven, the proems read like brief admonitory homilies from the king, reminding recipients and

⁸⁸ ‘King of the English and of all the peoples established in the surrounding land’.

⁸⁹ ‘Holding the primacy of the kingly rule of the whole of Britain’.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 3 on the Continental Tradition.

⁹¹ This concept of the king as God’s chosen one, finds fuller expression in the coronation ceremony in the Ratold *Coronation Ordo* with its references to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon. *Sacramentary of Ratoldus*, ed. by Nicholas Orchard, pp. cxxix-cxxxvi.

their witnesses of the Christian values they should uphold, while the conclusions warn them of the spiritual consequences of contravening the terms of the charter. These sometimes lengthy passages depict Æthelstan as a pious, Christian king, both promoting the scriptural and moral teachings of the Church and, by his charter gift, providing a practical example of the need to earn everlasting life through proper use of worldly possessions. The witnessing of the charters by archbishops, bishops and abbots gave ecclesiastical and monastic endorsement to this depiction of Æthelstan. Some of the charters also provide a picture of Æthelstan's personal piety, requiring as part of their terms that the recipient is to pray for Æthelstan or to give alms as part of the terms.⁹² Through these forms of religious narrative, the charters depict Æthelstan as the 'pius rex', a title which became closely associated with him.

Charter Narratives: Political and Legal

While Æthelstan's royal charters had an overt legal purpose in terms of granting land and privileges, I demonstrate below that they also had an overarching political purpose in helping to consolidate the power Æthelstan had won through his military victories. Æthelstan's earlier charters are significant for the number of witnesses, ecclesiastical and secular, from different ethnic groups. For example, charter S 416, delivered at the Witenagemot at Lifton (931), was witnessed by the archbishops of Canterbury and York, the *subreguli* Hywel and Idwal of Wales, seventeen bishops, five abbots, fifteen *duces* of whom seven had Scandinavian names,⁹³ and thirty four *ministri*. Charter S 425 delivered at Winchester (934) was witnessed by both archbishops, the subreguli Hywel of Dyfed, Idwal of Gwynedd, Morgan ap Owain and Teowdor of Brycheiniog, seventeen bishops, four abbots, twelve *duces* and and fifty two *ministry*.⁹⁴ The number and range of witnesses to these charters depict very large gatherings drawn from a

⁹² Electronic Sawyer: Prayers: S 403, 419, 422, 423, 429, 432, 438, 449; Almsgiving: S 379, 418.

⁹³ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 351 and n. 2.

⁹⁴ Five have Scandinavian names: Urm, Inwær, Halfdene, Scule and Hadd.

cross-section of the kingdom and bringing together leading men from across Britain. These charters, through the size of their gatherings and the range of witnesses, depict Æthelstan demanding a public expression of loyalty from his leading men and defeated enemies which enabled him to portray his kingdom as united under his rule. By 939 the number of ecclesiastical and lay witnesses is considerably reduced. Charters S 447 and S 449 are witnessed by the archbishop of Canterbury and eight bishops but only four *duces* and nineteen *ministri*. There is no mention of any *subreguli*. I suggest that this depicts Æthelstan as having established a secure kingdom following Brunanburh, and one in which he, as *basileus*, was sole ruler.

Eric John has commented on the way that Æthelstan's charters served as propaganda, sending a strong message to those who received them and to later inheritors:

It stands to reason that every charter, in addition to the ostensible purpose of the particular grant, bears impressive witness to the subjection of the magnates who sign and the supremacy of the king who gives. The charters were certain to be cherished and flourished, and every such occasion was necessarily a tribute to royal authority. In a world where fear and prestige mattered so greatly it is not probable that such an opportunity for propaganda would have been neglected. Indeed the titles of the charters are ample evidence that it was not.⁹⁵

The success of Æthelstan's charters in promoting this picture of his authority and standing is perhaps best illustrated by the number of surviving manuscripts from the Norman period which claim to provide legal evidence of Æthelstan's land grants to monasteries and churches. There are several reasons why Æthelstan charters might have been seen as particularly effective in resisting Norman attempts to appropriate Church and monastic lands.⁹⁶ Æthelstan's reign was notable for the number of charters issued;⁹⁷ given his designations as 'Rex totius Britanniae' and 'basileus', tracing land back to an

⁹⁵ Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae* (Leicester: University Press, 1966), pp. 48-49.

⁹⁶ H. R. Loyn, *The English Church 940-1154* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 99-101.

⁹⁷ Some thirty-nine can be considered authentic. Keynes, *Register of the Charters of King Æthelstan*, Toller Lecture (2001), pp 1-5.

initial royal charter in Æthelstan's name could give added status and make challenge by rivals more difficult; Æthelstan's alleged friendship with Rollo, founder of the Norman dynasty may also have played a part, ensuring that Æthelstan's name on a charter would carry more weight in the Norman courts.⁹⁸ At the same time, these charters ensured that Æthelstan's depiction as a powerful king and generous donor to the church was carried forward into the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A similar function was fulfilled by the records of Æthelstan's gifts of books to monasteries and churches. Although only six are known, the dedications they contain in Æthelstan's name reflect the images of Æthelstan provided by his charters and coins but also provide further, more personal depictions of Æthelstan as king.

Æthelstan's Book Dedications

Table 3. Book Donor Dedications

MS DETAILS	DONOR DESIGNATION	RECIPIENT AND DONATION DATE	DATE OF INSCRIPTION
London, Lambeth Palace 1370. Gospel book, IX ² . Probably a gift from Armagh.	Early charter designation 'Anglosæxna rex'. Date of presentation and occasion unknown.	Metropolitan See of Canterbury. Early in Æthelstan's reign?	Possibly x ²
BL Cotton, MS Claudius B. V. Acts of Third Council of Constantinople. Continental c. IX ^{end}	'Ætheltanus rex'. Possibly a gift from Otto in 929 but could have been obtained and donated at anytime in Æthelstan's reign.	Monastery at Bath: 925-939	Tenth century, contemporary or later.
BL Cotton MS Tiberius A. ii, Gospel book. Continental (Lobbes?) late ninth or early tenth century.	Uses the late charter designation 'Anglorum basyleos et curagulus totius Brytanniae'. Possibly a gift from Otto on his marriage in 929 or on his accession in 936	Christ Church Canterbury: 929 - 939.	936 to 962/68, by English scribe.
BL Royal 1. A. XVIII Gospel book (Brittany?) IX/X.	Possibly linked with Alan of Brittany 931-936.	St Augustine's Canterbury: 931-939.	10 th or 11 th , 13 th , 16 th century.
BL Cotton MS Otho B. ix. Gospel book. Continental (Brittany?); late ninth or early tenth century. MS burnt.	Possibly donated on Æthelstan's expedition to Scotland 934.	Chester-le-Street: 934?	c. 934?
Cambridge Corpus Christi College 183. Contemporary MS of Æthelstan's reign.	Donated on, or sometime after, Æthelstan's 934 expedition to Scotland.	Chester-le-Street: 934-939	Later tenth century?

⁹⁸ For details, see Chapter 3, 'Æthelstan in the Continental Tradition'.

The dedications depict Æthelstan as a king for whom finely produced books were suitable gifts which he then piously donated to chosen ecclesiastical and monastic centres. The recorded donation of two books to Christ Church and one to St Augustine's can be seen as royal recognition of Canterbury's leading ecclesiastical role in England and this is emphasized by the wording of the dedication of the Gospel Book London, Lambeth Palace 1370 to 'the Metropolitan See of Canterbury'. The donation of two books to St Cuthbert's community in Chester-le-Street depicts Æthelstan honouring the Church in Northumbria and both have been associated with his expedition to Scotland making these very personal gifts. Four of the book inscriptions carry personal messages:

Table 4. Book Dedication Inscriptions

<p>MS Cotton, Claudius B. V Monastery at Bath: 925-939</p> <p>Inscription tenth century, contemporary or later?</p>	<p>Gift made 'ob remunerationem suæ animæ'. Request for prayers for Æthelstan and his friends:</p> <p>et quisquis hos legerit characteres, omnipotenti pro eo proque suis amicis fundat preces</p> <p>and let whoever reads these words pour out prayers to the Almighty, for him and for his friends.</p>
<p>MS Cotton, Tiberius A. ii</p> <p>Christ Church Canterbury: 929 - 939.</p> <p>Inscription possibly added 936-962/68 by English scribe.</p> <p>A poem <i>Rex pius Æðelstan</i> is written on the reverse of the dedicatory inscription.</p>	<p>Gift made 'deuota mente'. First person request for prayers:</p> <p>Vos etenim obsecrando postulo . memores ut uestris mei mellifluis oraminibus consonaque uoce fieri prout confido . non desistatis .</p> <p>And indeed by entreaty I request, just as I am confident will happen, that you do not cease to be mindful of me in your mellifluous prayers and harmonious sound</p>
<p>Royal 1. A. XVIII</p> <p>St Augustine's Canterbury: 931-939?</p> <p>Inscription 10th century or 11/13/16th century?</p>	<p>Gift made 'deuota mente'. Request for prayers for Æthelstan and his friends:</p> <p>quisquis hoc legerit omnipotenti pro eo proque suis amicis fundat preces,</p> <p>let whoever reads this pour out prayers to the Almighty, for him and for his friends.</p>
<p>MS Cotton, Otho B. ix (Lost).</p> <p>Chester-le-Street: 934?</p> <p>Portrait and inscription contemporary tenth century?</p>	<p>Donation recorded as:</p> <p>Eathelstan Anglorum piisimus rex</p> <p>Æthelstan, the most pious king of the English.</p>

As the Tables illustrate, it is unclear whether these inscriptions were contemporary or added later. If later, they reflect a wish to keep alive Æthelstan's reputation for personal piety through their request for prayers for Æthelstan and, in two instances, for his friends. The use of the first person in MS Cotton, Tiberius A. ii, and the rhetorical language reminiscent of his charters, also give this request a direct personal touch. The descriptor 'pius' is used as a formal designation of Æthelstan both in the transcription of the lost MS Cotton, Otho B. ix and in the poem *Rex pius Æðelstan* written on the reverse of the dedicatory inscription in MS Cotton, Tiberius A. ii. This poem will be considered in detail in the section below on Æthelstan in Poetry and Song.

The dedication in Cotton Claudius B. V differs from all the others by giving a reason for Æthelstan's donation. It was made 'ob remunerationem suae animae'. Keynes translates this as 'for the salvation of his soul',⁹⁹ but the term *remuneratio* implies making recompense for some action. The main event in Anglo-Norman accounts of Æthelstan's life which cast a shadow over his reputation was the death of his half-brother Edwin. If the inscription is intended to designate the book as a form of recompense for Edwin's death, then it is the earliest surviving Anglo-Saxon reference to that event. I suggest that a possible reason for its presence at Bath may be because of links between Bath and the monastery of St Bertin in Flanders. Folcuin, writing in the tenth century, records that Edwin was buried by the monks of St Bertin and he later credits Æthelstan with providing accommodation at Bath for a group of monks from St Bertin who were opposed to the reformed Benedictine Rule imposed by Æthelstan's cousin Arnulf, Count of Flanders. This later event is dated by Folcuin to 944 and therefore to the reign of Edmund but Folcuin presents it as an act of kindness and piety by Æthelstan in gratitude for the burial of his brother.¹⁰⁰ As will be seen in Chapter 2 on

⁹⁹ Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', p. 160, n. 90.

¹⁰⁰ *Cartulaire de L'Abbaye de St Bertin*, ed. by M. Guérard (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1841), p. 145.

the Anglo-Norman Texts, accounts of Æthelstan's involvement in Edwin's death vary considerably. The earlier texts make no allegation of Æthelstan's involvement and it is only from the twelfth century that Æthelstan is depicted as personally responsible. Some of the possible reasons for this are discussed in that chapter.

The book dedications continue the depictions found in the charters and coins of Æthelstan as a king of high status noted for his generosity, piety and learning. The dates of donation are not easy to establish although the range of royal titles used suggests that they were given at various stages throughout his reign. Two manuscripts, BL Cotton MS Otho B. ix and Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 183, are the only ones which appear to have been produced in England. Both included a painting of Æthelstan personally presenting his book to St Cuthbert. Karkov has commented that the prominence given to the books in the portraits was 'a new and apparently original Anglo-Saxon addition'.¹⁰¹ Only the portrait in MS CCCC 183 has survived together with a description of the one in MS Otho B. ix, recorded in the Cotton library catalogue of Thomas Smith (1696) and the catalogue of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of Humphrey Wanley (1705). A comparison shows significant differences in how Æthelstan and Cuthbert are depicted in each portrait.

The portrait in the lost Cotton, MS Otho B. ix, is described as depicting Æthelstan on bended knee, wearing a crown and with a sceptre in his left hand while he offered a book to St Cuthbert with his right hand. St Cuthbert remained seated, with his right hand raised in blessing while holding a book in his left hand.¹⁰² The book contained two dedicatory inscriptions and Keynes concluded that the first of these and the portrait below it were probably intended as the primary dedication of the gift.¹⁰³

SCŌ CVDBERHTO EPĪS
EATHELSTAN ANGLO

To Saint Cuthbert, bishop,
Æthelstan most pious king

¹⁰¹ Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 58.

¹⁰² Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', pp. 171, 173-74.

¹⁰³ Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', p. 174.

RVM PIISIMVS REX
 HOC EVVANGELIVM OFFE
 RT

of the English presents this
 Gospel book.

Æthelstan's royal status is emphasized by his sceptre and crown. Cuthbert remains seated in his shrine while Æthelstan's kneeling posture depicts him piously and humbly offering his gift to him as a saint who, as bishop, provided an outstanding model of episcopal authority within the northern Church. As Cuthbert is also depicted holding a book, and with his hand raised in blessing, the portrait seems to indicate that Æthelstan's offering has been accepted. Karkov noted that the surviving descriptions of the portrait, if accurate, suggested the composition in Otho B. ix reflected Carolingian models.¹⁰⁴ This interpretation fits with the examples of Æthelstan's Carolingian associations mentioned above. This picture of Æthelstan's humble kingly piety is less clearly evident in the surviving painting in MS CCCC 183.

In MS CCCC 183 Æthelstan and Cuthbert are both standing and Cuthbert's hand is raised this time not in blessing but in acknowledgement. As before, both figures are shown holding books but Æthelstan is now holding his book open. Karkov commented that an open book was a common form of display:¹⁰⁵

it may be that this open book was intended to signify the very personal nature of the gift, and the tradition of learning on which it was based; this was, in other words, a book that had a special relevance to the king as well as to the saint and his community. It may be also that the depiction of two books, one open and one closed, was meant to convey the combined moments of giving and receiving, and to suggest the movement from present to past represented by this particular gift.

The idea of linking past and present seems particularly relevant in this context. As Karkov suggests, the texts in MS CCCC 183 appear to have been carefully chosen. The list below is drawn from Karkov's description of the manuscript but I have summarised the contents in order to provide an overview:

1. folios 2-58 Bede's prose life of Cuthbert and his two posthumous miracles from the *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

¹⁰⁴ Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁵ Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 59-60.

2. folios 59-67 lists of popes; disciples of Christ; archbishops and bishops
regnal lists and royal genealogies for Britain as a whole.
3. folio 67 arrival of the Saxons; dimensions of Britain from Bede.
4. folios 67-69 a collection of texts providing information on the world
and humankind including numbers and measurements relating
to human kind, the earth and Biblical times and texts.
5. folios 70-92 Bede's verse life of Cuthbert.
6. folios 92-95 Wessex hymn, Mass and rhyming Office of St Cuthbert.

From this, it can be seen that Groups 1, 3 and 5 all contain material from Bede while Groups 2 and 4 provide wider contextual material, Group 2 on England's ecclesiastical and royal history and Group 4 on aspects of the wider world, Biblical and Old Testament times. The whole book is enclosed by Bede's accounts of St Cuthbert's life in Groups 1 and 5 while Group 6 provides a fitting finale with the Wessex liturgical text in praise of St Cuthbert.

The book carries no written dedication. If, as in MS Cotton Otho B ix, the portrait is intended to act as a dedication, then the differences between the two noted by Karkov are even more relevant. For example, in MS CCCC 183 Æthelstan and the saint are both standing and Cuthbert's hand is raised in greeting or acknowledgement rather than blessing. He is also shown as coming out from his shrine where before he was said to be seated in his shrine. The king holds an open book but his head is bowed and turned away from St Cuthbert. Rollason has suggested that Æthelstan is now depicted as reading his book rather than presenting it. Karkov disagrees, pointing out that figures when reading are usually shown seated.¹⁰⁶ However, closer scrutiny of the painting could suggest that the depiction of Æthelstan three-quarter-face towards anyone looking at the picture is intended to draw the spectator into the action. Æthelstan can then be

¹⁰⁶ Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 59.

seen as a link between the spectator and St Cuthbert, drawing attention to the saint's acknowledgement or acceptance of him and his gift.

The addition of the Wessex hymn, Mass and rhyming Office of St Cuthbert in folios 92-95 depict the high regard in which St Cuthbert was held in Wessex. This is further emphasized by Mechthild Gretsch who comments that the form of the Office indicates it was intended for secular rather than monastic use.¹⁰⁷ While this may reflect a predominance of secular over monastic ecclesiastical centres at the time, it also means that the prayers and antiphons would have reached a wider public. Æthelstan's gift shows Wessex as a kingdom already involved in venerating Cuthbert but it also can be seen as depicting Æthelstan reinforcing links between Wessex and Northumbria at a time when national unity was very important.¹⁰⁸ Karkov also detected an attempt in the manuscript's genealogies to encourage national unity by showing that the people of the different regions shared a common descent.¹⁰⁹ Keynes has noted that this idea of unity is not supported by the ecclesiastical lists in MS CCC 183 which contain up-to-date information only on the Archbishops of Canterbury and the bishops for Wessex.¹¹⁰ However, as noted above, Canterbury received three of Æthelstan's book donations and I suggest that this linking of Wessex and Canterbury may have been designed to depict Æthelstan as strongly supporting the primacy of Canterbury over the English Church. At the same time, the emphasis on common ancestry and the inclusion of the Wessex-based liturgical material venerating Cuthbert, depict Æthelstan as strongly committed to celebrating the importance of St Cuthbert and the Church in Northumbria.

The dates of donation in the Table above for the two manuscripts would further support this idea. If, as suggested, MS Otho B. ix was presented by Æthelstan on his

¹⁰⁷ Mechthild Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of the Saints in late Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 85 -88.

¹⁰⁸ Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 150-52.

¹⁰⁹ Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 66.

¹¹⁰ Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', pp. 181-82.

way up to Scotland, then his kneeling pose in the portrait could reflect his seeking the support of Cuthbert for his expedition.¹¹¹ The date suggested for MS CCCC 183 places its donation after his victorious return from Scotland. This may explain why Æthelstan is now depicted as standing. Supplication is no longer necessary, victory has been achieved through Cuthbert's help and the saint comes out to greet him and acknowledge his offering of a second book in thanksgiving. Æthelstan is shown wearing the same crown as on his coins. Following his success in Scotland his charters will designate him as 'basileus Anglorum et eque totius Britanniae orbis curagulus'. Cuthbert's moving towards him with hand raised may therefore also be intended to represent the saint as accepting Æthelstan as *basileus*.

These depictions of Æthelstan through his charters, coins and book dedications are complemented by the celebration of his achievements in poetry and song. The following section examines four examples which have survived from the tenth century: the acrostic poem *ADALSTAN/IOHANNES*, the *Chronicle* poem on Brunanburh, the poem *Rex Pius* written on the reverse of the dedicatory inscription in MS Cotton, Tiberius A. ii and the fragmentary poem *Carta dirige gressus*. Together they provide poetic depictions of Æthelstan in Latin and in the vernacular which reflect different traditions—the royal court, the Church, heroic poetry and Carolingian verse.

Æthelstan in Poetry

Acrostic Poem *ADALSTAN/IOHANNES*

This poem was written into a late ninth-century manuscript from North-East France which contained works by Aldhelm and Prudentius. The acrostic poem foretells that Æthelstan will achieve greatness by defeating his enemies and achieving a period of

¹¹¹ Symeon of Durham claims Æthelstan sought Cuthbert's help and gave many gifts to his shrine while on his way to Scotland. See Chapter 2 on the Anglo-Norman Texts for details.

peace.¹¹² Michael Lapidge has suggested the poem was possibly written by John the Old Saxon who helped Alfred with his work of translation and that it was later added to the manuscript in the mid-tenth century.¹¹³ His interpretation that it was written for Æthelstan when a young boy has been challenged by Gernot Wieland who argues that the content is more appropriate to Æthelstan as king and may have been composed for his accession in 925.¹¹⁴ As will be seen below, it is also possible the poem may have been written after the battle of Brunanburh. The structure and language of the poem pose many difficulties for the translator but its overall purpose is clearly complimentary and depicts Æthelstan as destined to be remembered as pious and victorious.

Lapidge's translation and commentary on the poem provide a useful starting point for considering its meaning and significance, but I argue below that the poem can be seen as providing a richer depiction of Æthelstan than his analysis suggests:

<p>'Archalis' clamare, triumvir, nomine 'saxI'. Diue tuo fors prognossim feliciter aeuO: 'Augusta' Samu- cernentis 'rupis' eris -elH, Laruales forti beliales robure contrA. Saepe seges messem fecunda prenotat altam; iN Tutis solandum petrinum solibus agmeN. Amplius amplificare sacra sophismatis arcE. Nomina orto- petas donet, precor, inclita -oxuS.-</p>	<p>You, prince, are called by the name of 'sovereign stone'. Look happily on this prophecy for your age: You shall be the 'noble rock' of Samuel the seer, [Standing] with mighty strength against devilish demons. Often an abundant cornfield foretells a great harvest; in Peaceful days your stony mass is to be softened. You are more abundantly endowed with the holy eminence of learning; I pray that you may seek and the Glorious One may grant, the [fulfilment implied in your] noble names.</p>
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¹¹² Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C. 697 (S. C. 12541). The choice of book may reflect Æthelstan's Aldhelmian links noted in the language of his charters.

¹¹³ Michael Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athelstan', pp. 72-81.

¹¹⁴ Gernot R. Wieland, 'A New Look at the Poem "Archalis clamare triumvir"', in *Insignis Sophiae Arcator*, ed. by Gernot R. Wieland and others (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 178-92.

As part of his commentary on the poem, Lapidge quotes two acrostic poems addressed to King Alfred as earlier examples of the ‘same fumbling attempt to master the acrostic form that is found in John’s acrostic to Athelstan’.¹¹⁵ I suggest that the Æthelstan poem is much more enigmatic than the acrostic on Alfred and reads more like a riddle than a praise poem. For example, as Lapidge’s analysis explains, the poem twice puns the Old English form of Æthelstan’s name as ‘archalis saxi’ and ‘augusta rupis’, using a mixture of Latin and Greek vocabulary. Embedded in the ‘augusta rupis’ is a biblical reference to Samuel’s emblematic setting up of a stone to signify God’s support for the Israelites against the Philistines. Lapidge interprets this as indicating that, just as Samuel’s prophecy of the reigns of Saul and David was fulfilled, so will the poem’s prophecy of Æthelstan’s future reign.¹¹⁶ However, Samuel is also remembered for his task in seeking out and anointing the boy David as future king of Israel. This could suggest that the poem was also linking Æthelstan with David as a model of kingship. The ‘laruales beliales’, referring to the Philistines of the Bible, are easily seen as the Viking invaders, often referred to in the *ASC* as ‘pagans’. Æthelstan, as Samuel’s rock, then becomes the image of God’s support against these enemies.

The theme of Æthelstan as ‘rock’ is taken up again in the phrase ‘petrinum agmen’, literally ‘army of rock’. The use of ‘solandum’ can be seen as indicating that Æthelstan’s army will not need to fight because of the peace and security which his victories have won, depicted by ‘in tutis solibus’ and the pastoral phrases denoting plenty, ‘seges fecunda’ and ‘messe[m] altam’. If this was the meaning intended, it would suggest that the poem was written towards the end of Æthelstan’s reign and that the prophecy referred to how he would be remembered by future generations. Support for this may lie in the opening lines where ‘clamare’ would be more accurately translated as ‘you are acclaimed’ rather than ‘called’ (*vocare*).

¹¹⁵ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, p. 82.

¹¹⁶ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, pp. 73-74.

It is not only in its content that the poem can be read as a riddle, but in the ambiguity of its language which leaves certain lines open to different interpretations. For example, the term *triumvir*, literally one of three rulers, may be acknowledging Æthelstan as the third king in line, continuing the heritage handed down by his father Edward and grandfather Alfred; ‘aevum’ is ambiguous and can be translated ‘life’ or ‘lifetime’, or ‘age’, depending on whether the poem is seen as foretelling the events of Æthelstan’s life or his reputation in future times; the use of the Greek word ‘sophisma’, often translated as ‘wisdom’, is particularly ambiguous as in both Greek and classical Latin it is used of false wisdom. The use of ‘ortodoxus’, ‘the one of truth’, in the following line contrasts with this and raises the possibility that Æthelstan is being addressed as one who is richly distinguished by being a bulwark, ‘arx’, against false teaching whom God, author of truth, will support in achieving all the greatness the wordplay on his name implies. While my alternative translations are tentative, they illustrate the complexity and ambiguities to be found in the poem. It would seem that the author was not just writing an acrostic praise poem but a sophisticated verse which by its language and many allusions depicts Æthelstan as scholarly, appreciating the mixture of Latin and Greek vocabulary and enjoying the Biblical references and play on ideas. Æthelstan was later remembered as a king of some learning whose court attracted scholars from Ireland and the Continent. It is possible this poem was at least partly responsible for establishing that reputation.¹¹⁷

Rex pius Æðelstan

This poem, as noted above, was inscribed on the reverse of the prose dedicatory inscription in a ninth or early tenth-century Gospel Book, recording its donation by

¹¹⁷ Michael Wood, ‘The Making of King Aethelstan’s Empire: an English Charlemagne?’, in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. by Patrick Wormald (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 250-72.

Æthelstan to Christ Church, Canterbury.¹¹⁸ Lapidge identified the script of this poem as being in a Continental hand ‘probably of north or north-eastern French origin’.¹¹⁹ He commented that the diction and use of Graecisms were early examples of the Anglo-Latin poetry more characteristic of the later tenth century.¹²⁰ However, some examples he gives of unusual words I have found used in classical Latin literature and in the Vulgate or early Fathers.¹²¹ This suggests that whoever originally composed the poem was well-grounded in Latin, whether on the continent or in England. As will be seen below, written in elegiac metre, the poem describes Æthelstan as *pius*, famous world-wide and chosen by God to be king of the English and to subdue other kings to his rule:

Rex pius Æðelstan, patulo famosus in orbe,
 cuius ubique uiget gloria lausque manet,
 quem Deus Angligenis solii fundamine nixum
 constituit regem terrigenisque ducem
 scilicet ut ualeat reges rex ipse feroces
 uincere bellipotens, colla superba terens.

Pious king Æthelstan, celebrated in the whole world,
 whose glory flourishes everywhere and whose praise endures,
 whom God set firm on the foundation of the throne
 as king for the English race and leader over earth-born men,
 clearly so that he, as king himself, could, powerful in war,
 conquer fierce kings treading on their proud necks.

The description of Æthelstan as ‘King of the English and leader over earth-born men’, is reminiscent of the wording in Æthelstan’s later charters as King of the English and ‘curagulus’ or ‘gubernator’ of the surrounding peoples. I suggest that this and the description of him treading down the proud necks of fierce kings, are deliberately recalling Æthelstan’s victory at Brunanburh. This would date the inscription to

¹¹⁸ BL MS Cotton Tiberius A. ii.

¹¹⁹ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, p. 95.

¹²⁰ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, p. 96.

¹²¹ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, p. 96. ‘bellipotens’ - Vergil, *Aeneid*, 11. 8, describing Mars; Statius, *Thebaid*, 2. 715, describing Athena; Tertullian, *Contra Judaeos*, ch. 9. ‘terrigena’ - Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3. 118, 7. 141; *Heroides*, 6. 35, 12. 99; Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 5. 1411, 1427; Statius, *Thebaid*, 5. 506; Tertullian, *Adversum Marcionem*, 2. 12; *Vulgate*, Ps. 48. 3.

sometime after 937. This date would also align the poem with the likely date for the prose dedication which uses the same designation for Æthelstan as his later charters, ‘Anglorum basyleos et curagulus totius Brytanniae’.

Livingston also thought that the poem belonged to the last years of Æthelstan’s reign and has suggested that it was likely to have been written immediately after the battle at Brunanburh. He has commented that the phrase ‘colla superba terens’ was intended to recall the action of Joshua in the Old Testament, who ‘conquered the Promised Land for God’s chosen people’, and ordered his men to set their feet on the necks of the defeated five kings of Canaan whom he was about to execute. The figure five, as Livingston pointed out, is also the same as the number of kings said to have been killed at Brunanburh:

The association of Athlestan with Joshua is an obviously flattering one for both king and country, as it also associates the English with God’s chosen people, the Israelites.¹²²

The association with Joshua which Livingston makes is also capable of being extended to depict Æthelstan as the one who established England as the land of his chosen people. Joshua, however, did not himself tread on his enemies’ necks and the idea of trampling one’s enemies underfoot is found widely both in the Bible and in classical literature. It is therefore possible that the writer of the poem was combining both religious and Roman images of military triumph to depict Æthelstan as victorious over his enemies.¹²³

The remaining fourteen lines of the poem celebrate Æthelstan’s donation of the book to Christ Church and in particular the very splendid binding and decoration which he provided for it. Æthelstan is depicted as inspired by the Holy Spirit to embellish the

¹²² Michael Livingston, ‘The Roads to Brunanburh’, in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Livingston, pp. 1-26 (p. 24).

¹²³ The Vulgate and classical literature both use the verb *calco* for treading on a defeated enemy’s neck; *tero* carries the additional sense of repeated action and grinding down. Its use in this verse may be intended to represent Æthelstan’s repeated, or total, victory over his enemies.

book, thereby both personalizing the donation and ensuring that its appearance made it a worthy royal gift:

quod rex aureolis sacro spiramine fusus
 ornauit titulis gemmigerisque locis,
 quodque libens Christi ecclesiae de more dicauit
 atque agiae sophiae nobilitauit ouans.
 hoc quoque scematicis ornariet ora lapillis
 auxit ubique micans floribus ut uariis.

[the book] which the king, filled with the sacred breath [of the Spirit] ,
 adorned with golden titles and bejewelled parts,
 and which he willingly dedicated to the Church of Christ according to
 [his] custom
 and [this book] of holy wisdom he exultantly ennobled.
 this he also endowed, the covers to be decked with fashioned gems
 [the book] everywhere gleaming as if with different flowers.¹²⁴

The Gospel book is described as a book of holy wisdom, a reminder that it contained the word of God, but this is expressed through the Greek ‘*agiae sophiae*’. The Greek form may have been chosen for metrical reasons but, certainly today, and perhaps then, the phrase echoes the name of the great Hagia Sophia basilica in Byzantium, and may have been included as a reminder of the Byzantine status ascribed to Æthelstan by the title *Basileus*. This is the term used to describe Æthelstan in the prose dedication of the book reflecting the language of his later charters.

The poem ends by warning the community and the archbishop to take good care of the book and threatens with punishment anyone who takes the book away. This also echoes the content of the English prose inscription in the manuscript which Keynes considered was earlier than the poem. However, he also noted that Chaplais had identified the prose hand with that of a scribe responsible for several charters from 944

¹²⁴ Lapidge comments on the difficulty of the Latin in the lines ‘hoc [...] uariis’ assuming that ‘auxit’ is introducing an accusative and infinitive construction. Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, p. 96. However, Kennedy notes that in poetry the infinitive can be used to express purpose. *Revised Latin Primer*, para. 373, p. 164. The different meanings of ‘augeo’ are complex. I have chosen ‘endowed’ which links to the basic meaning of improving something which already exists and also incorporates an idea of purpose. Given the cluster of Greek words in this part of the poem, a possible alternative explanation is to see the sentence modelled on Greek use of the infinitive to express result.

to 949.¹²⁵ It therefore becomes increasingly difficult to say whether the prose dedication or the poem were included first and whether either was contemporary with Æthelstan and his reign or added later to celebrate him after his death. Whatever the date, the function of the poem remains the same, to provide and preserve a depiction of Æthelstan as a king of world-wide renown, known for his piety whose kingship and military success were ordained by God.

Battle of Brunanburh

The poem on the battle at Brunanburh in the *ASC* follows immediately after the account of his military expedition into Scotland and is the earliest surviving account of the battle. The poem has been variously interpreted as praising the whole Wessex royal dynasty;¹²⁶ a political statement designed to support the image and power of Edmund, Æthelstan's half-brother and successor;¹²⁷ a celebration of the survival of the whole Anglo-Saxon kingdom directly linked to Æthelstan's claim to be *Rex totius Britanniae*.¹²⁸ As will be seen below, I suggest that the poem is capable of all these interpretations, but argue that the underlying theme is one of Æthelstan as a heroic leader depicted in ways which reflect the traditions of both Old English and Old Icelandic/Norse poetry.

The opening lines of the poem provide a thumbnail sketch of Æthelstan as king:

Her Æþelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,
 beorna beahgifa, 7 his broþor eac,
 Eadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tir
 geslogon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum
 ymbe Bru'n'anburh. Bordweal clufan,

¹²⁵ Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', pp. 149-50.

¹²⁶ Donald Scragg, 'A Reading of *Brunanburh*', in *Unlocking the Wordhoard*, ed. by Mark C. Amodio and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), pp. 109-22 (pp. 116-17). Janet Thormann, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Poems', p. 65.

¹²⁷ Simon Walker, 'A Context for "Brunanburh?"', in *Warriors and Churchmen in the High Middle Ages*, ed. by Timothy Reuter (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), pp. 21-39 (p. 31).

¹²⁸ Joseph Harris, '"Brunanburh" 12b-13a and Some Skaldic Passages', in *Magister Regis*, ed. by Arthur Groos and others (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 61-68 (p. 67). Sarah Foot, 'Where English becomes British: Rethinking Contexts for *Brunanburh*', in *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters*, ed. by Barrow and Wareham, pp. 127-44 (p. 144). Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 171.

heowan heapolinde hamora lafan,
 afaran Eadweardes, swa him geæpele wæs
 from cneomægum, þæt hi æt campe oft
 wiþ laþra gehwæne land ealgodon,
 hord 7 hamas.¹²⁹

Here King Æthelstan, leader of earls
 ring-giver of warriors and his brother too
 Edmund the prince, gained undying fame
 in the contest with the swords' edges
 around Brunanburh. The wall of shields they cleaved through,
 their forged swords hacked the lime-wood shields,
 the sons of Edward, as was natural to them
 from their parent's pedigree, so that they often through battle
 with any enemy defended land, wealth and homes.

In these opening lines, Æthelstan is introduced as a warrior king who commands the loyalty of his followers, is generous in rewarding their service and wins undying fame through his victory in battle. Both he and Edmund, his brother and heir, are described as having shown the military prowess expected of them given their pedigree and their descent as sons of Edward.¹³⁰ This genealogical aspect has been seen by Thormann as central to the purpose of the poem and the fact that the poem both begins and ends with reference to this, provides strong backing for her argument. Thormann developed this theme commenting that Æthelstan and Edmund are depicted as 'actors in a heroic role they inherit through their genealogy' in which 'success in war is read as a confirmation of rightful inherited power: violence and the triumph of superior force are the performance of natural right'.¹³¹ Their success, therefore, can be seen as justifying the right of Wessex to rule England.

Joseph Harris has also interpreted the poem as depicting Æthelstan's unique position as 'Rex totius Britanniae', commenting that 'the extant Old English praise poems appear suddenly and strongly attested in the reign of Athelstan, the first West

¹²⁹ Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, pp. 70-71.

¹³⁰ As will be seen in Chapter 4 on the Scandinavian Tradition, Egill's *drápa* in honour of Æthelstan also emphasizes his generosity with gold rings and his noble lineage. These depictions of Æthelstan exemplifying his royal descent are in direct contrast to Hrotsvit's depiction of him as being of ignoble birth. See Chapter 3 on the Continental Tradition.

¹³¹ Thormann, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Poems', p. 65.

Saxon king to claim ‘all Britain’.¹³² However, the poem identifies Æthelstan only as ‘cýning’, not as king of Wessex. It is only at the end of the poem that Wessex is mentioned when Æthelstan and Edmund are described as returning to their land and kin among the West Saxons:¹³³

Swilce þa gebroþer begen ætsamne,
cýning 7 æþeling, cyþþe sohton,
Wesseaxena land, wiges hr‘e’ mige.

In the same way, then, the brothers, both together,
king and ætheling, sought their kin,
the land of the West Saxons, exulting in their valour.

I suggest that this single reference to Wessex emphasizes that Æthelstan is being praised first and foremost as an individual who is already established as King of all Britain.

Donald Scragg has argued that the poem should be seen in a wider ASC context and he has linked it with the later poem on the *Five Boroughs*. He sees both as emphasizing the role of Æthelstan and Edmund in expanding ‘the new order established by Edward: unity of the English and Danes under one rule, completing the design begun by King Alfred’.¹³⁴ Simon Walker has also stressed the importance of Edmund in the poem. He noted that ‘the ‘Brunanburh’ poem is almost as much in praise of the ætheling Edmund [...] as of the king himself’.¹³⁵ Based on linguistic evidence and the specific references to Mercian valour in the battle, he conjectured that the poem could have been composed in the mid-940s in Mercia, possibly in a Worcester scriptorium and been intended to bolster Edmund’s position as king of Britain.¹³⁶ However, Walker’s statement that the poem is ‘almost as much in praise of the ætheling Edmund’ concedes that Æthelstan is the main subject. Although the linking of king and ætheling gives

¹³² Harris, ‘‘Brunanburh’ 12b-13a and Some Skaldic Passages’, p. 67. Harris assumed that the poem was written 937-939.

¹³³ Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, p. 72.

¹³⁴ Scragg, ‘A Reading of *Brunanburh*’, p. 117. However, this interpretation is not supported by the prose entries in Version A of the ASC which give no impression of progression from Alfred to Edmund but rather of a pattern of repeated acquisition and loss of territory which continued under Æthelstan’s successors.

¹³⁵ Walker, ‘A Context for “Brunanburh?”’, p. 31.

¹³⁶ Walker, ‘A Context for “Brunanburh?”’, pp. 34-36.

equal status in the battle to Edmund, it is not unusual for both king and heir to be celebrated together.¹³⁷ A pro-Mercian origin for the poem could also be seen as supporting a pro-Æthelstan stance given his alleged election as king by the Mercians. Nevertheless, despite these reservations, the poem's later repetition of the close association of the two brothers suggests that Walker is right in seeing the poem, at least in part, as a praise-poem of Edmund's achievements as a young prince and heir to the throne.

The closing lines of the poem have been much debated as evidence that the poem's main purpose was to glorify the English as one nation under Æthelstan:¹³⁸

Ne wearð wæl mare
 on þis eiglande æfer gieta
 folces gefylled beforan þissum
 sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgað bec,
 ealde uðwitan, siþþan eastan hider
 Engle 7 Seaxe up becoman,
 ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
 wlance wigsmiþas, Wealles ofercoman,
 eorlas arhwate eard begeatan.

Never yet in this island
 was there ever more slaughter
 of people consigned to the sword's
 edges before this, as books tell us,
 old authorities, since there came here
 from the east Angles and Saxons,
 sought out Britain over the broad ocean,
 proud war-smiths overcame the British,
 warriors eager for glory invaded the country.

Bredehoft has commented that these lines link the victory at Brunanburh with a 'heroic Migration-era past' and represent it as one which involves all the Anglo-Saxons.¹³⁹

Foot agrees and comments that as a result

Æthelstan appears as heir to the *bretwaldas*, those earlier English kings who had also achieved military success against the British, among whom was his ancestor Ecgberht.

¹³⁷ David Dumville, 'The Ætheling: A Study in Anglo-Saxon Constitutional History', *ASE*, 8 (1979), 1-33.

¹³⁸ Batley, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, p. 72.

¹³⁹ Bredehoft, *Textual Histories*, pp. 102, 117.

She adds, however, that the poem's generalised description of the battle means that Æthelstan's contribution is implied but not defined so that Brunanburh is 'a victory of a nation, not just of its royal leaders'.¹⁴⁰ However, the emphasis in the closing lines is not on victory but on the ferocity of the battle and the amount of bloodshed it caused. Although Æthelstan and Edmund are not referred to by name, the use of the phrase 'sweordes ecgum' echoes the 'sweorda ecgum' in the opening lines. Later they are described as returning home rejoicing, not in their victory but in their valour. This serves as a reminder that, whatever the outcome for the nation as a whole, the dominant theme of the poem is about victorious warriors in battle.

Literary analyses of the poem have highlighted two other significant aspects which I suggest have an important bearing on how we should interpret the way Æthelstan is depicted in the poem. They are the relationship between the poem and other Old English poetry and the stylistic and linguistic features which show skaldic influence. Alistair Campbell's analysis of the poem identified twenty-one half-lines found elsewhere in Old English poetry, twenty-three nearly identical half-lines and ten examples of individual words and expressions which suggest a poetic origin.¹⁴¹ Of the fifty four examples Campbell gives, forty-two occur in the description of the battle. Given that the battle forms the major part of the poem, this is not surprising. What is perhaps more significant is that although the examples are fairly evenly spread they are not found in lines which refer to the Mercians, the number of kings killed, the references to Anlaf, the Northmen, Dingsmere and the war-hawk as one of the animals of death. I suggest that this shows the poem was composed using poetic formulae with the details specific to Brunanburh added as original composition. It therefore places the

¹⁴⁰ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 171.

¹⁴¹ *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Alistair Campbell (London: Heinemann, 1938), pp. 38-40. Campbell identified that eleven of these forty-four half-lines were also found in *Beowulf*.

depiction of Æthelstan and the victory at Brunanburh firmly within a tenth-century tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Campbell's analysis also identified that for its treatment of the battle, 'parallels must be sought among the poems of the Norse skalds rather than in the earlier Old English poetry'.¹⁴² This aspect was further explored by Joseph Harris. From his close analysis of lines 12b-13a of the poem he suggested that there were stylistic and linguistic parallels with the *lausavísa* of the tenth-century skald Kormakr and with the *Höfuðlausn* of the tenth-century skald Egill Skallagrímsson.¹⁴³ John Niles, building on Harris's work, suggested that the poem 'is best read within the context of an emerging tenth-century Anglo-Norse poetics'.¹⁴⁴ He agreed with Harris's acceptance of Norse influence in some of the vocabulary and kennings used in the poem and added further examples.¹⁴⁵

Niles also commented on the style of the poem as unusual among Old English texts because it was 'a quintessential poem of boasting and scorn', which exulted in the amount of blood spilled and depicted the enemy as 'humiliated' ('æwiscmode') and the victors as 'gloating in battle' (his translation of 'wiges hremge').¹⁴⁶ In conclusion, Niles agreed with the observations of N. Kershaw that *Brunanburh* is closer in spirit to the *Battle of Hafsfjord* of the ninth-century Norse skald Þorbjörn hornklofi, than to surviving Old English verse.¹⁴⁷ If Kershaw and Niles are correct in their analysis,

¹⁴² Campbell, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, pp. 37-38. For a summary of more recent scholarship in this area see Robert E. Bjork, 'Scandinavian Relations', in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 388-99 (p. 393).

¹⁴³ Harris, 'Brunanburh' 12b-13a and Some Skaldic Passages', pp. 63-65.

¹⁴⁴ John D. Niles, 'Skaldic Technique in 'Brunanburh'', *Scandinavian Studies*, 59:3 (1987), 356-66 (p. 356).

¹⁴⁵ *cnear* 'warship'; *sceard* 'deprived'; *gubafoc* 'battle-hawk or eagle'; *felde dænnede / secga swate* 'the field resounded with the blood of men'. He added to these, *garmitting* 'spear-meeting'; *gumena gemot* 'assembly of men'; *wæpengewrixl* 'weapon-exchange' and, possibly, *ðær læg secg mænig / garum ageted* 'there lay many a man poured out with spears'. Niles, 'Skaldic Technique in 'Brunanburh'', pp. 359-63.

¹⁴⁶ Niles, 'Skaldic Technique in 'Brunanburh'', p. 358.

¹⁴⁷ Niles, 'Skaldic Technique in 'Brunanburh'', p. 359.

Æthelstan is depicted as linked by skaldic association with Haraldr hárfagri, who was said to have established himself as the first king of all Norway just as Æthelstan was said to have established himself as king of all Britain.¹⁴⁸ The linguistic and stylistic content outlined above, suggest that the poem was aimed at an Anglo-Scandinavian, or perhaps more specifically an Anglo-Norse, audience.¹⁴⁹ Whether or not the audience recognized the literary connections mentioned above, I suggest they were likely to have recognized the added status given to Æthelstan through the use of poetic and skaldic techniques. Thormann has commented on the *Chronicle* poems as a way of establishing a sense of a shared history and a united sense of the present, based on a shared heroic tradition. The literary links in the Brunanburh poem could certainly serve such a purpose. It is also more clearly spelled out in the closing lines. In likening the battle at Brunanburh to the original victorious conquest of Britain by the Angles and Saxons, the poem depicts Æthelstan's victory as finally fulfilling and justifying that first invasion by consolidating all that the Anglo-Saxons had achieved in making England their own. Æthelstan's success at Brunanburh can be seen as both a warning to anyone who opposes the rule of Wessex and a reassurance that any future invaders will be similarly repelled with great bloodshed. This suggests that the poem's celebration of Æthelstan's victory at Brunanburh was as much a celebration of his personal political power as of his military supremacy. The Brunanburh poem is the first, the longest, and the only one of the *Chronicle* poems included in all the Versions A-D. By using Æthelstan as the first king celebrated in this way, the *Chronicle* scribes have given him a unique position in its historical narrative.

¹⁴⁸ As will be seen Chapter 4 on the Scandinavian Tradition, links between Æthelstan and Haraldr hárfagri form a key part of the Norse saga tradition.

¹⁴⁹ Æthelstan's charters were increasingly witnessed by *ministri* with Scandinavian names. For examples see the section above on Charters, Coins and Book Dedications.

Carta Dirige

The surviving fragmentary text of the *Carta dirige gressus* has been described as ‘an example of celebratory verse commemorating the king’s territorial authority and military success’.¹⁵⁰ I argue there is strong evidence that this text was sung or recited over a period of time before being committed to writing. Such oral transmission suggests that the story of Æthelstan’s success in the north of England became part of English historical tradition. The date of composition is unclear but the references in the verses to Sihtric, Constantine and the Saxons appear to refer to events after the peace agreement Æthelstan is said in Version D of the *ASC* to have made at Eamont in 926. The content is straightforward. The letter is to take good wishes and news of Æthelstan’s achievements to the court.¹⁵¹ He is described as ‘glorious through his deeds’ and depicted as now controlling the whole of Britain. Sihtric is dead and Constantine of Scotland has hurried to declare his loyalty to Æthelstan and enter his service. The verses end with a wish for the well-being and long life of all through God’s grace.

The simplicity of the content focuses attention on the central aspects of its depiction of Æthelstan. He is a king who deserved to be termed *gloriosus*, a description of him also found in prose, because he had united the whole of Britain under his rule. Jayne Carroll has suggested that, as a praise poem, the *Carta dirige* could have come from, or at least been approved by, the royal court and may have been specifically written to promote the concept of Æthelstan’s power as king.¹⁵² W. H. Stevenson noted

¹⁵⁰ Scott Thompson-Smith, ‘*Preliorum Maximum*: the Latin Tradition’, in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Livingston, pp. 269-83 (p. 270).

¹⁵¹ The queen and prince are specifically mentioned and as there is no record of Æthelstan marrying it has to be assumed that these are to be interpreted as referring to his step-mother, Eadgifu, and one of his half-brothers, either Edwin or Edmund.

¹⁵² Jayne Carroll, ‘Concepts of Power in Anglo-Scandinavian Verse’, in *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages*, ed. by B. Bolton and C. Meek (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 217-33 (pp. 223-26).

in his edition of the verses that they closely reflected a ninth-century poem addressed to Charlemagne by ‘Hibernicus exul’,¹⁵³ and this suggests that whoever composed the words may have intended to depict Æthelstan as like Charlemagne in his achievement.

The poem contains the phrase ‘cum ista perfecta Saxonia’, which Lapidge translates as ‘with this England [now] made whole’. Carroll interprets this as meaning that the boundaries of Æthelstan’s power had already been defined thus giving his achievement a historical context. The phrase is a difficult one. Lapidge’s interpretation of ‘Saxonia’ as referring to England recalls the Saxon invasions and is reminiscent of the closing lines of the poem on Brunanburh. It is possible, however, that the poem is referring to the fulfilment of the territorial ambitions of the West Saxon kings with Æthelstan, third in line, completing the work begun by Alfred and continued by his father Edward, reflecting the promise made to Alfred by St. Cuthbert.

The text is preserved in two manuscripts, Durham Cathedral Library, A. II, 17, pt 1, 31v and British Library, Cotton Nero A. ii, 10v-11v. From the script, Michael Lapidge has dated these to the late tenth or early eleventh century. He suggested Northumbria, possibly Chester-le-Street, as the place of origin for the Durham manuscript and St Germanus in Cornwall as the most likely source for the Cotton MS Nero A. ii.¹⁵⁴ Both places are associated with Æthelstan, Chester-le-Street through the contemporary manuscript Æthelstan donated to St Cuthbert’s shrine, and St Germanus by Anglo-Norman sources which claim that Æthelstan established a bishopric there. Both areas represented the furthest regions of Æthelstan’s kingdom, giving particular relevance to the survival of the manuscripts in these two areas. However, Lapidge

¹⁵³ *Poetae Latini Anni Carolini*, ed. by E. Dümmler and others, *MGH*, 4 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1881-1923), I, 399-400. W. H. Stevenson’s version of ‘Carta dirige gressus’ is printed in *The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse*, ed. by S. Gaselee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 61.

¹⁵⁴ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, pp. 86-87.

considered that neither of the two manuscripts was a copy of the other,¹⁵⁵ and this suggests that the words of *Carta dirige gressus* may have been more widely spread across the country.

As these are the earliest source for Æthelstan's conquest of Northumbria, I have included both surviving texts in full together with Lapidge's reconstruction and his translation of the better preserved BL, Cotton MS Nero version. Lapidge noted that the manuscript was written as prose and the stanza format provided is, therefore, his own. In addition I have provided excerpts, with my own translation, from the *Hibernici Exulis Carmina* which I identify as useful in helping to explain some of the Latin usage of the *Carta dirige gressus* texts. As a result of my analysis, I argue that some of the Latin in the *Carta dirige* approximates more to a phonetic rendering of the words, suggesting that the texts preserve an orally transmitted tradition.

¹⁵⁵ Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems', p. 87.

CARTA DIRIGE GRESSUS

A: <i>Cotton Nero A</i>	B: <i>Durham A. II</i>	C: Lapidge's Reconstruction	D: <i>Hibernici Exulis Carmina</i>
<p>Carta dirige gressus per maris et navium tellurisque spatium ad reges palatum</p> <p>regem primum salute regimen et clitanam clarus quoque commitis militis armieros</p> <p>quorum regem cum Æþelstanum ista perfecta Saxonia uiuít rex Æþelstanum perfecta gloriosa</p>	<p>Quarta dirie gressus per maria navigans stellarumque spatium ad regem spalacium</p> <p>regem primum salutem regem non aditunem clerum quoque conditum armites milierum</p>	<p>Carta, dirige gressus per maria navigans tellurisque spacium ad regis palacium</p> <p>Letter, direct your steps sailing across the seas and an expanse of land, to the king's burh.</p> <p>Regem primum salutem ad reginam clitonem, claros quoque comites, armigeros milites</p> <p>Direct first of all your best wishes to the queen, the prince, the distinguished ealdormen as well the arm-bearing thegns.</p> <p>Quos iam regit cum ista perfecta Saxonia: uiuít rex Æþelstanus per facta gloriosus</p> <p>Whom he now rules with this England [now] made whole: King Æthelstan lives glorious through his deeds!</p>	<p>Carta, Christo comite per telluris spatium ad Caesaris splendidum nunc perge palatium</p> <p>Letter, with Christ as companion through the space of the earth to Caesar's splendid palace now make your way</p> <p>dic, protegat dominus sic Francos armigeros regem, clerum, comites, milites belligeros.</p> <p>Say, may the Lord thus protect the Frankish men of arms the king, the clergy, the counts, the valiant soldiers</p>

<p>ille Sictric defunctum armatum in prelia Saxonum exercitum per totum Britannium</p> <p>Constantinus rex Scottorum et uelum Bryttanium saluando Regis Saxonum fideles seruitia</p> <p>dixit rex Æþelstanus per Petri preconia sint sani sint longuevi saluatoris gratia</p>	<p>illic Sitric defuncto armature prelio sex annum excerssitum uiuuit rex Adelstanum</p> <p>There Sihtric [...]</p> <p>the king lives [Æthelstan]</p> <p>Constantine</p>	<p>Ille, Sictric defuncto, armat tum in prelio Saxonum exercitum per totum Bryttanium</p> <p>He, with Sictric having died, in such circumstances arms for battle the army of the English throughout all Britain.</p> <p>Constantinus rex Scottorum aduolat Bryttanium; Saxonum regem saluando, fidelis seruitio.</p> <p>Constantine, king of the Scots, hastens to Britain: by supporting the king of the English [he is] loyal in service.</p> <p>Dixit rex Æþelstanus per Petri preconia: sint sani, sint longuevi saluatoris gratia</p> <p>King Athelstan said [these things] through the announcements of Peter: may they be well, live long, through the Saviour's grace!</p>	<p>dic ut Caesar Karolus perpeti praeconio [...] sint sani, sint longuevi saluatoris gratia</p> <p>Say with continuous laudation that King Charles [...] may they be healthy, may they be</p>
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			long-lived by the Saviour's grace.
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My arguments for interpreting Versions A and B as texts originally sung or recited can be summarized as follows:

Versions A and B are written in the iambic dimeter catalectic metre. Norberg, identifies this rhythmic metre as typical of texts written to be sung, quoting *Carta dirige gressus* as an example.¹⁵⁶

Version A uses the same two final lines as the Carolingian poem, ‘sint sani sint longuevi salvatoris gratia’. This suggests that the ‘perpeti praeconio’ which precedes these lines may also have been retained in Version A but reproduced as ‘per Petri preconia’ because it represented what was heard.¹⁵⁷

The Latin grammar and syntax of Versions A and B cause considerable difficulty and there are several examples where the form of the Latin suggests that the written text was based phonetically on the sound of the words. For example, Lapidge has noted the use of phonetic transcription in the use of ‘dirie’ for *dirige* and ‘armieros’ for *armigeros*, ‘representing the palatalization of intervocal -g- in late West Saxon’.¹⁵⁸

Other examples are:

the final letter of one word being run onto the beginning of the next as in Version B ‘navigans/stellarum’;

the similarity in sound, differently written, in the phrase ‘ad reges palatum’(Version A) and ‘ad regem spalacium’ (Version B);

the verbal echoes between ‘clerum quoque conditum armites milierum’ in Version B and ‘clarus quoque commitis militis armieros’ in Version A, and ‘Saxonum exercitum’

¹⁵⁶ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, pp. 87-88. Dag Norberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Medieval Latin Versification*, trans. by Jan Ziolkowski (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2004), pp. 130, 136 and n. 23, 140, n. 38.

¹⁵⁷ The retention of this phrase in Lapidge’s reconstruction of the poem has given rise to considerable scholarly discussion as to how ‘Peter’ should be identified. Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, pp. 92-93. See also Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 66 and n. 12. If my suggestion on the transcription of ‘per Petri preconia’ is correct, speculation on the identity of ‘Peter’ is unnecessary.

¹⁵⁸ Lapidge, ‘Some Latin Poems’, p. 88, n. 130.

in Version A and ‘sex annum excerssitum’ in Version B; the echoes in both texts of the Carolingian ‘clerum, comites, milites belligeros’ and possibly the use of ‘dixit’ in Version A, if this is modelled on the ‘dic ut’ of the Carolingian poem.

Version B also seems to have attempted to provide a rhyme at the end of each line in the manner of the Carolingian model: spatium/spalacium; salutem/aditunem; conditum/milierum; defuncto/prelio; excerssitum/Adelstanum. These provide an end-of-line beat like a marching song and help to structure each verse by signalling a breathing space although the word-endings fail to make good grammatical sense. However two phrases stand out as being written in correct Latin, ‘uiuit rex’, ‘the king lives’, and ‘sint sani sint longuevi salvatoris gratia’, ‘may they be well, live long, through the Saviour’s grace’. The first is very similar to the *vivat rex* said by all the people at a king’s consecration. The second reads like a set prayer which could have been widely used. The correctness of their form compared with the rest of the text suggests that the familiarity of these phrases to those singing or reciting the words, or to a scribe writing out the text, ensured their correct Latin spelling.

The fact that the text is in Latin and modelled on a Carolingian poem indicates an original clerical source. Its present form could suggest that Latin learning was in decline and the peculiarities of the Latin resulted from copyists using poor quality manuscripts or copying texts which they were unwilling or unable to amend. However, I suggest it is more likely that the text was handed down orally over a period of time and the Latin modified in the process. It is also possible that the text was originally composed as a song. The phonetic characteristics of the text suggest it might have been used over a period of time, the Latin being orally transformed through accent, dialect and repetition by those with limited knowledge of Latin. The textual versions which have survived may have been written down from oral recitation. Alternatively the

scribes may have reproduced the text from memory as they sounded the words in their heads.

As noted above, the content is straightforward. It does not use extravagant praise and reads more like a simple reminder of Æthelstan's achievement in bringing the whole of Britain under his rule. It is the only surviving tenth-century source which mentions Sihtric, the main sources being the later Version D of the *ASC* and the Anglo-Norman historians. However, the details in the poem are very fragmentary and I suggest that the historical value of the *Carta dirige gressus* lies less in the information it seeks to provide and more in its depiction of Æthelstan as a subject of story and celebration in song.

Conclusion

The small number of disparate tenth-century sources which has survived illustrates the chance factors experienced by every scholar of the past and the relevance of Robinson's advice on the need to bring sources together. However, in this chapter I have shown the importance of avoiding aggregating information from sources without taking account of their different contexts. My literary and linguistic analysis of the sources and of their related scholarship has shown that embedded in the surface information they provide are more hidden narratives about Æthelstan and his reign.

The entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Chronicon* of Æthelweard, although very brief, are important texts in that they are the only tenth-century historical narrative versions of his reign known to survive, they form the basis for the later Anglo-Norman historical texts and they continue to be used as essential sources for Æthelstan's reign today. In my analysis of Versions A and B of the *ASC*, I have drawn on both codicological and literary scholarship and as a result I have questioned the reliability of generally accepted historical interpretations that Winchester was hostile to Æthelstan and that his half-brother Æthelweard was Edward's intended heir for the

throne of Wessex. I concluded that these interpretations should be regarded as hypotheses rather than historical facts. By relating the texts to their wider contexts, I added my own hypothesis that the texts contained another narrative, that of political rivalry between Mercia and Wessex. I supported this by reference to the West Saxon regnal records and the wider context provided by earlier and later entries in the *ASC*.

My analysis of Æthelstan's charters, coins and book dedications showed that these sources have individually received much scholarly attention but that there has been relatively little attempt to explore how their depictions of Æthelstan interrelate with each other and with contemporary and later texts associated with Æthelstan. I therefore extended my analysis of the linguistic interrelationship between the charter designations of Æthelstan and the *Second English Coronation Ordo* to include the relationships between the charters and coins, and between these and the events for Æthelstan's reign recorded in the *ASC* tenth-century texts and the *Chronicon* of Æthelweard. Based on this analysis I suggested that Æthelstan had undergone a later coronation sometime after 926/7 to legitimize his claim to be King of all Britain. This was independently supported by the Old English manumission statement in the Gospel Book British Library Royal 1. B. VII and by Æthelstan's regnal dates on a thirteenth-century charter manuscript from Abingdon. Æthelstan is known to have had Carolingian family links through his great-grandfather's marriage to Charles the Bald's daughter and the marriage of his half-sister Eadgifu to Charles's grandson. The examination of precedents for a second coronation revealed examples of Carolingian second coronations by Charlemagne, Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald to mark the acquisition of additional titles or territory.

A further narrative was now emerging from the tenth-century sources of Æthelstan as Carolingian in his sentiments and actions. This was also supported by the evidence of Carolingian influences in the designation of *Basileus* used on his later

charters, the style of the painting of Æthelstan and St Cuthbert in MS Otho B.ix, the imagery in the poems on Æthelstan and the composition of the ‘Carta dirige’ modelled directly on a poem addressed to Charlemagne.

While many Anglo-Saxon kings may have been celebrated in poems, it is mostly those on Æthelstan which have survived. The fact that one poem has been incorporated into the *ASC*, another into an ecclesiastical book dedication and a third apparently handed down orally over time, depicts him as a king who was particularly celebrated in poetry, at court, within the Church and more widely. The poems do not claim to be historical records but as contemporary literary statements they echo many of the depictions of Æthelstan found in the chronicles and in the charters, coins and book dedications. For example he is celebrated as militarily successful and as a pious and powerful king, who earned God’s favour and that of his saints and brought peace and unity to his country. The poetic genre empowers their authors to use literary, biblical and poetic imagery through their references to Old Testament figures and their use of Roman, Byzantine, Carolingian, Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Scandinavian analogies. In these ways they depict Æthelstan as part of universal history.

Apart from Æthelweard’s family-based *Chronicon*, the other sources are all drawn from formal, public statements—entries in the *ASC*, the royal charters, the coin inscriptions, formal book dedications and praise poems. They are political narratives drawn up by, or with the authorization of, Æthelstan in order to promote his prestige in his lifetime and ensure lasting memories of him in the future. Æthelstan lacked the support of a contemporary biographer his grandfather King Alfred had enjoyed. Until William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century, the formal documentation and poetry produced during Æthelstan’s reign were the main source of memories of his reign. As the brief entries in Versions A and B of the *ASC* illustrate, they did not provide the kind of long-lasting memory their rhetoric suggests was intended.

My analyses in this chapter have illustrated the interdependence of historical research and literary scholarship and demonstrated how a comparative and multi-disciplinary approach can contribute to a greater understanding of narrative sources and their relationship with each other. As a result I have opened up opportunities for further research, both into ways of reading the tenth-century primary texts on Æthelstan and his reign, and into the narrative bases for Æthelstan's second coronation and his Byzantine and Carolingian aspirations.

Chapter Two

Æthelstan in the English Tradition

The Anglo-Norman Texts

Introduction

Robert Bartlett has characterised the period 1075-1225 as ‘one of the great ages of historical writing in England’.¹ Bartlett’s list of the more significant literary works includes those of four authors who have traditionally been seen as important sources for the study of Anglo-Saxon England:²

William of Malmesbury	<i>Gesta Regum</i>
Symeon of Durham	<i>Historia Regum</i> ³
Henry of Huntingdon	<i>Historia Anglorum</i>
Roger of Howden	<i>Chronicon</i>

The cause of this flowering of Anglo-Norman literature from the late eleventh to the thirteenth century has been ascribed to Norman patronage and propaganda and to an English determination to retain their memories of the past. Elisabeth Van Houts has also shown how texts written for Norman patrons provided accounts of the past which legitimized their power by showing how Norman rule built on and continued Anglo-Saxon traditions.⁴ Bartlett has argued that the works of Symeon, Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury provide pro-English attempts to preserve the memory of

¹ Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075-1225* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 616.

² Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, p. 618. In this thesis I have retained the older form of designation, Roger of Hoveden.

³ Whether Symeon personally wrote the *Historia Regum* has been the subject of scholarly debate. See David Rollason, ‘Symeon’s Contribution to Historical Writing in Northern England’, in *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North*, ed. by David Rollason (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 1998), pp. 1-13 (p. 10).

⁴ Elisabeth Van Houts, ‘Historical Writing’, in *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World*, ed. by Christopher Harper-Bill and Elisabeth Van Houts (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), pp. 103-121.

the Anglo-Saxon past after the turmoil of 1066 and its aftermath.⁵ Martin Brett has argued that the texts were written to protect English ecclesiastical and monastic possessions against Norman aggression.⁶ He suggested that by celebrating the achievements of the Anglo-Saxon kings and recording the royal foundation and benefices of individual monasteries and minsters, the texts challenged the Normans to acknowledge these traditional and historical ecclesiastical rights.

The political orientation of an individual work can be partly identified by looking at how the author portrays the Normans and, in particular, William of Normandy. The question of the legality of the succession of William of Normandy and his successors to the English throne was a matter of concern to both English and Normans.⁷ William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon, who both claimed to be of Anglo-Norman descent, describe Emma's marriage to Æthelred as providing a direct familial link of inheritance between the Dukes of Normandy and the English throne; William is depicted as Edward's named heir and Harold Godwinson as a grasping, perjured traitor who usurped the throne from personal ambition.⁸ The *ASC* and the *Chronicon* of John of Worcester present an English version of events. They name Harold Godwinson as Edward's heir and rightful king of England and depict him bravely defending his country at Hastings, despite his army not being at full strength, the location not being favourable to the English and some of his men deserting the field

⁵ Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, pp. 618-19.

⁶ Martin Brett, 'John of Worcester and his Contemporaries', in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, ed. by R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 101-26 (pp. 125-26).

⁷ Bartlett has identified the avoidance of succession by illegitimate sons as a significant factor in royal inheritance in Norman and Angevin times. Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, p. 9.

⁸ In this William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon can be seen as following a Norman version of events and supporting Norman political aims but their picture is more complex. Both authors are also critical of the Normans' cruelty, their usurpation of land rights and their secularization of the Church.

of battle.⁹ Both the *ASC* and John record that after the battle the English wished to elect Edgar, grandson of Edmund Ironside, as king and they portray William as burning and killing his way to the throne. As will be seen below, the pro-Norman or pro-English stance of these authors does not significantly influence their depictions of Æthelstan except in the way in which they address the ambiguities on his succession already noted in the texts of Versions A and B of the *ASC*.¹⁰

Scholarly analysis of the political, legal and ecclesiastical reasons for historical writing in England after the Norman invasion has tended to overshadow the other, more personal reasons, expressed by authors and their patrons. These included many of the traditional reasons for writing history—an interest in scholarship, the need to close the gap in English history-writing left unfilled since Bede’s *Historia*, a wish to retain a record of local events and traditions, and a concern to provide a historical basis for contemporary events. It can be argued that these reasons are more likely to be quoted by an author since to give the true reasons could prove counter-productive. My analysis will show that the Anglo-Norman historians wrote for a number of purposes and were capable of presenting these in different ways for their different audiences. While the overall purpose may have been dictated by the wishes of their patrons, the author’s influence is evident through his selection and interpretation of his source materials and his choice of genre and presentation.

We do not know how many other similar works were written during the same period and have not survived. It is possible that those listed by Bartlett were the works which attracted most scholarly attention, were supported by influential patrons or were produced or conserved in institutions with well-established scriptoria and libraries. Bartlett’s list concentrated on those works he identified as examples of literary history.

⁹ Version D of the *ASC* for 1066 records that God gave the victory to the Normans because of the sinfulness of the people, later described as ‘our’ sinfulness.

¹⁰ See the section on Æthelstan as Edward’s Heir in Chapter 1.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have extended the list to include John of Worcester's *Chronicon ex Chronicis*, Roger of Wendover's edited selection of earlier texts, the *Flores Historiarum*, and the *L'Estoire des Engleis* of Geoffrey Gaimar. These seven authors were clerics and all, except possibly John of Worcester and Symeon of Durham, were of Anglo-Norman descent. While John of Worcester, Roger of Hoveden, and Gaimar chose to use the traditional form of the annal or chronicle, William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon and Roger of Wendover produced extended and discursive narrative works. Symeon of Durham used both genres. His *Historia Regum* provides a brief chronicle of events while his *Libellus* gives a detailed account of the history of the Church in Durham. The *ASC* provided the foundations for all these works either directly or through an intermediate text. For example, John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon and Gaimar drew directly on the *ASC* while Roger of Hoveden, Roger of Wendover and Symeon of Durham in his *Historia Regum*, used John of Worcester's text as their basis. John's *Chronicon* was therefore a major intermediate source. Although there is some evidence that William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, John of Worcester and Symeon of Durham were aware of, and drew on, each other's work it is not clear to what extent similarities between their texts were the result of direct contact or their use of common sources.¹¹ What is clear is that the authors each approached the writing of history in a different way depending on their background, purpose and aims. Together, these seven texts provide evidence of how, under Norman rule, information and traditions on Anglo-Saxon England were collated, mediated and handed down to become part of collective memory.

¹¹ These historical writings were associated with monastic and ecclesiastical centres with a long tradition of learning and scholarship and Brett noted in particular that the 'historical research at Durham, Worcester, Malmesbury and Canterbury was accompanied by a frequent and elaborate exchange of its results as the work progressed'. Brett, 'John of Worcester and his Contemporaries', in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Davis and Wallace-Hadrill, p. 125.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first section I provide a brief overview of each of the writers. In the second section I provide a detailed analysis of how Æthelstan is depicted in their works. This second section concentrates on the narratives provided by John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon and Symeon of Durham and includes references to Gaimar and to Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover where they deviate significantly from the other narratives or include additional information. The third section provides a separate study of William of Malmesbury. Not only does William provide more information on Æthelstan than any other writer but his text has been the subject of more extensive scholarly study and the source of considerable controversy. Despite the criticisms which have been levelled at him as an historian, his work continues to be used as one of the most important sources for Anglo-Saxon history. His role as historian and his narrative on Æthelstan, therefore, merit separate treatment.

Section One: The Anglo-Norman Historians

The following overview of the authors used as the primary texts for this Chapter, considers the context and purposes of their work, the sources they used and the influences they had on other writers.

John of Worcester d. c.1140

The title of John of Worcester's work, *Chronicon ex Chronicis*, signalled that his was a compilation of previous texts based on the *ASC*. John's scholarly approach is evident in his careful translation of his *ASC* sources but he was also innovative, adopting Marianus's universal chronicle and more accurate Dionysian dating system as a framework within which to embed his material from the *ASC*. This approach appears to have been initiated by Bishop Wulfstan II of Worcester who was introduced to Marianus's chronicle through his friend Robert of Lorraine. John's *Chronicon* is

therefore an early attempt to present English history as part of European and world history.¹² John's work became a core text, used by Symeon of Durham for his *Historia Regum* and copied almost verbatim by Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover.

John's main purpose appears to be to produce a more accurate, scholarly history of England's past. Martin Brett has described John as 'a very literal compiler who modified his sources as little as grammar and brevity would allow.'¹³ This careful copying also has a plus side in preserving the content of older texts still available in the eleventh century. As well as the *ASC*, Marianus Scotus and Bede, John's initial sources included Asser, and saints' lives, especially those of Oswald and Dunstan. The later Norman material seems to have been drawn mainly from a copy of the 'Annals of Rouen' and the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Hugh of Fleury.¹⁴ Brett has noted that, 'where the Worcester *Chronicon* can be compared with its known sources, it proves to be a trustworthy, if unimaginative compilation.'¹⁵

Of the six copies of the *Chronicon* surviving from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Bury St Edmunds' version is of particular interest. It is closest to the Worcester manuscript attributed to John but includes additional Continental material, the *Visio Rollonis*, also found in the *Annals of St Neots*, and excerpts from *Les Annales de Flodoard* for the period 920-966.¹⁶ The inclusion of Continental sources reflecting Norman traditions, may be connected with King Cnut's re-founding of the abbey at

¹² *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. by R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. by Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), II, pp. xviii-xix.

¹³ Brett, 'John of Worcester and his Contemporaries', in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Davis and Wallace-Hadrill, p. 114. For the possible role of the monk Florence of Worcester see Simon Keynes, 'Florence', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, p. 188.

¹⁴ Brett, 'John of Worcester and his Contemporaries', in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Davis and Wallace-Hadrill, pp. 108-09, 117-18, and 'John Monk of Worcester' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 262-63.

¹⁵ Brett 'John Monk of Worcester', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 262-63 (p. 263).

¹⁶ 'The Bury St Edmunds' Interpolations' in *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, Appendix B, pp. 616-19, 633-40.

Bury St Edmunds in 1020 as a Benedictine community.¹⁷ If so, it provides another example of how John's initial work was regarded as a significant source to be further developed and extended.

Although John's account of events reflects the brevity of the *ASC*, he has managed through his use of language to impart something of his own individuality to the text and included information for which there is no other known source. As will be seen in the second section of this chapter, this includes some details on Æthelstan which are not found elsewhere. His depiction of Æthelstan is very positive and this may be linked to another purpose which Brett has identified in his work, that of protecting traditional monastic land rights in the face of the growing power of diocesan bishops.¹⁸

Symeon of Durham fl. 1130

David Rollason's study of Symeon's writings identifies him as almost certainly the principal author of the *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius hoc est Dunhelmensis ecclesiae* and probably of a large part of the *Historia Regum*. From the handwriting in his texts he is thought to have been born in Northern France or Normandy. From what can be pieced together of his life, he appears to have been at Durham by the early 1090s and to have witnessed the translation of St Cuthbert's body to the new cathedral there in 1104.¹⁹ The prominence given to Cuthbert in the works ascribed to Symeon reflects this background.

The *Historia Regum* includes events from the death of Bede to 1129 in chronicle form. It is a derivative work which draws together material from Byrhtferth of Ramsey, John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury, and other chronicle and northern

¹⁷ John Blair, 'Bury St Edmunds', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 76-77.

¹⁸ Brett, 'John of Worcester and his Contemporaries', in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Davis and Wallace-Hadrill, pp. 125-26.

¹⁹ David Rollason, 'Symeon of Durham', in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, p. 438. Keynes also ascribes preservation of the 'Second Set of Northern Annals' to Symeon. Simon Keynes, 'Annals' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 39-40.

material.²⁰ The work shows its northern origins in the information it contains on Northumbria and York but the accuracy of the entries, the amount of detail and the style is variable suggesting that Symeon intended it to be a compilation rather than an edited text.²¹ The *Libellus de Exordio* is a very different work. Described by Rollason as ‘in part at least propagandist in nature’, it covers the history of the community of St Cuthbert from the time of the founding of Lindisfarne by Aidan to the building of the cathedral in Durham in 1096.²² Central to the later part of the narrative is the description of the murder in 1080 of the Norman bishop Walcher, and the actions of his successor, William St Calais, who replaced the secular clerks of St Cuthbert’s community at Durham with Benedictine monks from Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. The emphasis given to these events has led Van Houts to describe Symeon as a local historian whose main purpose in the *Libellus* was to support Durham’s monastic claim to rights over the monasteries of Jarrow and Lindisfarne in the face of Norman attempts to appropriate monastic holdings.²³ W. M. Aird also interpreted the work as undertaken to protect land rights but saw this as part of the community’s concern to defend their monastic independence and ensure that their new bishop, Ranulf Flambard, successor to William St Calais, conducted himself ‘as the spiritual heir of St Cuthbert was expected to behave’.²⁴

The centrality of Cuthbert for the *Libellus de Exordio* is emphasized both by the designation of Symeon as Precentor of the church at Durham of St Cuthbert, or of the

²⁰ Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio*, ed. by David Rollason, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. xlix.

²¹ For a fuller discussion see N. K. Chadwick, ‘Some Observations on the *Historia Regum* attributed to Symeon of Durham’, in *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. by N. K. Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 104-19.

²² David Rollason, ‘Symeon’s Contribution to Historical Writing in Northern England’, in *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North*, ed. by David Rollason, p. 4.

²³ Van Houts, ‘Historical Writing’, in *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World*, ed. by Christopher Harper-Bill and Elisabeth Van Houts, pp. 111-12.

²⁴ W. M. Aird, ‘The Political Context of *Libellus De Exordio*’ in *Symeon of Durham: Historian of Durham and the North*, ed. by David Rollason, pp. 32-45 (pp. 42-45).

most holy Bishop Cuthbert, and by his extensive use of Cuthbertine narrative including material from the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* and the *Capitula de miraculis et translationibus sancti Cuthberti*.²⁵ This aspect of his work is particularly apparent in his treatment of Æthelstan which centres on West Saxon links with St Cuthbert from the time of King Alfred and records Æthelstan's generous donations to Cuthbert's community at Chester-le-Street. These details in Symeon's work are not found elsewhere suggesting that Symeon either drew on, or provided, a Northumbrian picture of Æthelstan and his reign which portrayed St Cuthbert as a patron of the Anglo-Saxon kings and a national saint, revered as greatly in southern England as in the north.

Henry of Huntingdon d. 1155

Henry of Huntingdon states that his work was commissioned by Bishop Alexander of Lincoln who requested a history of the kingdom and origins of the English people and advised him to use Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* as a major source.²⁶ Diana Greenway has estimated that approximately 25% of Henry's work is drawn from Bede, often quoted verbatim, and 40% from the *ASC*, with a version related to the Peterborough 'E' text as a main source augmented by material apparently drawn from a C-type version of the *Chronicle*.²⁷ Henry's text also shows he had access to Mercian material and possibly to other versions of the *ASC* which are now lost.²⁸

Henry uses his prologue to instruct his readers on the role of history and the purposes behind his own work: history separates rational beings from the stupid or brutish, for rational men wish to know about their origins and descent and about the misfortunes and achievements of their fatherland; history has the highest place in

²⁵ Rollason, *Symeon of Durham*, pp. 2, 8-9.

²⁶ 'regni gesta et nostre gentis origines'. Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by Diana E. Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), i, 'Prologus', p. 4.

²⁷ Greenway, *Historia Anglorum*, pp. xci-iii, lxxxv-lxxxix. For Henry's use of John of Worcester and William of Malmesbury see Greenway, pp. xciv- xcvi.

²⁸ See also Diana E. Greenway, 'Henry of Huntingdon' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, p. 232-33.

literature because, like philosophy, it teaches right behaviour and deters from evil through its account of events and men's actions.²⁹ This concept of history is also evident in Henry's emphasis on the transience of human life and achievement, and the emptiness of human glory compared with the true glory of heaven.³⁰

As a member of the secular clergy, Henry did not need, like John of Worcester or Symeon of Durham, to protect or promote a religious foundation and it is this didactic role which is particularly strong in Henry's work.³¹ Henry structured his work around the five invasions of Britain which he saw as examples of God's action working through history, rewarding the good and punishing evil.³² He narrates the histories of the seven separate Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and provides an overview of the growth and spread of West Saxon power. However, it would appear that Henry did not see Æthelstan as a major figure in this. Henry gives both Alfred and Edgar the status of *bretwalda* but he includes only the briefest of details on Æthelstan. He credits Æthelstan's brother Edmund with extending the kingdom of Wessex, describing him as the first Wessex king to hold Northumbria and the first sole king in England.³³ Although

²⁹ *Historia Anglorum*, i, 'Prologus', pp. 2-5.

³⁰ Book viii of the *Historia Anglorum* includes Henry's 'Epistole de Contemptu Mundi' in which he decries the false values he has observed in his world (pp. 584-619). Nancy Partner has argued that the *Historia Anglorum* as a whole should be seen as an example of *Contemptus Mundi* literature. Nancy Partner, *Serious Entertainments* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 28-29, 33-35.

³¹ Henry claimed he was writing for the many and the less-educated. *Historia Anglorum*, viii, 'Prologus'. Given that he was writing in Latin, it is not clear whom he meant by this. Nancy Partner considered Henry 'persists—almost to the point of insult—in telling his readers what they are reading'. Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, p. 22. The number of copies of his work, dating from the twelfth century and later, suggests that Henry's work was popular. Antonia Gransden has noted that of the twenty five medieval manuscripts extant, five, and possibly eight, date from the twelfth century. Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writings in England c. 550 to c. 1307* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 194.

³² *Historia Anglorum*, i, 4, pp. 14-15. The five invasions are those by the Romans, the Picts and Scots, the English (Anglici), the Danes and the Normans. He describes these as 'plaga' 'blows'. Henry's narrative on Æthelstan comes in Book V where he describes the Danish invasion as more extensive and cruel than any of the others.

³³ 'solus diceretur rex in Anglia', 'he was said to be sole king in England'. *Historia Anglorum*, v, 21, pp. 314-17. It may be that in this he was reflecting local traditions on Edmund whose taking of the Five Boroughs from the Danes included Henry's cathedral city of Lincoln and was celebrated in the poem in *ASC A*, 942.

praising Æthelstan's achievements he restricts these to the military successes recorded in the *ASC* and sums them up in such a way as to suggest he saw Æthelstan's reign as above all an example of the transience of earthly success.³⁴

Qui regno quidem parum uixit, sed clare gestis non parum splenduit, qui a fortissimis lacessiri sed bello numquam potuit uinci.

He indeed lived too little a time for his kingdom but clearly by his achievements he lacked nothing in brilliance, [a king] who could be challenged by the bravest but never defeated in warfare.

Henry's brief account of Æthelstan and apparent ignorance of his claims to be King of all Britain may reflect a specifically pro-Edmund approach. It is however equally likely that it comes from his dependence on the brief account of events in Version E of the *ASC*.

Geffrei Gaimar fl. 1136-1137 or 1141-1150³⁵

Little is known of Gaimar. Paul Dalton has suggested that he was a secular clerk who had served at court before settling in Lincolnshire.³⁶ There Lady Constance Fitz Gilbert became his patroness. She asked him to write a history of the English in French and appears to have typified those wealthy land-owning Norman families who wished to know more about English history while preserving their Franco-culture and language.

Gaimar's work is the earliest surviving example of French vernacular literature in England. His *L'Estoire des Engleis* played an important part in the transmission of Anglo-Saxon history by making the *ASC* accessible to French speakers through his verse translation of the text.³⁷ In the epilogue to his work Gaimar claims to have used

³⁴ *Historia Anglorum*, v, 18, pp. 308-11.

³⁵ Dalton has proposed a later date for the poem than Short's initial assessment of 1136-37. Paul Dalton, 'The date of Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis*, the Connections of his Patrons, and the Politics of Stephen's Reign', *Chaucer Review*, 42 (2007), 23-47. Ian Short, 'Gaimar's Epilogue and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Liber vetustissimus*', *Speculum*, 69 (1994), 323-43.

³⁶ Dalton, 'The date of Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis*', p. 23.

³⁷ Spiegel's comment on the role of vernacular historiography in thirteenth-century France is also applicable to Gaimar's work in England where his *L'Estoire* can be seen as helping 'to construct a new vision of history more appropriate to the operation of the emerging national monarchy'. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

many English books and many Latin and ‘Romance’ (French) grammars indicating the great care he took to produce an accurate translation. His account of his sources gives a picture of the kind of historical texts which were currently available to the Anglo-Normans. He mentions a Welsh book on the British kings belonging to Robert Earl of Gloucester and the *Historia Britonum* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, both of which he claims had been lent to him by his patroness, Lady Constance. He also refers to a history of Winchester from Washingborough in Lincolnshire which he used to correct an account of early England.

Gaimar’s poem contains several colourful stories celebrating heroes such as Havelock the Dane and Hereward the Wake. Despite this access to traditional material his account of Æthelstan records only the very brief details found in Version E of the ASC. Given Geoffrey’s use of traditional material for the reign of Edgar which is also found in William of Malmesbury, it would appear that Gaimar either did not have access to William’s Æthelstan material or did not regard it sufficiently interesting or important. As a result he depicts Æthelstan as an insignificant king, especially in comparison to Alfred, Edward and Edgar whose reigns are described in much greater detail.

Roger of Hoveden (fl. 1174 – 1201) Roger of Wendover (d.1236)

Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover are considered important sources for events in their own time. Their significance for Anglo-Saxon history lies in the use they made of existing texts which, through their works, were transmitted as part of the English historical tradition into the thirteenth and later centuries.

Roger of Hoveden is thought to have been a clerk in holy orders who served Henry II as a member of his court, was present at the siege of Acre in the Third Crusade and later acted as a Justice of the Forests in the North of England. Finally he appears to

1993), p. 313. See also Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, p. 497 and Damian-Grint, *The New Historians*, pp. 49-53.

have settled at Hoveden (Howden) and to have served there as the parish priest. It was during this time that he wrote his *Chronica*, a history of England from 732 to his own day. At the beginning of his text he outlines his intention to trace the genealogical descent of the Northumbrian kings down to the time of Bede and later. He states that he will use Bede's history as the foundation for his work but his initial list of the early Northumbrian kings differs from both Bede and the *ASC* suggesting he had access to other northern material.³⁸ Overall, Roger's text on Anglo-Saxon England is derived directly from John of Worcester with some direct borrowing from Symeon of Durham.

Stubbs has noted that Roger's strict adherence to the text of his sources was typical of his time. He has commented that for Roger to seek 'some authoritative and well-known work' on which to hang his own as 'a continuation or supplement' was 'in strict accordance with the practice of the time'.³⁹ Scott Thompson Smith has recently made the same point with reference to the chronicle writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but also saw this as one way in which the Latin narratives were kept alive.⁴⁰ Roger of Hoveden's text proved popular with other scholars well into the sixteenth century. He was therefore instrumental in carrying John of Worcester's depiction of Æthelstan forward in time, making it accessible to a wider audience.

Very little is known about the life of Roger of Wendover. A Benedictine monk of St Alban's he is the first of the chroniclers at St Alban's who is known by name. Roger's history starts with Christ and continues to his own day. The title *Flores Historiarum* is derived from Roger's own description of his work as taken from the

³⁸ Roger's use of mainly northern sources reflects Howden's links with Durham. William Stubbs records that William the Conqueror gave the Manor and church of Howden to the Norman Bishop of Durham, William Saint Carileph. He kept the Manor and civil rights but gave the church and its associated parishes to the priory at Durham. William Stubbs, *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, 4 vols (London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1868), I, p. xiii.

³⁹ *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, I, p. xxvi.

⁴⁰ Scott Thompson Smith, 'Preliorum maximum: the Latin Tradition', in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Livingston, p. 279.

writings of various reputable authors and he likens it to gathering a variety of flowers which will give interest and pleasure to those of different tastes. His sources include Bede, Symeon of Durham, Henry of Huntingdon, William of Malmesbury and John of Worcester. In his section on Æthelstan, he draws heavily on John's *Chronicon* but he frequently turns a phrase round or uses synonyms so giving his version an element of individuality. To these sources he adds information taken from the manuscript additions to the Bury St Edmunds' text of John's *Chronicon*, Henry of Huntingdon and William of Jumiéges. His work therefore includes some Continental material on Æthelstan's friendship with Rollo, founder of the Norman dynasty, and the arrangements Æthelstan made for his nephew, Louis, to return to Francia as king.⁴¹ In his *Preface* Roger states that his purpose in writing is both scholarly and moral. He wishes to record the main events of the past for posterity and for future scholars; he also wishes to provide admonitory examples of how God punishes evil so that his readers may avoid wrongdoing and instead imitate the examples of good men his history provides. In the thirteenth century his work was edited and continued under the name of Matthew Paris, a monk of St Albans. He introduced some additional material into Roger's text but left Roger's section on Æthelstan unaltered.

Section Two: Depictions of Æthelstan in the Anglo-Norman Histories

The following Table lists the main events of Æthelstan's reign recorded in Versions A-F of the *ASC* and indicates which are addressed by the Anglo-Norman authors:⁴²

Table 5. Main Events of Æthelstan's Reign in *ASC* and Anglo-Norman texts

Main Events in the <i>ASC</i>	Version	Gaimar	JoW	SoD	HoH	RoH	RoW
Succession	A, B, C, D, E, F	√	√	√	√	√	√
Sihtric Marriage	D		√			√	√

⁴¹ See Chapter 3 on the Continental Tradition.

⁴² William of Malmesbury is not included in the Table as his work is considered in detail in Section Three of this chapter.

Guthfrith	E, F	√	√	√	√		√
Eamont	E, F		√			√	√
Scotland	A, B, C, D, E, F	√	√	√	√	√	√
Battle of Brunanburh	E, F	√	√	√	√	√	√
Brunanburh Poem	A, B, C, D				√		
Death of Edwin	E		MS B	√	√	√	√

John of Worcester (JoW); Symeon of Durham (SoD); Henry of Huntingdon (HoH); Roger of Hoveden (RoH); Roger of Wendover (RoW).

The Table also shows that each of the Anglo-Norman authors records the three events common to the six Versions of the *ASC*, Æthelstan's succession, his expedition to Scotland and the battle of Brunanburh. In addition, all except John of Worcester include an account of Edwin's death. This is mentioned only very briefly in *ASC* Versions E and F and, as will be seen later, the Anglo-Norman accounts of how Edwin died show a northern influence which developed over time.⁴³

The Table also illustrates the individual choices made by the different authors. John of Worcester includes all the events in Versions A-F of the *ASC*; Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover include the same content as John of Worcester and, as will be seen below, draw directly on his text; Gaimar, Symeon of Durham and Henry of Huntingdon make no reference to Sihtric and Eamont and their depictions of Æthelstan as a whole are briefer and more narrowly focused than the others. In my textual analysis which follows, I relate these individual differences to the context, aims and purposes of the texts and identify how some of the depictions of Æthelstan were influenced by the way in which the authors interpreted their sources. To structure my analysis, I have used the same order of events as in the Table above but grouped the texts on Sihtric, Guthfrith and Eamont since they form one narrative. Below, I analyse the ways in which Æthelstan's succession was depicted by the Anglo-Norman writers. Bold type in the text identifies where authors use the same or similar terms.

⁴³ Versions D, E and F of the *ASC* include material on Æthelstan and Northumbria but only Version D includes details of Æthelstan's dealings with Sihtric and his peace agreement at Eamont while Versions E and F merely refer to his driving out Guthfrith.

Æthelstan's Succession as King

ASC, A, E, F: Her Eadweard cing forþferde, 7 Æþelstan his sunu feng to rice. Here King Edward died and Æthelstan his son ascended the throne.

ASC, B, C, D: Her Eadweard cing gefor on Myrcum æt Feardune 7 Ælfweard his sunu swiþe hraþe þæs gefor on Oxnaforda 7 heora lic licgað on Wintanceastre 7 Æþestan wæs of Myrcum gecoren to cinge 7 æt Cingestune gehalgod. Here King Edward died in Mercia at Feardune and Ælfweard his son soon after this died at Oxford and their bodies lie at Winchester and Æthelstan was chosen as king by the Mercians and consecrated at Kingston.⁴⁴

John of Worcester⁴⁵ and **Roger of Hoveden**:⁴⁶ Inuictissimus rex Anglorum Eadwardus Senior [...] regni sui anno .xxiiii., in regia uilla que Fearndum nominatur, indictione .xv., ex hac uita transiens, Athelstano filio **regni gubernacula reliquit**, cuius corpus Wintoniam delatum, **in Nouo Monasterio regio more sepelitur**. *Non multo post filius eius Alfuuardus apud Oxenofordam decessit, et sepultus est ubi et pater illius.*^a Athelstanus uero in Kingestone, id est regia uilla, in regem leuatur, et honorifice **ab Athelmo Dorubernensi archiepiscopo consecratur**.

^a *Non multo [...] pater illius*, not in Roger of Hoveden.

The most invincible king of the English Edward the Elder [...] passing from this life in the royal township which is called Farndon, in the fifteenth indiction in the twenty fourth year of his reign, left the governance of the kingdom to his son Athelstan and his body was carried to Winchester and buried in customary regal style in the New Minster. *Not long after, his son Ælfweard died at Oxford, and was buried where his father also lies.*^a But Athelstan at Kingston, that is, at the royal township, was elevated to the kingship and consecrated with honour by Athelmo, Archbishop of Canterbury.

^a *Not long after [...] also lies*, not in Roger of Hoveden.

Roger of Wendover:⁴⁷ rex Anglorum Edwardus, cognomento Senior, [...] in villa regia, Farnduna nuncupata, diem clausit extremum et Wintoniæ **in nouo monasterio more regio est sepultus**. Ethelstanus quoque filius ejus primogenitus, apud Kingestonam, regiam villam, rex creatus, **ab Athelmo Dorobernensi archiepiscopo consecratur**.

The King of the English Edward, surnamed The Elder, [...] ended his days in the royal township of Farndon, and was buried in customary regal style in the new monastery at Winchester. Ethelstan also his eldest son, at the royal township of Kingston, having been made king, was consecrated by Athelmo, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Henry of Huntingdon:⁴⁸ Edwardus rex [...] migravit a corpore apud Ferandune. Et Alward filius eius cito post patrem defecit apud Oxeneforde, et sepulti sunt apud Winceastre. [...] Adelstan filius Edwardi electus est rex in Merce et sacratus apud Kingestune.

King Edward [...] departed from life at Farndon. And Alward his son, soon after his father, died at Oxford and they were buried at Winchester. [...] Adelstan son of Edward was chosen king in Mercia and consecrated at Kingston.

Symeon of Durham:⁴⁹ *Historia Regum*: Edwardus rex mortuus est, **relinquens imperium** filio suo Ethelstano. King Edward died leaving the ruling power to his son Ethelstan.

Libellus De Exordio: Edwardo rege defuncto, filius eius Aethelstanus suscepta **regni gubernacula**

⁴⁴ ASC, Collaborative Editions (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983-2004). Version A, ed. by Batley; Version B, ed. by Taylor; Version C, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe; Version D, ed. by G. P. Cubbin; Version E, ed. by Susan Irvine; Version F, ed. by Peter S. Baker.

⁴⁵ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [924], pp. 384-85.

⁴⁶ *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p.53.

⁴⁷ Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. by Henricus O. Coxe (London: English Historical Society, 1841), pp. 384-85.

⁴⁸ Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, v, 17, p. 309.

⁴⁹ Symeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, ed. by I. Hodgson Hinde, Surtees Society, 51 (Durham: Andrews & Co., 1868), p. 64. *Libellus De Exordio*, ii, 17, pp. 132-33.

gloriosissime rexit. After King Edward died his son Æthelstan ruled most gloriously the governance of the kingdom he had received.

While Gaimar, reflecting the entry in *ASC E*, merely observes that after Edward's death his son Æthelstan was king,⁵⁰ the accounts in the prose histories are more developed and reflect their writers' interpretations of the *ASC* as source. Although John of Worcester bases his account of Æthelstan's succession on Versions B, C and D of the *ASC*, he avoids the ambiguities noted in Chapter 1 of the thesis by clearly depicting Æthelstan's succession as unproblematic. He states unequivocally that Edward 'left the governance of the kingdom to his son Æthelstan', and by only mentioning Ælfweard's death at the very end of his account he reinforces this picture of Æthelstan as his father's first choice as heir. He makes the version of events his own by including additional information not found in the *Chronicle*, recording that Edward was buried in New Minster and specifically referring to Farndon as a 'regia villa', suggesting that this information may not have been readily known by his readers.

John records that Edward died at Farndon in Mercia but he but makes no mention of Æthelstan's Mercian election. Given Worcester's long Mercian history, this seems surprising and suggests that John may have omitted it deliberately in order to emphasize Æthelstan as Edward's direct successor to the West Saxon throne.⁵¹ John's claim that Æthelstan was Edward's direct heir may be related to his aim of protecting Worcester monastic land rights mentioned by Brett. Bartlett has noted that, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, proof of land-tenure became increasingly important to protect monastic property rights and estates.⁵² Julia Barrow describes the contents of the Worcester cartulary as containing both genuine and forged charters most likely put

⁵⁰ 'Puis regnat sun fiz Edelstan'. Geffrei Gaimar, *L'Estoire Des Engleis*, ed. by Alexander Bell, Anglo-Norman Text Society, 14-16 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), 3509, p. 112.

⁵¹ I argued in Chapter 1 that the Mercian account of Æthelstan's succession reflected Mercia's struggle in the tenth century to keep its semi-independent status with Wessex. By the eleventh century this was no longer an issue and the concept of Mercia as a separate kingdom had been superseded by England's division into shires or counties. Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, p. 147. The last reference to Mercia in the *ASC* is the entry for 1049 in Version C.

⁵² Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, p. 7.

together to prevent seizure of ecclesiastical property by the Archbishops of York and by the Danish followers of Cnut and his successors. Among these are four eleventh-century charters in Æthelstan's name, one granting land to St Peter's and three to St Mary's.⁵³ As noted above, legitimacy of royal succession had become an important issue for the Norman kings. It is therefore possible that John deliberately depicted Æthelstan as Edward's direct and legitimate heir in order to give weight to the validity of the royal charters in his name at Worcester.

Roger of Hoveden uses John of Worcester's text verbatim while Roger of Wendover echoes John's text but indicates that Æthelstan succeeded to the throne as Edward's eldest son (*primogenitus*).⁵⁴ By emphasizing Æthelstan's right of succession on grounds of primogeniture, Roger of Wendover may be reflecting the controversies over legitimate royal dynastic succession current in his own day. This has been described by Bartlett as 'a fundamental and recurrent political problem' which influenced claims and counter-claims on succession for the Norman kings.⁵⁵ As Roger had previously recorded that Æthelstan's mother was a concubine it would appear that he is promoting primogeniture as taking precedence over illegitimacy of birth. This would reflect well on the historical position of William the Conqueror, eldest son but illegitimate by birth, and provide a further link between Anglo-Saxon and Norman kingship. It would, however, put Roger at odds with the thinking on legitimacy of royal succession in his own time.

Symeon of Durham depicts Æthelstan's succession as uncontroversial in both the *Historia Regum* and the *Libellus de Exordio*. He uses similar language to John of

⁵³ S 401, 402, 406, 428. Julia Barrow, 'Worcester' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 488-90.

⁵⁴ This may reflect John of Worcester's description of Æthelstan as 'primogenitus' in his account of Edward's wives and children. John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, 901 AD (pp. 353-57).

⁵⁵ Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, pp. 4-11 (p. 7).

Worcester describing Edward as ‘reliquens imperium filio suo Ethelstano’ and Æthelstan taking up the ‘regni gubernacula’. The succinctness of Symeon’s text makes it difficult to know to whether Symeon’s choice of words was intended to convey a deeper meaning. For example the term *imperium* is the word chosen by Bede to describe the power exercised by the early *bretwaldas*.⁵⁶ It also carries overtones of imperial status found in the description of Æthelstan in his charters as *basileus*.⁵⁷ Symeon’s depiction of Æthelstan as Edward’s direct heir, links well with his narrative in the *Libellus de Exordio* where, as will be seen later, he describes how St Cuthbert fulfilled a promise he had made to King Alfred that one of his descendants would become King of all Britain.⁵⁸

Henry of Huntingdon’s account of Æthelstan’s succession is very different from the others. He goes beyond the brief details in *ASC E* and includes the Mercian account of events found in *ASC B, C* and *D*. By retaining the same order of events as these Versions, he retains Æthelstan’s election as king by the Mercians and perpetuates the idea that Æthelstan only inherited the throne after the death of Ælfweard. Henry’s use of this Mercian material and his very brief account of the rest of Æthelstan’s reign sets him apart from the other Anglo-Norman historians considered above. It may be that he worked in isolation from them or preferred to use only the *ASC* source easily available to him. It is possible therefore that he did not have access to material on Sihtric, Eamont and Æthelstan taking control in Northumbria. Alternatively he may have chosen to ignore it. Yet, as will be seen below, its inclusion would have further emphasized Henry’s overall theme of the transience of worldly success.

Sihtric, Eamont and Guthfrith

The account of Æthelstan’s marriage agreement with Sihtric in John of Worcester

⁵⁶ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ii, 5, I, 224-25.

⁵⁷ For Æthelstan’s charter designations see Chapter 1.

⁵⁸ Discussed in Chapter 1 in the section on Æthelstan’s Book Dedications.

reflects the entry in *ASC* Version D but with a number of embellishments:

ASC Version D ⁵⁹	John of Worcester ⁶⁰
<p>Her Æþelstan cyning 7 Sihþ/ric Norðhymbra cyng heo gesamnodon æt Tameweorðþige . iii . kalendas, Februarius, 7 Æþelstan his sweostor him forgeaf.</p> <p>Here King Æthelstan and Sihtric, King of Northumbria, met at Tamworth three days before the Kalends of February (30 January) and Æthelstan gave him his sister in marriage.⁶¹</p>	<p>Strenuus et gloriosus rex Anglorum Athelstanus sororem suam cum magno honore et gloria Northymbrorum regi Sihtrico, Danica stirpe progenito, in matrimonium dedit.</p> <p>The vigorous and glorious king of the English, Æthelstan, gave his sister in marriage with great and honourable splendour to Sihtric king of the Northumbrians who was the offspring of Scandinavian stock.</p>

John again omits the Mercian content of the *ASC* by making no reference to Tamworth as the place of the meeting with Sihtric but he retains Æthelstan's role as broker of the marriage deal. He introduces the terms 'strenuus et gloriosus' to characterize Æthelstan and describes the marriage as conducted 'cum magno honore et gloria' as befitted a king of Æthelstan's standing. Sihtric's designation in *ASC* D as king of Northumbria is retained and John adds that Sihtric was of Danish descent.⁶² This mention of his Scandinavian background may be included for the benefit of his Norman audience who also claimed Scandinavian descent and depicts Æthelstan as actively seeking a marriage alliance with his Scandinavian neighbour.⁶³

John's brief account is in line with his annalistic style of writing history and

⁵⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, 6 MS D*, ed. by G. P. Cubbin (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), p. 41.

⁶⁰ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [925], pp. 386-87.

⁶¹ The tenth-century *ASC* Version B entry for 924 that Æthelstan, 'geaf his swystor', has generally been assumed to refer to the marriage arrangement with Henry the Fowler recorded in D for that year rather than to this arrangement between Æthelstan and Sihtric.

⁶² John describes Sihtric as 'Danish'. Darlington and Mc Gurk point out that Sihtric was in fact Norwegian. John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, p. 386, n. 2. However, the use of 'Danes' to describe anyone of Scandinavian origin seems to have become well-established and been adopted by later writers. John Haywood, *Encyclopaedia of the Viking Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 52. See also Susanne Kries, "'Westward I Came Across the Sea": Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes', *Leeds Studies in English, New Series*, 34 (2003), 47-76 (pp. 66-67).

⁶³ See Chapter 3 on the Continental Tradition.

although Æthelstan is depicted as the author of the agreement there is no suggestion that the marriage was other than a typical alliance between kings for their mutual benefit.⁶⁴ Henry of Huntingdon and Symeon of Durham do not mention the marriage agreement at all while, as will be seen later, William of Malmesbury gives it considerable prominence. It was John's version, however, which was carried forward into the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries by Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover. Roger of Hoveden uses John's text verbatim; Roger of Wendover omits the description of Æthelstan as *strenuuus et gloriosus* and names the sister Sihtric marries as Eathgita. Roger may have based this information on a marginal note in the twelfth-century MS B of John of Worcester's work at Bury St Edmunds. Roger seems also to have taken from this source the account he gives of Sihtric initially accepting baptism because of his love of Eathgita followed by a very negative picture of him rejecting soon afterwards both his Christianity and his wife and reintroducing the worship of idols.⁶⁵

The Death of Sihtric and the Defeat of Guthfrith

Version D of the *ASC* records the death of Sihtric in 926 and Æthelstan succeeding to the throne of Northumbria:

Her oðeowdon fyrena leoman on norðdæle þære lyfte. 7 Sihtric acwæl 7
Æþelstan cyning feng to Norðhymbra rice.⁶⁶

Here fiery rays appeared in the northern quarter of the sky and Sihtric died and King Æthelstan succeeded to the kingdom of Northumbria.

The writer records three events in sequence using the *Chronicle*'s usual paratactic style and leaving it to the reader to decide the relationship between them.⁶⁷ The standard

⁶⁴ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [901], pp. 353-57. The marriage agreement is discussed more fully in Section 3 of this chapter on William of Malmesbury.

⁶⁵ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, Appendix B, p. 635. Roger of Wendover also includes the further information found in the marginal note of MS B, that Eathgita remained a virgin and after Sihtric's death spent the rest of her life in fasting, prayer and almsgiving at Polesworth where veneration of her body became a source of miracles after her death. The source of this information is unknown but Eathgita's alleged connection with Polesworth may suggest a northern origin. It is possible that Æthelstan's sister is being confused with King Egbert's daughter Eadgytha. Egbert is said to have founded Polesworth and his daughter was abbess there. See Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 48.

⁶⁶ Cubbin, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS D*, p. 41.

expression ‘feng to rice’ in Version D depicts Æthelstan lawfully inheriting Sihtric’s kingdom of Northumbria. Version D makes no reference to Guthfrith whose expulsion by Æthelstan in 927 is recorded only in Versions E and F, while Versions E and F make no mention of Sihtric. As will be seen below, John of Worcester brings these two events together. His account is reproduced almost verbatim by Roger of Hoveden, but omitting the reference to fiery rays, while Roger of Wendover adds a number of details and variations to John’s text. In the excerpts below, Roger of Wendover’s additions are shown in bold type and the variations in italics:

John of Worcester, Roger of Hoveden ⁶⁸	Roger of Wendover ⁶⁹
<p>Ignei per totam Angliam uisi sunt radii in septentrionali plaga celi. Nec multo post Northanhymbrorum rex Sihtricus uita decessit, cuius regnum rex Æthelstanus, filio illius Guthfertho, qui patri in regnum successerat, expulso, suo adiecit imperio.</p> <p>Fiery rays were seen throughout the whole of England in the northern area of the sky. Not long afterwards Sihtric, king of the Northumbrians, departed from life, whose kingdom King Æthelstan placed under his own sovereign power having expelled Sihtric’s son, Guthfrith, who had succeeded his father as ruler.</p>	<p>ignei per totam Angliam visi sunt radii in <i>aquilonali</i> plaga cæli, portendentes mortem turpissimam regis Sithrici supradicti, qui non multo post male periit; cujus regnum rex Ethelstanus, expulso Guthfertho filio <i>ejus</i>, suo <i>copulavit</i> imperio.</p> <p>Fiery rays were seen throughout the whole of England in the northern quarter of the sky, foretelling the most disgraceful death of the aforesaid king Sithric, who not long afterwards came to an evil end; whose kingdom King Ethelstan joined to his own sovereign power, having expelled Guthferth his [Sihtric’s] son.</p>

John of Worcester omits the *ASC* statement that Æthelstan succeeded as king of Northumbria on Sihtric’s death. Instead he records that Guthfrith succeeded to Sihtric’s kingdom until driven out by Æthelstan.⁷⁰ John depicts Æthelstan as having to use

⁶⁷ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the ambiguities of the paratactic style of the *Chronicle* and its influence on reader interpretation.

⁶⁸ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [926], pp. 386-87. *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p. 53.

⁶⁹ *Flores Historiarum*, p. 386.

⁷⁰ John describes Guthfrith as Sihtric’s son and this is how he is described by later Anglo-Latin writers. In the *Annals of Ulster* Guthfrith is described as a grandson of Ímar and therefore

military action to secure the power over Northumbria he had tried to achieve peaceably through the marriage agreement with Sihtric. John's statement that Æthelstan 'regnum [...] suo adiecit imperio', 'added the kingdom [of Northumbria] to his own dominion', depicts Æthelstan as a powerful, high-status ruler whose sovereignty (*imperium*) is already more extensive than any individual kingdom (*regnum*). The term *imperium* implies the kind of supreme power ascribed by Roman historians to emperors and by Bede to the *bretwaldas*. It is not entirely clear what John intended by the choice of this word but, as was noted in Chapter 1, Æthelstan's claim to be king of all Britain can be linked through his charters and coins to his assuming power over Northumbria and John may have had this in mind. However, as will be seen in the chapter on the Scandinavian Tradition, *Egils Saga* also depicts Æthelstan as a king of high standing from early in his reign. It is possible, therefore, that both John and the saga writers were drawing on traditional Anglo-Scandinavian representations of Æthelstan as King of all Britain rather than referring to it as a specific event.

By comparing the texts of the *ASC*, John of Worcester and Roger of Wendover, it is possible to trace how the original *Chronicle* record was transformed into a fuller narrative. While John sets the scene by combining the *ASC* entries on Sihtric and Guthfrith, Roger of Wendover develops the story further by interpreting the fiery rays as a portent of Sihtric's death. The phrase 'regis Sithrici supradicti' and the description of Sihtric's death as very shameful, 'turpissimam', and evil, 'male periit', enables Roger to remind his readers of the information he had already included on Sihtric as an apostate who had rejected his Christian wife and his Christian baptism. While John's account depicts Æthelstan as having to abandon his original peaceful plan and resort to military force to achieve power in Northumbria, Roger of Wendover depicts him as a

Sihtric's brother or cousin. *Annals of Ulster*, ed. by Séan MacAirt and Gearóid MacNiocaill (Dublin: Institute of Advanced Studies, 1983), p. 372-73. The confusion may have been caused by the similarity of names among the Norse of Dublin or by variations in the spelling of names and inaccuracies in dating events.

Christian warrior king whose actions rescue Northumbria from further Scandinavian rule, ensuring the continued practice of Christianity in Northumbria and preventing the reintroduction of pagan idol-worship.

Both Gaimar and Henry of Huntingdon, in line with Version E of the ASC, make no mention of Sihtric but record Æthelstan defeating Guthfrith. Gaimar's concise choice of words depicts Æthelstan facing, and successfully overcoming, significant military opposition in driving out Guthfrith:⁷¹

Bataille tint cuntre Daneis,	He then fought such a battle against the Danes,
Si descunfist [Gudfrid li] reis.	So he dislodged Gudfrid the king.

Henry of Huntingdon provides his own rhetorical version of events in which he portrays Guthfrith as making war on Æthelstan, being defeated and eventually killed:

Curriculo siquidem sequentis anni, Gudfridum regem Dacorum [...] bello laccessitus bello reppulit, repulsum fugauit, fugatum perdidit.⁷²

Indeed in the course of the following year, he [Æthelstan] having been challenged in warfare, drove back the Scandinavian king, Guthfrith in war, [...] and having driven him back he put him to flight, and having put him to flight he destroyed him.

While Henry's 'bello laccessitus bello reppulit, repulsum fugauit, fugatum perdidit' presents a vivid picture of Æthelstan as a determined and successful warrior, the information he gives conflicts with that of the other sources and in particular with the *Annals of Ulster* which record Guthfrith's return to Dublin after only six months absence and his death in Ireland in 933/4.⁷³ Henry's description, however, fits his purpose, noted above, of depicting Æthelstan as a king who although challenged by the strongest of enemies, could never be defeated in war, 'qui a fortissimis laccessiri sed bello numquam potuit uinci'.⁷⁴ The emphasis which Henry places on Æthelstan's

⁷¹Gaimar, *L'Estoire*, 3511-12, p. 112. Gaimar makes no distinction in his poem between the Danes and the Norse of Dublin and describes Guthfrith as king of the Danes.

⁷²*Historia Anglorum*, v, 18, pp. 310-11. It is possible that Henry had access to a version of the ASC Version E which has since been lost.

⁷³*Annals of Ulster*, pp. 378-79, 382-83.

⁷⁴*Historia Anglorum*, v, 18, pp. 310-11.

military prowess depicts him as very much the warrior king. Henry makes no mention of Æthelstan's peace agreement at Eamont and his narrative lacks the complementary emphasis noted in the tenth-century texts of Æthelstan as a king who brought peace to his people and as a major source he provides a very one-dimensional picture of Æthelstan.

The Peace Agreement at Eamont

John of Worcester again follows the account in *ASC D* and his account in turn is followed by Roger of Hoveden and by Roger of Wendover who also makes some adjustments to the text. Although the differences are minimal, they have the same effect as the addition of a scribal gloss, extending or interpreting the content of the earlier text. The following analysis compares the versions from the *ASC*, John of Worcester and Roger of Wendover and identifies how a writer's interpretation of sources can result in small but significant changes in the way events are recorded and transmitted.

ASC Version D ⁷⁵	John of Worcester & Roger of Hoveden ⁷⁶	Roger of Wendover ⁷⁷
<p>Æþelstan cyning feng to Norðhymbra rice. 7 ealle þa cyngas þe on þyssum iglande wæron he gewylde, [...],</p> <p>King Athlestan succeeded to the kingdom of Northumbria. And he subdued all the kings who were in this island</p> <p>7 mid aþum fryþ gefæstnodon on þære stowe þe genemned is æt Eamotum [...]</p> <p>and with oaths they made a firm peace in that place which is called Eamotum</p>	<p>Omnes etiam reges totius Albionis, [...] proelio uicit et fugauit.</p> <p>He also defeated in battle and put to flight all the kings of Albion.</p> <p>H/Ii omnes, ubi se uiderunt non posse strenuitati illius resistere, pacem ab eo petentes, in loco qui dicitur Eamotum [...] conuenerunt,</p> <p>All of these, when they saw they could not resist his strength, seeking peace from him, came together in a place which is called Eamont</p>	<p>omnes Angliæ regulos [...] proelio uicit et fugauit.</p> <p>He defeated in battle and put to flight all the lesser kings (reguli) of England.</p> <p>hi omnes, cum provincialibus aliis, videntes se ejus strenuitati non posse resistere convenerunt, petentes pacem ab eo</p> <p>All of these, with the other peoples of the provinces, seeing they could not resist his strength came together, seeking peace from him;</p>

⁷⁵ Cubbin, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS D*, p. 41.

⁷⁶ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [926], pp. 386-87. *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, pp. 53-54.

⁷⁷ *Flores Historiarum*, p. 386.

ælc deofolgeld tocwædon 7 syppam mid sibbe tocyrdon and they prohibited all idolatry and afterwards they parted in peace.	datoque sacramento, firmum cum eo foedus pepigerunt. and having given an oath, they struck a firm treaty with him .	atque idololatriæ renuntiantes foedus cum ipso firmissimum pepigerunt and moreover renouncing idolatry they struck the firmest of treaties with him.
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The *ASC* states only that Æthelstan succeeded to Northumbria and subdued all the kings of the island. The names of those who met Æthelstan at Eamont are listed as Hywel of West Wales, Constantine of the Scots, Owain of Gwent and Ealdred of Bamburgh implying that these were the only areas which were not already part of Æthelstan's kingdom.⁷⁸ The simplicity of the account leaves plenty of room for interpretation. For example, it is not clear whether the kings named met with Æthelstan out of duress or because they too wished to see an end to Viking rule or whether they took the initiative to avoid military action.

John of Worcester and Roger of Wendover both provide their own interpretation of these events. They depict the agreement at Eamont as being a result of Æthelstan's superiority in battle which led his enemies to acknowledge they were no match for him and so actively to seek peace at Eamont. Roger of Wendover describes the kings named as *reguli* or under-kings. This implies that Æthelstan was already established as the most powerful king in England but also indicates that he faced rebellion from those he had previously subdued. Roger adds a vague reference to 'other peoples of the provinces' emphasizing that it was not just the defeated kings but whole peoples who submitted to Æthelstan. Finally, both chroniclers emphasise that the 'syppam mid sibbe tocyrdon' of the *ASC* was in fact a firm, or very firm, treaty. Roger of Wendover also includes a reference to renouncing idolatry, reflecting the 'ælc deofolgeld tocwædon' of the *ASC*, and perhaps providing evidence of his own independent use of *ASC* material.

⁷⁸ These names are retained in full by John of Worcester and Roger of Wendover while Roger of Hoveden omits reference to Ealdred.

There could be several reasons why John of Worcester and Roger of Wendover opted to interpret Eamont as a major peace treaty resulting from military action: the *ASC* account of Æthelstan's reign gives great prominence to his military successes; it is not unreasonable to assume that a peace agreement automatically indicated the end of military action; both may also have been aware of William of Malmesbury's account of Æthelstan taking York by force or Henry of Huntingdon's account of Guthfrith's defeat and death at Æthelstan's hands; they may have wished to use Eamont as a reason for Æthelstan's major expedition into Scotland which they relate next; alternatively they may have been drawing on other sources, written or oral, and using them to flesh out the account in the *ASC*. Whatever factors may lie behind these two later versions, John and Roger have both produced narratives which read as plausible accounts of Æthelstan's dominance at Eamont. It is only by comparing their texts with one of their major sources that it is possible to see how they have altered or added details and so provided their readers with their own interpretation of events. It is their versions of events, however, which have been used by later historians and become standard accounts of Æthelstan's meeting at Eamont.

Æthelstan's Expedition into Scotland

A comparison of the Anglo-Norman accounts of the expedition to Scotland shows that, apart from Gaimar, their authors used the brief *ASC* entry on Æthelstan carrying out a combined land and naval raid in 933/34 and then added other details. It is not clear whether they were using other sources, written or oral, or providing their own personal interpretation of the event. It is clear, however, that in their individual versions they reflect the different standpoints identified above for their histories as a whole:

ASC A-F
Her for Æþelstan cyning in on Scotland. ægþer ge mid landhere ge mid scyphere, 7 his micel oferhergade. Here King Æthelstan went into Scotland both with a raiding land-army and with a raiding ship-army and ravaged much of it.
John of Worcester,⁷⁹ Roger of Hoveden⁸⁰ and Roger of Wendover⁸¹
Strenuus ^a rex Anglorum Athelstanus quia rex Scottorum Constantinus foedus quod cum eo pepigerat dirupit ^b , classica manu perualida et equestri exercitu non modico ad Scottiam proficiscitur ^c , eamque maxima ex parte depopulatur. Vnde ui compulsus rex Constantinus filium suum obsidem cum dignis muneribus illi dedit, paceque redintegrata, rex in Wessaxoniam rediit. ^a et gloriosus (RoH). ^b violaverat, 'had violated' (RoW); fregit, 'broke' (RoH). Roger of Hoveden omits the rest of this text and adds that of Symeon of Durham, below. ^c perrexit, 'proceeded' (RoW). The vigorous king of the English, Æthelstan, because the king of the Scots, Constantine, broke off the treaty he contracted with him, set out for Scotland with a very strong naval force and no small mounted force, and ravaged a very large part of it. As a result, compelled by force, King Constantine gave him his son as a hostage along with worthy gifts and peace having been restored, the king returned to Wessex.
Henry of Huntingdon⁸²
At uero rex Adelstan [...] gentem perfidam Dacorum, et infidam Scottorum, in exterminium traducere disponens, confertissimum duxit exercitum terra et mari in Nordhymbram et Scottiam. Cui cum non esset qui resistere inciperet, uel qui resistere persisteret, ubique terrarum progrediens, et pro libitu predans cum triumphali rediit lauro. But indeed King Æthelstan [...] determining to bring to destruction the treacherous race of the Danes and the deceitful nation of the Scots, led a very large army by land and sea into Northumbria and Scotland. Since there was not anyone who could either begin to resist him, or continue in doing so, advancing all over the land and plundering at will, he returned with a triumphal victory.
Symeon of Durham, <i>Historia Regum</i>⁸³ and Roger of Hoveden⁸⁴
rex Ethelstanus cum multo exercitu Scottiam tendens, ad sepulcrum Sancti Cuthberti venit, illius patrocínio se suumque iter commendavit, multa ac diversa dona, quae regem decerent, ei optulit et terras, æterno igni contradens cruciandos quicumque ei aliquid ex his subtraxerint. Deinde (RoH adds 'maxima vi') hostes subegit: Scottiam usque Dunfoeder et Wertermorum terrestri exercitu vastavit, navali vero usque Catenes depopulatus est. King Æthelstan, while making his way to Scotland with a large army, came to the tomb of St. Cuthbert, committed himself and his expedition to his patronage, offered to him many, different gifts such as befitted a king, and lands, delivering to be tortured by eternal fire those whosoever took away anything from these. After this (RoH: with the greatest force) he subdued his enemies: he laid waste Scotland as far as Dunnottar and Wertemore with his land army and indeed with his naval force he plundered all the way to Caithness.

John of Worcester adds the information that Æthelstan made the expedition because Constantine had broken the treaty he had earlier made with Æthelstan. The choice of words, 'foedus [...] pepigerat', recall the 'foedus cum eo pepigerunt' of Constantine and

⁷⁹ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [934], pp. 388-90.

⁸⁰ *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p. 54.

⁸¹ *Flores Historiarum*, p. 389.

⁸² *Historia Anglorum*, v, 18, pp. 310-11.

⁸³ *Historia Regum*, p. 64.

⁸⁴ *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p. 54.

the Welsh kings at Eamont indicating that it was this treaty which John infers Constantine had broken. John again characterizes Æthelstan as ‘strenuus’, ‘vigorous’. He reinforces this by using the stronger Latin compound ‘depopulari’, ‘to ravage’, and then depicts Æthelstan using force to compel Constantine to make gifts and give his son as a hostage. John represents the land-force, ‘landhere’, of the *ASC* as ‘equestri exercitu’, a cavalry or mounted army/force. This appears to be anachronistic. There is no clear evidence that the Anglo-Saxons fought on horseback although horses were used to convey men and equipment to the battlefield.⁸⁵ If John had information on Anglo-Saxon warfare he may have been referring to this practice, taking into account the distance Æthelstan’s men had to cover. Alternatively it is perhaps more likely that he is reflecting the military practice of his own day. Finally, he portrays Æthelstan’s victory as so complete that peace was restored and he could safely leave Scotland and return to Wessex. John’s depiction of Æthelstan’s superiority as military leader is consistent with his portrayal of him at Eamont and later at Brunanburh. In this he captures and retains the picture provided by the brief entries in the *ASC* which depict Æthelstan as chiefly notable for his military victories.

Henry of Huntingdon provides a very different picture. He does not relate Æthelstan’s expedition to any former event but sees it as a wish to destroy the Danes and Scots, both of whom he describes as treacherous. As no-one was prepared to oppose Æthelstan, the whole expedition is presented as a show of Æthelstan’s military might. He plunders at will and returns victorious, ‘triumphali lauro’, in the manner of a successful Roman general. The ease with which Æthelstan overawes his enemy is in line with Henry’s overall depiction of Æthelstan as a very successful warrior king.

Symeon includes geographical details, claiming in the *Historia Regum* that the

⁸⁵ R. H. C. Davis, ‘Did the Anglo-Saxons have Warhorses’, in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, pp. 141-44. See also Nicholas Hooper, ‘The Anglo-Saxons at War’, in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, pp. 191-202 (p. 200).

army reached Dunnottar (Dunfoeder) and Fortriu (Wertemore) while the fleet sailed as far north as Caithness, and Roger of Hoveden adds this information verbatim to his transcription of John of Worcester's account. Dunnottar is a peninsular with very strong natural defences which is recorded in the late twelfth or early thirteenth-century *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba* as part of the kingdom of Constantine and his family.⁸⁶ Symeon's inclusion of Dunnottar can, therefore, be interpreted as consistent with John of Worcester's statement that Æthelstan's intention was to curb Constantine's power. Caithness was linked to Viking territory in Orkney on the trade route between Norway and the western isles and Symeon's statement that the fleet sailed to Caithness has given rise to various scholarly interpretations.⁸⁷ One possibility which has not so far been considered is that Symeon is drawing on Anglo-Scandinavian traditions of links between Æthelstan and Norway. As will be seen in the chapter on the Scandinavian Tradition, it is possible that Symeon's text may reflect Norse saga and historical accounts of Æthelstan supporting his foster-son, Hákon to return to Norway to inherit the throne of his father, Haraldr hárfagri.

In the *Libellus de Exordio*, Symeon depicts Æthelstan's successful expedition as the direct result of his having visited St Cuthbert's shrine at Chester-le-Street where he sought and received the patronage of St Cuthbert. This part of Symeon's text contains much repetition. He recounts the story that Cuthbert appeared to Alfred at Athelney and promised him victory over the Danes and greatness for his successors and does so twice—first in his account of Alfred's reign and later where he describes Edward telling the story to Æthelstan and urging him always to honour St Cuthbert. Symeon

⁸⁶ Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba 789-1070*, pp. 122-23. Barbara Crawford records that Dunnottar was taken by the Vikings towards the end of the ninth century. Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester: Leicester University, 1987), p. 56. It is unclear whether the Vikings still held Dunnottar in Æthelstan's reign, leaving uncertain whether Æthelstan's expedition was directed solely at Constantine or was also linked with the presence of the Vikings in Scotland.

⁸⁷ See Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, pp. 165-66. Anna Ritchie, *Viking Scotland* (London: Batsford, 1993), pp. 30-32, 72, 75-6. Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 166.

emphasizes the links between the St Cuthbert community and the kings of Wessex recording that Alfred sent gifts to St Cuthbert through Edward, listing the gifts Æthelstan brought and later mentioning those donated by Æthelstan's brother Edmund when king.⁸⁸ He refers more than once to Alfred and his descendants having remained faithful to St Cuthbert and to Cuthbert fulfilling his promise to Alfred by enabling the kings of Wessex to extend the boundaries of their kingdom more widely than ever before. This, he says, was most notably achieved through Æthelstan:⁸⁹

Que tamen in nepote ipsius Aelfredi Aethelstano maxime sunt completa, qui primus regum Anglorum subactis ubique hostibus, totius Britannie dominium obtinuit,

These [promises] however were especially fulfilled in Æthelstan, grandson of Alfred himself, who first of the kings of the English held absolute power over the whole of Britain, having everywhere subdued his enemies.

Æthelstan's success is depicted as resulting, not from his military prowess, but from his pious obedience to the admonitions of his father, Edward, that he should hold the church of St Cuthbert in particular affection and honour:⁹⁰

Hec pii patris monita Aethelstanus libenter suscipiens, libentius regno potitus est executus. Denique ante illum nullus regum ecclesiam sancti Cuthberti tantum dilexit, tam diuersis tamque multiplicibus regiis muneribus decorauit. Vnde hostibus passim emergentibus ubique preualens, omnibus illis uel occisis uel seruitio sibi subactis uel extra terminos Britannie fugatis, maiori quam ullus regum Anglorum ante illum gloria regnabat.

⁸⁸ Symeon quotes from a cartulary list the gifts recorded in Æthelstan's name which were still in the church at Durham, including the book donated by Æthelstan discussed in detail in Chapter 1. He also quotes from a charter donating twelve vills to the community, claims Æthelstan asked his brother Edmund to bring his body back to be buried at St Cuthbert's church should he be killed on the expedition to Scotland and states that Æthelstan confirmed the historic links between Wessex and St Cuthbert by affirming that the laws and customs of the saint, which his grandfather, Alfred, and Guthrum had jointly established, should be strictly observed in perpetuity: 'Leges quoque et consuetudines ipsius sancti quas auus eius rex Elfredus et Guthredus rex instituerant, ipse approbavit, et inuiolabili firmitate in perpetuum seruandas censuit.' *Libellus de Exordio*, ii, 10, 15, 17, 18, pp. 110-13, 128-29, 132-37 and n. 103. Rollason suggests that Symeon derived this information from the anonymous *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*. This contains the stories of St Cuthbert, Alfred and Edward, the list of Æthelstan's gifts, the terms of his land charter, details of Alfred and Guthrum's donations and the later reaffirmation of all these gifts and privileges by successive kings of Wessex. *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, ed. by Ted Johnson South, Anglo-Saxon Texts, 3 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 16-19a, 25-27, pp. 54-59, 64-69, 108-10.

⁸⁹ *Libellus de Exordio*, ii, 10, 17, pp. 110-13, 132-33.

⁹⁰ *Libellus de Exordio*, ii, 17, pp. 134-35.

Æthelstan, willingly adopting this advice of his pious father, carried it out more willingly when he gained the throne. Then none of the kings before him loved the church of St Cuthbert so much, adorned it with such varied and numerous royal gifts. As a result, being superior to his enemies arising on all sides, all of them either having been killed, or subdued into serving him, or put to flight beyond the boundaries of Britain, he reigned with greater glory than any of the kings of the English before him.

Having placed himself under Cuthbert's patronage, Æthelstan is depicted as rewarded with military victory through the saint's protection and help:

Fugato deinde Owino rege Cumborum et Constantino rege Scottorum, terrestri et nauali exercitu Scotiam sibi subiugando perdomuit'.⁹¹

Then Owain, king of the Cumbrians, and Constantine, king of the Scots, having been put to flight, he made himself complete master by subjugating Scotland with his land and naval force.

The hagiographical style of Symeon's narrative linking St Cuthbert so closely with the kings of Wessex can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Perhaps most importantly from the community's point of view, it depicts Cuthbert both as a powerful saint and a national saint who intervened in Wessex to support Alfred in his time of need and continued to be revered and honoured by his descendants. It also provides an example of how kingly pious devotion to St Cuthbert and his community gained victory over the enemy, not only for the king as ruler and military leader but for his people and country. The repeated emphasis on Æthelstan as the fulfilment of Cuthbert's promise depicts him as specially chosen to extend Wessex rule across Britain while his success gives added status to the royal gifts and charter in his name.

Symeon's depiction of Cuthbert as a powerful national saint and Æthelstan as rewarded for his piety by becoming king of all Britain further supports the interpretation, noted above, that Symeon's work was intended to promote the status of Cuthbert's shrine at Durham and prevent appropriation of the wealth and lands of the

⁹¹ *Libellus de Exordio*, ii, 18, pp. 136-39. The phrase 'terrestri et nauali exercitu' recalls the 'landhere' and 'scyphere' of the ASC but the main content of Symeon's narrative focuses on the account of the links between St Cuthbert and Wessex found in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*.

Cuthbert community by the Norman Bishop Ranulf and his barons. This becomes even more evident from the terms of Æthelstan's land charter. This assigned to St Cuthbert's community estates at Tynemouth and Jarrow, an area which later suffered depredations by the Norman Bishops of Durham.⁹²

A different story of saintly support for Æthelstan's expedition to Scotland is narrated by Ælred of Rievaulx. Writing in the twelfth century Ælred describes how Æthelstan, while travelling north, heard from local people of the power of their saint, John of Beverley. Æthelstan sent his troops on ahead while he turned aside to spend a night in prayer at St John's shrine. He left a knife with the saint, promising to return for it if successful. This he did and the monks of Beverley subsequently claimed that Æthelstan made a gift of land and monastic privilege to their community in thanksgiving for the saint's help and confirmed it by a charter—the validity of which was hotly disputed by the Archbishops of York.

It is possible that the role assigned to Cuthbert in supporting Æthelstan's expedition was unknown to Ælred of Rievaulx or perhaps he chose to ignore it. Ælred includes the story in his account of the English kings which he wrote in order to provide the future Henry II with models of good Christian kingship for him to follow.⁹³ Ælred opens his account of Æthelstan by praising his piety and slightly adapting the words

⁹² South has noted the reciprocal benefit of the royal benefactions for the St Cuthbert Community and for the kings of Wessex. He has commented that the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* was written to support the legitimacy of the Community's claims to their possessions and land while the Community itself, through its 'formidable political and economic force in the region', provided support for the kings of Wessex in establishing their rule in Northumbria. *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, ed. by Ted Johnson South, pp. 3, 11. Rollason has also argued that the Earls of Bamburgh and the Community of St Cuthbert managed on the whole to retain a degree of independence and were not subject to any significant degree to Viking dominance, the main Viking threat being directed at Cumbria and Lancashire from the Vikings of Dublin. David Rollason, *Northumbria 500-1000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 213.

⁹³ *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works*, trans. by Jane Patricia Freeland, ed. by Marsha L. Dutton, Cistercian Publications (Michigan: Kalamazoo, 2005), pp 10-18. Ælred, 'Genealogia regum Anglorum', in *Opera Omnia Beati Aelredi*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Cursus Completus, 217 (Paris: 1844-64), 195 (1855), 711-30 (pp. 711-13).

used in the Old Testament Book of Kings to describe King Josiah who was regarded as one of the best of Judah's kings and famed for his religious reforms:⁹⁴

ambulavitque in viis patrum suorum, non declinavit ad dextram neque ad sinistram.

He walked in the ways of his fathers (replacing 'of his father David') and did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

Ælred's account of Æthelstan stresses his pious behaviour and states that by following the best Christian example of his predecessors, he earned victory over his enemies:⁹⁵

eamdem in Deo fidem, in subditos gratiam, circa ecclesias devotionem, circa pauperes misericordiam, circa Dei sacerdotes retinens reverentiam. Contra hunc reliquiae Dacorum more suo nefandum erigunt caput, sed contriti sunt sub pedibus eius et redacti in pulverem.

[he kept] the same faith in God, the same graciousness towards his subjects, the same devotedness to the Church, the same pity for the poor, the same respect for God's priests. Against him the remnants of the Danes in their usual manner raised their wicked heads, but they were trodden down under his feet and ground to dust.

By his story of Æthelstan's prayerful vigil at St John's shrine, Ælred depicts Æthelstan as part of a tradition of successful Christian kings who achieved great things because of their humility, their reliance on prayer and their pious respect for the saints of the Church. Elizabeth Freeman, commenting on Ælred's role in advising the young prince Henry, sees his story of Æthelstan as providing an example of 'how the private activities of England's kings could carry wider public significance'. She points out that success is promised to Æthelstan and to his people as a result of his act of piety, demonstrating that 'the individual actions of kings stand in for the actions of all the people'.⁹⁶ Ælred's depiction of Æthelstan presents him as a model of kingly power and responsibility, a king who fulfilled his role as Christian monarch in a most exemplary fashion.

⁹⁴ 2 Kings 22. 2. Ælred, 'Genealogia regum Anglorum', p. 724.

⁹⁵ Ælred, 'Genealogia regum Anglorum', p. 724.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Historical Writing in England 1150-1220*, *Medieval Church Studies*, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), pp. 64-65.

Ælred's linking of kingly piety with military success echoes Ælfric's praise for Æthelstan written a century earlier.⁹⁷ These two texts, together with Symeon's account above, illustrate how ecclesiastical depictions of Æthelstan continued to keep alive his reputation as a *rex pius*. As will be seen later, these hagiographical accounts of Æthelstan are further extended by William of Malmesbury who recounts how St Aldhelm rewarded Æthelstan's piety by coming to his help at the battle of Brunanburh. The choice of Æthelstan as a role-model for Christian kingship by Ælfric, Symeon and Ælred suggests that a tradition of his piety had already been established.⁹⁸ The prominence given to this by these twelfth-century writers may reflect their wish to provide a royal role-model whose life and actions could be used both to oppose the Norman usurpation of Church property locally and counter national tensions which had arisen between the Norman and Angevin kings and the Archbishops of Canterbury.⁹⁹

Battle of Brunanburh

The variety of presentation and comment on Brunanburh in the Anglo-Saxon texts was noted in Chapter 1 of the thesis. There it was noted that the *ASC* poem concentrated on the battle-slaughter and the glory won by Æthelstan and Edmund; Æthelweard's *Chronicon* depicted the victory bringing peace and prosperity and Ælfric placed Æthelstan alongside Alfred and Edgar as a king who with God's support was successful against his enemies. By contrast, the *ASC* entries in the twelfth-century barely mention Brunanburh. Version E merely states 'Her Æðelstan cyning lædde fyrde to

⁹⁷ See Chapter 1.

⁹⁸ For accounts of Æthelstan's relationship with, and support for, the Church, see Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 348-50; Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 94-110. On Æthelstan's love of relics and devotion to the saints see Section 3 below on William of Malmesbury.

⁹⁹ The sources of continual tension and disagreement between the kings and archbishops were authority over ecclesiastical appointments, Church property and judicial powers. Bartlett identifies in particular the serious conflicts involving exile, murder or anathema between Anselm and William Rufus, Anselm and Henry I, Becket and Henry II, Stephen Langton and King John. Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, pp. 402-12.

Brunanbyrig', 'Here king Æthelstan led his army to Brunanbyrig'.¹⁰⁰ That the poem was known to the later *Chronicle* writers can be deduced from Version F. This appears to draw on the *Chronicle* poem by recording that Æthelstan was accompanied by Edmund and that five kings and seven earls were killed. It adds a Christian note lacking from the *Chronicle* poem by adding that Æthelstan's victory was 'Criste fultumegende', and 'auxiliante Christo', 'with Christ's help'.¹⁰¹ The brevity of the later *ASC* entries seems to assume that the reader will know the details and this may indicate that by this time the poem on Brunanburh was already treated as an independent text. This is further supported by Henry of Huntingdon's comments. He attempts his own translation of the poem describing it as a kind of song, 'carmen', written in strange forms of language but he makes no reference to it being part of the *Chronicle* or any other text.

The longer Anglo-Norman accounts draw on the *ASC* but also vary in the way they present Brunanburh. John of Worcester provides a summary which reflects the main information in the poem:

The battle lasted from dawn to dusk; of the enemy, five kings and seven earls were killed; more blood was shed than in any war in England; Anlaf and Constantine were forced to flee and returned home with few men; King Æthelstan and the ætheling Edmund returned to their own kingdom exuberant in victory.¹⁰²

John adds the information that the invading forces entered by the mouth of the Humber. He describes Anlaf as the heathen, 'paganus', king of the Irish and of many islands and son-in-law to Constantine whom he claims urged Anlaf to invade Britain.¹⁰³ Although

¹⁰⁰ *ASC E*, ed. by Susan Irvine, p. 55.

¹⁰¹ *ASC F*, ed. by Peter S. Baker, pp. 79-80.

¹⁰² John uses the word 'tripudio', literally an energetic dance, used to signify the kind of celebration due to the magnitude of the victory. John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [937], pp. 392-93.

¹⁰³ 'Hiberniensium multarumque insularum rex paganus Anlafus, a socero suo rege Scottorum Constantino incitatus, ostium Humbre fluminis ualida cum classe ingreditur', 'The pagan king of Ireland and the many islands, Anlaf, driven on by his father-in-law Constantine king of the

the tenth-century texts represent Anlaf as the leading protagonist, John's version suggests a source which depicted the invasion as the work of Constantine.¹⁰⁴

As in the poem, John's account depicts Æthelstan with his brother Edmund the prince, 'clito', as equally responsible for the death of the five kings and seven earls and for the overall victory. Unlike the poem, he makes no reference to their family descent as sons of Edward or to their returning to Wessex, and his summary of the bloodshed differs from the poem in making no comparison with the Saxon invasions:

tantumque sanguinis quantum eatenus in Anglia nullo in bello fustum est
fuderunt.

they shed as much blood as had so far not been shed in any war in England.

While there is nothing to suggest that these differences are anything other than John's simplification of details in line with his normal *Chronicle* style, they effectually remove both the dynastic Wessex element stressed in the poem and the place of the battle within Saxon historical tradition. Æthelstan is depicted by John, not as a tenth-century King of Wessex, but as a king of England who successfully repulsed a Scots initiated invasion which, if successful, would have given the pagan Vikings of Ireland rule over the English.

Symeon of Durham includes details not found in John and this may indicate he was drawing on local traditions. He gives three alternative names for the site of the battle, Wendune, Et Brunnanwerc and Brunnanbyrig. This has not helped scholars to locate the battlefield but, as will be seen in Chapter 4 on the Scandinavian Tradition, the name Wendune has been seen as possibly linking Brunanburh with the battle of *Vínheiðr* in *Egils saga*. Symeon also states that the invaders came in 615 ships and he

Scots, entered the mouth of the Humber river with a strong fleet'. John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, [937], pp. 392 and 393, n. 9.

¹⁰⁴ These variations may indicate that different local names existed for the site. Symeon's account linked Æthelstan's expedition to Scotland with Dunottar and the east coast. It is possible that John is reflecting this when he describes the invading force coming from the east to enter Britain via the Humber.

includes the King of the Cumbrians alongside Constantine and Anlaf (or Olaf) as one of the kings involved. He does not describe the battle or the numbers killed, nor does he describe Anlaf as a pagan but, in keeping with the theme already noted, he depicts Æthelstan as victorious because of the trust he had placed in the patronage provided for him by St Cuthbert. Symeon continues the tenth-century theme of Æthelstan as a bringer of peace, noted in Chapter 1, and draws a contrast between this and the terror Æthelstan inspired in his enemies:¹⁰⁵

At ille sancti Cuthberti patrocínio confisus, prostrata multitudine infinita reges illos de regno suo propulit, suisque gloriosum reportans triumphum; hostibus circumquaque tremendus, suis erat pacificus, et in pace postmodum uitam terminauit.

But he [Æthelstan], having placed his trust in the patronage of St Cuthbert and a vast number beyond counting [of the enemy] having been laid low, drove those kings from his kingdom, winning for his people a glorious triumph; an object of terror to his enemies on all sides, he was a bringer of peace to his own people and afterwards he ended his life in peace.

Gaimar refers to the battle at Brunanburh as an event which will always be remembered. This however is for the number killed rather than the valour shown by Æthelstan and his brother.¹⁰⁶ Alexander Bell comments that the *Chronicle* poem on Brunanburh appears to be unknown to Gaimar. However, he may, as Paul Cavill has pointed out, have drawn on Symeon of Durham or related material for the name of the battle as his choice of the form Brunewerce closely models Symeon's Brunnanwerc.¹⁰⁷

Aprés un an ne mei[n]s ne plus	After a year, no less nor more
A Brunewerce ot le desus	At Brunewerce he had the upper hand
Sur les Escoz e sur Cumbreis,	Over the Scots and the Cumbrians,
Sur Galweiens e sur Pecteis;	Over the Welsh and over the Picts;

Gaimar's inclusion of the Cumbrians also echoes Symeon's account above. A reference to the Picts is also found in Æthelweard's *Chronicon*. The Welsh, however, seem to be

¹⁰⁵ *Libellus de Exordio*, ii, 18, pp. 138-39.

¹⁰⁶ 'Iloc en furent tant ocis,/Crei que parole en ert tut dis', 'In that place there were so many killed/I believe mention will always be spoken of it'. Gaimar, *L'Estoire*, 3521-22, p. 112.

¹⁰⁷ Gaimar, *L'Estoire*, 3517-20, pp. 112, 249. Paul Cavill, 'The Place-Name Debate', in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Livingston, pp. 327-49 (pp. 329, 334).

Gaimar's own contribution. It would seem that Gaimar drew on a range of sources to expand the brief details also found in *ASC* Version E, perhaps reflecting those most easily available to him locally and through his patroness.

Henry of Huntingdon is the only Anglo-Norman writer who attempts to reproduce the content of the *Brunanburh* poem. He describes *Brunanburh* as 'preliorum maximum', 'the greatest of battles'. He makes no mention of Constantine but states that Anlaf increased his forces from among those of Scots and Danish descent living in England.¹⁰⁸ He therefore depicts Æthelstan as facing rebellion from within as well as from outside his kingdom. As will be seen later, this idea that Æthelstan faced civil war as well as invasion from abroad is also hinted at by William of Malmesbury and depicts Æthelstan as a more vulnerable king than the image of him as *Rex totius Britanniae* and *basileus* in the tenth-century texts.

Henry attempts a Latin translation of the Old English *Brunanburh* poem, explaining some of the difficulties he faced but justifying his decision on the grounds that his readers need to understand the enormity of the event for people at the time:¹⁰⁹

De cuius prelii magnitudine Anglici scriptores quasi carminis modo proloquentes, et extraneis tam uerbis quam figuris usi translatione fida donandi sunt. Vt pene de uerbo in uerbum eorum interpretantes eloquium ex grauitate uerborum grauitatem actuum et animorum gentis illius condiscamus.

Concerning the magnitude of this battle, the English writers, as if communicating in the manner of a song, have used both foreign words and images and they must be represented through a faithful translation. So that by giving expression to their eloquence almost word for word, we may, from the dignity of the words used, together learn of the dignity of the deeds and courage of that race.

¹⁰⁸ 'Qui uires suas gente Scotorum et Dacorum in Anglia conuersantium adauxerat', 'Who (Anlaf) had increased his own forces with descendants of Scots and Danes living in England'. *Historia Anglorum*, v, 18, pp. 310-11.

¹⁰⁹ *Historia Anglorum*, v, 19, pp. 310-315. A. G. Rigg, counters criticism of the accuracy of Henry's translation arguing that he achieved a remarkable coalescence of the very different techniques involved in Latin metrical poetry and Old English rhythmic verse. A. G. Rigg, 'Henry of Huntingdon's Metrical Experiments', *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 60-72 (pp. 68-69).

Despite the serious motive he gave for including his translation of the poem, Henry later describes it as having been inserted as light relief before he returned to the task of writing history.¹¹⁰ It is not that Henry is averse to including poetry in his *Historia Anglorum*. Greenway has identified several places where Henry incorporates lines from lost Latin poems which celebrate the battle successes of the Wessex kings Aethelwulf, Alfred, Edward and Edmund. In each of these examples, the king is depicted as supported by God in achieving victory.¹¹¹ As noted in Chapter 1, the Old English poem on Brunanburh is singularly lacking in Christian references and Henry's translation captures this. The strangeness of his Latin and the images of Æthelstan as 'decus ducum', 'the glory of military leaders', and 'nobilibus torquium dator', 'giver of rings to the nobles', depict Æthelstan as a pagan, heroic king of the past who belonged to a very different culture from that of the twelfth century.

Death of Edwin

The earliest reference to the death of Edwin is found in the texts of the Continental tradition. Folcuin, writing in the early 960s, records that Æthelstan had welcomed to Bath a group of monks from St Bertin who were opposed to the introduction in their abbey of the Benedictine reforms. Folcuin explained that Æthelstan's action reflected his gratitude to the monks of St Bertin

[...] quia frater eiusdem incliti regis Edwinus rex in monasterio Sancti Bertini fuerat tumultatus. Siquidem anno Verbi incarnati 933. idem rex Edwinus, cum, cogente aliqua regni sui perturbatione, hac in maris parte ascensa navi vellet devenire, perturbatione ventorum facta navique collisa, mediis fluctibus absortus est. Cuius corpus cum ad litus esset devectum, Adalolfus comes, quoniam propinquus ei carnali consanguinitate erat, cum honore sumens, ad Sancti Bertini monasterium detulit tumultandum.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ 'His causa recreandi interpositis, ad historiam redeamus', 'having interposed these [verses] to provide refreshment, let us return to history'. *Historia Anglorum*, v. 19, p. 314.

¹¹¹ *Historia Anglorum*, ii, 30, pp. 114-15; ii, 34, pp. 120-21; iii, 33, pp. 184-85; iii, 34, pp. 188-89; iii, 39, pp. 194-95; iv, 29, pp. 262-63.

¹¹² Folcuin, 'Gesta Abbatum Sancti Bertini Sithiensium', ed. by O. Holder-Egger, *MGH Scriptores*, 13 (Hannover: Hahn, 1881), pp. 607-35 (p. 629).

Because the brother of that same celebrated king, King Edwin, had been buried in the monastery of St Bertin. Since indeed in the year 933 of the Word Incarnate, when the same King Edwin, some disorder in his kingdom making it necessary, had embarked on ship and wished to come to land in this part of the sea, a turmoil of winds having arisen his ship was wrecked and he was swallowed down in the middle of the waves. When his body had been washed to the shore, Count Adalolfus, since he was a kinsman of his closely related by blood, received it with honour and brought it to the monastery of St Bertin for burial.

Folcuin's account does not suggest that there was anything suspicious about Edwin's death. The reason why Edwin felt it necessary to leave England is only vaguely stated but he is twice referred to as 'rex'. Scholarship has provided various theories as to why Edwin left England. Charles Plummer has suggested that he might have been under-king of Kent and suspected of fomenting rebellion.¹¹³ However, other theories are equally possible. For example, it has always been unclear how Northumbria was governed after Eamont, especially as Æthelstan's charters suggest that he spent most of his time in the southern parts of the country. One possible answer would be that Edwin, the only half-brother old enough to have challenged for the kingship, acted as under-king of Northumbria. If so, given the vulnerability to invasion of this northern region, it is easy to surmise that Edwin may have been represented as dealing with the enemy, as was Archbishop Wulfstan of York. In Edwin's case this may have resulted in exile, whether voluntary or enforced. This may also help to explain later accounts of Edwin's death which seem to have originated from Northumbria.

The following Table compares the accounts of Edwin's death in the *ASC* and Anglo-Norman histories. This reveals the existence of two very different versions. One makes no mention of Æthelstan while the other accuses him of ordering Edwin to be drowned.

¹¹³ Charles Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892-99), II, 137-38.

Table 6. Accounts of Edwin's Death

Æthelstan Accused	No Direct Accusation
<p style="text-align: center;">Twelfth Century Texts</p> <p>Symeon of Durham, <i>Historia Regum</i>:¹¹⁴ 933 rex Ethelstanus jussit Eadwinum fratrem suum submergi in mare. King Æthelstan ordered his brother Edwin to be drowned in the sea.</p> <p>Roger of Hoveden: (934)¹¹⁵ As above.</p> <p>John of Worcester, Marginal Note in MS B of <i>The Chronicle</i>:¹¹⁶ Middletunensem ecclesiam fecit rex Athelstanus pro anima fratris sui Edwi(n)i, quem pravo corruptus consilio Anglia eiecit. King Æthelstan built the church at Milton for the soul of his brother Edwin whom he, seduced by distorted advice, drove out of England.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Twelfth Century Texts</p> <p>ASC Version E: 933 Her adranc Ædwine æðeling on sæ. Here the aethling Edwin was drowned at sea.</p> <p>Henry of Huntingdon:¹¹⁷ Nec multo post, aduersa percussus fortuna fratrem suum Edwinum, magni uigoris et bone indolis iuuenem, maris fluctibus flebiliter amisit. Not long after, stricken by bad fortune he sorrowfully lost to the waves of the sea his brother Edwin, a young man of great energy and good disposition.</p> <p>John of Worcester, MS C of <i>The Chronicle</i>: No mention of Edwin's death.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Thirteenth Century Texts</p> <p>Roger of Wendover: (934)¹¹⁸ As in Symeon of Durham, but gives as a stated reason that Æthelstan, being of low birth, feared Edwin's claim to the throne.</p>	

The earliest surviving account of Æthelstan as responsible for his brother's death comes from the *Historia Regum*, attributed to Symeon of Durham, and is given further prominence by being repeated verbatim in the summary *Historiae Recapitulatio*.¹¹⁹ No

¹¹⁴ 'Historia Regum', in *Opera et Collectanea*, ed. by Hodgson Hinde, p. 64.

¹¹⁵ *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p. 54.

¹¹⁶ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, Appendix B, p. 394.

¹¹⁷ *Historia Anglorum*, v, 18, pp. 310-11.

¹¹⁸ *Flores Historiarum*, p. 389-90.

¹¹⁹ 'Historiae Recapitulatio', in *Opera et Collectanea*, ed. by Hodgson Hinde, Surtees Society, 51 (Durham: Andrews & Co., 1868), pp. 67-77 (p. 77).

reason is given for Æthelstan's action but the text dates the event to 933, just before Æthelstan's recorded expedition to Scotland and his visit to Chester-le-Street, supporting the idea that it represents a Northumbrian version of events. Of the later chroniclers only Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover follow the Northumbrian version, with Roger of Wendover ascribing political reasons for Edwin's death. This, he relates, was the result of Æthelstan's anxiety over the status of his own birth and his fear that as the young Edwin grew into manhood he would challenge for the throne:

consecratus autem Ethelstanus, fratrem suum Eadwinum, quem de legitimo matrimonio cognovit generatum, nigerrimo perstrinxit odio, metuens ne per ipsum quandoque a regni solio privaretur.¹²⁰

However, Æthelstan, after his consecration, marked with the blackest hatred his brother Edwin, whom he knew was the son of a legitimate marriage, fearing that through him at some point he might be deprived of the throne of the kingdom.

It is not known whether Roger was using a written source for this information or drawing on the kind of popular versions of Æthelstan's birth and succession mentioned by William of Malmesbury and considered in the section on William below. If the latter, it is perhaps indicative of the strength of such popular stories that they apparently were still current in the early thirteenth century.

Version E of the *ASC* is the only entry on Edwin's death in the *Chronicle*. This represents it as an accidental event. Henry of Huntingdon emphasises this further by describing Edwin's death as an ill-fortune suffered by Æthelstan. John of Worcester makes no mention of Edwin's death in the main manuscript C but a marginal note in the Bury St Edmunds' MS B, depicts Æthelstan as responsible for his brother's exile but on the basis of false information. These texts, which reflect more kindly on Æthelstan, are

¹²⁰ *Flores Historiarum*, p. 390. Roger's account of Æthelstan's birth is the same as in William of Malmesbury but William does not link it with Edwin's death. Instead he ascribes Edwin's exile and drowning to malicious and false rumours which caused Æthelstan to suspect his brother's loyalty. For details see Section 3 below.

more in line with Folcuin's contemporary version of events rather than the Northumbrian-based accounts which accuse Æthelstan of causing his brother's death.

Overview

These accounts of Edwin's death particularly illustrate how the versions provided by the Anglo-Norman writers depended on their choice and use of existing sources. Roger of Hoveden perhaps provides the best example. He mainly uses John of Worcester as his source but draws on Symeon for Edwin's death, which John's original text does not mention. For Æthelstan's reign as a whole, it is noticeable that Symeon of Durham and Henry of Huntingdon both provide individualized versions which reflect the aims of their work. Thus the Æthelstan of Henry is a highly successful military leader who dies young, illustrating his overall theme of the transiency of worldly success. Symeon's Æthelstan is a pious, generous and humble king whose devotion to St Cuthbert earns him victory over his enemies and the crown of all Britain, fulfilling Cuthbert's promise to King Alfred. At the same time as Henry and Symeon were writing their accounts, John of Worcester was compiling his scholarly chronicle. Although based closely on the *ASC*, there is evidence of John editing his material by combining or altering the order of events to fit his own purposes, omitting some details and adding his own interpretation, for example in his account of Æthelstan's succession.

John's use of several versions of the *ASC* gives his work greater breadth and the use of his text as a main source by Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover both endorses what he has written and gives it greater permanency. Gaimar can be said to have done the same for the *ASC*, making it accessible in French for a Norman audience. However, like Henry of Huntingdon, he draws almost exclusively on Version E of the *Chronicle* and, as a result, both provide a very limited account of Æthelstan and his reign.

William of Malmesbury is the only Anglo-Norman historian who sets out to produce a detailed account of Æthelstan by drawing on a wide range of sources. He is also a historian who shows concern about how history should be written and shares this with his readers. William indicates he had several purposes for his work. He wishes to provide a trustworthy account of Æthelstan as a person as well as king, win patronage and financial support for his abbey of Malmesbury where Æthelstan was buried and please the patrons to whom he had dedicated his work. In the following section I analyse how these purposes are evident in William's depiction of Æthelstan and how his narrative on Æthelstan and his reign illustrate his approach to writing history.

Section Three: William of Malmesbury

Introduction

Opinions on William's standing as a historian differ widely.¹²¹ He is variously described as having produced 'a popular and standard history',¹²² 'one of the last major figures in a tradition of Christian scholarship dominated by Benedictine monasticism';¹²³ 'a treacherous witness' of unconfirmed historical material;¹²⁴ 'creative, entertaining', humorous and, 'from a scholar's point of view, subversive';¹²⁵ a writer of 'studied ambiguity' and paradox.¹²⁶ While this range of views reflects something of the variety of content and style to be found in William's work, it also illustrates how scholars have

¹²¹ For an overview of William as historian see Gransden, *Historical Writings in England*, pp. 166-85.

¹²² *De Gestis Regum Anglorum Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi*, ed. by William Stubbs, 2 vols (London: HMSO, 1887), I, p. xci. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by R. A. B. Mynors, completed by R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998-99), II, pp. xliii-xlv.

¹²³ Rodney M. Thomson, 'William of Malmesbury' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 476-77.

¹²⁴ Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar*, p. 146.

¹²⁵ Julia Barrow, 'William of Malmesbury's Use of Charters', in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Tyler and Balzaretta, pp. 67-89 (pp. 72, 81).

¹²⁶ Paul Antony Hayward, 'The Importance of Being Ambiguous: Innuendo and Legerdemain in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum* and *Gesta Pontificum Anglicorum*', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 33 (2010), 75-102 (p. 75).

responded as readers, their specialist knowledge focusing them on certain aspects of the text. Yet despite these differences there is also a measure of agreement that William showed great industry in gathering together material from disparate sources. As a result his work is still recognized today as a significant source for Æthelstan and his reign.¹²⁷

While the opinions of others may vary, there is no doubt that William regarded himself as a serious, scholarly historian. In his *Gesta Regum* William claims to have fulfilled his aim of following in Bede's footsteps and providing a work which will be of benefit to future historians:¹²⁸

priuatim ipse michi sub ope Christi gratulor, quod continuam Anglorum historiam ordinauerim post Bedam uel solus uel primus. Si quis ergo, sicut iam susurrari audio, post me scribendi de talibus munus attemptauerit, michi debeat collectionis gratiam, sibi habeat electionis materiam.

I personally congratulate myself under Christ's help, that I either alone, or first since Bede, have narrated in order a continuous history of the English; If anyone, therefore, as already I hear is whispered, attempted after me the task of writing about such things, he would owe thanks to me for collating the material, the thanks for its selection he would have for himself.

However, William's letters on the dedication of his work suggest that he had another main aim which influenced his writing. The first letter celebrates the encouragement given to his writing of the *Gesta Regum* by Queen Matilda during her lifetime; the second dedicates the work to her daughter, addressed as the Empress Matilda. This records that Queen Matilda had requested the work wishing to know more of her family connections with St Aldhelm, founder of Malmesbury.¹²⁹ Following the death of the Empress Matilda, William introduced at the end of Book Five an epilogue in praise of her half-brother, Robert Earl of Gloucester, whom he praises for his known support for Tewkesbury Abbey and to whom he promises to dedicate his *Historia Novella*. Later he dedicates the *Gesta Regum* to Robert in a separate letter originally appended in the

¹²⁷ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 258.

¹²⁸ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, v, 445, I, 796-97.

¹²⁹ *Gesta Regum*, I, 2-9.

manuscripts at the end of Book Three.¹³⁰ These dedications indicate that William hoped to secure royal support for his work. There is no evidence that this happened but it may help to explain his moderate, and at times sympathetic, treatment both of the reign of Robert's father, Henry I, and of Æthelstan who was buried at Malmesbury. This bias in favour of the Abbey of Malmesbury is particularly evident in his section on Æthelstan where William repeatedly refers to Æthelstan's devotion to St Aldhelm, records his generous gifts and support for the Abbey and his choice of Malmesbury for his own burial and that of his two cousins killed at Brunanburh.

William's Presentation of Himself as Historian

William tells his readers a great deal about his approach to history in the separate Prologues at the beginning of each of the five books of the *Gesta Regum*. Taking the Prologues as a starting point it is possible to identify how William saw his role as historian and how he disassociated himself from practices of historiography he criticised in others. His Prologues provide a framework for looking at William's text as a whole. As Robert Stein has argued, by looking 'at' a text 'rather than *through* it',¹³¹ we are able to avoid concentrating on what seems plausible (or of specialist interest) and look instead at how the author seeks to gain his reader's trust in his representation of events. In the *Gesta Regum* William does this by spelling out his own very clear views both on historical 'truth' and on the importance of his readers' responses to his text.

William's Prologues

The following analysis of William's prologues is based on Gransden's identification of the key *topoi* used by Latin historians of the twelfth century.¹³² From this it will be seen

¹³⁰ *Gesta Regum*, I, 10-13, 446-49, 798-801.

¹³¹ Robert M. Stein, 'Literary Criticism and the Evidence of History', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, pp. 67-87 (p. 72).

¹³² Gransden defines twelfth-century Latin historical prologues as a genre rooted in Greek and Roman literary traditions, designed to introduce the writer to his audience, make the reader

that William presents himself as a reflective, critical historian. He uses his prologues to address the question of the veracity of his work, express his opposition to contemporary expectations of the historian and outline the complementary role which he expects of his readers. By comparing the content of the separate prologues it is possible to chart changes in the way William portrays himself against the criteria identified by Gransden.¹³³ This is particularly evident in the transition from his self-confident approach in Prologues I and II to that of greater self-analysis and justification in the Prologues to Books III-V.

receptive, provide information on the purpose and range of the work and show some rhetorical skill. Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England*, pp. 125-51.

¹³³ Gransden, *Legends and Traditions*, pp. 125-26.

Table 7. Examples of Historical *topoi* in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum* 'Prologues', Books I-V

Topoi (Gransden).	Gesta Regum:Books I-II	Gesta Regum: Books III-V
1. Dedication to important person.	1. Dedication to Matilda provided in a separate letter.	1. Separate letter of dedication to Robert, Earl of Gloucester, son of Henry I.
2. Author persuaded to write.	2. Bk. I. Writing from love of country and respect for authority of those enjoining the task, he wishes to make good the break in historical writing since Bede.	2. Bk. IV. As a result of criticism he had retired. Now he has decided to continue his history from love of study, the inability to do nothing or spend time on worthless activities, and encouraged by his friends.
3. Modestly claims to be unequal to the task –can't write good enough prose to do justice to subject.		3. Bk.V. Henry's achievements require an abler hand. To record only what he knows could weary the most eloquent and overload a library. Matters require more leisure than he has. Cicero and Vergil could not do it justice.
4. Promises to write briefly and simply.	4. Bk. I. Will achieve his aim if divine favour enables him to avoid the kind of language which wrecked Æthelweard's work.	4. Little time to be spent on things useful to no-one, boring to the reader and producing hatred towards the writer.
5. Will compensate by industry.	5. Bk. I. Hopes for a future reputation, if not of eloquence, then of diligence.	5. Bk. IV. Does not claim his account of the Christians' journey to Jerusalem will be more fitting than those of previous writers.
6. Sometimes mention previous authors and discuss sources.	6. Bk. I. Praises Bede's learning, humility and good style; castigates Æthelweard's Latin; Eadmer brief on times before William. Challenges readers to see if they can find other early sources. Bk. II. Sought out chronicles but found them unsatisfactory.	
7. Special difficulty of contemporary history.		7. Bk. IV. Many think it unwise he wrote of contemporary kings. Truth leads to upset, falsehood meets with support. The indolent consider him unequal to so great a task and distortedly censure the

<p>8. Subject to accusations of malice and flattery.</p> <p>9. Primary duty to tell the truth</p> <p>10. Narrative to be accurate, facts right and free from bias.</p> <p>11. Purpose often given as preserving memory of past for posterity.</p> <p>12. History provides examples of good & bad behaviour for reader to follow. or eschew.</p>	<p>8. Bk. I. Gives little weight to the judgement of his contemporaries. Looks forward to a time when love and envy no longer play a part.</p> <p>9/10. Bk. I. Does not vouch for the truth of his account of long past events. Truth rests with his sources. His account of later times is based on what he himself has seen, or heard from trustworthy men. Bk. II. Asks readers to send him information he should know so he can add it in the margin. Hopes that although the first book may give rise to doubt for some, truth will not be shamed.</p> <p>11. Bk. I. Claims to fill a gap of 223 years from the time of Bede.</p> <p>12. Bk. II. Has been influenced by his study of ethics which promotes the living of a good life. The examples of history inspire readers to pursue good and beware of evil.</p>	<p>undertaking with their insults. His limited knowledge and his omissions could detract from Henry's standing. His weakness prevents him recounting all Henry's actions and to do so would provide readers with a surfeit.</p> <p>8. Bk. III. The Normans praise William I excessively; the English give undeserved reproach. Always there are some ready to detract from the actions of the noble. Bk. IV. Everything inclines to evil. Writers pass over the bad from fear and fabricate the good to win plaudits.</p> <p>9/10. Bk. III. His account of William I will be in proportion so that it is not blamed as false and does not over-censure or over-praise. Different interpretations are possible but the time will come when the reader decides for himself.</p> <p>Bk. IV. In writing of William II, he will avoid exciting hatred or falsifying the truth. Some matters may be omitted, but he will not conceal his opinions.. Bk. V. In writing of Henry I he does not trust doubtful accounts and includes only a few events; concerned this may mean the hero suffers.</p> <p>11. Bk. V. He will relate a few deeds. Fame will disseminate the rest and memory successfully carry them to posterity.</p> <p>12. Bk. III. Includes things which will spur on the indolent, provide an example to the energetic, be useful to the present age and pleasing to posterity. He will spend Bk. IV. Includes the crusade because of its fame and as a spur to valour.</p>
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13 Shows God's dominion & how he punishes wrongdoers.		
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In his prologues William addresses his readers as fellow scholars and potential critics,¹³⁴ bemoaning his lack of Latin sources since the time of Bede, challenging his readers to see if they are more successful,¹³⁵ seeking their forbearance if he includes nothing new and asking them to send him any further information so he can add it in the margins of his text.¹³⁶

He anticipates the criticisms which his selection of material may generate but justifies his decisions citing as reasons the importance of moderation, his limited access to contemporary information and the need to avoid boring his reader with unnecessary detail. Major digressions he excuses on the grounds that they provide information which his readers should have or which was not previously available to them. In line with tradition, he sees history as having a moral purpose, inspiring valour and encouraging good behaviour and the avoidance of evil.

The prologues show that William was not afraid to communicate his personal standpoints on the writing history to his readers. His comments also indicate that he knew others would have different points of view. In Prologue I William refers to the existence of love ('amor') and envy ('livor') among his contemporaries and claims not to care about their opinions, but in Prologue IV he states that criticism had caused him to break off his work which he only resumed because of his love of study and the support of his friends. His Prologues to Books III-V reflect the difficulties he faced in

¹³⁴ In his prologue to Book IV, William quotes St Jerome's on his readers, 'si placet, legant; si non placet, abstant', 'if [my work] pleases them, let them read it; if it does not please them, let them depart', adding, 'et ego haec non tediosis ingero, sed studiosis [...] consecro', 'I too do not present these [writings] to those who find such things irksome but dedicate them to those who are devoted to studying'. *Gesta Regum*, I, 540-41.

¹³⁵ 'post eum non facile, ut arbitror, reperies qui historiis illius gentis Latina oratione texendis animum dederunt. Viderint alii si quid earum rerum uel iam inuenerint uel post haec inuenturi sint', 'after him [Bede], you will not easily, as I think, find those who have given their attention to producing histories of that [the English] race in the Latin language. Let others see if they have either already found anything of those things or are going to after this'. *Gesta Regum*, i, 'Prologue', I, 14-15.

¹³⁶ 'immo, dum uiuo, michi cognoscenda communicet, ut meo stylo apponantur saltem in margine quae non occurrerunt in ordine', 'By all means, while I live, let him communicate to me those things I ought to know about so that those which have not appeared in the text may at least be added by my pen in the margin'. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 'Prologue', I, 152-53.

recounting the actions of the Norman and Plantagenet kings so soon after the actual events. His criticisms of the work of other writers as emotionally charged and open to serious bias and distortion, paints a vivid picture of the influences William believed historians faced:

Prologue: Book III	De Willelmo rege scripserunt, diuersis incitati causis, et Normanni et Angli. Illi ad nimias efferati sunt laudes, bona malaque iuxta in caelum predicantes; isti, pro gentilibus inimicitiiis, fedis dominum suum proscidere conuitiis. Satis superque suffitiunt qui genuino molari facta bonorum lacerent.	Both the Normans and the English have written about King William, but spurred on for different reasons. The Normans have been unrestrainedly roused to excessive praise, lauding to the sky good and bad alike; the English, because of inherited animosity, have reviled their lord with foul abuse. There are enough people, and more, who, through their inbuilt habit of grinding the facts, mangle the deeds of the good.
Prologue: Book IV	quippe presentium mala periculose, bona plausibiliter dicuntur. Eo fit, inquiunt, ut, quia modo omnia magis ad peius quam ad melius sint procliuia, scriptor obuia mala propter metum pretereat, et, bona si non sunt, propter plausum confingat.	It is dangerous to speak of the bad deeds of those still alive while to speak of their good deeds wins applause. And so it happens, men say, that, because now everything is more inclined to the worse than the better, the writer omits through fear the evil he meets, and, if there are no good things to report, invents them because of the applause they bring.

William states that he will avoid the pitfalls he outlines in Prologue III by courageously following a course of moderation, avoiding excessive praise or blame. He claims that, judged correctly, his readers will see that he is aware of potential criticism but can be moderate without making any sacrifice to style:¹³⁷

Michi haec placet prouintia, ut mala quantum quo sine ueritatis dispendio extenuem, bona non nimis uentose collaudem. De qua moderatione, ut estimo, ueri qui erunt arbitri me nec timidum nec inelegantem pronuntiabunt.

¹³⁷ *Gesta Regum*, iii, 'Prologue', I, 424-25; iv, 'Prologue', I, pp. 540-41.

For me, this is the position which seems right, that, as far as I can, I play down evil without losing the truth; the good I strongly commend but not too inflatedly. Those who will judge this moderation truly, will, I reckon, proclaim that I am neither cowardly nor lacking in stylishness.

Perhaps conscious some readers will see his claim to play down evil and strongly commend the good as bias, he qualifies it; the good will be suitably emphasized but not over-inflated while evil will be presented in a moderate light ‘quantum queo sine ueritatis dispendio’, ‘as far as I can without losing the truth’.

William presents himself as very concerned with questions of veracity and reliability in his own text and in his sources. He addresses this issue in a number of ways. He makes it clear that he expects his readers to be critical and make their own assessment of the credibility of his material. Referring to the content of his first book, William expresses his hope that his readers will find it a truthful account but anticipates there will be some who will also question it:

in quibus, ut spero, non erubescet ueritas, etsi forte alicui suboriatur dubietas.

in which, as I hope, truth will not have cause to blush, although perhaps for anyone doubt may arise.

He explains that responsibility for the veracity of events from the past rest with the authors of his sources and not with himself:¹³⁸

sciat me nichil de retro actis preter coherentiam annorum pro uero pacisci; fides dictorum penes auctores erit.

Let him know that I make no covenant respecting the truth concerning things done in the past other than the sequence of years; the credibility of what is recorded will be with their authors.

Not infrequently, William shares his own reservations on the acceptability of his source material. For example, he questions the reliability of some early traditions and dismisses

¹³⁸ *Gesta Regum*, i, ‘Prologue’, I, 16-17; ii, ‘Prologue’, I, 150-51. Gransden draws a parallel with Bede’s statement in the ‘Prologue’ to the *Historia Ecclesiastica* where he states that any error should not be imputed to him because he has tried to ensure the very best reliability for his sources. William’s statement is much stronger, absolving himself of any responsibility for the accuracy of his source material. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I, 8-11. Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History*, p. 142.

the work of Æthelweard because of its extravagant style;¹³⁹ he queries some of Bede's statements, directly or indirectly;¹⁴⁰ in his section on Æthelstan he queries or challenges the veracity of some of the traditional material he uses.¹⁴¹ Sometimes he quotes directly from a source text rather than paraphrasing it, stating that he wishes to preserve the accuracy of the content and style of the original.¹⁴²

William is also aware that different interpretations can exist for the same events and sees the reader as having a responsibility for making up his or her own mind on these. He leaves it to his readers to resolve the difference in dates given in the *Chronicle* and in Bede for the reign of Ethelbert of Kent, claiming it was sufficient he had drawn attention to it.¹⁴³ Writing of William I's younger son in Prologue III he points up different ways of looking at historical outcomes:

Si expeditiones attendas, ignores cautior an audatior fuerit, si fortunas aspicias, hesites beator aut boni eventus indigentior fuerit. Sed de talibus tempus erit cum lector arbitretur.

If you were to concentrate on his military expeditions, you would not know whether he was more cautious or more daring; if you were to consider how things turned out for him, you would be uncertain whether he had been more blessed or more in need of a good outcome. But there will be a time when the reader makes a decision about such things.

In his summing up towards the end of Book V, William returns to this issue again and claims that whatever alternative versions of events exist, he has chosen to use those he considered were based on sources worthy of trust. This, he says is the 'true law' of history writing:¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ *Gesta Regum*, i, 'Prologue', I, 14-15; i, 57, I, 86-87.

¹⁴⁰ *Gesta Regum*, i, 9; i, 33; ii, 208, I, 28-29, 46-47, 388-89.

¹⁴¹ See analysis below.

¹⁴² William's reasons for including Bede's own account illustrates this particularly well: 'ipsius uerba lector recognoscat licebit, ne meis sermonibus, uel plus uel minus, ipsa nouae formae procudat necessitas', 'the reader will be allowed to examine the words of [Bede] himself, so as to avoid the need for them to be cast, either more or less, into a new form by my discourse'. *Gesta Regum*, i, 54, I, 84-85.

¹⁴³ *Gesta Regum*, i, 9, I, 28-29.

¹⁴⁴ *Gesta Regum*, iii, 'Prologue', I, 424-25; v, 445, I, 796-97.

Et quidem erunt multi fortassis in diuersis regionibus Angliae qui quaedam aliter ac ego dixi se dicant audisse uel legisse. Veruntamen, si recte aguntur iudicio, non ideo me censorio expungent stilo; ego enim, ueram legem secutus historiae, nichil unquam posui nisi quod a fidelibus relatoribus uel scriptoribus addidici.

And indeed, there will perhaps be many, in different parts of England, who say they have heard or read certain things differently from what I have said; nevertheless, if in their judgement these are correctly done, let them not for that reason strike me off with their pen like a censor; for I, following the true law of history, have never set down anything unless I have learnt it from trustworthy narrators or writers.

While this passage is reminiscent of Bede's claim to follow the 'vera lex historiae' in his Preface to the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, there are also significant differences.¹⁴⁵ Where Bede refers to the possibility of his readers finding things in his faithful transmission of tradition which are contrary to the truth, William refers only to their finding information which differs from that in his sources. The historian has to make choices and William continued this theme, pointing out that anyone who undertakes a similar task to his own in the future would also need to decide what material to include and what to omit.¹⁴⁶

While William's prologues reflect many of the historical *topoi* identified by Gransden, they go further. William uses them to share with his readers his experience as an historian, his philosophical position on what constitutes 'veracity' in a history text and his expectations of his readers. As the examples above illustrate, he continues to address these themes through the discourse of his text, conversing with his readers both as historian and narrator. In this, his style exemplifies many of the literary techniques identified by Partner as typical of a narrative form of history:

Medieval texts that approached their contemporary readers, and us, claiming to be non-fictional works of history nevertheless drew fully on the paradigms of

¹⁴⁵ 'Lectoremque suppliciter obsecro, ut si qua in his quae scripsimus aliter quam se veritas habet posita repererit, non hoc nobis imputet qui, quod vera lex historiae est, simpliciter ea quae fama vulgante collegimus ad instructionem posteritatis literis mandare studuimus', 'And I humbly beg the reader, that if he finds anything included in what we have written contrary to how the truth exists, he would not impute this as a fault to us who, because it is the true law of history, have striven to entrust straightforwardly to our text those matters made known by tradition which we have gathered for the instruction of succeeding generations'. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I, 8-11.

¹⁴⁶ *Gesta Regum*, v, 445, I, 796-97.

contemporary fiction. They made use of the same techniques of narrative structure, were conscious of their relations with other texts and played with the poetic resources of language in ways we associate with works of fiction.’¹⁴⁷

The sections on Æthelstan in the *Gesta Regum* provide many examples of William’s abilities as a narrative historian. Within the text he assumes the role of narrator, frequently using the first person, reminding his readers of information he has already given, signposting what is to follow and giving his opinion and personal interpretation of events. He is anxious to avoid boring his readers with too much detail, lengthy digressions or a bombastic style typical of some of his sources. He identifies the intertextuality of his narrative by identifying his sources whether oral, story, poetry, song or written documentation.

William’s detailed narrative on Æthelstan forms part of his history of the English kings, the *Gesta Regum*. However, his history of the Bishops, the *Gesta Pontificum*, includes some material which adds to, or further extends, the depictions of Æthelstan in the *Gesta Regum*. For my analysis of William’s depictions of Æthelstan, therefore, I draw on both texts as a source.

Æthelstan in the Gesta Regum and the Gesta Pontificum

In his *Gesta Regum* and his *Gesta Pontificum* William depicts Æthelstan both as a person and as a king. He achieves this partly through the range of information he provides, drawing on different sources, partly through his choice of language and personal comments. William’s narrative on Æthelstan in the *Gesta Regum* falls into four overlapping sections. He makes no comment on the sources for the first section which combines material from the *ASC* with a saga-type story about Anlaf and Brunanburh; the second section is based on material which William claims to have found in an old book; in section three William recounts the story of the thegn Alfred’s death, quoting

¹⁴⁷ Partner, *Writing Medieval History*, pp. xiv-xv.

from a charter in Æthelstan's name donating Alfred's lands to Malmesbury Abbey; section four contains stories taken from old songs about Æthelstan's birth and his brother Edwin's death.

William's use of an old book and old songs are found only in his account of Æthelstan and this may reflect the dearth of source information on Æthelstan noted in Chapter 1. By combining material from four different sources William creates an extended narrative which contrasts with his much briefer accounts of Edmund, Eadred and Edwy. Only the sections on Edgar and Edward the Confessor are longer. It would appear that William wished to give considerable prominence to Æthelstan whose connections with Malmesbury Abbey are repeatedly mentioned. This aspect is further extended in the *Gesta Pontificum*, where William writes from an ecclesiastical perspective. Although he complains at the lack of written records and stories of saints' lives, he supplements the sources he uses by descriptions of the monasteries, shrines and religious sites he had visited and the relics and sacred objects he saw there. In both works Æthelstan's love of relics, his generosity towards the Church and his patronage and special commitment to Malmesbury Abbey, are described in some detail. Given that one of William's purposes in writing his *Gesta Regum* was to gain further royal patronage for his community, it is not surprising that he wishes his readers to recognize Æthelstan as one of the greatest of the Wessex kings.

The following summary of the content on Æthelstan in the *Gesta Regum* and the *Gesta Pontificum* shows where the texts overlap and where they provide different information. The same events are repeated more than once in the *Gesta Regum* and this can appear unnecessarily clumsy to the reader unless the structure of William's account is considered as a whole. The first section provides an overview which the other sections enhance or extend. In addition, four central themes can be traced in the *Gesta Regum* some of which are further touched on or developed in the *Gesta Pontificum*.

They are, the legitimacy of Æthelstan's right of succession; his success and magnanimity as a warrior king; his piety and love of relics, and his particular devotion to St Aldhelm and Malmesbury Abbey. These themes are highlighted in the summary below leaving in normal type the additional material provided in the two texts:¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ii, 131, 133-35, 136-38, 138-40, I, 206-29. William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Pontificum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by M. Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), v, 246-250, I, 592-603.

Table 8. Summary of Main Content on Æthelstan in the *Gesta Regum* and *Gesta Pontificum*

<i>Gesta Regum</i> : Section 1	Old Book: Section 2	Charter: Section 3	Songs: Section 4	<i>Gesta Pontificum</i>
Edward died. Æthelstan succeeded. He reigned sixteen years. Æthelweard died and was buried at Winchester.	Edward died at Farndon. Æthelstan acclaimed king; heir in his father's will. King Alfred invested Æthelstan as a warrior; sent him to Mercia to be trained for kingship; his education; coronation after death of his father and brother.			Edward reigned twenty years; Æthelstan succeeded his father and reigned sixteen years. Æthelstan was related to Aldhelm and devoted himself to his service.
Opposition from the thegn Alfred on grounds of Æthelstan's birth from a concubine.		Thegn Alfred accused of trying to blind Æthelstan; collapsed in St Peter's Rome, after swearing his innocence; died. Æthelstan gave him Christian burial.	Æthelstan's birth and rule of Britain foretold in a dream. Edward's legitimate son Æthelweard dies. Æthelstan inherits. Opposed by Alfred.	
Æthelstan's generosity to monasteries.	Æthelstan's links with Malmesbury: his half-sisters' marriages and his gifts of relics from Hugh the Great; the burial of his cousins at Malmesbury; Æthelstan's wish to be buried there.	In thanksgiving Æthelstan gives Alfred's possessions to Malmesbury. Buries there his two cousins killed at Brunanburh.		Charter giving Alfred's lands to Malmesbury. Æthelstan's built monasteries; gave relics to Middleton, Malmesbury and Milton. Letter and relics from Radbod of Dol. Obtained relics in Brittany and Normandy with Rollo's help. Built shrine at Malmesbury.
Sihtric's marriage to Æthelstan's sister. Sihtric died and Æthelstan took Northumbria.	Terror of Æthelstan's name subdued all England except Northumbria. Sihtric's marriage and death; Æthelstan took Northumbria by right.			
Æthelstan subdued Idwal and Constantine. Æthelstan magnanimously restored them	Dacre peace treaty with Constantine and Owain. Æthelstan took York. Treated Guthfrith magnanimously. Imposed tribute			Æthelstan drove the Britons from Exeter and fortified the city. He set the boundary with Scotland.

to their kingdoms.	on North Wales; expelled the Britons from Exeter, fortified the city, Taemar the boundary.			
			Edwin exiled and dies at sea. Æthelstan did seven years penance. Cup-bearer punished.	Æthelstan founded Mulcheney and Milton Abbeys in memory of Edwin, exiled through crooked advice.
Anlaf invaded; Æthelstan deliberately gave way. Anlaf spied on Æthelstan who was warned by Anlaf's ex-man and moved camp. Anlaf destroyed the camp of a bishop and his household.	Anlaf invaded and, accustomed to peace and leisure, Æthelstan initially took no notice of his peoples' suffering.			
Anlaf attacked Æthelstan's camp. Æthelstan saved when his sword was restored by his praying to God and St Aldhelm.				Æthelstan's sword restored by Bishop Odo's prayers. Theodred, Bishop of London present. In memory of the event Æthelstan buried his cousins at Malmesbury.
	Æthelstan's fame abroad, the embassies he received and his sister's marriages.			
Brunefeld: Æthelstan's victory. Anlaf fled; Constantine killed.	Battle of Brunefeld. Æthelstan's victory and his soldiers' sufferings in battle.			Æthelstan supported by bishops Odo and Theodred at Brunanburh.
			Buried at Malmesbury.	Æthelstan buried at Malmesbury.

William's Sources on Æthelstan in the *Gesta Regum*

Section One: Chronicle and Saga Material

William does not state which sources he used for this opening section. Thomson and Winterbottom in their commentary align William's accounts with Version E of the *ASC*, largely based on the information he provides on Æthelstan's succession and on Brunnaburh. However, it is difficult to align William's narrative with any of the existing versions of the *ASC*. For example, Version E makes reference to Guthfrith and to Edwin, neither of which William includes in his first section, narrating them instead as part of the old book and songs. It is also possible to see parallels between Versions B, C and D of the *ASC* and William's references to Sihtric's marriage and death, his account of Æthelstan taking Northumbria and his description of Æthelstan establishing his supremacy over Constantine and the Welsh kings. Yet he makes no mention of Æthelstan's election in Mercia or of his expedition to Scotland both of which occur in Versions B, C and D of the *ASC*. It is possible to argue that William was using a different version of the *Chronicle* from those available today. Alternatively, as will be suggested below, he may have been deliberately selective in the information he used, passing over entries which did not easily fit with his overall plan. As the summary above shows, the first section of his text introduces each of the four central themes I have identified and the later sections contribute further to them.

Section Two: An Old Book

William next introduces an old book he claims to have found, which was written during Æthelstan's reign. William criticizes the book's bombastic style and extravagant praise of Æthelstan but excuses the latter as showing the affection in which Æthelstan was held, and explains the former as typical of the style of Æthelstan's time. He tells the reader he will recount in ordinary language some of the information from the book. He makes it clear that his intention is to enhance Æthelstan's reputation by sharing the

book's eulogistic praise of Æthelstan. William provides no further details on his source and this has given rise to considerable scholarly debate as to when the book was written, whether it existed at all or whether Æthelstan created it in order to provide his own narrative in praise of Æthelstan.

The idea of an old book turning up with useful information for the writer was not new.¹⁴⁹ William's contemporary, Geoffrey of Monmouth, claimed to have been given an old book by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford. Geoffrey stated he had translated it from the British language into Latin in his own homely style, avoiding the rhetoric which he considered would have bored his readers.¹⁵⁰ There are parallels between Geoffrey and William; both were writing during the same period 1125-43; both dedicated their work to Robert Earl of Gloucester and both claimed to have acquired an old book and translated it into reader-friendly language. These similarities have been part of the continuing debate over the status of the information in William's book and whether it was merely a literary device used by William to introduce his own version of events. The answers to these questions have considerable implications both for how we read this section on Æthelstan and how we interpret the work of later historians who used William's work.¹⁵¹

Thomson and Winterbottom have pointed out that the material from the old book repeats some of the information in the first section of William's account of Æthelstan and suggested that this supported William's claim to have inserted the material from the book he had found.¹⁵² It is clear from William's comments that he

¹⁴⁹ Thomson and Winterbottom in their commentary suggest that William's use of 'uetusto' may refer to the script which William saw as old, rather than to the age of the book itself. *Gesta Regum*, II, 118, n. 132.

¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *De Gestis Britonum*, ed. by Michael D. Reeve, trans. by Neil Wright (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007).

¹⁵¹ Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 116-18. Michael Wood, *In Search of England* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 149-68. For a recent overview of the arguments for and against the authenticity of the old book, see Foot, *Æthelstan*, Appendix 1, pp. 251-58.

¹⁵² Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 116.

was aware of the overlaps in his sources but by retaining them he creates a sense of consensus which helps give validity to his narrative.

The narrative from the old book contains several pieces of information for which William is the only source: King Alfred investing Æthelstan with a sword, bejewelled scabbard and red cloak as a warrior;¹⁵³ his upbringing and education with his aunt and uncle in Mercia; his coronation feast and his military successes in taking York, imposing tribute on North Wales and driving the Britons out of Exeter. The additional information on Æthelstan's military successes has prompted the suggestion that the book might be a copy of the *Bella Etheltani Regis*, 'Wars of King Æthelstan', listed in a thirteenth-century Glastonbury library catalogue.¹⁵⁴ While no trace of this book has so far been identified, William's close connections with Glastonbury could support such a theory.¹⁵⁵ Despite the uncertainties over the status of William's book, its material continues to be widely used as a historical source. Most recently Foot has included its material in her biography of Æthelstan and suggested that, despite all the reservations which have been expressed, the text should, guardedly, be accepted as a useful source for Æthelstan and his reign.¹⁵⁶

Section Three: The Malmesbury Charter

William includes a Malmesbury charter verbatim in order to complete the story introduced at the beginning of his narrative of Alfred's opposition to Æthelstan on

¹⁵³ This has been interpreted as Æthelstan being invested as a 'knight' on the basis of later medieval usage of 'miles'. As a result the text has been used either to argue for a late date of composition or for chivalry as an earlier concept than previously thought. The problem does not exist if 'militem' is given its normal meaning of soldier. The red cloak, jewelled belt and Saxon sword conferred status and indicated wealth but did not, on present evidence, indicate 'knighthood' in Anglo-Saxon times. Gale Owen-Crocker has commented that archaeological evidence indicates madder-red as a colour particularly popular with the English and the Anglo-Scandinavians of York, and this may also suggest a northern origin for the book. Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), p. 320.

¹⁵⁴ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 256-57.

¹⁵⁵ William spent time at Glastonbury researching and writing up its history. William of Malmesbury, *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie*, ed. by J. Scott (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1981).

¹⁵⁶ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 258.

grounds of birth. In his opening section William promised to do this so his readers could learn what had happened in the king's own words.¹⁵⁷ William uses the charter in both the *Gesta Regum* and the *Gesta Pontificum* to illustrate Æthelstan's commitment to Malmesbury, but he also adapts his use of the charter to suit the overall purpose of each work. In the *Gesta Regum* William includes only that part which describes Alfred's death and its aftermath, using it as evidence of Alfred's treachery against his future king and Æthelstan's wisdom and piety in showing him mercy. In *Gesta Pontificum*, where William is providing a history of Malmesbury Abbey, he quotes the whole charter, giving details of the estates and their boundaries. The use of what is claimed as a legal, Latin document in the king's own words, lends status to William's account. Foot has suggested that charters which include narrative of this type were specifically designed to solve disagreements and prevent challenges in the future.¹⁵⁸ If so, William may have had a further reason for ensuring that the full charter was included in the *Gesta Pontificum*. He recounts in his later *Historia Novella* that Malmesbury had been appropriated by Bishop Roger of Salisbury, although its ancient rights and privileges were afterwards restored by King Henry.¹⁵⁹ An Æthelstan charter making a donation of land to Malmesbury would have been helpful in designating the boundaries of the lands claimed by the Abbey in this later period.

Although modern scholarship has largely discounted the genuineness of the charter,¹⁶⁰ opinions vary as to whether William himself believed in its authenticity, included it regardless of whether it was genuine, or even constructed it himself, basing

¹⁵⁷ He uses the same technique with Leuthere's charter in favour of Malmesbury stating, 'ut omnem sermo noster dubietatis deprecetur offensam, uerba eius hic aliqua intexam', 'so that our discourse may avert all displeasure arising from uncertainty, I will include here some of his words'. *Gesta Regum*, i, 29, I, 44-45.

¹⁵⁸ Foot, 'Reading Anglo-Saxon Charters' in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Tyler and Balzaretti, pp. 39-65 (p. 62).

¹⁵⁹ Stubbs, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, II, 481-82, 559-60. Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Electronic Sawyer lists S 436 as spurious and a compilation made from Malmesbury charters S 434-5. S 434 is generally considered genuine and S 435 doubtful.

it on tradition and monastic memories of the past.¹⁶¹ Julia Barrow has suggested a further possibility. She argues that William's use of charters, including this one, can be seen as William poking fun at his scholarly audience. By quoting charters which were known to be constructs, William was able to use monastic sleight of hand, conferring respectability on a charter which he and his audience knew was undeserved.¹⁶²

Although the question of what William knew or believed about the Æthelstan charter remains unclear, his including it as evidence falls well within his criteria, noted above, of reporting his sources while taking no responsibility for their veracity.

Section Four: The *Cantilena*e

'Carmina' is the more usual Latin word for songs in both classical and medieval Latin. 'Cantilena' was often, but not exclusively, used of scurrilous or gossipy songs but it is not clear how William intended the word to be interpreted in the *Gesta Regum*. He justifies including the stories of Æthelstan's birth and Edwin's death from the songs because they were traditional. This suggests that their content was sufficiently available in his own day to make it difficult for him to ignore them:

sequentia magis cantilenis per successiones temporum detritis quam libris ad instructiones posteriorum elucubratis didicerim. Quae ideo apposui, non ut earum ueritatem defendam, sed ne lectorum scientiam defraudem.¹⁶³

The following matters I may have learnt more from songs impaired by the passages of time, than from books diligently worked on for the instruction of future generations. These details I have added in for this reason, not to defend their truthfulness but to avoid cheating my readers out of knowledge.

¹⁶¹ Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 126, n. 137.

¹⁶² Barrow, 'William of Malmesbury's Use of Charters', in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed by Tyler and Balzaretta, pp. 67-85 (pp. 75-81). Barrow's evidence rests on her interpretation of William's introductory phrases to charters, especially his use of first person comment. In the case of the Æthelstan Malmesbury charter, William passes responsibility for its trustworthiness to his source claiming that the charter is in the king's own words.

¹⁶³ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 138, I, 224-25. William uses songs elsewhere in his *Gesta Regum* and similarly qualifies their inclusion as untrustworthy. See Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 127, n. 138 (2). C. E. Wright also identifies *cantilena*e as the probable source for William's accounts of Anlaf disguising himself as a minstrel to spy on Æthelstan at Brunanburh and Alfred's attempt to blind Æthelstan to prevent his succession as king. *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), pp. 30-31, 144-46, 156-57.

William's comments can again be seen as an example of his making available all the information he has found to his readers while leaving responsibility for its veracity to the source itself and his readers' own judgement. His own negative view of the reliability of the 'cantilenaes' is conveyed through his description of them as 'impaired by the passage of time' and lacking the status of scholarly books. However, as will be seen below, his inclusion of the material enables him both to present Æthelstan's birth and future greatness as predestined and to challenge the accusation that Æthelstan was responsible for his brother's death.

William's use of parallel source material can make his narrative account of Æthelstan appear disjointed. However, through his introductory comments on their relevance and trustworthiness, he encourages the reader to see them as accumulative rather than fragmented. In this way he is able to extend and reinforce his positive depictions of Æthelstan. My following analysis of how William presents his four central themes examines the literary strategies which William uses to convince his readers of the reliability of his account of Æthelstan as Edward's heir, a highly successful warrior, a Christian king noted for his piety and generosity to the Church and a worthy royal patron of Malmesbury Abbey.

Æthelstan as Edward's Heir

While the *Gesta Pontificum* records only that Æthelstan succeeded to the throne, the *Gesta Regum* provides conflicting accounts of Æthelstan's succession from different sources. William undertakes the role of guide for his readers, emphasizing certain aspects, questioning and challenging others and making clear his personal view of events:

Section 1: Based on William's own Research	
Anno Dominicae incarnationis nongentisimo uicesimo quarto,	In the nine hundredth and twenty fourth year of the Lord's incarnation Æthelstan

<p>Ethelstanus filius Edwardi regnare cœpit, tenuitque regnum annis sexdecim. Frater eius Elwardus, paucis diebus post patrem uita decedens, sepulchrum cum eodem Wintoniæ meruerat. Itaque magno consensu optimatum ibidem Ethelstanus electus, apud regiam uillam quae uocatur Kingestune coronatus est.¹⁶⁴</p>	<p>son of Edward began to reign, and he held the kingdom for sixteen years. His brother, Æthelweard, departing life a few days after his father, had earned the right to be buried with him at Winchester. And so with the great agreement of the nobles Æthelstan was elected in that same place and crowned at the royal township called Kingston.</p>
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This account includes much of the information found in the *ASC* versions B, C and D:

Ælfweard dies shortly after his father Edward, both are buried at Winchester and

Æthelstan is crowned at Kingston. William's ordering of these events suggests he wished to be true to his sources even to the extent of reflecting the ambiguity in the

Chronicle on whether Æthelstan only inherited the throne because of his brother

Ælfweard's death.¹⁶⁵ William, however, omits any reference to a Mercian election.

Instead he states that Æthelstan was elected with the great support of the nobles at

Winchester. By omitting the Mercian election William depicts Æthelstan's succession

as a normal part of the established dynastic succession in Wessex, based on his direct

descent from Edward the Elder and accepted and supported by the kingdom's leading

men.¹⁶⁶ Then William introduces a negative note.

William is the only Anglo-Norman source to include an account of organised opposition to Æthelstan's coronation led by the thegn Alfred and based on the allegation ('ut ferunt', 'as they say') that Æthelstan's birth was illegitimate:

¹⁶⁴ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 131, I, 206-07.

¹⁶⁵ See section on Æthelstan as Edward's Heir in Chapter 1. William's use of 'itaque', 'and so', to introduce Æthelstan's election is ambiguous. 'Itaque' can be used merely mark a sequence of events—the royal funerals of his father and brother at Winchester took place and Æthelstan's formal election as king at Winchester, 'ibidem', followed their funerals. Alternatively 'itaque' can be used to imply cause and effect. If this meaning is taken, William's statement implies that Æthelstan was only elected because of Ælfweard's death.

¹⁶⁶ His calculation of the length of Æthelstan's reign as sixteen years is out of line with the fourteen years ten months of the *ASC* Versions A-D but correct if the dates of accession and death in the *ASC* are used as a basis. Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 114-15, n. 131.

quamuis quidam Eluredus cum factiosis suis, quia seditio semper inuenit complices, obuiare tentasset [...] Occasio contradictionis, ut ferunt, quod Ethelstanus ex concubina natus esset; sed ipse, preter hanc notam, si tamen uera est, nichil ignobile habens, omnes antecessores deuotione mentis, omnes eorum adoras triumphorum suorum splendore obscurauit. Adeo prestat ex te, quam ex maioribus, habere quo polleas, quia illud tuuum, istud reputabitur alienum.¹⁶⁷

although a certain Alfred with his faction had tried to block it because sedition always finds accomplices. [...] The reason for this opposition, as they say, was that Æthelstan had been born of a concubine; but he himself, apart from this blemish, if indeed it is true, possessing nothing ignoble overshadowed all his predecessors in devoutness of mind and put all their glories in the shade by the splendour of his own triumphs. So superior is it to have what makes you powerful from your own self than from your ancestors because that will be credited to you which otherwise will be ascribed to another.

William's robust response is an attempt to guide his readers on how to interpret these events: the support for Alfred reflected individuals' love of sedition rather than genuine concern over Æthelstan's birth; Æthelstan's personal qualities and achievements were more important than any power or reputation inherited by birth. William's clear support for Æthelstan, irrespective of his birth, is in line with the praise he gives to Æthelstan throughout his narrative. However, the fact that William felt the need to include the information on Æthelstan's birth and then disparage it, suggests that it was a strong tradition in his day. As will be seen, this is further borne out by his returning to the theme several times, in his account of the contents of the old book, the Malmesbury charter and the story of Æthelstan's birth as it was handed down in song.

William's account of Æthelstan's succession in the old book is very similar to his initial description but lacks the direct reference to opposition to Æthelstan on grounds of his illegitimate birth. It also repeats the ambiguous order of events found in the *Chronicle*, placing Æthelstan's coronation after the deaths of his father and brother. This is immediately followed by an extended description of Æthelstan's childhood and education something which is not found in any of the other surviving sources. Æthelstan is depicted as having been identified by his grandfather, King Alfred, as a future king

¹⁶⁷ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 131, I, 206-207.

while still a child, to have been invested by him with the royal regalia of a warrior king and sent to Mercia to be brought up by his aunt, Æthelflæd, and educated in the schools there.¹⁶⁸ However, the Latin phrase used, ‘ad omen regni altus’, ‘brought up for the kingdom which had been fore-destined’, does not define whether the kingdom was Mercia or Wessex. William then makes it very clear that the old book depicted Æthelstan succeeding to the throne of Wessex as a result of Edward’s express instructions and in accordance with the terms of his will:¹⁶⁹

Section 2: The Old Book	
<p>[Rex Edwardus] apud Ferdunam uillam, tactus ualitudine, uitam præsentem exiuit; et Wintoniæ, ut prædixi, humatus est. Tunc, jussu patris et testamento, Ethelstanus in regem acclamatus est, quem iam tricennalis aetas et sapientiae maturitas commendabant. [...] post mortem patris et interitum fratris in regem apud Kingestune coronatus.¹⁷⁰</p>	<p>[King Edward] touched by ill-health at the town of Farndon, departed this present life; and, as I have already said, was buried at Winchester. Then, on his father’s orders and by his written will, Æthelstan was acclaimed king, his age then of thirty years and the maturity of his wisdom commending him. [...] After the death of his father and the decease of his brother he was crowned king at Kingston.</p>

The reference to Æthelstan’s age and wisdom commending him as the next king reinforces the point William made earlier, that Æthelstan had all the qualities which merited his being elected as king. This justification of Æthelstan’s consecration as king is further developed in the next section of William’s narrative.

¹⁶⁸ Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 119. The section on Æthelstan’s education is in verse and contains praise of Æthelstan and a description of the coronation feast. The ‘Mercian’ background has been interpreted by Thomson and Winterbottom as supporting the theory that Æthelstan was not first choice as king of Wessex and was opposed by the nobles at Winchester.

¹⁶⁹ The use of a will to name an heir is also found in Saxo Grammaticus. As will be seen in Chapter 4 on the Scandinavian Tradition, Saxo depicts Æthelstan setting aside his grandfather’s will in order to seize power for himself and using his own will to name Hákon of Norway as his own heir.

¹⁷⁰ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 133, I, 210-11.

In Section Three, William returns to the story of Alfred's opposition. The charter quoted as drawn up by Æthelstan recounts the death of Alfred in Rome where he had been sent to answer to the Pope on a charge of attempting to blind Æthelstan to prevent him becoming king. Although the charter makes no direct reference to Æthelstan's birth, its story of Alfred recalls it to mind. Alfred's collapse and death after swearing his innocence in St Peter's, is seen as proof of his wickedness and so undermines Alfred's accusations of illegitimacy against Æthelstan. William does not draw attention to this but instead uses the episode as an example of Æthelstan's wisdom and piety:¹⁷¹

regis sapientiam et pietatem eius in Dei rebus suspicere par est: sapientiam, quod animaduerteret iuuenis presertim non esse Deo gratiosum de rapina holocaustum, pietatem quod munus ultione diuina collatum Deo potissimum non ingratus rependeret.

It is equally possible to recognize his wisdom and his piety in matters relating to God: his wisdom because, especially as a young man, he was aware that an offering gained through theft was not pleasing to God, his piety because, above all, not lacking in gratitude he paid back to God a gift which had been conferred on him as a result of divine retribution.

In section four, William returns once more to the theme of Æthelstan's succession and birth and narrates the story as it had been handed down in song. He introduces the material with the following statement:

Itaque rege Edwardo defuncto, filius ejus Elwardus, ex legitima coniuge creatus, patrem cita morte secutus. Tunc omnium spebus in Ethelstanum erectis [...] ¹⁷²

And so, after King Edward died, his son Elwardus [Ælfweard] born of his lawful wife, quickly followed his father in death. Then the hopes of all were built on Æthelstan

¹⁷¹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 138, I, 224-25. The charter records Æthelstan giving Alfred's lands to God and St Peter, 'qui emulum meum in conspectu omnium cadere fecerunt, et michi prosperitatem regni largiti sunt', 'who caused my enemy to fall in the sight of all and endowed me with the prosperity of my reign'. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 137, I, 224-25.

¹⁷² *Gesta Regum*, ii, 139, I, 226-27.

The order of events again mirrors that of Versions B, C, and D of the *ASC*, but the use of ‘Tunc’, ‘Then’, at the beginning of the final sentence suggests that Æthelstan was only regarded as future king after the death of Elwardus [Ælfweard].¹⁷³ The qualifying phrase describing Elwardus/Ælfweard as ‘ex legitima conjuge creatus’ also suggests that Æthelstan’s birth was considered illegitimate, making Æthelstan of lower status to his younger half-brother.¹⁷⁴ The songs therefore provide a picture of Ælfweard as Edward’s intended heir with Æthelstan only succeeding because of Ælfweard’s death and because there was no other suitable candidate. William counters this by retelling the song’s story of how Æthelstan came to be born. The main points can be summarized as follows:

A beautiful girl, a shepherd’s daughter, dreamt that a light shone from her stomach and filled all England with its light. Edward’s old nurse heard of this and decided to bring the girl up herself so that she could be part of aristocratic society. Edward unexpectedly visited his nurse, fell in love with the girl, spent the night with her and so she conceived his son, Æthelstan.¹⁷⁵

This story contains several literary *topoi*; the prophetic dream; the choice of unlikely agents as the catalysts of another’s greatness; the birth of a special baby destined to achieve great things. The song suggests that a strong popular tradition had been created about Æthelstan’s birth which was still accessible in the twelfth century, although William’s retelling of the details may imply that its content was not so well-remembered by his day. However, the existence of the songs provided him with an

¹⁷³ William uses two forms of name for this son: Ethelwardus and Elwardus. The similarity and possible confusion of the forms Ætheluuerdus and Ælfuuerdus was commented on in the section on Æthelstan as Edward’s Heir in Chapter 1. There it was noted that the New Minster *Liber Vitae* records both names as those of two of Edward’s sons who were buried at New Minster with their father.

¹⁷⁴ The status of Æthelstan’s birth is an issue raised by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim in her *Gesta Ottonis* written c. 960 where she twice refers to Æthelstan’s mother as being of inferior stock. Her work is considered in detail in Chapter 3 on the Continental Tradition.

¹⁷⁵ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 139, I, 224-25.

opportunity to retell the story of Æthelstan's birth, reinforcing the idea initially introduced by the old book that Æthelstan had been clearly marked out for kingship.¹⁷⁶ Whereas King Alfred had recognized in the boy a future king, his mother's dream had predicted that he would rule over the whole of Britain.¹⁷⁷

Despite the ambiguities William encountered in his sources over Æthelstan's succession, he managed to bring together a sufficient variety of material to challenge those who questioned Æthelstan's position and to support his preferred interpretation of Æthelstan as Edward's chosen and direct successor and a worthy royal patron of Malmesbury Abbey. William's repeated references to Æthelstan's birth and his right of succession suggest that these were a matter of some concern to him and his presentation contains different emphases on how events should be interpreted. First he challenges the assertion that Æthelstan was the son of a concubine; he then discounts it, if true, on the grounds that Æthelstan's innate greatness and suitability to be king made it irrelevant; he shows how Alfred was punished by God for trying to prevent Æthelstan's coronation; he provides information both supporting and challenging the belief that Æthelstan only inherited the throne because of Ælfweard's death; he declares that Æthelstan was Edward's named heir and finally he includes an account of Æthelstan's predestined greatness foretold in a dream.

There could be a number of reasons for William's approach. He may have been reflecting twelfth-century concerns over legitimacy in royal succession. It was noted earlier that avoiding the succession of illegitimate sons to the throne was a significant factor in Norman and Angevin times. Bartlett has commented that it was specifically

¹⁷⁶ 'nam cum ille pueritia mortua in adolescentiam euaderet, magnam spem regiae indolis dabat, preclaris facinoribus approbatus', 'for when, his boyhood passed, he progressed into young adulthood, he gave rise to great expectations of his royal qualities which he proved by his outstanding achievements.' *Gesta Regum*, ii, 139, I, 226-27.

¹⁷⁷ 'Huic per uisum monstratur prodigium, lunam de suo uentre splendere, et hoc lumine totam Angliam illustrari', 'A great sign was shown to her through a dream, that the moon was shining from her womb, and by this light the whole of England was illuminated'. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 139, I, 224-225.

ruled out in the agreements on succession made between William Rufus and earl Robert in 1091 and Henry I and earl Robert in 1101 and this was formally recorded in Version A of the *ASC* for those years.¹⁷⁸ It may be that William was doing no more than protecting the reputation of Malmesbury as a royal site. The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a time when many monastic centres were trying to prevent their lands and possessions from being abrogated by Norman barons and charters claimed as copies of lost originals abounded as legal evidence of royal donations and right of tenure. While the written evidence provided by a royal charter gave strong support to a land claim, the legitimate status of the king who made the initial donation could be equally important, especially when the Normans, as a new dynasty, were trying to establish their own legitimate rule as heirs of the Anglo-Saxon kings. From William's point of view, and that of Malmesbury, Æthelstan's legitimacy by birth and as Edward's heir was potentially of great significance.¹⁷⁹

Æthelstan as Warrior King

As will be seen from the summary below, William's depiction of Æthelstan as military leader is based mainly on the chronicle and saga material of the first section and the old book of section two. The main focuses are on Æthelstan's successes in Northumbria and his defeat of Anlaf at Brunefeld. The narrative on Northumbria includes examples of Æthelstan's magnanimity towards his defeated enemies while that on Brunefeld gives prominence to Æthelstan being saved from death, first by the actions of his servant and then through his prayers to God and St Aldhelm. As noted above, the miracle of the

¹⁷⁸ Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, pp. 7-9.

¹⁷⁹ William of Normandy was illegitimate and his greatness too was said to have been foretold in a dream. William's later patron was Robert of Gloucester whose father was an illegitimate son of Henry I. It could be that these factors played a part in William's determination to show that personal qualities were the more important and illegitimacy no bar to royal status.

sword is credited to the prayers of Bishop Odo in the *Gesta Pontificum* which, together with the old book, also includes brief references to Æthelstan's other military successes:

Table 9. Æthelstan's Military Successes in the *Gesta Regum* and *Gesta Pontificum*

William's Own Account	Old Book	<i>Gesta Pontificum</i>
Æthelstan's sister marries Sihtric. Sihtric died. Æthelstan took Northumbria.	Æthelstan's name subdued all England except Northumbria. After Sihtric's death Æthelstan took Northumbria by right.	
Æthelstan subdued Constantine and Idwal. He magnanimously restored them to their kingdoms.	Peace treaty at Dacre with Constantine and Owain. Æthelstan took York. He treated Guthfrith with magnanimity. He imposed tribute on North Wales and expelled the Britons from Exeter. He fortified the city setting Taemar as the boundary with the Britons.	Æthelstan drove the Britons from Exeter and fortified the city. He set the boundary with Scotland.
Anlaf invaded. Æthelstan initially gave way. Anlaf entered Æthelstan's camp as a spy. Æthelstan warned by one of Anlaf's ex-men and moved camp. Anlaf destroyed the camp of a bishop and his household.	Anlaf invaded and, accustomed to peace and leisure, Æthelstan initially took no notice of his peoples' suffering.	Æthelstan supported by the bishops Odo and Theodred at Brunanburh.
Æthelstan attacked by Anlaf. He was saved from death when his sword was restored by his praying to God and St Aldhelm.		Æthelstan's sword restored through Bishop Odo's prayers.
Battle of Brunefeld. Æthelstan victorious. Anlaf fled. Constantine killed.	Battle of Brunefeld. Æthelstan victorious. His soldiers suffered greatly in the battle.	

Northumbria

Both of William's accounts of Æthelstan gaining control of Northumbria start from the arranged marriage of Æthelstan's sister with Sihtric, the Scandinavian ruler of Northumbria. In section one, Æthelstan is depicted as the main actor:

cum Sihtrico rege Northanimbrorum, data ei in matrimonium una ex

sororibus, uicturum fedus perculit; quo post annum mortuo, prouintiam illam sibi subegit, expulso quodam Aldulfo qui rebellabat.¹⁸⁰

Having given Sihtric one of his sisters in marriage, he [Æthelstan] made with Sihtric, king of the Northumbrians, an agreement which would bring him victory. When after a year he [Sihtric] died, he [Æthelstan] subdued that province for himself having driven out a certain Aldulfus who was in rebellion.

William does not name Æthelstan's sister but in his section on Edward the Elder, he identifies her as the child of Edward and Egwina. Æthelstan is therefore depicted as personally giving his own sister, of identical parentage with himself, in marriage to Sihtric in order to establish a familial bond between them.¹⁸¹ By describing Sihtric as King of Northumbria William portrays this as a royal marriage of a status similar to those of Æthelstan's other sisters.¹⁸² William's choice of the future participle 'uicturum' may imply Æthelstan deliberately made a marriage agreement which he intended would eventually bring him victory over Northumbria, or he may be using it to signal that this was what happened. Either way, William depicts Æthelstan as taking the initiative and seeking a long-term, political settlement with Northumbria in preference to military conquest.

Following the death of Sihtric a year later, Æthelstan is depicted as taking military action and overcoming opposition from Adulfus to take control of Sihtric's kingdom.¹⁸³ Æthelstan's negotiated settlement has now been replaced by military

¹⁸⁰ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 131, I, 206-07.

¹⁸¹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 126, I, 198-99.

¹⁸² Sheila Sharp has identified such marriage arrangements with potential enemies as something of a tradition in Wessex and a powerful way of exerting influence without resorting to costly and difficult military campaigns. Sheila Sharp, 'The West Saxon Tradition of Dynastic Marriage with special reference to Edward the Elder' in *Edward the Elder*, ed. by Higham and Hill, pp. 79-88 (pp. 79-82).

¹⁸³ William makes no reference in section one to Guthfrith, but his mention of Adulfus' rebellion may ultimately be derived from the *Chronicle* reference to Eadwulf of Bernicia. In their commentary Thomson and Winterbottom correct the name to Ealdred, son of Eadwulf of Bamburgh, in line with *ASC* version D for 926. Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 115, n. 3. Guthfrith is mentioned in *ASC* 927 Versions E and F where he is said to have been driven out by Æthelstan but no details are given.

conquest. This aspect is developed much more fully in William's second account which he assigns to the old book.

The account from the old book does not give Sihtric the title of King of Northumbria but describes him as a leader of the Northumbrians. It dwells negatively on Sihtric's Scandinavian background. He is portrayed as a potential threat—a barbarian, a kinsman of the formidable Guthrum who had shown contempt for other kings.¹⁸⁴ The narrative then enhances Æthelstan's standing by describing Sihtric as acting out of character towards him. He does not 'thumb his nose' at Æthelstan, instead he is described as taking the initiative in seeking a marriage alliance with him and then pursuing it humbly and with persistence:

Transacta consecrationis celebritate, Ethelstanus, ne spem ciuium falleret et inferius opinione se ageret, omnem omnino Angliam solo nominis terrore subiugauit, preter solos Northanimbros. Nam preerat illis Sihtritius quidam, gente et animo barbarus cognatus illius Gurmundi de quo in gestis Elfredi regis legitur, qui, cum antecessorum regum potentiam rugatis naribus derisisset, huius affinitatem ultro suplicibus nuntiis expetiit. Ipse quoque, festino pede subsecutus, uerba legatorum asseruit; quare et sororis copula et multiplicibus xeniis muneratus, perpetui federis fundamenta iecit.¹⁸⁵

The ceremony of consecration having taken place, Æthelstan, so as not to disappoint the hopes of the citizens, or act less honourably than they expected, subdued practically the whole of England solely by the terror of his name, except for the Northumbrians alone; For their (the Northumbrians) leader was a certain Sihtric, a barbarian both in race and mind-set, a kinsman of that Gurmund who is read about in the accounts of King Alfred. Sihtric, although he had turned up his nose and derided the power of previous kings, on his own initiative humbly sought through messengers some closer relationship with Æthelstan, and he himself too, swiftly followed this up and confirmed the words of his envoys. And so, honoured with the hand of Æthelstan's sister in marriage and numerous gifts, he laid the foundations of a lasting agreement.

The reason for Sihtric seeking an alliance with Æthelstan is implied in the first sentence of the paragraph. After his coronation, Æthelstan is said to have established his military

¹⁸⁴ The description of Sihtric as a kinsman of Guthrum links him with William's earlier account of Guthrum submitting to Alfred and being appointed by him to rule Northumbria and East Anglia. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 121, I, 184-85. For comment on William's statements that Guthrum and his successors retained Northumbria and East Anglia until Æthelstan's reign see Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 96.

¹⁸⁵ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 212-13.

superiority across England in order to fulfil his subjects' expectations of him as king. This he had achieved purely through the fear his name caused. Sihtric's actions suggest that he also stood in fear of Æthelstan but, rather than submit, he sought a marriage alliance as a way of establishing peace between them. In this account it is Sihtric, not Æthelstan, who initiates the action although Æthelstan remains the dominant actor, acceding to Sihtric's request and giving him many gifts. It therefore supports the account in section one that in Northumbria Æthelstan initially preferred a negotiated political settlement to military conquest.

The old book narrative claims that, once Sihtric was dead, Northumbria belonged rightfully to Æthelstan on two counts:

Sed, ut predictum recole, post annum uita deturbatus occasionem Ethelstano exhibuit ut Northanimbriam suae parti iungeret, quae sibi et antiquo iure et noua necessitudine competeret.¹⁸⁶

But, as I remember it was previously stated, a year later, thrust from life, he [Sihtric] presented Æthelstan with the opportunity to add Northumbria to his own sphere of power, since this was his due by ancient right no less than by his new relationship.

The reference to Æthelstan's right to dominion over Northumbria may be linked to William's earlier claims that Alfred ruled Northumbria through his son-in-law Æthelred of Mercia and that Northumbria was part of Edward's kingdom.¹⁸⁷ However, the use of the adjective 'antiquo' implies a long-established right and may refer to a familial link derived from Bede's account of Oswald standing as godfather to Cyneigils, King of Wessex, and later marrying Cyneigils's daughter.¹⁸⁸ Æthelstan's 'new relationship'

¹⁸⁶ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 212-15. In their commentary Thomson and Winterbottom assign the whole of this passage and the following story of Guthfrith and Æthelstan's generosity to his enemies to William's old book but as can be seen from this quotation it is not always clear when William is quoting and when he is speaking in the first person. Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 114.

¹⁸⁷ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 121, 125, I, 186-87, 196-97.

¹⁸⁸ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii, 7, I, 354-57. ASC Version A also records Cyneigils' baptism; Versions C and D record Oswald's body being transferred from Bardney to Mercia during the reign of Edward the Elder, in 909 or 906. Hrotsvit also refers to Wessex links with

through the marriage agreement with Sihtric is presented as equally supporting his right to Northumbria and he is depicted as having a claim to the kingdom on two different grounds. William's use of the old book enables him to record a tradition linking Wessex with Northumbria which is also found in Symeon of Durham's account of the reigns of Alfred, Edward and Æthelstan and is celebrated in the tenth-century manuscript painting of Æthelstan presenting a book to Cuthbert at his shrine.¹⁸⁹

Æthelstan Consolidates his Rule in the North

The differences in emphasis and detail noted above in sections one and two of William's work, continue in the accounts both sections provide of his further conquests. Following his account of Sihtric in section one, William depicts Æthelstan as so fired by his success in Northumbria and so driven by his spirited nature that he went on to force Constantine of Scotland and Idwal of Wales to hand over to him their kingdoms virtually making him king of all Britain:

Et quia nobilis animus, semel incitatus in ampliora conatur, Iudualum regem omnium Walensium [et] Constantinum regem Scottorum cedere regnis compulit. Quos tamen non multo post, miseratione infractus, in antiquum statum sub se regnatos constituit, gloriosius esse pronuntians regem facere quam regem esse.¹⁹⁰

And because a noble spirit, once roused strives for greater achievements, he compelled Idwal king of all the Welsh and Constantine king of the Scots to give up their kingdoms. Not long after, however, assuaged by pity, he restored them to their former positions, to reign under him as kings, declaring it more glorious to make a king than to be one.

Æthelstan is depicted as initially driven by ambition which turns to pity, compassionately restoring his defeated rivals to their kingdoms. However, it is evident that this is only on condition they lose their independence and serve as *subreguli* under him. The words attributed to him, 'gloriosius esse [...] regem facere quam regem esse', are consistent with the idea that making Constantine and Idwal his client kings brings

Oswald in her account of Otto's marriage to Æthelstan's sister Eadgytha in Chapter 3. For a useful Family Tree see Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 284-87.

¹⁸⁹ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 183.

¹⁹⁰ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 131, I, 206-07.

him the greater glory. In the Continental and Scandinavian texts Æthelstan is similarly depicted as a king-maker, restoring his nephew Louis to West Francia, Alan Twistedbeard to Brittany and Hákon to Norway. These latter events are not included in William's narrative but his attribution to Æthelstan of the glory to be gained by making someone king may reflect this wider tradition.

In his excerpt from the old book William gives a version of events which provides a different explanation for Æthelstan's action against Constantine and refers to Eugenius, King of Cumbria, while making no mention of Idwal of Wales:

Fugit tunc Analauus filius Sihtrici Hiberniam, et Godefridus frater eius Scottiam; subsecuti sunt e uestigio regales missi ad Constantinum regem Scottorum et Eugenium regem Cumbrorum transfugam cum denuntiatione belli repententes.¹⁹¹

Then Anlaf, son of Sihtric, fled to Ireland and Guthfrith his brother to Scotland; royal envoys followed hard on their heels, sent to Constantine of the Scots and Eugenius, King of the Cumbrians, demanding back the fugitive on threat of war.

In this passage, Æthelstan is seen as strategically securing his victory in Northumbria by ensuring that Guthfrith cannot find a safe haven in Scotland or Cumbria from which to launch a future attack. The death of Sihtric is now portrayed as having the potential to precipitate a large-scale military uprising involving both Scotland and Cumbria.

Æthelstan is again depicted as powerful enough militarily to subdue his enemies by the mere threat of war. As a result Constantine and Owain willingly submit at Dacre.¹⁹²

Æthelstan orders Constantine's son to be baptized and stands as the boy's godfather. By establishing a link with his enemy, this time of Christian kinship, Æthelstan is again shown as seeking a political solution by establishing a familial alliance designed to make rebellion more difficult:¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 214-15.

¹⁹² ASC Version D records the event as taking place at Eamont in 926.

¹⁹³ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 214-15. Joseph Lynch explores the role of Christian baptism as a means of establishing familial and political alliances. Joseph Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship* (London: Cornell University, 1998), pp, 222-23, 226-228.

Nec fuit animus barbaris ut contra mutirent; quin potius sine retractatione, ad locum qui Dacor uocatur uenientes, se cum suis regnis Anglorum regi dedidere. In cuius pacti gratia filium Constantini baptizari iussum ipse de sacro fonte suscepit.

The barbarians had no inclination to murmur against this; but rather, coming without hesitation to a place called Dacre they surrendered themselves and their kingdoms to the king of the English. In acknowledgement of this agreement Æthelstan himself stood godfather to Constantine's son, whom he had ordered to be baptized.

There could be much significance in Dacre being designated as the place of submission. Situated at the confluence of the Lowther and Eamont rivers it lay near the boundary between Cumbrian and Northumbrian territory. Bede also mentions Dacre as a place where one of St Cuthbert's posthumous miracles took place.¹⁹⁴ The naming of Dacre as the site of the peace agreement and rite of baptism dignifies both by relating them to a major northern saint closely associated with Æthelstan. As has already been seen, Æthelstan's military successes were repeatedly presented in both historical and ecclesiastical sources as a reward for his piety.

With the following story of Guthfrith and Turfrith, William's old book continues to reinforce the picture it has given of Æthelstan as a formidable warrior king who can also be merciful towards his enemies. The style of narrative for Guthfrith's adventures is reminiscent of oral story-telling.¹⁹⁵ The plot includes a treacherous enemy who is foiled in his attempt to seize power and a heroic king, generous in rewarding others and magnanimous to his enemy:

Euasit tamen Godefridus [...] fuga cum quodam Turfrido, diuersarum partium duce, lapsus; moxque Eboracum obsidens, oppidanosque nunc precibus nunc minis ad defectionem sollicitans, et neutrum pro uoto expediens, abscessit. Nec multo post, in quodam castro ambo conclusi, custodientium perspicatiam fugiendo luserunt; quorum Turfridus mature diem obiit in pelago naufragus,

¹⁹⁴ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iv, 32, II, 192-95. For Æthelstan's devotion to St Cuthbert and the protection the saint is said to have given to him, see Æthelstan's Expedition to Scotland in Chapter 1.

¹⁹⁵ For an analysis of saga material in the English chronicles see C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 245-49. Despite its similarity in content and language to saga narratives, Wright does not include the Guthfrith story as an example.

preda piscibus expositus. Godefridus, multis miseris terra marique iactatus, ad postremum supplex curiam uenit. ibi pacifice a rege susceptus, quattuorque diebus profusissime cum eo conuiuatus, naues suas repetiit, pirata uetus, et in aqua sicut piscis uiuere assuetus.¹⁹⁶

However Guthfrith escaped [...] having slipped away in flight together with a certain Turfrith, a leader of a different faction; and soon, laying siege to York, he incited the townspeople to rebellion, now with entreaties, now with threats, and as neither achieved what he desired, he withdrew. Not long afterwards, both were confined in a certain stronghold and made a sport of their guards' sharp sightedness by fleeing; of them Turfrith soon met his end, shipwrecked at sea, exposed as prey for fishes. Guthfrith, after being tossed by many afflictions by land and sea, at last came as a suppliant to the royal court. There, he was received peaceably by the king, and after feasting very lavishly with him during four days, he made his way back to his ships, a pirate of long standing and used to living in the water like a fish.

The inhabitants of York are shown as remaining loyal to Æthelstan despite the siege, and the threats and appeals of Guthfrith and Turfrith. The surrender of Guthfrith is presented as his last resort but the narrative depicts Æthelstan as generous in victory, hospitably entertaining Guthfrith and then letting him go to resume his career as a pirate. This description of Guthfrith portrays him as a marauder rather than a serious military threat but having acted nobly towards him Æthelstan immediately shows caution by destroying the Scandinavian fortress in York to prevent it being used in the future as an enemy base. Rather than taking the booty he finds there for himself, he is said to show generosity by distributing it to individuals.¹⁹⁷ William had already warned his readers that the old book was excessive in its praise of Æthelstan and this seems to be apparent in the description of Æthelstan's treatment of Guthfrith. It is also difficult

¹⁹⁶ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 214-15. Symeon of Durham refers to this obliquely in his *Historia Regum*, noting that 'Ethelstanus rex de regno Brittonum Gudfridum regem fugauit', 'King Æthelstan put King Guthfrith to flight from the kingdom of the Britons' (ie Strathclyde). *Historia Regum*, p. 64.

¹⁹⁷ 'Ethelstanus interea castrum, quod olim Dani in Eboraco offirmauerant, ad solum diruit, ne esset quo se tutari perfidia posset: preda quae in castro reperta fuerat, et ea quidem amplissima, magnifice et uiritim diuisa', 'Æthelstan meanwhile demolished down to the ground the stronghold which some time ago the Danes had fortified in York, so that it might not be a place where treachery could defend itself; the booty which had been found in the stronghold - and it was indeed very extensive - was generously distributed to each man separately'. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 214-15.

for a modern reader to be convinced that generosity rather than self-interest led Æthelstan to dispense booty freely to chosen individuals.

By drawing on *Chronicle*, saga and the old book for his accounts of Æthelstan and Northumbria, William conveys the impression that Æthelstan was celebrated in story and poetry, as well as chronicle records, as a highly successful warrior king. He inspired fear by his prowess in battle, could be magnanimous in victory and used political and familial agreements, as well as military strategy, to secure his power. This picture of a successful warrior king is further developed and modified by William's use of his sources to describe Æthelstan's wider conquest of England and his victory at Brunanburh.

Æthelstan's Wider Conquests

In section two from the Old Book, William describes Æthelstan compelling the rulers of North Wales to meet him at Hereford where he forced them to surrender to his rule. In addition he is said to have imposed on them a hefty annual tribute of twenty pounds of gold and three hundred pounds of silver and to have demanded twenty five thousand head of oxen and as many hounds and birds of prey as he wanted.¹⁹⁸ William comments, 'ita quod nullus ante eum rex uel cogitare presumpserat, ipse in effectum formauit', 'thus, what no king before him had presumed even to think of, he himself made happen'.¹⁹⁹ This account of Æthelstan's treatment of the Welsh seems out of keeping with the merciful treatment he is said to have shown to Constantine, Idwal and Guthfrith. However, the old book continues this theme of Æthelstan as a ruthless military leader, describing how Æthelstan campaigned in the south west, forcing the

¹⁹⁸ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I. 214-17.

¹⁹⁹ Although the other chroniclers make no reference to this event, the poem *Armes Prydein Vawr* has been interpreted as a possible Welsh response, seeking through its prophecy to achieve vengeance for the harsh tribute imposed by the 'Great King'. The date of the poem is unclear but it could be as early as c. 930 and so be intended to refer to Æthelstan. Foot certainly interprets it in this way. Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp, 163, 226. David Dumville argues for a later date in the tenth century and sees the poem as mythological rather than political. David Dumville, 'Brittany and "Armes Prydein Vawr"', *Études Celtiques*, 20 (1983), 145-59.

Britons of Cornwall to leave Exeter and fortifying the city with a wall and towers.

Æthelstan is also credited with securing his conquests by setting firm territorial boundaries, the River Tamar in the South West and the River Wye for North Wales.²⁰⁰

The *Gesta Pontificum* repeats verbatim the description in the *Gesta Regum* of Æthelstan taking control of Exeter and adds that he also set the boundaries with Scotland.²⁰¹

Although William does not describe Æthelstan as King of all England his quotation of the Alfred charter in the *Gesta Pontificum* uses the late charter designation, ‘rex Anglorum, per Omnipotentis dexteram totius Britanniae regno sullimatus’,²⁰² while his accounts of Æthelstan depict him as the king whose actions in the South West and with Wales and Scotland set the boundaries of his kingdom so as to enclose most of the country.

Brunanburh

William’s first account of the Battle of Brunanburh includes a saga-like story centred on Sihtric’s son, Anlaf.²⁰³ It tells of Anlaf entering Æthelstan’s camp as a spy dressed as a musician. This narrative has all the drama of a saga and the focus on Anlaf as the main character suggests that William was drawing on Anglo-Scandinavian or Norse traditions.²⁰⁴ Æthelstan is portrayed as over-confident. Relaxed and off his guard he suspects nothing. He is warned of Anlaf’s deceit by a servant who had once been in service with Anlaf but was now one of Æthelstan’s men. Æthelstan first tests the man’s loyalty and then moves camp but is still confident enough to sleep soundly. When Anlaf suddenly attacks in the night, Æthelstan is unable to find his sword. Inserted into this narrative is a brief hagiographical episode in which Æthelstan at last realises his vulnerability and like a good Christian king, he turns to God and St Aldhelm in prayer

²⁰⁰ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 216-17.

²⁰¹ *Gesta Pontificum*, v, 246, I, 594-95.

²⁰² *Gesta Pontificum*, v, 250, I, 600-01.

²⁰³ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 131, I, 206-09.

²⁰⁴ *Egils saga* mentions only Anlaf’s unexpected attack on the English camp and his attempt to kill Æthelstan. See C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 144-46.

and his sword is miraculously restored to its scabbard. The *Gesta Regum* claims this was in response to Æthelstan's prayers; the *Gesta Pontificum* assigns the miracle to the prayers of his bishops, Oda and Theodrod, reflecting William's different audiences for the two works. William comments that encouraged by God's support in restoring his sword, Æthelstan attacked the enemy and fought tirelessly for victory.²⁰⁵

William may have attempted to explain Æthelstan's failure to assess the serious threat posed by Anlaf by describing him initially enticing Anlaf further into England as a deliberate strategy so that he might win greater glory in defeating him:

Postremum illi bellum cum Analauo fuit, Sihtrici filio, qui spe inuadendi regni cum supradicto Constantino iterum rebellante terminos transierat. Et Ethelstano ex consulto cedente, ut gloriosius iam insultantem uinceret, multum in Angliam processerat iuuenis audacissimus et illicita spirans animo²⁰⁶

His last battle was with Anlaf, Sihtric's son, who had crossed the country's boundaries in the hope of invading Æthelstan's kingdom together with the aforementioned Constantine who was again in rebellion. And while Æthelstan was deliberately giving way so that he might more gloriously defeat an enemy already acting insolently, the extremely rash young man, setting his mind on what was unlawful, had advanced far into England.

William's story may reflect a Scandinavian tradition. *Egils Saga* relates that, following advice from his counsellors, Æthelstan strategically withdrew in order to lure Anlaf into a false sense of security while giving the Anglo-Saxons time to gather their forces.

However, the reason William gives in his narrative for Æthelstan's supposed strategy is so opaque as to suggest that it was his attempt to excuse Æthelstan's inaction and counter the criticisms of the king found in the version of events in the second section in the old book. There, Æthelstan is roundly criticised for his lack of concern for the suffering of his subjects and the wholesale devastation being caused by Anlaf and Constantine. Æthelstan is described as young, hot-headed, overconfident and grown too

²⁰⁵ 'Hoc Dei dono fretus', 'relying on this gift from God'. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 131, I, 208-09.

²⁰⁶ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 131, I, 206-07.

use to leisure having retired from warfare.²⁰⁷ The language used to describe Anlaf and his troops further highlights the seriousness of Æthelstan's inaction. They are described as a plague and poisonous pest; they are barbarians and Anlaf a pirate, invading the land, and uttering savage and unlawful threats in Bacchic fury.²⁰⁸ It is only Æthelstan's fear of disgrace which finally drives him to action:²⁰⁹

Exciuit tandem fama querimonia regem,
ne se cauterio tali pateretur inuri,
quod sua barbaricae cessissent arma securi.

The complaints brought by rumour at last roused the king
not to allow himself to be branded by disgrace of this kind
that his arms had yielded to the barbarian axe.

This unflattering picture of Æthelstan is the only example of negative criticism of the king which William does not directly challenge suggesting that it was too well ingrained in tradition to be easily dismissed. It would appear that however much the writer of the old book wished to praise Æthelstan, it was impossible to ignore Æthelstan's failure to respond more quickly to Anlaf's invasion. Once roused, however, Æthelstan is depicted as opposing the invaders with all the vigour of a Roman general:²¹⁰

Section Two: The Old Book	
Nec mora: uictrices ducentia signa cohortes explicat in uentum, uexilla ferotia centum; cruda uirum uirtus decies bis milia quina ad studium belli comitantur preuia signa.	There was no delay: he unfolded to the wind the emblems leading his victorious cohorts, a hundred fierce standards; the raw courage of ten times twice five thousand men follow to the pursuit of war the banners leading the way

²⁰⁷ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 220-21. '[...] rex noster, fidens alacrisque iuuenta,/emeritus pridem detriuerat otia lenta', 'our king, a confident, energetic youth, long retired from active service, had passed his time in untroubled leisure'.

²⁰⁸ 'lues', 'plague'; 'Europae noxia labes', 'the poisonous pest of Europe'; 'fera barbaries', 'fierce barbarians'; 'pelago pirata relicto', 'a pirate who had abandoned the sea'; 'illicitas toruasque minas Analauus anhelans', 'Analauus emitting unlawful and savage threats'; 'Bacchanti furiae', 'in raging Bacchanalian frenzy'. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 220-21.

²⁰⁹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 220-21.

²¹⁰ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 220-21.

The account of the battle in the old book is very brief. The noise and sight of the advancing English army turns the invaders to flight. Only Anlaf escaped to trouble England again in the future:²¹¹

<p>Hic strepitus mouit predatorum legiones, terruit insignis uenientum fama latrones, ut posita preda proprias peterent regiones. At uulgus reliquum, miseranda strage peremptum infecit bibulas tetrus nidoribus auras.</p> <p>Fugit Analauus, de tot modo milibus unus, depositum mortis, fortunae nobile munus, post Ethelstanum rebus momenta daturus.</p>	<p>This uproar upset the plunderers' legions, the outstanding reputation of those approaching terrified the robbers, so that dropping their booty they made for their own lands. But the common people left behind, destroyed by a pitiful slaughter tainted the thirsty breezes with foul stench. Anlaf fled, just one from so many thousands, a remnant of death, a renowned gift of fate, destined to provide disruption to events after Æthelstan.</p>
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Thomson and Winterbottom comment that the note of foreboding at the end of the poem contains two phrases which echo phrases in Lucan's poem on the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, 'fortunae nobile munus' and 'rebus momenta daturus'.²¹²

If these phrases were intended as a literary reference, rather than just poetic phrases, then the poem not only draws a parallel between Æthelstan as the victorious Caesar and Anlaf the defeated Pompey, but compares the battle at Brunanburh to the violence and horror of civil war. The picture of the abandonment and pitiless fate of the ordinary soldiers then takes on an added significance and forms a stark contrast to the exultation of their leaders and the glorification of bloodshed noted in the *ASC* poem. A similar example of pity for the suffering caused by the battle can be found in the record of Brunanburh in the *Annals of Ulster*. This annal entry is also very different in tone from

²¹¹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 222-23. These lines have been taken to indicate that the poem was composed after Æthelstan's death but Lapidge has argued that the Latin suggests the poem belongs to a much later date, either the late eleventh or the early twelfth century, so disproving William's comment that the old book dated from Æthelstan's reign. Such a late date, however, does not rule out the use of traditional material. Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems', pp. 64-71.

²¹² Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 126.

the *ASC* poem. It not only records the great loss of life suffered caused by Æthelstan's victory but provides the same kind of contrast between men and leader as the old book's Latin poem.²¹³

937 Bellum ingens lacrimabile atque horribile inter Saxones atque Nordmannos crudeliter gestum est, in quo plurima milia Nordmannorum que non numerata sunt, ceciderunt, sed rex cum pauci euasit, .i. Amlaiph. Ex altera autem parte multitudo Saxonum cecidit. Adalstan autem, rex Saxonum, magna victoria ditatus est.

A very great, lamentable and terrible war was cruelly waged between the Saxons and the Northmen in which very many thousands, which cannot be counted, of Northmen fell, but the king Amlaíb escaped with a few men. Moreover on the other side a great number of Saxons fell. Æthelstan, however, king of the Saxons, was enriched by a great victory.

Æthelstan as Pious Christian King and Patron of Malmesbury

Early in section one of his account, William describes Æthelstan as outstripping all his predecessors in piety and founding new, magnificent monasteries while also enhancing practically every old monastery in England with buildings, ornaments, books or land.²¹⁴

Some independent evidence for Æthelstan's gifts exists in his book dedications, the sacramentary list of his gifts to the St Cuthbert community and the monastic land charters which have survived.²¹⁵ However, the details William himself provides in his *Gesta Regum* and his *Gesta Pontificum* do not back up his statement of Æthelstan's extensive donations and monastic foundations. The following Table summarizes the information he provides and illustrates the pre-eminence he gives to Æthelstan's links with Malmesbury:

²¹³ *Annals of Ulster*, ed. by MacAirt and MacNiocail, pp. 384-86.

²¹⁴ 'omnes antecessores deuotione mentis [...] obscurauit. [...] Noua monasteria quot et quanta fecerit, scribere dissimulo; illud non transilium, quod vix aliquod in tota Anglia uetustum fuerit quod non uel edificatiis vel ornamentis aut libris aut prediis decorauit'. 'He eclipsed all his predecessors in piety of mind. How many and how great the new monasteries he founded I leave unwritten; the one fact I will not pass over is that there was scarcely any long-established monastery in the whole of England which he did not adorn either with buildings, or decorations, or books or estates'. *Gesta Regum*, ii. 131, I, 206-07.

²¹⁵ See the sections on Æthelstan's charters and book dedications in Chapter 1.

Table 10. Æthelstan's Monastic Donations and Foundations

	<i>Gesta Regum</i>	<i>Gesta Pontificum</i>
Monastic Foundations		Mulcheney and Milton Abbeys in memory of Edwin.
Gifts and donations	Gave to his successors the sword of Constantine with nail from the cross; spear of Charlemagne said to be the lance which wounded Christ's side; the banner of St Maurice of the Theban Legion, which were all given to him by Hugh King of the Franks. ²¹⁶	Gave relics to Middleton, and Milton. To Milton he gave many relics acquired from Brittany, including the bones of St Samson, Archbishop of Dol.
Malmesbury	Æthelstan related to St Aldhelm. Gave to Malmesbury part of the holy cross and crown of thorns he received as gifts from Hugh King of the Franks. Called on St Aldhelm who restored his sword. Buried his cousins Elwin and Ethelwin at the head of St Aldhelm's tomb and stated his own wish to be buried there. Gave many lands to Malmesbury; these included Alfred's estates given in thanksgiving to God. Buried under the altar at Malmesbury.	Related to Aldhelm and devoted himself to his service. Gave altar cloths, a gold cross, gold reliquaries, a piece of the cross given to him by Hugh, King of the Franks. Built a shrine at Malmesbury for the relics of St Paternus. Buried in St Mary's Malmesbury, his two cousins, killed at Brunanburh, in memory of St Aldhelm's action in miraculously restoring his sword. Æthelstan gave Alfred's forfeited lands to St Peter's Malmesbury on behalf of the souls of his cousins killed at Brunanburh. Æthelstan buried at St Mary's Malmesbury under the altar in the tower.

The Table shows that, although details may vary, William used the same basic information about Æthelstan and Malmesbury in both his works. Only the *Gesta Pontificum* names two monastic foundations directly credited to Æthelstan, Milton and Mulcheney, founded on behalf of the soul of his brother Edwin.²¹⁷ William's account of Æthelstan's involvement in Edwin's death is more developed than in the other Anglo-

²¹⁶ William refers to Hugh the Great, Duke of the Franks, as 'rex' in both works, implying greater honour for Æthelstan as recipient.

²¹⁷ *Gesta Pontificum*, ii, 85, 93, I, 292-93, 312-13.

Norman historians. He provides the following narrative claiming that he is using the *cantilenae* as his source:²¹⁸

Edwin is accused of plotting against Æthelstan. Despite denying the charge on oath, Æthelstan drives Edwin into exile and virtually condemned Edwin to death by having him cast adrift in a rickety old boat without oars or oarsmen. Edwin is accompanied by an attendant but when the sails no longer coped with the fierce winds, Edwin, unable to endure the situation any further, ends his own life by leaping overboard. The attendant manages to propel the boat to land with his feet and brought Edwin's body to land.

William has already pointed out to his readers the unreliability of the *cantilenae* as a source, thereby immediately creating some doubt as to the accuracy of its information. He comments that the story of Edwin's death may seem plausible to some but that it is out of keeping with Æthelstan's known affection for his family:

Haec de fratris nece, etsi ueri similia uidentur, eo minus corroboro quod mirabilem suae pietatis diligentiam in reliquos fratres intenderit; quos cum pater puerulos admodum reliquisset, ille paruos magna dulcedine fouit et adultos regni consortes fecit.²¹⁹

These details of his brother's death, although they seem credible, I do not at all endorse, the less so because of the remarkable dutifulness of the affection which he showed towards the rest of his brothers, whom, when their father had died leaving them still small boys, he cherished as little children with great charm and as young men made them sharers in his kingdom.

William rounds off his account by relating that Æthelstan's cup-bearer was revealed as responsible for false accusations against Edwin. Æthelstan punished his cup-bearer and showed remorse for his own treatment of Edwin by undertaking seven years of penance.²²⁰ As Edwin's death is generally dated to 933, this means that, counted inclusively, Æthelstan is depicted as doing penance until 939, the year of his death. William also depicts Æthelstan piously founding two monasteries to pray for the

²¹⁸ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 139, I, 226-27.

²¹⁹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 140, I, 228-29.

²²⁰ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 139, I, 226-27.

soul of his brother and he provides other examples of Æthelstan's Christian concern for the souls of the dead. Æthelstan is said to have allowed the thegn Alfred Christian burial in response to requests from the nobles and from Alfred's family and to have given Alfred's estates to Malmesbury on behalf of the souls of his two cousins buried there. Æthelstan's personal piety is further emphasized by William's accounts of Æthelstan's commitment to gathering relics for personal and public veneration.

Relics

William lists the sacred relics presented to Æthelstan by Hugh the Great when seeking Æthelstan's half-sister in marriage. He uses the high status of the relics to depict the high esteem in which Æthelstan was held. Not only do the relics include those closely associated with Christ's passion and death but their association with Constantine and Charlemagne imply that Æthelstan was of comparable standing. According to William, Æthelstan gave Malmesbury Abbey two of the most sacred relics, part of Christ's cross and crown of thorns which William claims to believe still continued to give new life to the monastic community despite all the difficulties it faced. His narrative serves not only to show how highly Æthelstan valued Malmesbury but how his gift of these relics had conferred status on the Abbey and helped sustain it, through God's support, into William's own day.

William gives particular prominence to Æthelstan's love of Breton relics. He claims that Æthelstan had endowed his foundation of Milton with the bones of Saint Samson of Dol together with other Breton relics. At Milton, William states, he came across a letter from Radbod, Prior of Dol, sent to Æthelstan with gifts of the relics of SS. Senator, Scubilion and Paternus and details of the dates for their veneration.²²¹

Æthelstan had given the bones of St Paternus to Malmesbury and had a shrine made for

²²¹ Radod's letter indicates that Æthelstan's links with Dol certainly go back to his father's time and possibly his grandfather's. He refers to Edward the Elder as a *confrère* of Dol and Asser describes King Alfred providing financial support for churches in Brittany. *Gesta Pontificum*, v, 249, I, 596-99. See also Asser, *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*, 102, p. 89.

them. William also refers to Æthelstan obtaining relics in Brittany and Normandy with the help of Rollo and mentions Breton relics being carried at the head of Æthelstan's funeral procession.²²² While Æthelstan's love of relics is mentioned in other sources,²²³ William particularly stresses Æthelstan's love of Breton relics and comments that Æthelstan, in response to a dream, had spent large amounts of the wealth he inherited from his father on obtaining his Breton relics. It would seem from William's version of events that the traditions linking Wessex with Brittany deserve more thorough scholarly study than can be provided in this thesis.

Æthelstan's Personality and character

William provides a number of brief pen-pictures of Æthelstan through which he depicts his personal qualities and physical appearance. William states that he had heard Æthelstan was of average height, slim in build and with fair hair—something which William claims to be able to endorse having seen the king's body himself. He notes an English tradition that no ruler was more observant of the law or more educated than

²²² William's reference to Rollo depicts a friendship between Rollo and Æthelstan which is also referred to by Roger of Wendover but not mentioned in the other Anglo-Norman sources. It is described in detail in William of Jumièges *Gesta Normannorum* based on Dudo's tenth-century history of the Dukes of Normandy and this may be the source used by William. See Chapter 4, 'Æthelstan in the Scandinavian Tradition'.

²²³ Mention was made in Chapter 1 to Æthelstan's claim in his manumission statement to have provided relics for the people throughout England. An eleventh-century entry in the Leofric Missal lists relics at Exeter from the Holy Land, the eastern Mediterranean, Italy, Gaul, Brittany and England held at the monastery of St Mary and St Peter and notes: 'maximam partem gloriosissimus et uictorissimus rex Athelstanus, eiusdem scilicet loci primus constructor, illuc dedit', 'the greatest part, the most glorious and victorious king Æthelstan gave there, for of course he was the first to build that same place'. *Leofric Missal*, ed. by Nicholas Orchard, II, 8-13. Rollason has suggested that the Exeter list of relics could be read out to the congregation, perhaps on days when the relics were displayed for veneration and that this would remind people of the piety, power and wealth of the donor. David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 160. Royal gifts of relics gave added prestige to the churches which had been chosen to receive them. Donations by Æthelstan are also recorded for the monasteries at Abingdon, Glastonbury, and Winchester. Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 198-200. William of Malmesbury, *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie*, 54, pp. 112-15. Robinson described Æthelstan's reputation for collecting relics as 'unique'. He has pointed out that the records of Æthelstan's donations cannot be substantiated but that, 'what matters is that as we turn the pages of list after list of our English monasteries we find Æthelstan among the greatest of the donors'. Robinson, *The Times of St Dunstan*, pp. 72-73, 75.

Æthelstan.²²⁴ The description of the lavish celebrations for Æthelstan's coronation in the old book also depicts Æthelstan as a strong personality who brought hope to some of his subjects and fear to others. His followers are described as keen to show their support and loyalty to him. In return Æthelstan is depicted as welcoming their honouring of him and responding in an appropriate social manner:²²⁵

Rex non inuitis oculis hunc haurit honorem,
omnibus indulgens proprium dignanter amorem.

The king drinks in this honour with eager eyes,
conferring courteously on all a proper affection.

This depiction of Æthelstan as skilled in relating effectively to others is further developed through a series of contrasting statements. He can be courteous, agreeable, modest and courageous but also unremitting towards his enemies:²²⁶

Deo famulantibus pronus et dulcis, laicis iocundus et comis, magnatibus pro contuitu maiestatis serius, minoribus pro condescensione paupertatis deposito regni supercilio affabiliter sobrius. [...] Cuius ammaritione fortitudinis et humilitatis percarus, rebellibus inuicta constantia fulmineus.

He was favourably disposed and agreeable to the servants of God, to the laity, pleasant and courteous, to important people, serious in keeping with the

²²⁴ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 214-15. 'De hoc rege non inualida apud Anglos fama seritur, quod nemo legalius uel litterarius rempublicam amministrauerit', 'concerning this king a strong reputation is established among the English that no-one more law-abiding or more educated has governed the state'. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 132, I, 210-11. Patrick Wormald notes the extensive legislation attributed to Æthelstan. Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 290-95. For Æthelstan's laws see F. L. Attenborough, *Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963). That Æthelstan continued to be credited with the set of law codes which still carry his name is an indication of the continuing reputation he had established as a law maker. It may also be reflected in the saga accounts of his foster-son Hákon's reputation as a law-maker but it is challenged by Saxo Grammaticus in his account of Æthelstan illegally seizing the kingdom. See Chapter 4, 'Æthelstan in the Scandinavian Tradition'. William's description of Æthelstan's reputation as an English tradition may indicate that the Normans too had a different view. Malmesbury Abbey possessed a copy of the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* written by William of Jumièges in which he depicts Æthelstan as gentle, ineffective and inferior in every way to Rollo, founder of the Norman race. See Chapter 3, Æthelstan in the Continental Tradition.

²²⁵ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 133, I, 212-13. See Chapter 4 Section Three where Saxo Grammaticus depicts Æthelstan as over-concerned with social niceties. The old book contains a description of Æthelstan's coronation and feast which William quotes as verse. The nobles are said to place the 'diadema' on his head while the bishops declare the disloyal accursed. While this description does not reflect the actual coronation ceremony, it fits with William's earlier and later prose accounts of Æthelstan's succession being supported by the nobles and the thegn Alfred suffering divinely ordained punishment for his attempt to blind Æthelstan.

²²⁶ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 134, I, 214-15.

appearance of his royal position, to lesser men, in keeping with his recognition of their limited circumstances, he was kindly and restrained having put on one side the pride of kingship. [...] To his citizens he was very dear because of their admiration for his courage and humility, to rebels he was a lightning stroke of unconquerable firmness.

Above all, the old book depicts Æthelstan as enhancing his distinguished royal family's descent and providing a model of moral rectitude:²²⁷

Regia progenies produxit nobile stemma,
cum tenebris nostris illuxit splendida gemma,
magnus Adelstanus, patriae decus, orbita recti,
illustri probitas de uero nescia flecti

The royal offspring advanced his noble line,
when, a brilliant jewel, he illumined our darkness,
great Adelstanus, the glory of his fatherland, an example of righteousness,
of famed uprightness, not knowing how to be diverted from the truth.

This is echoed in, or perhaps modelled on, the opening lines of the epitaph for

Æthelstan at Malmesbury Abbey, which William quotes in his *Gesta Pontificum*:²²⁸

Hic iacet orbis honor, patriae dolor, orbita recti,
iustitiae fulmen, munditiae specular.

Here lies the honour of the world, the grief of his fatherland,
an example of righteousness, a thunderbolt of justice, a glass of purity.

In the *Gesta Pontificum* William also makes a comparison between Æthelstan and King Edgar, in which he claims Edgar built on what Æthelstan had achieved relying on the

²²⁷ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 133, I, 210-11. William's emphasis on Æthelstan's noble lineage is also found in the ASC poem on Brunanburh and in the *Aðalsteins drápa* in *Egils saga* of the Scandinavian tradition. It contrasts with the denigration of his status in the Continental tradition by Hrotsvit in her *Gesta Ottonis*. See Chapter 3, 'Æthelstan in the Continental Tradition'.

²²⁸ *Gesta Pontificum*, v, 246, I, 594-95. There is a striking similarity in the references to Æthelstan as a thunderbolt, *fulmen* and *fulmineus* and in the language of the old book and Æthelstan's epitaph. Thomson and Winterbottom have suggested that these similarities could show the old book dated from the tenth century or could be evidence of William editing the old book wording to reflect the epitaph. Winterbottom has also argued that the epitaph was quite possibly written by William himself. *Gesta Pontificum*, II, 296. Thomson and Winterbottom have identified the opening line of the epitaph as the same as one used for Charles the Bald. Thomson and Winterbottom, *Gesta Regum*, II, 120. Given Æthelstan's family links with Charles the Bald and his Carolingian aspirations, deliberate use of a Carolingian model, whether by William or by others, is a genuine possibility. For Æthelstan's access to, and use of, Carolingian material, see Rodney Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1987), pp. 139-57.

wise counsel of men. He credits Æthelstan with being the courageous innovator who had confidence in himself and in God's support:²²⁹

succedente Edgardo fratre, omnium antecessorum, nisi Ethelstanus palmam preoccupasset, facile primo. Denique nescias quem preferas, nisi quod iste tenuerit, ille inceperit, ille fortior, iste fortunatior, ille Dei et suo auxilio nisus, iste prudentium uirorum consilio credulus.

His brother Edgar succeeded him [Eadwig], of all who had gone before easily the most outstanding, if only Æthelstan had not attained the palm before him. And so you would not know whom you should put first, except that Edgar possessed what Æthelstan had begun. He was more courageous and Edgar more fortunate. Æthelstan relied on God's help and his own, Edgar trusted in the advice of wise men.

Although William in the *Gesta Regum* describes Edgar as excelling all other Kings of England, it seems that in the *Gesta Pontificum* he did not wish Edgar to overshadow Æthelstan as the English King who had given the greatest support to Malmesbury.

Overview

In both the *Gesta Regum* and the *Gesta Pontificum*, William carefully selects and presents his material so as to guide his readers' assessment of Æthelstan as a person and as a king. In keeping with his approach to writing history outlined in his prologues, William appears to let his sources tell their own story, including criticism as well as praise of Æthelstan. However, he does not entirely leave responsibility for the sources' veracity with their authors, or with his readers, but questions, challenges and casts doubt on the negative depictions of Æthelstan's birth and his treatment of Edwin. His use of different sources in the *Gesta Regum* gives an impression of disjointedness but allows him to reinforce the positive through repetition. The cumulative effect of William's narrative is to give the reader the impression that there is a weight of evidence

²²⁹ *Gesta Pontificum*, v, 251, I, 602-03. King Edgar (959-975), Æthelstan's nephew, was credited with introducing the Benedictine Reform into England. John Blair comments, 'The narratives of the reform present Eadgar's reign as a golden age which transformed the English Church'. John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 351.

supporting his main thesis that Æthelstan was a king whose personal qualities and achievements proved his right to rule.

The high and ambiguous profile given to the question of Æthelstan's birth is very noticeable and suggests that this was seen as an issue in William's day. Given twelfth-century concerns about the legitimacy of Norman and Angevin kings, the stories about Æthelstan's birth had the potential to damage Æthelstan's standing and deter further royal patronage for the Abbey. William therefore stresses the qualities which made Æthelstan a good choice as king and supports this with the story of the dream foretelling Æthelstan's destined greatness, the foresight of his grandfather Alfred who saw the makings of a king in the young Æthelstan from an early age, and the evidence of the Malmesbury charter which recorded God's punishment of the thegn Alfred for claiming on oath that he had not tried to prevent Æthelstan's coronation on grounds of his birth.

William's range of literary and charter sources is found only in his works. This may reflect his more energetic research for material connected with Æthelstan but his use of the sources to present Æthelstan in as favourable light as possible suggests the kind of flattery which he criticised in others. As a result, his standing as a reliable historian has fluctuated. Stenton drew on him extensively for his account of Æthelstan; Dumville has characterized his work as treacherous and posing real problems for today's historians; Wood has strongly supported William as a source on Æthelstan; and most recently Foot has taken a measured view which recognizes the value of William as a source while taking account of his work as one of literature as well as history. My own analysis has argued that rather than a work of history, William's narrative should be seen as his personal biography of the Anglo-Saxon king most closely connected with Malmesbury and a piece of special pleading for recognition and patronage of the abbey and community at Malmesbury.

Conclusion

The Anglo-Norman histories provide accounts of Anglo-Saxon England which could appeal to both the conquered English and the conquering Normans. The aim of celebrating the Anglo-Saxon past was common to both peoples. The Normans sought current and future status based on the continuity they claimed with the Anglo-Saxon kings; the English wished to preserve their history and traditions and so safeguard their position under Norman rule. But the Anglo-Norman writers also had their own particular aims for their works, both scholarly and practical.

My analysis shows how the Anglo-Norman writers used their tenth-century sources to promote their own general and particular aims. As a result, their depictions of Æthelstan are individualized. This is particularly evident in the works of John of Worcester, Symeon of Durham and William of Malmesbury. The title of John of Worcester's work, *Chronicon ex Chronicis*, signalled that his was a scholarly compilation of previous texts. His scholarly approach is evident in his adoption of the chronicle of Marianus as a framework which provided a broader context and more accurate dating system for his recording of English History. However, my analysis also identified how John, by his ordering of events, avoided controversy over Æthelstan's succession. I suggested that this could be related to the aim identified by Brett, of John seeking through his work to preserve Worcester land holdings, some of which were based on Æthelstan charters.

The use of history to safeguard traditional monastic status and possessions is more clearly evident in the works of Symeon of Durham and William of Malmesbury. In his *Libellus de Exordio*, Symeon of Durham depicts Æthelstan as the fulfilment of Cuthbert's promises to King Alfred that one day a descendant would rule the whole country. In his narrative, the decisive event is not Æthelstan's taking of Northumbria after Sihtric's death, but his expedition to Scotland under Cuthbert's patronage. The list

of Æthelstan's devotion to St Cuthbert and his gifts to the community of St Cuthbert serve to reinforce the national status of the saint's shrine following the community's move to Durham.

William of Malmesbury is much more overt about his aims and methods. His letters of dedication to Matilda and to Robert of Gloucester make clear his wish for his work to win their patronage for Malmesbury Abbey. His account emphasizes Æthelstan's generosity as patron of the Abbey and the importance of Malmesbury as the burial place of the king. William also emphasizes that his work is based on painstaking scholarship. In his prologues he specifically addresses the issues of veracity, bias and prejudice faced by the historian. In his account of Æthelstan, William provides the reader with material drawn from a range of sources and through his comments provides guidance on the key issues of Æthelstan's birth and his involvement in Edwin's death. It seems that despite his awareness of bias in others, William deliberately sets out to provide a very positive picture of Æthelstan for his audience. By including descriptions of the king's personality and appearance, his work reads more like a biography designed to win hearts as well as minds.

By contrast, Henry of Huntingdon's account of Æthelstan is very brief and very individualistic. Henry's history is about the English as a people. Henry makes clear the didactic and moral purpose of his work by organizing it around the five invasions the people have suffered from Saxon to Norman times. Perhaps from a limited, or selective, use of the *ASC* sources Henry depicts Æthelstan's military success as his main achievement, yet makes no mention of Æthelstan's successes in the north or his claim to be King of all Britain. The expedition to Scotland is portrayed by Henry as something of an empty victory and his account of Æthelstan focuses mainly on the battle of Brunanburh. His Latin translation of the Brunanburh poem is included partly for scholarly purposes, so his readers may be aware of the strange language and imagery of

the original, and partly to provide an interlude before he returns to events following Æthelstan's reign. The overall effect is to depict Æthelstan as part of a heroic culture and a king whose early death illustrated Henry's main theme of the transience of worldly achievement.

The more focused approach illustrated by John of Worcester's *Chronicle* is also found in the works of Gaimar, Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover. These writers closely follow the content of the *ASC*. They do not question the accuracy or veracity of the information they provide and make no comment on the content.²³⁰ Their main purpose is the transmission of information about the past for instruction and as a basis for their own, more lively and more critical, representations of contemporary events.

The Anglo-Norman texts are drawn from, and build on, earlier texts but my analysis has also shown how their depictions of Æthelstan derive much of their meaning from the longer narratives in which they are embedded. Gaimar, John of Worcester, Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover have written chronicle-style texts which draw directly on memories of Æthelstan already available through the *ASC*. The tenth-century entries on Æthelstan can now be seen as fairly minor records within a much broader canvas of events. Henry of Huntingdon also draws on the *ASC* but re-positions the information it provides within his broader narrative of the moral import of historical events. Symeon of Durham retells episodes from the history of St Cuthbert and his community showing how Æthelstan fulfilled Cuthbert's prophecy but also by his actions provided an example of humble royal patronage which others might follow. As a result, their authors depict Æthelstan in ways in which he is already remembered, and

²³⁰ Their authors face the same problems over the veracity of their sources as any modern-day historian, that of deciding whether a source accurately represents a past which cannot be directly accessed. Otter, 'Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, p. 114.

in ways in which they and their communities or patrons, wish him to be remembered in the future.

Leah Shopkow has pointed out that among the twelfth-century Norman historians there was no shared definition of ‘what constituted historical truth’ and writers varied in their level of concern on this. William of Malmesbury resolved his concerns by claiming to have used what were considered to be reliable sources but left responsibility for the veracity of their information with the source writers themselves.²³¹ It may be that this was the approach adopted by other Anglo-Norman writers, but not articulated by them. Christopher Given-Wilson has succinctly summed up the dilemma for modern historians in his comment that ‘accuracy was what chroniclers claimed for their chronicles; trustworthiness was what they claimed for themselves’.²³² Through my analyses I have shown that making choices based on later theoretical criteria on the historicity of sources and their content runs the risk of decontextualizing the content which their authors selected for a different purpose.²³³ As Robert Stein has commented,

we discover that by taking into account not merely the things that are being said directly by our documents [...] but also the linguistic mechanisms that allow them to be said and said in the particular way they are [...], we discover that the reality we are engaged in understanding becomes thicker, less rarefied, more nuanced and multi-dimensional. And as we extend our inquiry outwards from the single source into examining the textual contexts and the intertextual play inseparable from the particular document on which we happen to be working, we uncover the continual social and cultural pressure on what is being said, how experience is being formulated, what is included and what is left out.²³⁴

The pattern of continuity, adaption and innovation found among the Anglo-Norman writers is also evident in the texts which provide the source material for the next chapter

²³¹ Leah Shopkow, *History and Community* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), p. 135.

²³² Christopher Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Press, 2004), p. 6.

²³³ Partner, *Writing Medieval History*, pp. xi-xiii.

²³⁴ Robert Stein, ‘Literary Criticism and the Evidence for History’, in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, pp 81-82.

on the Continental Tradition. In this, I will show how the different ways in which Æthelstan is depicted reflect national, regional and dynastic interests and as a result include memories of Æthelstan which are not found in the tenth-century or Anglo-Norman texts of the English Tradition.

Chapter Three

Æthelstan in the Continental Tradition

Introduction

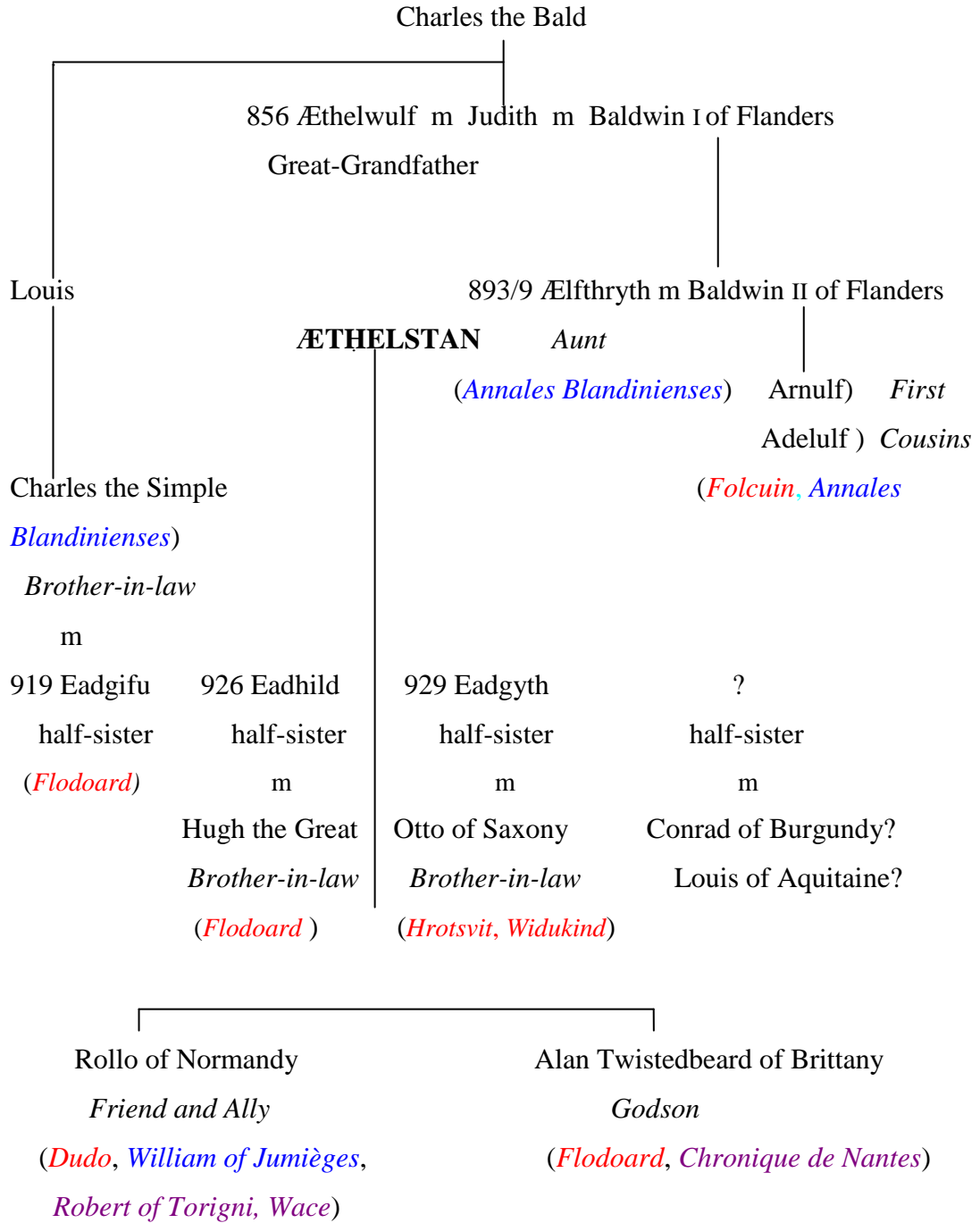
In this chapter I examine how *Æthelstan* is depicted in Continental texts from the tenth to the twelfth centuries in the regions associated with his reign, Saxony, Francia, Brittany and Normandy. My analysis reveals significant regional variations. The Saxon sources include only brief mentions of *Æthelstan*, either in connection with the marriage of his half-sister Eadgytha to Otto, or as a generous benefactor to the Saxon monasteries. The texts from West Francia and from Brittany portray *Æthelstan* as actively involved in the safe return of Louis to inherit his father's throne in West Francia, and of Alan Twistedbeard to assume the position of power in Brittany once held by his grandfather, Alan the Great. The texts from Normandy also describe *Æthelstan*'s involvement in these events, but as a friend and ally of the Scandinavian Vikings.

I show how the portrayal of *Æthelstan*'s involvement in Continental matters stems from his family and friendship links with Continental leaders and rulers. I argue that the Continental sources depict *Æthelstan* as pro-Carolingian in his sympathies, aware of the complex power struggles taking place following the break-up of the Carolingian empire and prepared to involve himself politically in order to achieve his own objectives. I demonstrate how the ways in which the authors of the tenth-century Continental texts depict *Æthelstan* give expression to the separate national identities emerging among the regions which had previously been part of the Carolingian empire, and how their accounts influenced the work of later writers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The Continental texts were written for different audiences and from different national, dynastic and political perspectives. When read together, they illustrate how concentration on only one, or one group of texts, provides a picture of people and events very specific to a particular writer, nation or time. By bringing the Continental sources together and examining the ways in which Æthelstan has been depicted in the different texts, it has been possible to identify a range of authorial voices and contrasting representations, both within the Continental tradition and between the Continental, English and Scandinavian traditions.

Æthelstan's Continental Links

The diagram below provides an overview of Æthelstan's familial and friendship links with rulers and leaders on the Continent as recorded in the Continental sources from the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries:



- Ninth Century - Tenth-Century - Eleventh-Century - Twelfth-Century

The diagram shows that Æthelstan's Carolingian family links originated with the marriage of his great-grandfather, Æthelwulf, to Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald and great-granddaughter of Charlemagne. Her subsequent marriage to Baldwin I, Count of Flanders, established a family link which was later reinforced by the marriage of Alfred's daughter Ælfthryth to Count Baldwin II of Flanders. The Continental sources suggest that this Wessex-Flanders link, with its Carolingian origins, continued to be close during the ninth and tenth centuries.¹ As will be seen below, sources also describe active links between Wessex and the abbey of St Bertin where, in the tenth century, Æthelstan's cousins, Adelulf and Arnulf, became lay abbots and where his brother Edwin was buried.

Æthelstan's Carolingian family links were further strengthened by the marriage of his half-sister Eadgifu to Charles the Simple, grandson of Charles the Bald and Carolingian King of West Francia. The Continental sources depict Æthelstan actively supporting the Carolingian royal line by providing a place of safety for Charles's son the future Louis IV. The later marriages recorded for Æthelstan's other half-sisters established familial links with Hugh the Great, Duke of Francia, and Otto King of Saxony. As a result, Æthelstan was at the same time brother-in-law to Charles the Simple, Hugh the Great and Otto of Saxony, three Continental rulers whom the sources describe as being in constant territorial rivalry with each other, especially over the region of Lotharingia. Their disputes also drew in Æthelstan's cousin Arnulf of Flanders whose support for Louis, Hugh or Otto is often depicted as reflecting his own territorial and political ambitions.

¹ Philip Grierson has noted that of Ælfthryth's family, 'two of her four children and one of her grandchildren were named after her side of the family; her second son Adelulf was called after her grandfather Ethelwulf and her elder daughter Ealswith after her mother, the wife of King Alfred, while Egbert, the second son of Arnulf, was named after his more distant ancestor, King Egbert of Wessex (died 839)'. Philip Grierson, 'The Relations between England and Flanders before the Norman Conquest', pp. 85-86.

This Continental aspect of Æthelstan's kingship has largely been ignored in the secondary scholarship. Where it has been addressed it has been from an Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Norman perspective. Thus Sharp, commenting on the marriages of Æthelstan's half-sisters, has characterized these as showing how highly Æthelstan was rated by Continental rulers:

The pool of appropriate royal partners within the whole of western Europe was very small, and made even smaller by the extension of rules on consanguinity and affinity. It was additionally aggravated by the refusal of the Carolingians to marry out of the three parts of their empire. Edward and, more particularly, Æthelstan, were seen, by later writers at least, as highly prestigious connections by contemporary rulers on the continent, and their advances do seem to support this view. Perhaps this helps explain why several foreign magnates sought English wives in the first half of the tenth century.²

Sharp's comments appear to be based on the writings of William of Malmesbury who stated of Æthelstan that:

tota Europa laudes eius predicabat, uirtutem in caelum ferebat; felices se reges alienigenae non falso putabant si uel affinitate uel muneribus eius amicitias mercarentur.³

All Europe proclaimed Æthelstan's merits and praised his qualities to the sky; kings of other races thought, correctly, that they were fortunate if they purchased an alliance with him either through a marriage agreement or by their gifts.

The Continental sources, however, in describing the marriages as prestigious do so, not on the grounds that they were with Æthelstan's sisters, but with the daughters of Edward the Elder. In this way they established a direct link back through Edward to Alfred and to Æthelwulf and his marriage with Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald and suggest that Æthelstan's Continental reputation derived more from his lineage than his own achievements.

Sharp's analysis of the purpose lying behind the Continental marriage agreements is also open to question. She sees them as helping 'to gain or strengthen an

² Sheila Sharp, 'The West Saxon Tradition of Dynastic Marriage', in *Edward the Elder*, ed. by Higham and Hill, p. 82. By marrying Eadgifu, Charles the Simple clearly did marry outside the Carolingian Empire but still within the family connections already established through the marriage of Æthelwulf to Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald.

³ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 216-17.

alliance against a common enemy', by providing Æthelstan with access to the leading ruling families among his neighbours across the Channel.⁴ This may be a valid interpretation from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, but the Continental sources present the marriage agreements as part of a complex series of political alliances driven by individual leaders' personal ambitions as part of the power struggles which followed the break-up of the Carolingian Empire. This depiction of the marriages as driven by political convenience is also apparent in the later accounts of both Hugh the Great and Louis marrying sisters of Otto of Saxony, perhaps in an attempt to achieve a balance of political power between them underwritten by familial loyalties.

Æthelstan's links with Normandy and Brittany were not based on direct family connections. His contacts and influence with the Dukes of Normandy are depicted in the Continental sources as based on friendship and military alliances. These are said to have been initiated by Rollo, the founder of the Norman dynasty, and to have continued into the reign of his son, William Longsword. Æthelstan's links with Alan the Great's family are less clearly defined. The texts suggest that this was a connection inherited from his father's time when Alan the Great's family sought safety from the Normans at the Wessex court. Æthelstan is said to have stood as godfather to Alan's grandson, the future Alan Twistedbeard, so forming a bond of spiritual kinship with Alan and his family.

The tenth-century Anglo-Saxon sources contain little information on Æthelstan's links with the ruling families of Western Europe. As noted in Chapter 1, Æthelweard lists the marriage alliances in the *Prologue* to his *Chronicon* and Version B of the *ASC* for 924 may have included a reference to Otto's marriage to Eadgytha. Of the Anglo-Norman historians, William of Malmesbury is the main source on the Continental marriage agreements with Wessex but he provides no information on

⁴ Sharp, 'The West Saxon Tradition of Dynastic Marriage', in *Edward the Elder*, ed. by Higham and Hill, pp. 82-86.

Æthelstan's involvement in Continental politics. This only becomes part of the Anglo-Norman tradition with the introduction of excerpts from Flodoard's *Annales* in the Bury St Edmunds' manuscript of John of Worcester's *Chronicle*. By contrast, the tenth-century Continental sources depict Æthelstan playing an active, and sometimes pivotal, role in political events. They do so from their authors' different perspectives but my analysis has identified a measure of agreement between them in their depiction of Æthelstan as driven by Carolingian ideals which found their most powerful expression in his support for his nephew, Louis, son and heir of Charles the Simple.

Primary Continental Sources

The majority of the Continental sources for Æthelstan date to between 960 and the year 1000. The texts are not contemporary with the events they describe but their authors provide accounts of recent past events based on their knowledge both of historical tradition and of later political and national developments. The emergence of separate kingdoms following the break-up of the Carolingian Empire encouraged the production of texts designed to promote a sense of regional or national identity and foster loyalty to the new leading families and rulers. In my analysis of the texts I consider how this influenced their depictions of Æthelstan and his reign. The following Table lists the Continental sources used for this section by the geographical area for which their authors provided a narrative account. The range of titles of the individual works indicates those texts which were thought of as part of the established tradition of annals, chronicles or histories. Others, for example Dudo's *De Moribus et Actis Primorum Normanniae Ducum*, suggest a more informal approach while Hrotsvit's *Gesta Ottonis* and Wace's *Roman* are written in verse. Despite the differences in nomenclature and genre, their authors indicate that they intended their works to be accepted as authoritative accounts of the people and events they described.

Table 11. Primary Continental Sources by Geographical Area

Century	Saxony	Francia	Flanders	Brittany	Normandy
Tenth	Hrotsvit (<i>Gesta Ottonis</i>) Widukind (<i>Res Gestae Saxonicae</i>) <i>Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli</i>	Flodoard (<i>Annales</i>) Richer (<i>Historiae</i>)	Flodoard Richer	Flodoard Richer	Flodoard Richer Dudo (<i>De Moribus et Actis</i>)
Eleventh	Thietmar (<i>Chronicle</i>)	Folcuin (<i>Gesta</i>) <i>Historia Francorum Senonis</i>	Folcuin	<i>La Chronique de Nantes</i>	William of Jumièges (<i>Gesta</i>) Wace (<i>Roman</i>)
Twelfth	<i>Annalista Saxo</i>				Robert of Torigni (<i>Gesta</i>)

The shifting patterns of territorial dominance on the Continent in the tenth century resulted in writers including accounts of events in neighbouring territories, especially where they posed a threat to the security of their own region. Thus Flodoard and Richer are a source for events in Flanders, Brittany and Normandy as well as West Francia while Folcuin records events in both Flanders and Francia. Dudo, Hrotsvit and Widukind write from a narrower geographical perspective, Dudo focussing almost entirely on Normandy and Hrotsvit and Widukind on events in Saxony. For my analysis of how Æthelstan is depicted in the Continental sources, I have adopted the geographical divisions outlined above so as to retain the texts within their author's contemporary and historical contexts.

Æthelstan and Saxony

Hrotsvit: *Gesta Ottonis*

The main Continental source for Æthelstan's links with Saxony is the poem *Gesta Ottonis* written c.960-65 in honour of Otto I by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. Hrotsvit states that the poem was written at the request of her abbess, Gerberga, who was Otto's niece.⁵ Katharina Wilson has commented on the reputation Gandersheim enjoyed in the tenth century as a spiritual and intellectual centre of learning and culture. She also records that in 947 Otto

freed the abbey from royal rule and gave the abbess the authority to have her own court of law, keep her own army, coin her own money, and hold a seat in the Imperial Diet.⁶

Hrotsvit was, therefore, part of an aristocratic religious community closely associated with the Saxon royal family. She would have been aware that Gerberga's father, Duke Henry of Bavaria, had initially challenged Otto's succession on the grounds that Otto, although he was the elder son, had been born before his father had become king. Duke Henry argued that Otto, unlike himself, was therefore not of royal birth. Jay T. Lees has seen this as having a significant influence on Hrotsvit's poem commenting that

one of her goals in the *Gesta* was to undermine Henry's pretension by emphasizing the principle of clear-cut primogeniture unencumbered by the idea of being first-born to a reigning king.⁷

Lees suggested that Hrotsvit's purpose was not to attack Henry directly but to secure the principle of primogeniture for the future.⁸ The poem, therefore, had a political background and possibly a political purpose. In the following analysis, I trace how this is reflected in Hrotsvit's depiction of Æthelstan and the marriage alliance between Saxony and Wessex.

⁵ The earliest surviving manuscript, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 14485, dates from the end of the tenth and early eleventh centuries.

⁶ Katharina M. Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her Works* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998), pp. 6-7.

⁷ Jay T. Lees, 'Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and the Problem of Royal Succession in the East Frankish Kingdom', in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, ed. by Phyllis R. Brown and others (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp.13-28 (p. 20).

⁸ Lees, 'Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and the Problem of Royal Succession', in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, ed. by Brown and others pp. 23-24.

In the *Gesta Ottonis* Hrotsvit describes how Henry the Fowler of Saxony decided to seek Æthelstan's half-sister, Eadgytha, as a suitable wife for his son and heir and sent diplomatic messengers with many gifts on a secret mission to England to make a marriage alliance. Hrotsvit links the need for secrecy to Henry's decision not to seek a bride for Otto from his own kingdom but gives no indication as to why Henry turned to England and Æthelstan.⁹ The eleventh-century *Vita Antiquior Mathildis Reginae* provides one explanation. There, Otto is said to have married a royal bride *ab Anglis Saxonibus*, from the English Saxons.¹⁰ Æthelstan and his sister are thus depicted as related to Henry and his son by race and this may explain why Hrotsvit places great emphasis on Eadgytha's virtues and royal lineage, further enhancing Henry's choice of a Saxon bride from England.

Other interpretations have seen the marriage as part of wider Continental politics. Stenton has suggested that Henry wanted to establish links with Æthelstan because he was currently acting as guardian for Louis, heir to Charles the Simple of West Francia. He commented that Henry had recently taken advantage of Charles the Simple's imprisonment to seize control of the Lotharingian region of Francia. Because the traditional loyalty of the Lotharingians for the house of Charlemagne was still seen as a threat, it was in Henry's best interests to establish friendly relations with Æthelstan as guardian of the heir to the Frankish throne.¹¹ Foot has suggested that the marriage arrangement would have brought advantages to both kings, boosting the status of Henry

⁹ Karl Leyser has noted that by seeking a bride for his son from overseas, Henry was breaking the long tradition of Saxon rulers marrying from within their own people. He suggested that Henry may have done this to avoid internal rivalries and subsequent challenges to his dynastic line and that a bride from England may have been seen as an acceptable alternative given the historic links between the two countries and their claims to shared Saxon descent. Karl Leyser, *The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries*, pp. 69, 78.

¹⁰ *Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde*, ed. by Bernd Schütte (Hannover: Hahn, 1994), p. 119.

¹¹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 346.

the Fowler in Saxony and enabling Æthelstan to form a useful Continental alliance.¹²

Both these interpretations of the marriage alliance assume that Henry already saw Æthelstan as a king of some influence in Continental politics. This, however, does not fit easily with Hrotsvit's account of events.

Hrotsvit credits Henry with initiating the marriage agreement but makes it clear that the choice of Otto's bride was made, not because she was a sister of Æthelstan, but because she was a daughter of King Edward and his queen. Edward she describes as a noble king and Eadgytha as the descendant of a distinguished royal line. She also adds that Eadgytha (Edith) was said to be descended from the martyr-king, St Oswald:

Nobilitate potens, primis meritis quoque pollens,
Edita magnorum summo de germine regum;
[...]
Nec mirum, meritis si lucebat bene primis,
Germen sanctorum quam producebat avorum:
Hanc tradunt ergo natam de stirpe beata
Oswaldi regis, laudem cuius canit orbis,
Se quia subdiderat morti pro nomine Christi.¹³

Mighty in her nobility, strong too in her outstanding merit,
Edith (Eadgytha) from the most exalted stock of mighty kings;
[...]
Nor is it amazing if she shone brightly with outstanding merit,
[she] whom the stock of saintly forebears produced:
because men say that she was born from the blessed lineage
of King Oswald, whose praise the world sings,
because he had subjected himself to death for Christ's name.

Hrotsvit does not mention Eadgytha's Saxon descent but her references to the high status of Eadgytha's royal forbears and her links with St Oswald suggest that her readers were already familiar with Eadgytha's family history. Hrotsvit's source for tracing Eadgytha's lineage back to St Oswald is unknown. The use of 'tradunt' indicates that Hrotsvit was drawing on a traditional source whether oral or textual and it is always possible that such a tradition was based on Eadgytha's own account of family links.

¹² Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 48.

¹³ *Hrotsvithae Opera*, ed. by Paulus de Winterfeld (Berlin: Weidmann, 1902), 85-86, 93-97, p. 207.

Alternatively, a family link may have been extrapolated from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* where Bede records that Oswald was present at the baptism of Cynegils, King of Wessex, accepted him as his godson and later married Cynegils's daughter.¹⁴

Bede also mentions that by the mid-seventh century the fame of Oswald had spread as far as Germany through Willibrord as Archbishop of Frisia.¹⁵ There is evidence that during the later tenth century the feast of St Oswald was widely commemorated in Saxony and Leyser has pointed out that this was certainly true of Essen where Matilda, Æthelweard's cousin and Eadgytha's granddaughter, was abbess.¹⁶ Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel has suggested that Eadgytha herself may well have been instrumental in promoting this interest in the saint in Saxony,¹⁷ and this would suggest that Oswald was particularly venerated in Wessex. Perhaps too little scholarly account has been taken of the references in the *ASC* of Æthelred and Æthelflæd of Mercia transferring Oswald's body from Bardney to Gloucester in 906 (Version D), or 909 (Version C). Alan Thacker has linked this event and Æthelstan's reputation for collecting and donating relics and suggested that Æthelstan may have played a part in disseminating relics of St Oswald in England and through this helped to develop the story of his family's descent from the saint. So far, however, the evidence for Wessex

¹⁴ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii, 7, I, 354-57. Roger Ray has commented on the extensive copying of Bede's works on the Continent from the eighth century onwards and especially in France and Germany. Roger Ray, 'Bede' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Lapidge and others, pp. 57-59 (p. 57). Given Gandersheim's intellectual reputation for learning noted above, it is quite likely that Bede's works would have been known to Hrotsvit.

¹⁵ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii, 13, I, 386. Alan Thacker comments that: 'English and Frisian liturgical material combined to make knowledge of Oswald as a Christian saint comparatively widespread in Frisia and parts of Germany along the Rhine in the eighth and ninth centuries.' 'Membra Disjecta: The Division of the Body and the Diffusion of the Cult', in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. by Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), pp. 97-127 (p. 121 and n. 150).

¹⁶ Leyser, *The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries*, p. 78.

¹⁷ Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel, 'Edith, Judith, Matilda: the Role of Royal ladies in the Propagation of the Continental Cult', in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. by Stancliffe and Cambridge, pp. 210-229 (p. 216).

family links with Oswald remains inferential and no convincing explanation can be given for Hrotsvit's claim.¹⁸

Whatever the reason for Hrotsvit linking Eadgytha with St Oswald, she clearly saw it as enhancing Eadgytha's standing within Saxony. It did not, however, enhance Æthelstan's standing. While recognizing him as Edward's son and heir, Hrotsvit never uses Æthelstan's name, referring to him only as Eadgytha's brother and describing him as being of inferior birth on his mother's side:¹⁹

Fratre suo regni sceptrum gestante paterni;
Quem peperit regi consors non inclita regni,
Istius egregiae genetrix clarissima domnae,
Altera sed generis mulier satis inferioris.

Her brother was now wielding the sceptre of his father's kingdom;
whom a consort who was not illustrious bore to the king of the kingdom,
the mother of that outstanding lady [Eadgytha] was very distinguished,
but the other was a woman of quite inferior descent.

Foot commenting on Hrotsvit's criticism suggested that:²⁰

Hrotsvitha did not intend to denigrate Æthelstan or his mother, but rather to emphasize the status of the parents of Otto's future wife; she never implied that Æthelstan was illegitimate, or his mother a concubine,

While Hrotsvit certainly stresses the nobility of Eadgytha's parentage she also gives considerable emphasis to Æthelstan's ignoble birth by mentioning it twice. It is not clear how 'consors non inclita' is to be interpreted but Hrotsvit's additional description of Æthelstan's mother as 'generis mulier satis inferioris', 'a woman of quite inferior descent', leaves no doubt that she intended Æthelstan's royal status to be seen as derived solely from his father's side. It is possible that this may explain why Æthelstan's name is either not remembered or not recorded by Hrotsvit.²¹

¹⁸ Thacker, 'Membra Disjecta', in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. by Stancliffe and Cambridge, p. 121.

¹⁹ *Gesta Ottonis*, 79-82, p. 207.

²⁰ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 30.

²¹ Hrotsvit's statement is the earliest surviving textual reference to Æthelstan being of inferior birth. The status of Æthelstan's mother remains obscure in the English sources. As noted in Chapter 2 on the Anglo-Norman Histories, William of Malmesbury describes her as 'illustri-

Hrotsvit's account of Æthelstan's response to Henry's embassy depicts him as seeing the marriage proposal as an honour. He is depicted as flattered, using subtle steps to persuade Eadgytha to agree to the marriage and going to great efforts to gather a huge array of costly gifts to send to Otto in Saxony:

Moxque suae dulci narrabat voce sorori,
 Exortans illam regi parere fideli,
 Illam qui propriae proli voluit sociari.
 Cumque suae monitis menti instillaret amicis
 Oddonis dulcem, pueri regalis, amorem,
 Collegit innumeras summo conamine gazas.²²

And soon, in a sweet voice he told his sister [of the request]
 encouraging her to obey the loyal king
 who wished her to be joined to his own offspring.
 And when, by his friendly advice, he inspired in
 her heart sweet love of the royal youth,
 he gathered with the greatest exertion treasure beyond number.

In addition Æthelstan is said to have provided Eadgytha with a suitable entourage and to have sent her 'summo honore', 'with the greatest honour', to Saxony together with one of her sisters 'quo sic maiorem prorsus conferret honorem Oddoni', 'so that in this way he might confer greater honour on Otto'.²³ By the repetition of 'honore' and 'honorem' Hrotsvit emphasizes her depiction of Æthelstan acknowledging the greater standing of the Saxon royal family.

This negative depiction of Æthelstan may have been linked to Hrotsvit's political aim of justifying Otto's claim to the throne on grounds of primogeniture. In her account of the reign of Otto's father, Hrotsvit comments that although both Otto and his

femina', 'a woman of distinction', but also records the tradition that she was Edward's concubine. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 126, 131, I, 198-99, 206-07. As Pauline Stafford has pointed out, the two need not have been mutually exclusive and she has noted a number of circumstances in which a concubine's son succeeded as royal heir. Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers* (London: Batsford, 1983), pp. 64-65.

²² *Gesta Ottonis*, 102-107, p. 207. The only evidence thought to survive from this display of wealth and power is the eighth-century Metz Gospel Book which may have been presented to Otto by Æthelstan. Ivory bound and with fine illustrations, it was placed at Gandersheim for safe keeping.

²³ *Gesta Ottonis*, 109, 114-15, pp. 207-08. This sister's name is variously transcribed as Adiva, Eadgifu and Ælgifu. Æthelweard, at the end of his 'Prologus' to his *Chronicon*, also mentions this second sister and asks his cousin Matilda if she has information on this sister's marriage. *Chronicon Æthelwardi*, p. 2.

brother Henry were brought up in the royal manner ('regali more') his father regarded Otto as his first born and heir.²⁴ There are significant similarities between the position of Otto as king and Æthelstan as king. Both were born before their fathers became king; both could claim the right to inherit the throne on the grounds of being the king's eldest son; both could be challenged by a younger brother who was royally born on both sides. Hrotsvit's references to Æthelstan's lowly birth on his mother's side emphasize that while he and Otto both inherited the throne as eldest sons, Otto could also claim that both his parents achieved royal status, while Æthelstan could not. As a result, Otto's standing and claims to kingship on grounds of primogeniture could be seen as so much stronger.

It would seem that the popular story of Æthelstan's birth, ignored in the surviving English texts until recounted by William of Malmesbury, was already known on the Continent in the tenth century. By mentioning it, Hrotsvit seems to signal that it was too well-established to ignore but she was determined to show that it did not detract in any way from Eadgytha's royal standing or from the splendour of Otto's marriage. As the poem was dedicated to Otto and written long after Eadgytha's death, Hrotsvit's account would appear to have had Otto's approval while avoiding the possibility of giving any offence to Eadgytha herself.

William of Malmesbury, writing from a pro-Æthelstan perspective, gives a completely different account of the marriage alliance. He describes Henry seeking the marriage because of Æthelstan's noble descent and inherent greatness:²⁵

Henricus primus filius Conradi (multi enim huius nominis fuere), rex Teutonicorum et imperator Romanorum, sororem eius filio Ottoni expostulavit, tot in circuitu regibus pretermittis, progeniei generositatem et animi magnitudinem in Ethelstano e longinquo conspicatus.

²⁴ Hrotsvit does not mention Henry's earlier son by a concubine but describes Henry seeking a worthy bride for Otto, 'suo primogenito regique futuro', 'his firstborn and future king'. *Gesta Ottonis*, 66, 70, p. 206.

²⁵ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 216-217.

Henry the First, son of Conrad (for there were many of this name), king of the Teutons and emperor of the Romans, having passed over so many kings around him, energetically begged for his [Æthelstan's] sister for his son Otto, having espied in Æthelstan from afar his nobleness of descent and greatness of spirit.

William's depiction of Æthelstan is in sharp contrast to Hrotsvit's. He retains the idea that it was Henry who instigated the marriage alliance but depicts it as with a sister of Æthelstan rather than a daughter of Edward, giving Æthelstan's family descent as one of the reasons. Unless William knew of Hrotsvit's version of events and was deliberately countering it, these very different accounts illustrate how the same event was interpreted from opposite points of view and handed down to form separate national traditions of the past.²⁶

The portrayal of Saxon superiority in Hrotsvit may also have been challenged in the exchange of gifts of books said to have taken place between Otto and Æthelstan. As noted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the Gospel Book which Æthelstan is thought to have received from Otto, MS Tiberius A. ii, was some time afterwards dedicated by him to Christ Church Canterbury. The dedication uses the designation found in Æthelstan's later charters which would fit with Keynes's suggestion that Otto sent his gift to Æthelstan either at the time of his marriage in 929 or to celebrate his accession and the consecration of Eadgytha as queen in 936.²⁷ The name of Otto's mother, the queen Matilda, is also included but placed second, perhaps indicating that Otto was now king and that the book was inscribed after Henry's death and Otto's coronation in 936.

²⁶ Foot, perhaps because her main focus is on Æthelstan, credits him with 'negotiating' a treaty and 'brokering an alliance' with Henry although this conflicts with both Hrotsvit's and William's account of Henry as the initiator. Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 48.

²⁷ See the discussion on BL, Cotton MS, Tiberius A.ii in the section on Æthelstan's Book Dedications in Chapter 1 for details of the book Æthelstan is thought to have received from Otto. Keynes has noted that the Metz Gospel Book was at Gandersheim from the early eleventh century, and may have been there earlier, perhaps given by Otto into the keeping of his niece, the Abbess Gerberga II. Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', pp. 192-93.

The Metz Gospel Book at Gandersheim is thought to have been the book sent to Otto by Æthelstan. It carries the following inscription which has puzzled scholars:

+ eadgifu regina :- æþelstan rex angulsaxonum
7 mercianorum :-

Keynes has commented that the inscription was probably written by an Englishman and the use of ‘þ’ and ‘7’ would certainly support this. Commenting on the designation of Æthelstan as ‘rex angulsaxonum 7 mercianorum’, Keynes described it as ‘anomalous’ by the time of Otto’s marriage. He agrees that it could be said to represent Æthelstan’s position as king between 924/5 and 927 but that ‘it would probably be dangerous to press this point too far’.²⁸ Keynes does not explain his reasons for saying this but it may be based on the assumption that both books were exchanged at the time of the marriage in 929. However, Version D of the *ASC* records Æthelstan giving his sister in marriage to Otto in the same year as Edward died, 924/25. The use of the earlier designation of Æthelstan as ‘angulsaxonum’ could suggest that Æthelstan sent the book to Otto as a gift at that earlier time.

Keynes has provided a detailed analysis of the inscription, suggesting three different theories as to which Eadgifu is named and how the book came to Gandersheim. He has expressed considerable doubt as to whether Eadgifu refers to Edward’s wife and therefore Eadgytha’s mother and has also queried why her name comes first.²⁹ However, if the book was sent in the year of Edward’s death, or as part of the gifts Hrotsvit states accompanied Eadgytha to Saxony, it would not be unreasonable for Eadgifu’s name to have been put first. As Eadgytha’s only surviving parent, her name

²⁸ Keynes, ‘King Athelstan’s Books’, pp. 189-90.

²⁹ His own preference was to take ‘Eadgifu regina’ as a reference to Æthelstan’s half-sister, the wife of Charles the Simple. He suggested that she might have taken the book back with her to the Continent and somehow it finally found its way to Gandersheim, but he conceded that this ‘preference could not be expressed with much conviction’. Keynes, ‘King Athelstan’s Books’, pp. 189-93.

provided living continuity for Eadgytha's royal link with Edward, a lineage which Hrotsvit strongly emphasizes.

Comparing the two inscriptions, Keynes noted that both were written at, or near, the bottom of the folio page and that this could fulfil several purposes, providing a record of the donors, showing them honour and enlisting prayers for them.³⁰ He pointed out, however, that the inscription in Tiberius A. ii was superior to that in the Gandersheim Gospels, both in the type of script used and in its placement on the folio page. This would seem to be in keeping with the claims of higher status for Otto made by Hrotsvit, but it is possible that Æthelstan by his choice of book may also have been making a statement of precedence.

At the end of his article, Keynes commented that it was strange of Æthelstan to send Otto a German book, although he qualifies his statement by suggesting that Æthelstan might not have realised the book's origin.³¹ There are, however, reasons why Æthelstan might have deliberately chosen a Metz Gospel Book as a gift for Otto. Metz, in Lotharingia, has been described as 'the cradle of the Carolingian dynasty'. It was the place chosen by Louis the Pious for his re-coronation as emperor in 835 and where he was buried. His son, Charles the Bald, father-in-law to Æthelstan's great-grandfather Æthelwulf of Wessex, held his coronation at Metz in preference to Aachen.³² It is possible, therefore, that Æthelstan's choice of book depicts him celebrating his own Carolingian family connections while at the same time sending Otto a clear warning that he was not to have designs on Lotharingia which was Carolingian territory and part of Louis's future inheritance.

³⁰ Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', p. 193.

³¹ Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', p. 193.

³² Pierre Riché, *The Carolingians: A Family who Forged Europe*, trans. by Michael Idomir Allen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 158, 198.

Hrotsvit's poem has been described as 'one of the most successful tenth-century attempts at a Christian epic'.³³ Eadgytha is a model queen and Otto is shown to be the ideal type of Christian emperor. By the 960s, when Hrotsvit was writing her poem, Frankish texts were also portraying Otto as a powerful and successful ruler of the kingdom of Saxony. Hrotsvit's work is the earliest and most detailed of the surviving Saxon sources which refer to Æthelstan. The next work to do so is that of Widukind who completed his first text of the *Res Gestae Saxonicae* in 967/68, shortly after Hrotsvit's poem was written.

Widukind: *Res Gestae Saxonicae*; Thietmar: *Die Chronik des Bischofs*

The *Res Gestae Saxonicae* is a history of Saxony from the period of conquest and settlement to the establishment and maintenance of the East Frankish kingdom of Saxony. It includes some of the early, oral history of the region and covers the reigns of Henry I (Henry the Fowler) and his son Otto I in detail, ending with the death of Otto in 973. A member of the monastic community of the royal centre of Corvey, Widukind dedicated his work to Matilda, Otto's daughter by his second marriage, who as a child was designated abbess of the royal Abbey of Quedlinburg. Sverre Bagge has suggested that Widukind's choice of dedicatee reflected the tension in the two main aims for his work—first and foremost to provide a history of the peoples of Saxony and secondly a celebration of the achievements of the region's first two great kings, Henry I and Otto.³⁴

Widukind makes only a passing reference to Æthelstan. In his narrative he makes no mention of Henry's embassy to Æthelstan and only briefly records Otto's marriage. This he describes as celebrated with great magnificence shortly after the Saxon victory at Lenzen in 929:

³³Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, p. 12.

³⁴Sverre Bagge, *Kings, Politics, and the Right Order of the World in German Historiography c. 950-1150* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 25-30, 93.

Itaque recentis victoriae laetitiam augebant nuptiae regales, quae eo tempore magnifica largitate celebrabantur. Nam rex dedit filio suo Oddoni coniugem filiam Ethmundi regis Anglorum, sororem Adalstani,³⁵

And so the joy of the recent victory was increased by the royal nuptials which were celebrated at that time with magnificent liberality. For the king gave to his son Otto as his wife, the daughter of Ethmund king of the English, and sister of Æthelstan.

Eadgytha is not named but identified only by her male connections as the sister of Æthelstan and the daughter of the King of the English. Widukind erroneously calls her father 'Ethmund' and by describing him as King of the English implies that the marriage was arranged before Edward died in 924/5. In his later account of Eadgytha's death, Widukind refers generally to her noble, English descent but he does not name her father or any of her family:

Haec nata ex gente Anglorum non minus sancta religione quam regali potentia pollentium stirpe claruit.³⁶

She, born of the English race, was no less distinguished by her holy reverence for God than by her descent from the royal power of mighty ancestors.

By this extremely brief and inaccurate account, Widukind effectively wrote Æthelstan and the West Saxon kings out of Saxon history. This may reflect his strong commitment to narrating events in Saxony rather than Saxon contacts overseas. Conversely it can be asked why he mentioned Æthelstan at all. One possibility is Æthelstan's Carolingian connections. In the Frankish sources Æthelstan is remembered for his role in reinstating his nephew, Louis, as king in West Francia and later supporting Louis militarily in order to foil Otto's attempt to take Lotharingia for himself.³⁷ Alternatively, it may have been that Widukind simply included Æthelstan's name from using family records or from the Metz Gospel Book at Gandersheim, mentioned above. Widukind's text became a

³⁵ *Die Sachsengeschichte Des Widukind Von Korvei*, ed. by Paulus Hirsch and H.-E. Lohmann, 5th edn, (Hannover: Hahn, 1935), i, 37, p. 54.

³⁶ Widukind states that Eadgytha's death in 946 was a catastrophe which caused grief throughout Saxony. Widukind, ii, 41, pp. 99-100.

³⁷ Flodoard, *Annales*, ed. by Philip Lauer (Paris: Picard et Fils, 1905), p. 73.

seminal source for later writers. Thietmar in the eleventh century based his account of Otto's reign on Widukind while the twelfth-century author of the *Annalista Saxo* followed Widukind's narrative almost verbatim.³⁸

Thietmar was bishop of Merseburg and a descendant of a noble family. He recounts that his grandfather was imprisoned by Otto for taking part in a plot against him, but later pardoned. Although critical of Otto, Thietmar also represented his reign as a 'golden age' apparently seeing the fits of anger and acts of ruthlessness ascribed to Otto by Widukind, as an inevitable part of kingship.³⁹ Thietmar's reference to Eadgytha's marriage is included as part of his description of Eadgytha's consecration as queen and is even briefer than Widukind's:

Otto coniugem suam Eadgytham, Ethmundi regis Anglorum filiam, bene timoratam, quam patre suo adhuc vivente duxerat, consecrari precepit.⁴⁰

Otto, ordered to be consecrated [as queen] his wife Eadgytha, daughter of Ethmund king of the English, a very devout lady, whom he had married while his father was still alive.

Thietmar retains Widukind's use of Ethmund for Edward's name but makes no mention of Æthelstan.⁴¹ Widukind and Thietmar were both concerned to record and celebrate the history of the people of Saxony and the achievements of their kings and Eadgytha as Otto's queen was part of that story. Their treatment of Edward and Æthelstan indicate that they regarded Otto's connection with the kings of Wessex as tangential to Saxony's history and of little significance.⁴² While Eadgytha's piety and good works continued to

³⁸ 'Augebant hanc leticiam regales nuptie, que celebrantur tunc magnifica largitate. Rex enim filio Othoni dedit coniugem filiam Ethmundi regis Anglie, sororem Adelstani'. *Annalista Saxo* ed. by Georg Waitz, *MGH SS 6* (Hannover: Hahn, 1844) pp. 542-777 (49, p. 597).

³⁹ Karl Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society*, pp. 34-37.

⁴⁰ Thietmar, *Die Chronik des Bischofs*, ed. by Robert Holtzmann (Berlin: Weidmann, 1935), ii, 1, p. 38.

⁴¹ The use of Ethmund for Edward is puzzling. Widukind may have been using an oral source or the misnomer may have arisen from a faulty entry in a written source.

⁴² For discussion of the evidence for continuing family and state links between Wessex and Saxony in the tenth century and later, see K. J. Leyser, *Medieval Germany and its Neighbours 900-1250* (London: Hambledon Press, 1982), p. 192, and *The Carolingian and Ottonian*

be praised in writings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the details of Eadgytha's Wessex family connections were lost from Saxon records.⁴³ The depiction of Æthelstan which survives is one of a king of no importance. This negative view, however, is countered by the tenth-century monastic records of St Gallen and its linked abbeys of Reichenau and Pfafers. These depict Æthelstan as a Christian king of considerable status.

Ecclesiastical Texts

Eadgytha's marriage to Otto I is recorded as having taken place in 929 both by Widukind and by the Annals of the Ottonian foundation at Quedlinburg.⁴⁴

Independently, the *Confraternitatum Syngraphae* at St Gallen records that on 15 October 929 Cenwald, Bishop of Worcester, visited the monastery.⁴⁵ The St Gallen text states that Cenwald visited monasteries throughout the whole of Germany with a generous gift of silver to which the king of the English had added a comparable amount.⁴⁶ Cenwald is said to have stayed a few days with the monks and to have celebrated the feast of St Gall's *depositio* with them:

Quique gratissime a fratribus susceptus et eiusdem patroni nostri festivitatem cum illis celebrando quatuor ibidem dies demoratus est. Secundo autem

Centuries, pp. 93-94, 102-04; Versions B and C of the ASC, record in 982 the death of Otto son of Liudolf, the son of Otto the Elder and King Edward's daughter. John of Worcester, drawing on Byrhtferth's tenth-century *Vita Oswaldi*, records that when Edgar succeeded to the throne in 959, Otto sent him wonderful gifts and affirmed peace between them. Byrhtferth, *Vita Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. by Michael Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), pp. 106-110. John of Worcester, *The Chronicle*, p. 412.

⁴³ *Annales Quedlinburgenses*, ed. by Martina Giese (Hannover: Hahn, 2004), pp. 457, 463. But see the descriptions in praise of Eadgytha in *Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde*, ed. by Bernd Schütte (Hannover: Hahn, 1994), pp. 124, 169-72.

⁴⁴ Widukind states that at her death in 946 Eadgytha had been queen for 10 years and resident in Saxony for nineteen, that is, from 927. Widukind, ii, 41, p. 100. Version D of the ASC records the marriage arrangement as taking place in 924. It is always possible that the marriage was agreed then but given the hostilities between Saxony and Hungary did not take place until 929.

⁴⁵ The date has been taken to indicate that Cenwald may have been sent by Æthelstan to help escort his sisters safely to Saxony under the marriage arrangement. Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ 'Keonwald venerabilis episcopus profectus ab Anglis omnibus monasteriis per totam Germaniam cum oblatione de argento non modica et in id ipsum a rege Anglorum eadem sibi tradita visitatis in Idibus Octob venit ad monasterium sancti Galli'. 'Confraternitatum Syngraphae', in *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis*, Appendix A, ed. by Paulus Piper (Berlin: Weidmann, 1884), pp. 136-37.

postquam monasterium ingressus est, hoc est in ipso depositionis sancti Galli die, basilicam intravit et pecuniam copiosam secum attulit, de qua partem altario imposuit, partem etiam utilitati fratrum donavit. Post hec eo in conventum nostrum introducto omnis congregatio concessit ei annonam unius fratris et eandem orationem, quam pro quolibet de nostris sive vivente sive vita decedente facere solemus, pro illo facturam perpetualiter promisit.⁴⁷

He was welcomed very kindly by the brethren and by celebrating with them the feast of our own patron saint, he spent four days there. But on the second day after he entered the monastery, that is on the day itself of [remembrance of] St Gall's burial, he entered the church and brought with him a large amount of money, from which he placed part on the altar and gave part also for the use of the brothers. After this, when he had been brought into our assembly, the whole congregation allotted him the daily food ration of one monk and promised to offer for him in perpetuity the same prayer[s] which we are accustomed to make for any one of our brethren whether during their lifetime or when departing from life.

Cenwald is said to have asked for the following names to be entered in the *Liber Vitae*:

Hec sunt autem nomina que conscribi rogavit: Rex Anglorum Adalstean. Keonowald episcopus. Wighart. Kenvun. Conrat. Keonolaf. Wundrud. Keondrud.⁴⁸

By placing Æthelstan's name first, Cenwald not only gives him precedence but identifies him as the king of the English who had contributed equally to the gift of money to the German monasteries. The *Liber Vitae* itself has another twenty two names added and ends 'cum ceteris'. The full list includes archbishop Wolfhelmus (Canterbury), the bishops Elwinus (Menevia), Eotkarus (Hereford), Wunsige (Dorchester), Sigihelm (Sherborne), Oda (Wilton), Fridosten (West Saxons) and Cunifrid (Rochester), the abbots Kenod (Evesham) and Albrich.⁴⁹ It is not clear how many of these names were added *in absentia* and how many were intended to be read as having accompanied Cenwald on his visit to the monastery.⁵⁰ Nevertheless the number

⁴⁷ 'Confraternitatum Syngraphae', in *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis*, ed. by Piper, p. 137.

⁴⁸ 'However, these are the names he asked to be enrolled: the King of the English Adalstean, Keonowald Bishop. Wighart. Kenvun. Conrat. Keonolaf. Wundrud. Keondrud'. 'Confraternitatum Syngraphae', in *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis*, ed. by Piper, p. 137.

⁴⁹ *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis*, ed. by Piper, p. 100.

⁵⁰ Simon Keynes has commented that 'an entry in a book of confraternity does not necessarily imply a visit'. Simon Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', p. 201, n. 15.

and range of the names depict Æthelstan as a pious Christian king of considerable status. His envoys had honoured the community at St Gallen by taking part in one of their major feasts and by donating money to their church and community. As a result, Cenwald was admitted to their confraternity and Æthelstan and his senior clerics enrolled in the *Liber Vitae* to be prayed for in perpetuity.

The entry of Æthelstan's name in the St Gallen *Liber Vitae* depicts him as a king of equal status alongside the names of the Continental rulers entered in the book, to several of whom he was related through family marriages - Henry I of Saxony and his queen Matilda, Otto and his brother Duke Henry and most of the Carolingian rulers from Pippin and Charlemagne down to Charles the Fat.⁵¹ A briefer entry appears around the same time in the *Liber Vitae* of Reichenau apparently made by Wighart who is also listed as having visited St Gallen with Cenwald:

Aethelstaenum regem cum Wifelmo archiepo et nostris fidelissimis vivis ac in pace quiescentibus vestro servitio in Christi nomine commendamus. Wighart.⁵²

We commend to your service of prayer in the name of Christ, King Æthelstan together with Archbishop Wulfhelm and our most loyal followers living and resting in peace.

The use of the royal 'We' and the reference to 'our most loyal followers' may be intended to depict Æthelstan as the original author of the wording for this entry. The *Liber Vitae* of Pfafers contains a much briefer reference to Æthelstan. Written in the mid-tenth century, the entry reads:

Athalsten rex, Otmundus rex, Odgiva, Odo archiepiscopus.

Given the reference to Edmund as king and the inclusion of Odo (Oda) as archbishop, Keynes has suggested that the entries in the Pfafers book may be connected with a later visit to the abbey by Archbishop Oda and his retinue, perhaps on their way to or from

⁵¹ *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis*, ed. by Piper, pp. 15, 84, 227, 383.

⁵² *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis*, ed. by Piper, p. 238.

Rome, or possibly as part of a visit of Oda's own to the German monasteries, and if so, this would indicate that the direct contact with the German monasteries at the time of Eadgytha's marriage 'were maintained, and extended, by his successors'.⁵³

Dumville has cautiously suggested that Eadgytha's marriage may have made longer-term ecclesiastical links between England and Saxony more likely, perhaps helped by Cenwald's contacts with the monasteries there. However, he points out that from the time when Alfred brought John the Saxon to England to help reinstate learning, names of German origin can be detected in some of the royal charters indicating that a number of Saxon clerics were resident and working in England.⁵⁴ Dumville has also commented that the names of German clerics become more evident during the tenth century citing evidence from Abingdon, New Minster, London and Canterbury. Nevertheless, while noting that 'no doubt England and Germany drew closer in Otto's reign', he suggested that any increase in the number of German clerics should be seen more as a natural extension of existing practice rather than a deliberate policy.⁵⁵ Michael Wood disagreed and suggested that recruitment of clerics might also have formed part of Cenwald's mission.⁵⁶ Leyser has drawn attention to the textual evidence of continual contacts between the courts of Wessex and Saxony in the later tenth century following Eadgytha's marriage.⁵⁷ The picture he paints, however, is one of a fluctuating relationship increasingly dictated by political needs.⁵⁸ While Æthelstan can be seen as having helped establish, and possibly develop, closer ecclesiastical and royal links between Wessex and Saxony, it would seem that Hrotsvit's disparagement of

⁵³ *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis*, ed. by Piper, p. 363. Simon Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', p. 201.

⁵⁴ Dumville, *Wessex and England*, p. 160.

⁵⁵ Dumville, *Wessex and England*, pp. 159-160. See also Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 101.

⁵⁶ Michael Wood, 'The Making of King Athelstan's Empire', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. by P. Wormald, p. 261.

⁵⁷ Leyser, *The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries*, pp. 93-94.

⁵⁸ Leyser, *The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries*, pp. 102-04.

Æthelstan, and Widukind writing Æthelstan out of Saxony's history, may also reflect something of the ambiguities and difficulties associated with foreign marriage alliances.

The divergent accounts of Æthelstan in the Saxon sources reflect the very different purposes of those recording them. By comparison, the textual sources from West Francia, Flanders and Brittany provide a consistent picture of Æthelstan as an influential king who played an active part in Continental politics. In the following section I show how these Frankish sources present Æthelstan as pro-Carolingian in his sympathies and depict him taking a leading role in events in Francia, Flanders and Brittany.

Æthelstan and West Francia, Flanders and Brittany

The sources used for this section are the *Annales* and *Historia Remensis Ecclesiae* of Flodoard of Reims (894-966), the *Historiae* of Richer of Reims (c.995-96), Folcuin's *Gesta Abbatum Sithiensium* (c. 961-62) and the eleventh-century *La Chronique de Nantes*. Of these works, Flodoard's has proved particularly influential. He was a contemporary of Æthelstan and of the tenth-century events of Æthelstan's reign and was used as a major source by later writers. Because of the breadth of his work, he is also an important source for events in Flanders and Brittany.

Flodoard had first-hand experience of political life in West Francia during the reigns of both Charles the Simple and his son Louis IV. In their recent translation of Flodoard's *Annales*, Steven Fanning and Bernard Bachrach noted that Reims was an important political and ecclesiastical centre. As archivist of the church in Reims Flodoard had unique access to manuscripts and records and was also involved in acting as a diplomat for the church and the king of West Francia.⁵⁹ As a result he was able to provide in his *Annales* and *Historia Remensis Ecclesiae* a contemporary, or near

⁵⁹ *The Annals of Flodoard of Reims*, ed. and trans. by Steven Fanning and Bernard Bachrach, (Ontario: Broadview, 2004), pp. viii-xiii.

contemporary, account of events both in West Francia and in the neighbouring regions of Flanders and Brittany which had only recently acquired their independence from Carolingian rule. Commenting on Flodoard's reliability as a historian, Fanning and Bachrach concluded that, despite charges of bias in favour of Reims, Flodoard's work remains a useful source for the tenth century:

Flodoard's *Annales* may well be considered a useful example of the work of a medieval author who strove to get the facts right for his readers. In short, modern scholars regard him as consistently providing accurate information concerning political and ecclesiastical matters. This would appear to be the case, it is claimed, despite Flodoard's clear personal bias in favour of vindicating the rights of the church of Reims.⁶⁰

In style, Flodoard adopts an annalistic approach, listing events in a linear fashion and allowing his readers to make connections and draw their own conclusions. In general, the picture Flodoard provides of tenth-century politics on the Continent is one of constant intrigue, treachery and changing loyalties. The value of Flodoard's work was acknowledged by later writers and especially by his near contemporary, Richer of Reims, who used his works extensively as a source for the early tenth century.

Richer (c.950-1000) was the son of one of Louis IV's councillors and military leaders and grew up as part of the Carolingian political world. In his *Historiae* he states that he is writing his narrative of events at the request of his patron Gerbert of Aurillac, Archbishop of Reims. While he acknowledges his debt to Flodoard's *Annales* he claims that his text will be more rhetorical in style.⁶¹ A comparison of the texts of the two writers shows that Richer closely follows the information provided by Flodoard but embellishes his narrative with more detailed descriptions of events and characters, including their motivation and speeches, together with his own authorial comments. Eric Christiansen, critical of Richer's approach to writing history, has seen his style as over-elaborate commenting that Richer

⁶⁰ Fanning and Bachrach, *The Annals of Flodoard*, p. xiii.

⁶¹ Richer of Saint-Rémi, *Histories*, ed. and trans. by Justin Lake, 2 vols (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), I, 'Prologus', pp. 2-5.

succeeded in infusing his subject-matter with drama, rhetoric, poetic licence, and classical echoes to a greater extent than any prose historian since Paul the Deacon.⁶²

While Richer's style has tended to detract from his reputation as an historical source, his stated aim was to invest events with the same kind of dignity and pride as can be found among the Roman historians. If read in this way, Richer can be seen as replacing the annalistic recording of events adopted by Flodoard with a narrative which describes the same events but invests them with a sense of drama and national pride.

The narratives provided by both Flodoard and Richer give a similar picture of the politics of the time. They describe the break-up of the former Carolingian Empire resulting in a series of power struggles marked by the emergence of several powerful leaders, Hugh the Great and Heribert of Vermandois in West Francia, Æthelstan's cousin Arnulf in Flanders, Alan the Great in Brittany and Henry the Fowler and his son Otto in East Francia. In West Francia, Charles the Simple is depicted as granting territory to Rollo and the Vikings in Normandy to help ease Viking raids but, as a result, leaving Brittany vulnerable to further Viking expansion. To the north, Lotharingia is described as the object of repeated invasions from West or East Francia resulting in a series of changing political alignments between Hugh the Great, Otto of Saxony and Louis IV of West Francia. This is the troubled and complex background Flodoard and Richer provide for their accounts of Æthelstan and his involvement in Frankish politics.

Folcuin of Lobbes was a monk at St Bertin during the mid-tenth century where his great-uncle was bishop. He was later appointed Abbot of Lobbes and was said to have been inaugurated at Cologne before the Emperor Otto I. St Bertin was noted for its scholarship. Fulk, archbishop of Reims and abbot of St Bertin, is recorded as having chosen to send to King Alfred the monk Grimbald of St Bertin to help with Alfred's

⁶² Dudo of St Quentin, *History of the Normans*, ed. and trans. by Eric Christiansen (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), p. xx.

educational aims.⁶³ Later, Arnulf, Count of Flanders, assumed the lay abbacy of St Bertin and Æthelstan was credited with providing refuge at Bath for a group of monks who opposed the Flemish monastic reforms Arnulf introduced. Folcuin's main work was the history of the Abbots of St Bertin which he researched using documentary rather than oral evidence, which he distrusted. His work also includes accounts of events in Flanders of more general historical interest, including the return of Louis, son of Charles the Simple, from Æthelstan's court to assume the throne of West Francia.

Æthelstan and West Francia

The diagram earlier in this section, of Æthelstan's Continental connections, showed how his family links with the Carolingian royal family of West Francia dated from the time of Æthelwulf's marriage to Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald and were further extended by the marriage of his half-sister Eadgifu to Charles the Simple. Folcuin, Flodoard and Richer all recount the defeat, imprisonment and death of Charles the Simple in 923, following a rebellion among the Frankish nobles, and describe how his kingdom was then taken over by Raoul of Burgundy with the support of Heribert II of Vermandois and Hugh the Great.

Folcuin states that following Charles's imprisonment, his son and heir, Louis, was sent to England by his mother Eadgifu in order to prevent him falling into the hands of Heribert of Vermandois and his men:

Uxor vero eius regina nomine Odgeva, genere transmarina, cum et ipsa multas insecutiones fuisset sub hoc tempore passa, filium suum Hludowicum puerum ad Anglos direxit tuendum; nam et ipsum querebant interficiendum

But the queen Odgeva his [Charles's] wife, of overseas race, since she had herself too suffered much persecution at this time, sent her son Louis straight to the English for his protection; for they were seeking to kill him too.⁶⁴

⁶³Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), pp. 883-86.

⁶⁴Folcuin, 'Gesta Abbatum S. Bertini Sithiensium', *MGH*, 13 (Hannover: Hahn, 1881), p. 626.

Flodoard and Richer also mention Louis being with Æthelstan from an early age and their account is echoed in the eleventh-century *Historia Francorum Senonis*, where Louis is described as ‘exulentem et profugum’, ‘an exile and fugitive’.⁶⁵ Richer also names Herbert of Vermandois and Hugh the Great as Louis’s main enemies and explains that Louis was in England

eo quod illuc delatus infans ad avunculum Adelstanum regem fuerit, ob Hugonis et Heriberti insectationem, eo quod ipsi patrem eius comprehendissent, ac carceri trusissent.⁶⁶

for the reason that he had been taken there as a baby to his uncle King Æthelstan, on account of the hostility of Hugh and Heribert because they were the ones who had seized his father and thrust him into prison.

Louis’s birth is recorded in 920. He was, therefore only some three years old when he came with his mother to Edward’s court in 923. As Louis was Charles’s only son, these Continental sources all depict Æthelstan as the guardian and protector of the future Carolingian line in West Francia and responsible for Louis’s upbringing and education.

The next significant event recorded by Flodoard is the marriage in 926 of Hugh the Great, Duke of Francia, with Æthelstan’s half-sister Eadhild. Flodoard describes Eadhild as ‘filiam Eadwardi regis Anglorum, sororem conjugis Karoli’, ‘the daughter of Edward King of the English and sister of the wife of Charles [the Simple]’.⁶⁷ It is noticeable that Flodoard does not mention Æthelstan in connection with this marriage. Instead the emphasis, as with Eadgytha in Saxony, is on the bride’s descent from Edward and, on this occasion, her relationship with Eadgifu, wife of Charles the Simple.

⁶⁵ ‘quem rex Alstannus, avunculus ipsius, nutriebat’, ‘[Louis] whom king Æthelstan, his uncle, was bringing up’. Flodoard, ‘Historia Remensis Ecclesiae’, ed. by Martina Stratmann, *MGH 4* (Hannover: Hahn, 1998), iv, 26, p. 417. Richer, *Histories*, ii, 1, I, 158-59. The eleventh-century *Historia Francorum Senonis* also records Louis being in England with his mother, Ogiva, who had sought safety with her father, the king of the English, because of her fear of Heribert and Hugh. Unlike the tenth-century sources, there is no mention of Æthelstan. This may be the result of the concise style of the text or may reflect that by the eleventh century Frankish interest in Æthelstan had waned. ‘Historia Francorum Senonensis’, ed. by George Henry Pertz, *MGH SS 9* (Hannover: Hahn, 1851), pp. 364-69 (p. 366). Fanning and Bachrach provide a concise overview of these events, *The Annals of Flodoard*, pp. xvi-xix.

⁶⁶ Richer, *Histories*, ii, 1, I, 158-59.

⁶⁷ Flodoard, *Annales*, p. 36.

William of Malmesbury again presents a different picture. He quotes Hugh as another example of a powerful ruler wishing to be associated with Æthelstan because of the king's status among the ruling families of Europe.⁶⁸ He describes Hugh going to extraordinary lengths to achieve his aim. He enlists the help of Æthelstan's cousin Adelulf of Flanders to plead his cause and provides a range of extremely rich gifts and an abundance of priceless relics. Æthelstan is depicted as responding with gifts of equal magnificence, apparently completely won over by Hugh's strategies.⁶⁹

Both William's and Flodoard's account suggests that Hugh hoped to achieve political power and influence in Francia through marriage with Eadgifu's sister. Stenton has interpreted the marriage from Æthelstan's point of view, commenting that he also might have seen it as a convenient way of gaining support for Louis who would need the backing of a powerful figure like Hugh if he was to succeed as king.⁷⁰ In making this interpretation, Stenton may have been drawing on Flodoard's later description of the influence Hugh was said to have exerted over the young Louis in the earliest years of his reign. Foot describes the alliance as one of strategic significance for Æthelstan but queries William's interpretation on the grounds that Æthelstan had not yet achieved the military success which would have merited his being seen as high status in Europe. However, I suggest that William's description of the marriage arrangement with Hugh, and the lavish gifts he claims were exchanged, does not require independent historical evidence but is better read as part of William's overall portrayal of Æthelstan as a king of high status whose friendship was eagerly sought by others.

The Continental sources suggest that Louis remained with Æthelstan until the death of Raoul in 936 when Hugh the Great became the dominant leader in West Francia. The accounts in Flodoard and Richer of Louis's return to inherit his father's

⁶⁸ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 216-17.

⁶⁹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 135, I, 218-221.

⁷⁰ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 345.

throne emphasize the great care Æthelstan took to ensure the continuation of the Carolingian line. Flodoard in his *Annales* describes Hugh as the instigator in arranging for Louis to return to succeed to his father's throne:

Hugo comes trans mare mittit pro accersiendo ad apicem regni suscipiendum Ludowico, Karoli filio⁷¹

Count Hugh sent across the sea for the purpose of summoning Louis, Charles's son, to take up the highest power in the kingdom.

The choice of 'apicem' suggests that, in keeping with earlier Carolingian practice, Louis, as a direct descendant of Charlemagne, was to be regarded as holding the senior position among those ruling the former Carolingian territories. Flodoard gives no reason for Hugh's action but as Fanning and Bachrach have pointed out, Flodoard's later account stresses Hugh's influence over Louis until the return of Eadgifu to West Francia in 937. Flodoard then describes Louis adopting a more independent approach, alienating Hugh and helping to spark off a round of new alliances between Hugh, Heribert and Otto of Saxony.⁷²

Æthelstan's reaction to the request for Louis's return from his brother-in-law, is depicted by Flodoard as being extremely cautious:

quem rex Alstanus, avunculus ipsius, accepto prius jurejurando a Francorum legatis, in Franciam cum quibusdam episcopis et aliis fidelibus suis dirigit; cui Hugo et ceteri Francorum proceres obviam profecti, mox navim egresso, in ipsis littoreis harenis apud Bononiam, sese committunt, ut erat utrinque depactum.⁷³

King Æthelstan, his [Louis's]uncle, having first received from the Frankish legates their word on oath, sent him to Francia with certain bishops and other loyal followers; Hugh and the rest of the Frankish nobles set out to meet him and soon after he had disembarked from the ship, committed themselves to him on the sandy seashore itself at Boulogne, as had been agreed by both sides.

⁷¹ Flodoard, *Annales*, p. 63.

⁷² Flodoard, *Annales*, p. 65. Fanning and Bachrach, *The Annals of Flodoard*, pp. xvii,

⁷³ Flodoard, *Annales*, p. 63. In the *Historia Francorum Senonensis* there is again no mention of Æthelstan. The archbishop William is depicted as successfully negotiating Louis' return dealing directly with Louis' mother Ogiva, giving her hostages and promises on oath. 'Historia Francorum Senonensis', p. 366.

Flodoard portrays Æthelstan as mistrustful of Hugh and the Franks: he required oaths, sent his own escort with Louis and made sure the Franks would give immediate pledges of loyalty to Louis on his arrival. These actions depict Æthelstan as well aware that Louis was returning to rule a kingdom where the threat of treachery was ever-present as part of the changing patterns of loyalty between rival leaders.

Richer of Reims follows Flodoard's main account of events but considerably embellishes it. First he provides an account of the political background to Louis's return which can be summarised as follows:

Following the death of Raoul the Franks are divided; some want Hugh as king in West Francia, some want Louis. Hugh is afraid to accept the kingship for two main reasons: his own father (Robert, Count of Paris) had been killed because of his over-bearing manner and he therefore feared for his own safety; Louis had been taken to England to avoid any violence from Hugh and from his ally Heribert (Count of Vermandois) who had been jointly responsible for Charles the Simple's capture and imprisonment. Hugh therefore speaks in favour of restoring the Carolingian line of Charles the Simple. He piously states that Charles's imprisonment and death as king was not acceptable to God and he argues that every effort should be made to remove anything which might have offended God's majesty.⁷⁴

Richer's analysis of why Hugh did not wish to accept the kingship, and the speech he assigns to him, presents Hugh as calculating and manipulative. This is further extended by Richer's account of how Hugh planned his strategy for obtaining Louis's return. He draws on Flodoard's account of events but turns them into part of Hugh's strategy, describing Hugh directing the legates to give Æthelstan oaths guaranteeing Louis's safe passage and instructing them to say that Louis will be acknowledged as king as soon as he disembarks on the shore. In this way Richer not only presents Hugh

⁷⁴ Richer, *Histories*, ii, 1-2, I, 158-61.

as a clever politician and negotiator but implies that Hugh knows that Æthelstan will be distrustful and require firm assurances of Louis's safety.⁷⁵

The legates are described as meeting Æthelstan in York where he is attending to state affairs with Louis. This sole reference to Louis being at York with Æthelstan on state business depicts Æthelstan not only providing protection, but personally involved in preparing Louis for kingship. Richer depicts Æthelstan as distrustful of the legates, just as Hugh had anticipated. He is said to have regarded them as barbarians, implying that they could not be trusted to act in a civilized and Christian manner.⁷⁶ He first made them swear in his presence to the trustworthiness of their words which they did. Having agreed a time for formal consultation, Æthelstan sent the legates back with gifts and messages of thanks to Hugh, and promises of his friendship in return for Hugh ensuring Louis's consecration as king. Louis, however, did not return with the legates but remained with Æthelstan in England.⁷⁷

Richer's description of Æthelstan's distrust and extreme caution depicts him as very well aware of the potential political intrigues which could lie behind his brother-in-law's approach. This is further emphasized by Richer describing Æthelstan personally overseeing Louis's embarkation and taking extraordinary steps to ensure everything went to plan. The arrangements for Louis's return are described in dramatic and military style. Fires were to be lit on both sides of the channel to indicate that both parties were ready to proceed; Æthelstan is portrayed as riding to the shore with his royal horsemen (*regio equitatu*) and then dispatching his own legate, Bishop Oda, to check out that all was well before he sent Louis back. Richer recounts as follows the message Æthelstan ordered Oda to give to Hugh and the Franks:⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Richer, *Histories*, ii, 2, I, 162-63.

⁷⁶ 'barbaris non satis credens', 'not sufficiently trusting the barbarians'. Richer, *Histories*, ii, 3, I, 164-65.

⁷⁷ Richer, *Histories*, ii, 2-3, I, 162-67.

⁷⁸ Richer, *Histories*, ii, 3-4, I, 166-69.

Ludovicum sese libenter missurum mandans, si tanto illum in Galliis honore proveant quanto ipse a suis proventus est, cum illi etiam non minus id facere valeant, idque iureiurando se facturos confirmant. Quod si nolint, sese ei daturum suorum aliquod regnorum, quo contentus et suis gaudeat et alienis non sollicitetur.

Enjoining that he [Æthelstan] would willingly send Louis, on condition that they exalted him with as much honour in Gaul as he himself had been exalted by his own people, since they too were no less able to do that, and they were to confirm it by an oath. If they were unwilling to do so, he would himself give Louis some of his own kingdoms, which he would be happy with and where he would give joy to his people and not be troubled by those hostile to him.

Richer depicts Æthelstan leaving Hugh and the Franks in no doubt of his mistrust of them but he also provides a pen-picture of Æthelstan as King of England. Æthelstan can claim to be held in high honour by his people and to have at his disposal a number of kingdoms where both Louis and his subjects could be happy and enjoy peace free from the threat of enemies. This has echoes of Æthelweard's description of Britain after Brunanburh in his *Chronicon* where he claims Æthelstan established peace and plenty everywhere and no fleet could enter harbour without first receiving permission.⁷⁹ This picture of England under Æthelstan is in vivid contrast to the disarray and political turmoil Richer describes as the background to Louis's return.

Richer describes Hugh, along with the other leaders, agreeing to Æthelstan's conditions but adding one of his own, that Louis, if he became king, should not refuse to use his advice. On this basis, the oath Æthelstan sought was given and Richer now depicts Æthelstan as trusting, untroubled, and reassured by the oaths which had been given. As a result, he sends Louis back but with suitable ceremony, accompanied by his leading men and a great display of marks of honour.⁸⁰

Folcuin describes events on Louis's arrival at Boulogne in Flanders, the port chosen for Louis's return. He states that Arnulf, Count of Flanders and Æthelstan's

⁷⁹ See Chapter 1, Brunanburh.

⁸⁰ 'si rex creatus a suis consiliis non absistat', 'if, having been made king, he would not ignore his advice'. 'cum iis qui apud se potiores erant multa insignium ambitione', 'accompanied by those who were more powerful at his court with much display of marks of honour'. Richer, *Histories*, ii, 4, pp. 168-69.

cousin, was there to greet Louis and Folcuin's account suggests that Æthelstan was adroitly using his family connections for political ends, both helping to ensure Louis's safe return and at the same time securing Arnulf's allegiance for Louis as king of West Francia:⁸¹

Ipsique Francorum proceres episcopique et comites Bononiam usque civitatem cum maximo honore regem suscepturi obviam pergunt; inter quos erat Hugo dux Francorum inclitus Heribertusque deceptor fraudulentissimus, et Adalolfus markisus. Suscipientesque regem, Lugduno civitate cum honore maximo deducunt ibique eum in regem elevant et unguunt.

The leading men of the Franks themselves, and the bishops and nobles proceeded all the way to the region of Boulogne to meet and acknowledge the king with the greatest honour; among whom was Hugh the distinguished leader of the Franks and Heribert the most deceitful of fraudsters, and Adalolfus the marquis. And acknowledging the king, they escorted him with the greatest honour to the city of Laon and there they raised him to the position of king and anointed him.

Folcuin, unlike Flodoard and Richer, disassociates Hugh from Heribert's crimes, describing Hugh as *inclitus*, distinguished, and branding Heribert as a double deceiver who tricked and imprisoned Charles the Simple and intended to do the same to Louis. In this he perhaps reveals his personal belief that in seeking Louis's return Hugh was showing genuine loyalty to the Carolingian cause.

All three historians take a pro-Carolingian approach in their narratives and all three depict Æthelstan as the king who provided a place of safety for Louis, prepared him for kingship and took great care to ensure his safe return as the last heir to Carolingian rule in West Francia. Their positive picture of Æthelstan is paralleled by their representations of the threats to Louis as king posed later by the machinations and changing allegiances of Heribert, Hugh and Otto of Saxony. Their narratives depict Æthelstan as continuing to be concerned for Louis and events in Francia and in the last year of his reign Æthelstan is described as taking military action to support Louis in his claim to the traditionally Carolingian region of Lotharingia.

⁸¹ Adelulf's death is recorded in 933 and if Folcuin's version is to stand, then for Adelulf we must read Arnulf. Folcuin, 'Gesta Abbatum S. Bertini Sithiensium', p. 626.

Flodoard and Richer record that in 939 Arnulf of Flanders acted for Louis with Otto in order to reach an agreement on Lotharingia. At the same time, Æthelstan sent a fleet to support Louis. Richer describes the fleet as carrying troops to fight against those living on the coast who were causing Louis trouble but, as no-one resisted them and Louis had gone to Germany, the fleet returned home. Flodoard gives a different picture. He claims that the fleet failed to carry out the purpose for which it had been sent and turned to raiding on the Flemish coast instead. Very few details are provided but the overall effect is to depict Æthelstan as sufficiently involved in Continental politics to justify his taking military action to oppose his brother-in-law Otto of Saxony in support of his nephew Louis as the Carolingian ruler of Lotharingia and West Francia.

After 939, Arnulf of Flanders is depicted by Flodoard and Richer as allying himself more and more with Otto and against Louis. No reason is given for this change of allegiance. Rosamond McKitterick has interpreted the hostile action of Æthelstan's fleet as the cause.⁸² Alternatively, Arnulf's action may merely reflect his political judgement that Otto's growing power made alliance with him more advantageous than continuing to support Louis. It is also possible that Arnulf's change of allegiance was a direct result of the death of Æthelstan in 939/40. This may have severed the family connection between Wessex and Flanders which the sources depict as close and effective during Æthelstan's lifetime.

Æthelstan and Flanders

McKitterick traces the development of Flanders as a separate territorial region and attributes this largely to the actions of King Alfred's son-in-law, Baldwin II. She comments that Flanders as a region was different from the rest of Francia in retaining much of its original Germanic character and language.⁸³ Although Flodoard depicts Baldwin II as generally supportive of Charles the Simple, McKitterick notes that by the

⁸² McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians*, p. 251.

⁸³ McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians*, p. 249.

time of Baldwin's death in 918 Carolingian royal influence was no longer evident in the region.⁸⁴ Arnulf became Count of all Flanders in 933 on the death of Adelulf, his elder brother and Flodoard portrays him as playing an active role in the complex pattern of changing allegiances which existed between Louis, Otto, Hugh the Great and Heribert II of Vermandois. At the same time Arnulf is shown seeking to extend his own territory to the south and coming into conflict with the Counts of Monteuil and Ponthieu and with the Northmen of Rouen.⁸⁵

The Continental sources present Æthelstan's contacts with his Flemish cousins as part of formal negotiations or direct political action, although it is also possible to see them as based on family loyalty. Mention was made above of Hugh the Great using Æthelstan's cousin Adelulf to help him make a marriage agreement with Æthelstan's half-sister Eadhild, and Æthelstan ensuring Arnulf's support for Louis's return to Francia. Both actions depict Æthelstan as being on close terms with his cousins. The Continental sources also depict Æthelstan helping Arnulf in his efforts to secure Flanders' southern boundaries. Both Flodoard and Richer state that in 939 Arnulf captured the fortress at Montreuil through the act of a traitor and sent the wife and children of Hélouin, the Count of Montreuil, as hostages to Æthelstan for safe keeping. Shortly afterwards they record that Hélouin recaptured the fortress 'having gathered a not inconsiderable military force of Northmen'.⁸⁶ It is difficult to know how to interpret this portrayal of Æthelstan's willingness to support Arnulf by holding hostages for him. It may reflect family loyalty. Alternatively Æthelstan could be seen as holding the hostages as a way of ensuring a future peace agreement between Arnulf and Hélouin so helping protect Louis against possible conflict on his western boundaries. Æthelstan's action could also be interpreted as self-interest. The reference to Hélouin returning with

⁸⁴ McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians*, pp. 250-51.

⁸⁵ For a summary of Arnulf as Count of Flanders see Fanning and Bachrach, *The Annals of Flodoard*, pp. xx-xxii.

⁸⁶ 'collecta Nordmannorum non modica manu'. Flodoard, *Annales*, p. 72.

a force of Northmen suggests that Viking invasion into the coastal regions of Ponthieu and Montreuil was seen as a distinct possibility, posing a threat not only to Flanders and West Francia but also providing a base for future invasions of England. Whichever interpretation is preferred, they all depict Æthelstan able and willing to influence events across the Channel.

Flodoard portrays Arnulf as initially supporting Louis as king. His entries for 938 and following describe Arnulf and Louis spending time together, record Arnulf negotiating a truce between Louis, Hugh the Great and Heribert, and speak of an agreement between Louis and Otto which was brokered by Arnulf.⁸⁷ As Arnulf was descended from Charles the Bald through his grandmother, Judith, this account of his support for Louis could be interpreted as loyalty towards his own Carolingian relatives. Alternatively, as mentioned above, it could be seen as reflecting Æthelstan's personal influence with his cousin.

As noted above, McKitterick interpreted the action of Æthelstan's fleet raiding the Flanders coast in 939, as resulting in Arnulf withdrawing his support for Louis and ending the friendship between the ruling families of Flanders and Wessex. She cites in support of this the lack of evidence of continuing family contact. However, textual evidence exists of continuing contact between Flanders and England, especially at an ecclesiastical level. A letter sent in 961 by Count Arnulf II to Dunstan, then Archbishop of Canterbury, speaks of the tradition of friendship between the rulers of Flanders and England and in the early eleventh century Adelard of Ghent writes to Elfege, Archbishop of Canterbury, about the *Vita Dunstani* he had written at Elfege's request.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Flodoard, *Annales*, pp.71-72.

⁸⁸ *Memorials of Saint Dunstan*, ed. by William Stubbs (London: Longman, 1874), pp. 359-61. 'Adelard, 'Epistola Aderladi ad Elfegum Archiepiscopum de *Vita Sancti Dunstani* Auctore Adelardo', in *Memorials of Saint Dunstan*, ed. by Stubbs, pp. 53-68. An account of Dunstan's family and royal court connections with Æthelstan can be found in 'Vita Sancti Dustani: Auctore B.', in *Memorials of Saint Dunstan*, ed. by Stubbs, pp. 3-52. For commentary on Æthelstan's links with Dunstan see Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 22, 107-09.

Four other letters survive from 980-991, written to archbishops of Canterbury from abbots of Flemish monasteries with close links to the Counts of Flanders. Steven Vanderputten points out that these

not only document the increasing exchanges between England and Flanders in the late tenth century, but also suggest liaisons that had clearly been operative for several years, if not decades.⁸⁹

Whatever the level and nature of later links between England and Flanders, the narratives of Folcuin, Flodoard and Richer depict Æthelstan in close and friendly contact with Arnulf and directly involved in continental politics through his support for Louis. I have suggested above that Æthelstan may have secured Arnulf's loyalty in neighbouring Flanders as part of his strategy for protecting Louis's position as king of West Francia. I argue below that the accounts of his relationship with the family of Alan the Great and his support for the return of Alan Twistedbeard to Brittany can also be interpreted as depicting Æthelstan ensuring a ruler friendly to Louis on Francia's southern borders.

Æthelstan and Brittany

Linguistic evidence suggests that the Bretons were mostly of non-Frankish origins and that West Brittany was settled by peoples from Wales and Cornwall, although the details and dates of settlement are unclear.⁹⁰ McKitterick has noted that Armorica or Brittany had strong Carolingian links in the ninth and tenth centuries and she credited Louis the Pious with helping to unite the western and eastern parts of Brittany by establishing Nominoe c. 831 as his nominated ruler.⁹¹ However, Version A

⁸⁹ Steven Vanderputten, 'Canterbury and Flanders in the Late Tenth Century', *ASE*, 35 (2006), 219-244 (p. 234) and Appendix, pp. 235-44. Continuing trade links are noted by David Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 53. For a more detailed analysis of links between England and Flanders see Veronica Ortenberg, *The English Church and the Continent in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries: Cultural, Spiritual and Artistic Exchanges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 23-40.

⁹⁰ McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians*, pp. 228, 241.

⁹¹ McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians*, p. 242.

of the *ASC* records in 884/85 that Charles the Fat succeeded to all the West Kingdom of Francia except for Brittany suggesting that the direct Carolingian links had ended. Later *Chronicle* references record incursions by the northmen, the Bretons defeating a raiding-army which had moved from the Seine to St Lô (890),⁹² and the Vikings using Brittany as a base for future raids on England.⁹³

Flodoard and Richer are the main Continental sources on Brittany together with the eleventh-century *Chronique de Nantes*. As noted in the chapter on the Anglo-Norman texts, close ecclesiastical links seem to have existed between Wessex and Brittany from at least the time of King Alfred and the Continental sources name England as a place of safety for Bretons escaping from Viking raids.⁹⁴ Among those said by Flodoard to have fled to England were the daughter of Alan the Great together with her husband Mathedoi Count of Poher, and her son the future Alan Twistedbeard. *La Chronique de Nantes* claims that Æthelstan, either before he was king or early in his reign, stood as godfather to Alan Twistedbeard thereby forming a link of Christian kinship with the future leader of the Bretons:

Fugit autem tunc temporis Mathuedoi, comes de Poher, ad regem Anglorum Adelstanum cum ingenti multitudine Britonum, ducens secum filium suum, nomine Alanum, qui postea cognominatus est Barbatorta, quem Alanum ex filia Alani Magni, Britonum ducis, genuerat, et quem ipse rex Angliae Adelstannus jam prius ex lavacro sancto susceperat. Ipse rex pro familiaritate et amicitia hujus regenerationis magnam in eo fidem habebat.⁹⁵

There fled, however, at this time, to the king of the English, Mathedoi, Count of Poher with a very great number of Bretons, taking with him his son, named Alan, who afterwards was given the nickname Twistedbeard. This Alan had been born of the daughter of Alan the Great, Duke of the Bretons, and the king of England himself, had earlier stood as godfather at his baptism (raised him from the sacred font). The king himself because of the kinship and friendship arising from this baptism had great faith in him.

⁹² *ASC* A, 890.

⁹³ *ASC* Version D records for 910 that a great raiding ship-army came from Brittany and raided along the Severn. Version A for 918 (914) and Version D for 915 (914) record a great raiding army from Brittany with jarls Ohtor and Hroald.

⁹⁴ Flodoard, *Annales*, p. 63.

⁹⁵ *La Chronique de Nantes*, ed. by René Merlet (Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1896), pp. 82-83.

La Chronique de Nantes records that Alan was brought up at Æthelstan's court. He is described as being physically strong, brave and daring and an excellent huntsman, indicating that his education included the manly skills expected of those nobly born.⁹⁶ In 936, the year of Louis' return to Francia, Alan Twistedbeard is said to have returned to Brittany with Æthelstan's support via Dol and to have established himself as Duke of the Bretons in his family's former territories of Vannes and Nantes.⁹⁷

Congregata navium parvitate, cum his Brittanis, qui adhuc superstites erant, venit per licentiam regis revisere Britanniam.

A small fleet having been assembled, [Alan] along with those Bretons who were still with him, came with the permission of the king back to Brittany.⁹⁸

La Chronicle de Nantes describes the return of Alan Twistedbeard as being 'per licentiam regis', 'with the king's permission'; Flodoard uses the phrase 'Alstani regis praesidio', 'with the king's protection', implying that Æthelstan had a more active, and possibly military, involvement.⁹⁹ In both texts Æthelstan is depicted as a central figure ensuring Alan's safe return. The descriptions of Æthelstan's direct involvement depict him ensuring that Brittany, a close neighbour of West Francia, was governed by a ruler with whom he had close personal links. In this way, he could hope to exercise some influence in ensuring that Brittany remained on friendly terms with Louis.¹⁰⁰

I have argued that the Continental sources on West Francia, Flanders and Brittany considered above, depict Æthelstan taking an active role in enabling Louis to inherit his father's throne. I have also argued that they support a view of Æthelstan ensuring, through his family and kinship links, that Louis had friendly neighbouring

⁹⁶ *La Chronique de Nantes*, p. 88.

⁹⁷ *La Chronique de Nantes*, pp. 88-89. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 348. For links between Dol and Wessex see Chapter 2, Section 3, William of Malmesbury.

⁹⁸ *La Chronique de Nantes*, pp. 88-89.

⁹⁹ Flodoard, *Annales*, p. 63.

¹⁰⁰ Alan Twistedbeard and his nobles are said to have become loyal allies of Louis IV. Michael Jones, 'The Capetians and Brittany', in *Between France and England: Politics, Power and Society in Late Medieval Brittany*, ed. by Michael Jones (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum Reprints, 2003), p.5.

territories to the west and south in Flanders and Brittany. What influence, if any, Æthelstan had with Otto in the territories north and east is unclear although the textual evidence is that his cousin Arnulf acted as mediator between Louis and Otto at least until Æthelstan's death in 939. To these accounts can be added the tenth-century narrative of Æthelstan's links with Rollo and the Vikings of Normandy written by Dudo of St Quentin. Dudo also includes an account of Louis's return to West Francia and Alan's to Brittany but from a different perspective from the versions considered above.

Æthelstan and Normandy

Dudo of St Quentin wrote his *De Moribus et Actis Primorum Normanniae Ducum* sometime between 996 and 1020 at the request of his patrons, Richard I and Richard II, Dukes of Normandy. His work is a dynastic history in praise of the deeds of the Dukes of Normandy. His main source for this was a family member, Count Rodulf Ivry, the stepson of William Longsword. Elisabeth Van Houts describes the *De Moribus* as 'very much a work of propaganda written to legitimize the viking settlement' and written in a style designed to show off Dudo's 'knowledge of difficult and obscure words'.¹⁰¹ His narrative is openly eulogistic and includes extravagant praise for the roles and exploits of the Viking leader Hasting, Rollo founder of the Norman dynasty, and his descendants William Longsword and Richard I. Although Dudo was himself from Francia, he depicts the Normans throughout as superior in every way to the Franks who are forced to accede territory and status to the northern newcomers and former pagans.¹⁰²

Eric Christiansen, in his translation of Dudo's work, has acknowledged that Dudo did not have a fund of written sources he could use as a basis for his work but he has identified a long list of literary influences. These include Vergil, John Scotus

¹⁰¹ *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, ed. and trans. by Elisabeth Van Houts, Oxford Medieval Texts, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992-95), I, pp. xx, xxxv, lix.

¹⁰² Dudo, *History of the Normans*, ed. by Eric Christiansen, pp. xiii-xv.

Eriugena, Boethius, Venantius Fortunatus, Martianus Capella, Fulgentius and various works of hagiography. Christiansen argued that, in narrating the lives of Hasting, Rollo, William Longsword and Richard I, Dudo was attempting an original piece of literary composition in which he portrayed the four men as ‘a sequence of four interwoven “studies” of a tyrant, a redeemer, a martyr, and a confessor’.¹⁰³ Dudo’s narrative often includes episodes which read like saga material, for example the stories of Rollo’s exile and viking adventures, his prophetic dream and its realisation, and his friendship and military alliance with King Æthelstan.

Dudo, whether he was drawing directly on saga or on family traditions, makes it clear that his work was intended to support as legitimate the dynastic and territorial claims of the Dukes of Normandy.¹⁰⁴ Given the obvious literary and political character of the work, Christiansen dismisses Dudo on the grounds that he is not a serious source of historical information:

Anachronism, mistaken identity, and misinformation are woven into the narrative, quite apart from political partisanship, rhetorical exaggeration, and hearty plagiarism; all the faults of a great historian, but none of the virtues of a monkish chronicler. Dudo is not a reliable source for the early history of the Normans; nor did he know of any; nor do we.¹⁰⁵

However, Dudo’s work proved very popular. Some fourteen manuscripts survive and his narrative was continued and passed down by William of Jumièges in the eleventh century and by Robert of Torigni and Maistre Wace in the twelfth century.

William was a monk at the abbey of Jumièges refounded during the reign of William Longsword. His *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* drew extensively on Dudo’s work to which he added an account of the achievements of the Dukes Richard I, Richard II and William II. His account of the origins of the Normans differs from Dudo’s in suggesting their descent from Ragnarr Loðbrók, reflecting Scandinavian

¹⁰³ Dudo, *History of the Normans*, ed. by Eric Christiansen, pp. xxi-xxiii.

¹⁰⁴ Dudo, *History of the Normans*, ed. by Eric Christiansen, p. xxii. Emily Albu, *The Normans in their Histories: Propaganda, Myth and Subversion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Dudo, *History of the Normans*, ed. by Eric Christiansen, p. xv.

sources.¹⁰⁶ His work proved very popular. Some forty seven manuscripts survive, the earliest being from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Robert of Torigni re-edited the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* restoring to the text several sections from Dudo which William had omitted and adding an account of the reign of Henry I and a short history of Le Bec. The autograph manuscript of his work survives from c. 1139. Initially Prior at Le Bec, Robert became Abbot at Mont-St-Michel and there met with Henry of Huntingdon who stayed at Mont-St-Michel on his way to Rome. He is said to have introduced Henry to the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth and it is likely that this contact helped to make Robert's version of the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* known in England.¹⁰⁷ In his book on Henry I, Robert writes that he is thinking of including a *Vita* of St Margaret to show that her daughter, Queen Matilda II, was of Anglo-Saxon royal descent. In this he seems to reflect the wish of the Norman kings of England to be seen as natural successors to the English throne.¹⁰⁸ This aspect is illustrated more clearly in the *Roman de Rou* of Maistre Wace.

A cleric, born in Jersey, Wace came from a family whose ancestors may have served in the ducal royal household. The verse chronicle of the *Roman de Rou* was possibly commissioned by Henry II and intended to justify the right of the Norman kings to rule in England, something which was still being challenged by some English nobles.¹⁰⁹ For his sources up to the time of William the Conqueror, Wace drew heavily on Dudo and William of Jumièges. He has been described as, 'a good poet and an excellent storyteller', 'a historian and a moralist', who used dramatic and rhetorical techniques to good effect in portraying people and events and a writer whose use of the French vernacular created a wider audience for his work on both sides of the channel

¹⁰⁶ *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, ed. by Van Houts, I, p. xxxvii.

¹⁰⁷ See Henry of Huntingdon in Chapter 2, 'The Anglo-Norman Historians', Section 1.

¹⁰⁸ *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, ed. by Van Houts, I, pp. lxxxvii-lxxxviii, II, viii, 10, pp. 216-17.

¹⁰⁹ Glyn S. Burgess, *The History of the Norman People: Wace's 'Roman de Rou'* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. xi, xvi-xvii.

and helped to develop the concept of Romance as a vehicle for dynastic history.¹¹⁰ The following Table based on the work of Van Houts shows how Wace, William of Jumièges and Robert of Torigni used Dudo's earlier text to depict Æthelstan's involvement in Continental events. These fall into two groups: those relating to Æthelstan and Rollo and those relating to Æthelstan and William Longsword.

¹¹⁰ Burgess, *The History of the Norman People*, pp. xxxi, xxxiii-xxxiv.

Table 12. Comparative analysis of the later use of Dudo's texts¹¹¹

Dudo of St Quentin	William of Jumièges	Robert of Torigni	Maistre Wace
1. Dream directs Rollo to England. The English resist him and his men.	Rollo sails to England. He defeats the English.	✓	✓
2. Rollo sends men to Æthelstan to request a truce and promises to leave for Francia in the Spring.	Æthelstan sues for peace.	✓	✓
3. Æthelstan meets Rollo and offers lasting friendship. They pledge to help each other as needed and exchange gifts.	Firm friendship pact. No mention of helping each other or of gifts.	✓	✓
4. Æthelstan sends supplies and men to Rollo in Walcheren.	Support for Danes gathering an army.	✓	✓
5. Rollo sends Æthelstan gifts and a pledge of service.		✓	
6. Æthelstan asks Rollo for help against English rebels; Rollo leaves the siege of Paris to give support.	✓	✓	✓
7. Æthelstan promises him half his kingdom and half his possessions in thanks.			Æthelstan offers Rollo half his kingdom.
8. The English ask Rollo to reconcile them to Æthelstan. Both take hostages.	Rollo takes hostages.	Rollo takes hostages.	Rollo asked by the English to reconcile them with Æthelstan.
9. Rollo refuses the offer of half the kingdom in order to return to Francia; Æthelstan's offer to go with him is refused.	Rollo given rich gifts.	Rollo given rich gifts.	Rollo refuses Æthelstan's offer of half his kingdom.
10. Rollo dies and his son William Longsword inherits. William defeats the Bretons and Alan flees to Æthelstan.	✓	✓	Alan rebels. Alan goes to Æthelstan who brings about a reconciliation.
11. At Æthelstan's request William arranges for Louis to return to Francia and Alan to Brittany.	Return of Louis and Alan achieved with the support of Hugh the Great.	✓	Return of Louis and Alan achieved with the support of Hugh the Great.

¹¹¹ A tick indicates that Dudo's text is used virtually verbatim.

All four authors depict Æthelstan as the one who initiates a pact of friendship with Rollo. As a result, both men assist each other in their military actions, Æthelstan sending supplies and men to the Continent and Rollo returning in person to England to help Æthelstan defeat a rebellion. The reference to Rollo leaving the siege of Paris to help Æthelstan dates the first group of details to the reign of Alfred. As a result Van Houts interprets the name Æthelstan as referring to Guthrum/Æthelstan of East Anglia. While Dudo may well have confused the two names, his description of the Æthelstan who forges a friendship with Rollo does not fit Guthrum but does reflect the designations used in the tenth century of Æthelstan son of Edward the Elder:

Eo namque tempore rex Anglorum christianissimus, nomine Alstemus, omnium bonorum titulis exornatus, sacrosanctæ Ecclesiæ prædignus advocatus, habenas regni Anglorum moderabatur piissimus.¹¹²

For at that time a most Christian king of the English, named Æthelstan, adorned with titles of all kinds of goodness, an outstandingly worthy advocate of most holy Church, was with great piety guiding the reins of the kingdom of the English.

Æthelstan is depicted throughout Dudo's work as kindly, generous and a very Christian king. He repeatedly urges Rollo to be baptized but without success. More importantly, from a Norman perspective, Æthelstan's gratitude to Rollo for helping to put down the English rebellion results in him offering Rollo half his kingdom and half his wealth as a reward. Rollo refuses these as he is set on achieving the much greater fame in Francia promised to him in two separate dreams (or *visios*). Although written before the Norman invasion of 1066, the idea that their ancestor Rollo could have controlled half the English kingdom must have seemed prophetic to the later Dukes of Normandy.¹¹³

Compared with Rollo, Æthelstan is portrayed as rather gentle and ineffective. Rollo repeatedly takes the initiative and makes decisions for them both. His dominance is so strong that Æthelstan is prepared to accompany him back to Francia to assist him

¹¹² Dudo of St Quentin, *De Moribus et Actis Primorum Normanniae Ducum*, ed. by Jules Lair, La Société des Antiquaires de Normandie (Caen: F. Le Blanc-Hardel, 1865), 7, p. 147.

¹¹³ Albu, *The Normans in their Histories*, p. 60.

in his siege of Paris. Rollo refuses his offer reminding him that, as a king, his duty lay in England.¹¹⁴ This depiction of Æthelstan as well-disposed, but dependent on outside help and lacking a proper awareness of his kingly role, is in direct contrast to the image of him created by the tenth-century English texts and the Continental texts of Flodoard and Richer.¹¹⁵ From a Norman perspective it serves to enhance their superiority and that of Rollo who, through his sense of royal duty, his honourable behaviour and his military prowess, is made to appear more like a king than Æthelstan.

The friendship Æthelstan is said to have established with Rollo is extended also to Rollo's son, William Longsword. Like his father, William is portrayed as the dominant partner. In Dudo's text, William Longsword as Duke of Normandy is said to be the leader of the Viking forces responsible for the Bretons seeking safety overseas in England. As a result, he is described as the only one who can agree their return. Æthelstan is depicted as recognizing William's good qualities and, being well-disposed towards him, appeals to him for help to secure the return of Alan Twistedbeard to Brittany and Louis to Francia. Dudo portrays William Longsword as willing to agree to Æthelstan's request but only because of Æthelstan's long and close friendship with William's father, Rollo.

Two main themes emerge in Dudo's version of the return of Louis and Alan to positions of power. It is William Longsword, not Æthelstan, who has the greater political influence on the Continent. Æthelstan's family connections with Charles the Simple and Hugh the Great are irrelevant in securing the return of both Louis and Alan and Dudo does not even mention them. Secondly, Æthelstan's influence with William derives solely from his earlier friendship with William's father, Rollo. I suggest that this emphasis on the importance of Anglo-Saxon-Normandy friendship reflects the

¹¹⁴ Dudo, *De Moribus et Actis Primorum Normanniae Ducum*, ed. by Jules Lair, 19, p. 160.

¹¹⁵ In Chapter 4 on the Scandinavian Tradition, Æthelstan is also depicted as dependent on Viking help and generous in rewarding it.

contemporary desire of the Dukes of Normandy to maintain a family link with Anglo-Saxon royalty. King Æthelred of England had recently married Emma, sister of Richard II, Dudo's main patron. Dudo's depiction of William providing help and support for Æthelstan was being partly relived as he wrote his work by Richard's support for Æthelred and his sons in exile in Normandy. The texts of William of Jumièges, Robert of Torigini and Maistre Wace build on Dudo's work and carry his version of tenth-century events forward into the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In this way Dudo's narrative account of Æthelstan and his links with Rollo and William Longsword became an established part of Norman history.

The popularity of the works of Dudo, William of Jumièges, Robert of Torigini and Maistre Wace may indicate that they were seen as fulfilling a useful political function. Mention has already been made of the Norman kings' desire to be seen as legitimate successors to the English throne in continuity with the earlier Anglo-Saxon kings of England.¹¹⁶ By including Æthelstan offering Rollo half his kingdom, Dudo and Wace can be seen as providing the first Anglo-Saxon endorsement of the right of the Dukes of Normandy to rule England.¹¹⁷ While neither writer develops the idea that Rollo ruled in England, Dudo describes Rollo as having helped Æthelstan subjugate England in the face of rebellion and Wace portrays Rollo handing back the land to Æthelstan as if he had already possessed it.¹¹⁸ William of Jumièges and Robert of Torigini omit all reference to Æthelstan's offer to Rollo's of half his kingdom. As a result their texts stress that William of Normandy's claim to rule England was as Edward the Confessor's legitimate heir.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ This is considered in more detail in Chapter 2 on the Anglo-Norman Texts.

¹¹⁷ As will be seen in Chapter 4 on the Scandinavian Tradition, Saxo Grammaticus also depicts Æthelstan as ready to hand his kingdom over to be ruled by Hákon of Norway.

¹¹⁸ Dudo, *De Moribus et Actis Primorum Normanniae Ducum*, ed. by Jules Lair, 20, p. 160. Wace, *The Roman de Rou*, ed., by A. J. Holden, trans. by Glyn S. Burgess (St Helier: Société Jersiaise, 2002), ii, 651-54, 661-62, pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁹ For more detailed discussion of these aspects see Nick Webber, 'England and the Norman Myth', in Barrow, *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters*, pp. 211-228 (pp. 218-219).

Conclusion

Written from different national, regional and dynastic perspectives, the Continental sources illustrate how concentration on only one, or one group of texts, provides a picture of people and events which is very specific to a particular time and political scene. For example, if the monastic records of St Gallen were our only source, we would know of Æthelstan only as King of England and a generous benefactor of the German monasteries, whose visiting representatives ensured his name was duly inscribed in their *Libri Vitae*. If we only had the historical text of Widukind, we would know the name of Æthelstan only as the brother of Otto's queen, Eadgytha. From Hrotsvit, we would learn that Eadgytha's brother, unnamed, was a low-born son of King Edward of England, who, flattered by the request from Henry the Fowler for a bride for his son Otto, sent two of his sisters to Saxony so Otto could choose one as his wife.

These low-key depictions of Æthelstan are in sharp contrast to the regional texts of West Francia, Flanders and Brittany. They provide a very positive picture of Æthelstan, depicting him as the dominant agent in achieving the accession of his nephew, Louis, as king in West Francia, and ensuring rulers friendly to Louis in the neighbouring regions of Flanders and Brittany. The dynastic texts of the Dukes of Normandy also refer to Æthelstan's role in these events but depict him as secondary and dependent for his success on his relationship with William Longsword, Duke of Normandy and son of Rollo.

From this comparative summary it becomes clear that the different regions developed and perpetuated very different memories of Æthelstan. The Continental texts were written shortly after the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire and reflect the desire of the newly established kingdoms in East and West Francia and Normandy to have their separate identities recognized and respected through their own histories. In Saxony Æthelstan is depicted as no rival for Otto whose own birth gives him a much

higher status as king of the Old Saxons. Similarly, Dudo's portrayal of Æthelstan as a well-disposed but rather ineffectual king emphasizes the strategic power of William Longsword in deciding who shall be the future ruler in West Francia. The Frankish texts depict Æthelstan as a strong and loyal guardian of the rights of the Carolingian kings, bringing Louis up in safety at his court and ensuring his triumphant return to become king of West Francia. In each case their depictions of Æthelstan reflect their different historical contexts and political needs. Each narrative tells its own story and gives no evidence of knowing the others'.

Taken together, the Continental sources suggest that they are not so much about what really happened but about what their writers and their patrons believed, or wanted others to believe, happened. This does not require some definitive judgement to be made as to who is right and who is wrong,¹²⁰ rather it illustrates the creative nature of written records and literary narratives about the past and the multi-dimensional character of 'historical reality'.¹²¹ This is not to say that the Continental texts have no basis in reality but that writers have mediated events in line with their own aims and purposes.

The Continental sources also provide a number of depictions of Æthelstan which are absent in the surviving tenth-century English sources and only partially acknowledged in the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman texts. Hrotsvit is the earliest source we have on Æthelstan's lowly birth; the monastic records provide the only surviving account of Æthelstan's generosity to the German monasteries; from Folcuin comes the earliest and most straightforward account of Edwin's death at sea; Flodoard is the main source for Æthelstan's role in Louis's restoration to the throne of West Francia and the

¹²⁰ Otter has pointed out the fundamental problem today, as before, of deciding how a text can represent a past which cannot be directly accessed. 'Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing, in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, p. 114.

¹²¹ Robert M. Stein, 'Literary Criticism and the Evidence for History', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, pp. 80-82.

return to Brittany of Alan Twistedbeard. The detailed account of Æthelstan's friendship and alliance with Rollo is unique to Dudo but, as will be seen in the chapter on the Scandinavian Tradition, his account of Æthelstan's ability to relate well to Viking leaders has parallels in *Egils saga*.

Only by bringing the Continental sources together is it possible for the reader to identify the range of authorial voices and the contrasting representations of Æthelstan's status and involvement in Continental politics. This dilemma is again very evident in the following chapter on the Scandinavian Tradition. There I show that significantly different depictions of Æthelstan are found in the Latin and the vernacular texts, reflecting authorial choices and interpretations of their sources and resulting in separate ecclesiastical, nationalistic and traditional ways of remembering Æthelstan.

Chapter Four

Æthelstan in the Scandinavian Tradition

Introduction

This Chapter focuses on how Æthelstan is depicted in the Old Icelandic/Norse texts from Norway, and in the Latin texts from Norway and Denmark, from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The texts are drawn from a range of genres—histories, kings’ sagas, family sagas and skaldic poetry. The texts indicate the existence of a number of traditions about Æthelstan as king of England, as military leader and as foster-father of Hákon, son of Haraldr hárfagri of Norway. As my analysis will show, the selection and presentation of content on Æthelstan in the different texts illustrate the differing contexts, purposes, intended audiences and national viewpoints of their authors. Despite these variations there is also much common material and I suggest that the range of texts and their content have ensured Æthelstan as Anglo-Saxon king of England a unique place within the Scandinavian tradition. The Table below lists the main primary texts used for this chapter.

Table 13. Main Primary Sources on Æthelstan in the Scandinavian Tradition

TITLE	ASCRIBED AUTHOR	AREA OF ORIGIN	CONJECTURED DATE OF COMPOSITION ¹
<i>Bersqglisvísur</i>	Sigvatr	Norway	c.1038
<i>Íslendingadrápa</i>	Haukr Valdísarson	Iceland	fl. twelfth century
<i>Historia Norwegie</i>		Norway?	1150-1220
<i>Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium</i>	Theodoricus Monachus	Region of Trondheim?	1177-1188
<i>Nóregs konungatal</i>		Iceland	c.1190
<i>Gesta Danorum</i>	Saxo Grammaticus	Roskilde, Denmark	c.1185-1200
<i>Ágrip</i>		Region of Trondheim?	c.1190?
<i>Fagrskinna</i>		Region of Trondheim?	early 1200s
<i>Heimskringla</i>	Snorri Sturluson	Iceland	1220-1230s
<i>Egils saga</i>	Snorri Sturluson?	Icelandic?	1220-1230

¹ See Theodore M. Andersson, ‘Kings’ Sagas’, in *Old Norse Icelandic Literature*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 197-238.

It is immediately apparent that the written texts post-date the events to which they refer by at least a century, and most by two centuries or more. This has raised much scholarly discussion about the historiography of the Old Icelandic/Norse skaldic poems and saga narratives and the extent to which they can be said to provide an accurate account of people and events.² However, this thesis is not about the historical reliability of the sources but about the narratives they provide. Although the work of later copyists and scholars may have altered some of what was originally written, these texts have endured as records of how their authors wished the past to be remembered.

The Table below gives the traditional genre classifications of the texts. In addition, my own analysis has led me to identify the use of Latin (L) or the vernacular (V) as another significant classification in terms of how Æthelstan is depicted. For example, the Old Icelandic/Norse vernacular texts reflect traditions which are favourable to Æthelstan and depict him as a good king who made a positive contribution to the history of Norway. Of the Latin texts, those from Norway make only brief reference to Æthelstan while Saxo Grammaticus, writing from a Danish perspective, provides a more detailed version of events which is hostile both to Norway and to Æthelstan.

² The following provided useful overviews of the different theories on saga and oral tradition: Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic literature*, pp. 122-35. Joseph Harris, 'Saga as Historical Novel', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by John Lindow and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 187-219. Diana Whaley, 'A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, pp. 161-202. Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 101-118. Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature with Special Reference to its Representation of Reality', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. by Quinn and others, pp. 27-47. Gareth Williams, 'Hákon Aðalsteins fóstri: Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Kingship in Tenth-Century Norway', in *The North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Liszka and Walker, pp. 108-26.

Table 14. Traditional Genre Classifications of the Source Texts

<i>Histories (L & V)</i>	<i>Kings' sagas (V)</i>	<i>Family sagas (V)</i>	<i>Skaldic Poetry (V)</i>
<i>Historia Norwegie (L)</i>	<i>Fagrskinna</i>	<i>Egils saga</i>	<i>Bersöglisvísur</i>
<i>Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium (L)</i>	<i>Heimskringla</i>		<i>Íslendingadrápa</i>
<i>Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium (V)</i>	<i>Orkneyinga saga</i>		<i>Nóregs konungatal</i>
<i>Gesta Danorum (L)</i>			

This chapter is in three sections. The first analyses how Æthelstan is depicted in the Old Icelandic/Norse saga texts and skaldic verse. The second concentrates on his depiction in the Latin and vernacular synoptic histories from Norway. Each of these sections contains an overview of its primary sources and a textual analysis structured around the main events in which Æthelstan is depicted as playing a part:

Æthelstan's fostering of Hákon, son of Haraldr hárfagri, king of Norway

Æthelstan's involvement in Hákon's return to Norway to take the throne

Æthelstan's dealings with Eiríkr blóðøx, Hákon's elder brother

Æthelstan's actions as king and military leader.

The third section of the chapter takes the form of a study of Saxo Grammaticus. As a writer he has been relatively ignored in British scholarship but his depiction of Æthelstan forms a key part of his account of the whole history of the relationships between England and Denmark.

Section One: Æthelstan in Old Icelandic/Norse Saga and Skaldic Verse

The oral origin of skaldic verse and saga has resulted in the written texts being generally regarded as unacceptable as historical sources. However, as noted in the thesis Introduction, Williams has argued for a more cautious approach, characterising as

‘overly simplistic’ the view that because the sagas cannot be assumed to be historically accurate their historical information should be discounted:³

The fact that a source is not reliable does not necessarily mean that it is valueless, but that it should be used with caution, and the evidence it contains evaluated in the light of the overall picture of the period presented by all the material available.

Vésteinn Ólason had adopted a similar approach, arguing that sagas defy simple categorisation into one genre or another,⁴ and using *Njáls saga* as an example he concluded that, although accuracy of reporting events is ‘not unimportant’,

the saga’s more general relation to lived history is much more important. What it tells us about particular persons and events may be exaggerated, misunderstood, or invented, but the stories told are a response to something real, to words and feelings, to memories and fantasies; they are stories with roots in real life.⁵

My analysis of the saga and skaldic verse texts is based on these concepts of saga as a record of the social memories which formed part of the Norse traditions and national feelings about their past. The depictions they provide of Æthelstan have become part of a continuous narrative which still inspires historical and literary research today. The three skaldic poems, *Bersöglisvísur*, *Íslendingadrápa* and *Nóregs konungatal* have been dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries making them earlier than the prose sagas. The three sagas which provide the most detailed depictions of Æthelstan are *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, also known as Kings’ Sagas, and *Egils saga*, the family saga of the skaldic poet Egill Skalla-Grímsson. Although the written texts of all three sagas are thought to date from the early thirteenth century, their interrelationship with each other, and with other saga and skaldic material, indicates that they draw on earlier and more widely spread traditions.

³ Gareth Williams, ‘Hákon Aðalsteins fóstri’, in *The North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Liszka and Walker, p. 109.

⁴ ‘It would be a serious methodological mistake to look at the Icelandic narratives from the Middle Ages that have been termed sagas as if they were static phenomena that could be clearly distinguished from other narratives and categorized unequivocally’. Vésteinn, ‘The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature’, in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. by Quinn and others, p. 29.

⁵ Vésteinn, ‘The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature’, in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. by Quinn and others, p. 47.

Sagas of the Kings: *Fagrskinna*

The author of *Fagrskinna* makes no statement as to the purpose of the work. Alison Finlay has noted that ‘it is generally accepted that [...] the author of *Fagrskinna* was a conservative arranger of earlier written sources’.⁶ The frequent references to oral or saga material and the extensive use of skaldic verse in the text suggest that conservation rather than interpretation was a significant purpose in composing the work.⁷ *Fagrskinna* is therefore a valuable source of traditional material for the events it describes.

Overall *Fagrskinna* provides a briefer and more concise narrative of events than *Heimskringla* and this has been commented on both positively and negatively.⁸ Finlay has noted that Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson interpreted this as indicating that the work was hastily put together while Gustav Indrebø suggested that this appearance of haste may reflect pressure from the patron for the work to be finished.⁹ Finlay interpreted their evidence more positively, arguing that *Fagrskinna*’s conciseness gives the narrative a format which is ‘more balanced than that of *Heimskringla*’ and she has credited the author with deliberately choosing a structure ‘dictated by principles of order and proportion’.¹⁰ As with all the written sagas, what is unknown is the extent to which the author chose and presented his material for literary reasons and how this may have affected the accurate transmission of the traditional material on which his work was based. What is known is that the written saga text proved popular and has continued to be used as a traditional source on the past.

Fagrskinna is the earliest of the surviving texts to provide a detailed account of Æthelstan challenging the power of Haraldr hárfagri, fostering Haraldr’s son, Hákon,

⁶ *Fagrskinna, A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway*, ed. and trans. by Alison Finlay (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 2.

⁷ A useful and concise overview is provided by Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Royal Biography’ in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. by McTurk, pp. 388-402 (pp. 396-97).

⁸ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, pp. 17-18.

⁹ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, p. 13.

and providing political support both for Hákon and for his brother Eiríkr blóðøx. Initially the text credits Hákon with being the first king to try to bring Christianity to Norway and describes some of the difficulties he faced. Later in the text this is contradicted by the assertion that Óláfr Tryggvason was the first king to hold the Christian faith. This may be an example of the author's haste in using material from different sources but failing to combine them into a cohesive whole. Alternatively, as will be seen later, it may reflect the influence on traditional saga accounts of the ecclesiastical versions of the Christianization of Norway found in the synoptic histories.

Sagas of the Kings: *Heimskringla*

Despite repeated scholarly debates on the authorship of *Heimskringla* it has generally been accepted that Snorri Sturluson was responsible for its composition.¹¹ Ármann Jakobsson has described the *Heimskringla* narrative as tripartite in structure, beginning with the story of the early Ynglingar and continuing its narrative up to the year 1177, but built around the extended account of Norway's Christianization by St Óláfr in the *Óláfs saga Helga*.¹² Sverre Bagge has agreed and has commented that while Snorri reflects ecclesiastical traditions in his *Óláfs saga*, he is primarily concerned to trace the political rise of Óláfr inn helgi and his fall as king, brought about through the antagonism of the land-owning *bændr* to his rule. Sverre interprets *Heimskringla* and the kings' sagas as 'mainly dealing with a "game of politics" between individual actors', and based on aristocratic and secular rather than ecclesiastical and Christian moral values. He identifies as the main underlying theme of *Heimskringla* the importance of individual loyalty, arguing that Snorri emphasizes this, and not personal

¹¹ An overview of the theories on authorship are provided by Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla an Introduction*, Viking Society for Northern Research, 8 (London: University College, 1991), pp. 13-19.

¹² Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Biography', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. by McTurk, pp. 396-97.

power, status or authority, as the determining factor for kingly success.¹³ Sverre's overall views have been challenged as too simplistic,¹⁴ but, as will be seen below, his analysis is particularly helpful for an understanding of the *Heimskringla* narratives on Æthelstan as foster-father of Hákon.

While the account of Hákon's fostering by Æthelstan in *Heimskringla* corresponds closely to the content and language in *Fagrskinna* it also shows an independence which may be Snorri's own or may reflect use of a different tradition. Whaley has commented that the relationship between *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* is difficult to define and she prefers to support the generally accepted idea that both texts drew on a common source now lost.¹⁵ However, Snorri's extended narrative on Hákon's attempts to introduce Christianity is not found elsewhere, suggesting that for this he was using an independent source or perhaps challenging the synoptic version of events which branded Hákon as an apostate. As a result, *Heimskringla* provides a different background to the Christianization of Norway from the synoptics. Hákon is depicted as making great efforts as Norway's first Christian king to introduce Christianity gradually in ways designed to win the support of the leading men. This forms a strong contrast to Snorri's later, more conventional accounts of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi imposing Christianity on Norway and Iceland by force.

Family Saga: *Egils saga*

The authorship of this saga remains a subject of debate. Bjarni Einarsson has argued that *Egils saga* was written by Snorri Sturluson, to whom he also ascribes the

¹³ Sverre Bagge, 'Icelandic Uniqueness or a Common European Culture?', *Scandinavian Studies*, 69:4 (1997), 418-42 (pp. 427-40).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, Review of Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's 'Heimskringla'*, *American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 1501-02. Marlene Ciklamini, Review of Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's 'Heimskringla'*, *Speculum*, 69 (1994), 413-15. Bagge refutes these criticisms in 'Icelandic Uniqueness or a Common European Culture?', *Scandinavian Studies*, 69:4 (1997), 435-37.

¹⁵ Whaley, *Heimskringla*, p. 72.

composition of the skaldic poems in the text.¹⁶ Andersson agreed that Snorri could have written both *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga* at about the same period of time, despite the contrasting ways in which Haraldr hárfagri and his sons are depicted in each. He has identified rivalry between the Icelandic chieftains and the Norwegian kings as the main theme of *Egils saga* and commented that the saga may have been written with the events of the trade war between Norway and Iceland (1215-1220) in mind. As a result, he has suggested that *Egils saga* was written for an Icelandic audience and *Heimskringla* for a Norwegian one.¹⁷

Egils saga extends the picture of Æthelstan provided by *Heimskringla* in two distinct ways. Æthelstan is depicted in the saga as a successful military leader willing to use Viking mercenaries and generous in rewarding good service. In addition the saga depicts Æthelstan as a respected foster-father whose advice Hákon heeds even after he is king in Norway. One of the key features which distinguish the narrative of *Egils saga* from other family sagas is the picture it provides of Egill's relationships with four different kings – Haraldr hárfagri, Eiríkr blóðøx, Hákon inn góði and King Æthelstan. While Egill is repeatedly in conflict with Haraldr and Eiríkr to the point of literally almost losing his head, he finds in Æthelstan and Hákon two kings whom he can respect and whom he is willing to obey. Commenting on this, John Hines has interpreted the saga as marking a transition from a Norse kingship based on fear to one based more on consensus.¹⁸ If *Egils saga* is read as a commentary on kingship, then I suggest that, rather than kingship based on consensus, it more prominently promotes the merits of

¹⁶ *Egils saga*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: University College, 2003), pp. 183-89.

¹⁷ Theodore M. Andersson, 'The politics of Snorri Sturluson', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 93:1 (1994), 55-78 (p. 78).

¹⁸ John Hines, 'Kingship in *Egils saga*', in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. by John Hines and Desmond Slay, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: Oxford University Computing Services, 1992), pp. 15-32 (p. 30).

kingly rule based on the just use of law, as exemplified by Æthelstan and Hákon, over a traditional Viking kingship based on power and fear, exemplified by Haraldr and Eiríkr.

Æthelstan's Fostering of Hákon in Skaldic Poetry

The earliest surviving reference to Æthelstan in skaldic verse is found in the *Bersöglisvísur* of Sigvatr Þórðarson of the eleventh century. The poem, a skaldic *flokkr*, is addressed to King Magnús (1035-1047) and quoted in *Heimskringla*.¹⁹ In this, Hákon, the son of Haraldr hárfagri and his successor as king in Norway, is referred to as 'fóstra Aðalsteins', the foster-son of Æthelstan:

Hét, sás fell á Fitjum, fjölgegn, ok réð hegna heiptar rán, en hónum, Hókun, firar unnu. Þjóð hélt fast á fóstra fjölblíðs lögum síðan, (enn eru af, því minnir) Aðalsteins (búendr seinir).	He who fell at Fitje was called a very upright man and he punished the unlawful seizure of property and him, Hákon, the people loved. The people held fast to the laws of Æthelstan's very agreeable foster-son from that time, still, therefore, are the landowners slow to give up what they remember.
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The skaldic use of epithets and kennings assumes the listener has some prior knowledge of the person being praised and the verses themselves provide no background information on either Æthelstan or Hákon. However, the description Sigvatr provides of Hákon can be seen as indicating how Æthelstan's fostering moulded Hákon and his actions as king. Hákon is praised as very upright ('fjölgegn'), loved by the people ('firar unnu'), very pleasant ('fjölblíðr') and a noted law-giver who particularly defended property rights. These qualities are similar to the ones which William of Malmesbury assigns to Æthelstan whom he describes as pious, pleasant, courteous, very dear to his

¹⁹ Sigvatr Þórðarsonr, 'Bersöglisvísur', in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, I, 11-30 (p. 16). In *Heimskringla* Hákon is credited with establishing the earliest law codes in Norway and St Óláfr is described as frequently asking for these to be recited to him. 'Hákonar saga Góða', in *Heimskringla*, I, 11, p. 163; 'Óláfs saga helga', in *Heimskringla*, II, 58, p. 73.

people and the most law-abiding of kings.²⁰ This may indicate the existence of a shared Anglo-Scandinavian tradition about Æthelstan as foster-father to Hákon, or, perhaps more likely, a shared concept of the attributes of a good and successful king.

R. I. Page has argued for the reliability of this early skaldic reference to Æthelstan as Hákon's foster-father, basing his argument on the lack of explanation of the phrase, 'Aðalsteins [...]fóstra', and the fact that it is split over three lines indicating that knowledge of the fostering relationship was already well-established.²¹ The accuracy of the transmission of the poem has also been strongly supported by Williams who argued that the sophisticated structure of skaldic verse provided a measure of safeguard against faulty oral transmission.²² Judith Jesch, commenting on the reliability of skaldic verses in Icelandic texts of the thirteenth century and later, has suggested the following three criteria could reasonably be used to decide reliability:

- (1) the type of source in which the verse is preserved, with kings' sagas usually considered the most reliable
- (2) the ways in which verse is cited in that source, with verses cited as authentication of events in the narrative considered more likely to be genuine than verses cited as the direct speech of a character and
- (3) both internal and external evidence indicating the poetic form of the verse, with formal praise poems considered more likely to be genuine than other types.²³

²⁰ William depicts Æthelstan's personal qualities as the cause of his high standing with kings from abroad whom he describes as singing Æthelstan's praises and seeking his friendship through family alliances or with gifts. Among these he includes a Harald, king of Norway who is said to have sent a richly adorned ship to Æthelstan but William gives no further details. *Gesta Regum*, ii, 132, 134, 135, 138, I, 210-11, 214-15, 216-17, 224-25. This suggests there was an Anglo-Scandinavian tradition linking Æthelstan with Norway but, if so, the details appear to have been lost by William's time and he gives no evidence of knowing about Hákon as Æthelstan's foster-son.

²¹ R. I. Page, 'The Audience of Beowulf and the Vikings' in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by C. Chase (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 113-22 (p. 114).

²² Gareth Williams, 'Hákon Aðalsteins fóstri', in *The North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Liszka and Walker, p. 112.

²³ Judith Jesch, 'Skaldic Verse in Scandinavian England', in *Vikings and the Danelaw*, ed. by James Graham Campbell and others (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001), pp. 313-25 (p. 315).

Sigvatr's verse can be seen as meeting these criteria. It is preserved in the saga on King Magnús in *Heimskringla*; it is used to authenticate a warning to the king that the *bændr* are threatening to kill him if he does not honour the laws on property established by Æthelstan's foster-son, and, although not written as a praise poem, it celebrates Hákon and his support for the *bændr* land rights. In his introduction to *Heimskringla* Snorri specifically addresses this question of the reliability of skaldic verses, arguing that the poems addressed to a king provided the best evidence on the grounds that a skald would not include information which was known to be false as this would be seen as scoffing.

Despite the arguments for regarding *Bersöglisvísur* as a reliable source, the possibility still remains that someone like Snorri, skilled in skaldic composition, could have inserted the material later and ascribed it to Sigvatr to give it credibility. The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century dates for the earliest extant texts of *Bersöglisvísur* make it impossible to trace the accuracy of the existing text against an earlier version and so come to a more considered conclusion.

A second skaldic example of Hákon being designated, this time not by his own name but solely as 'fostra Aðalsteins', occurs in the twelfth-century *Íslendingadrápa* of Haukr Valdísarson.²⁴ It could be argued that Haukr's use of the phrase reflects a skaldic preference for a kenning to refer to a person rather than the actual name but this does not fit easily with Haukr's poem as a whole. Designed to celebrate the achievements of leading Icelanders from the time of the Settlement, Haukr includes in this same verse the proper name of Þórálfr (sic), the Icelandic henchman whose courage in supporting Hákon at Fitjar is celebrated by the verse. It would seem that by the time Haukr was composing his *drápa*, Hákon's status as Æthelstan's foster-son was so well-established that it immediately identified him and could take precedence over Hákon's other epithets of 'inn góði', and 'Haraldsson'.

²⁴ Haukr Valdísarson, *Íslendingadrápa*, ed. by Th. Möbius (Kiel: University Press, 1874).

Haukr makes one other reference to Æthelstan in his verse celebrating Egill's brother Þórólfr whom he describes as killed while fighting alongside Æthelstan in England. This reference has linked the verse with the battle of *Vínheiðr* described in *Egils saga*. There has been considerable scholarly discussion as to whether Haukr drew on saga material for his poem or whether he was a source for the written sagas or whether both drew independently on common sources.²⁵ As the only surviving manuscript of his work belongs to the fourteenth century, it is not possible to trace the origins of his work reliably.

What is particularly striking is that these texts all record Hákon as Æthelstan's foster-son rather than son of Haraldr hárfagri and this designation is carried forward into the fourteenth century and beyond through the anonymous poem *Nóregs konungatal*. The text is found only in the fourteenth-century manuscript of *Flateyjarbók*, a compilation of saga, poems and annals dedicated to Jón Loptsson of Iceland, whose descent from King Magnús berfœttr it celebrates. Based on its references to Magnús Erlingsson's death (1184) and to Sverrir Sigurðarson as the reigning king, the poem has been dated to c. 1190, some seven years before Jón Loptsson died.²⁶

The source for the kings' list in the poem is uncertain. The text is headed, 'Er Sæmundr Frodi Orti', 'Which Sæmundr the Learned composed'.²⁷ This has been taken to mean that the early part of the poem was composed by Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056-1133), although there is no indication whether the composition was oral or written. The later date of 1190 assigned to the poem as a whole has resulted in alternative suggestions that the poem draws on Sæmundr's work but may have been written in its present form by Ari Þorgilsson (1067/8-1148) or Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241). The

²⁵ Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Íslendingadrápa', *Gripla*, 1 (1975), 76-91.

²⁶ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'The *Flateyjarbók* Annals as a Historical Source', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 27 (2002), 233-41.

²⁷ *Flateyjarbók*, ed. by G. Vigfusson and C. R. Unger, 3 vols (Christiana: Mallings, 1860-68), II, 520.

linking of the poem with Sæmundr means that, whether composed in the eleventh or twelfth century, *Nóregs konungatal* had a long history before it was incorporated into *Flateyjarbók*. It therefore remains unclear whether the poem preserves early traditions about the kings of Norway or is the result of a consensus achieved over several centuries.²⁸

The attribution of the poem to Sæmundr indicates that it was regarded as a significant literary work and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has noted how the decoration of its initial letter marks it out as one of the more important sections within the *Flateyjarbók* as a whole.²⁹ The poem traces the kings of Norway from Haraldr hárfagri to King Sverrir, who is described as ruling the kingdom which had been held by Haraldr hárfagri and his descendants.³⁰ Within the poem's narrative Hákon is described as the distinguished foster-son of Æthelstan in England:

Tók Eírekr	áðr vinsæll
við jofursnafni	vestan kæmi
blóðøx brátt,	Aðalsteins
sem búendr vildu.	einkafóstri
Vas vígfimr	ok Hókon
vetr at landi	halfrar allrar
Eírekr alls	bróður sinn
einn ok fjóra,	beiddi erfðar. ³¹

Soon Eírekr blóðøx received the name of king, as the landowners wanted. Eírekr, nimble in war, was [king] of the land one winter and four in all, before the popular Hákon, the distinguished foster-son of Æthelstan, came from the west and asked his brother for half of all his inheritance.

Some of the ideas expressed in this verse match those found in other texts. For example, Hákon is also described as 'vinsæll', 'popular', in *Fagrskinna*; the statement that Hákon

²⁸ Theodore Andersson in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. by Clover and Lindow, pp. 199, 206, 225. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, II, 761-806 (p. 761).

²⁹ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók: Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), pp. 377-84.

³⁰ 'Nóregs konungatal', in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, II, 761-806.

³¹ 'Nóregs konungatal', in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, ed. by Gade, II, 768, verse 10. For discussion of the different lengths given for Eírekr's reign see Gade, II, 769.

‘vestan kœmi’, ‘came from the west’, is also found in *Ágrip*; the power of the landowners to make or break kings is found in the skaldic poem *Bersögglisvísur* and in the sagas of ‘Hákon inn góði’ and ‘Magnús inn góði’ in *Heimskringla*. *Nóregs konungatal* uses ‘einkafóstri’, ‘distinguished’ ‘special’ or ‘excellent foster-son’, to describe Hákon.³² This is a distinctive use of the word and open to different interpretations. It may reflect awareness that Louis of Francia and Alan of Brittany were also brought up at Æthelstan’s court or it may be a reference to Hákon’s later achievements as king. Whichever interpretation is adopted the phrase emphasizes that Hákon’s relationship with Æthelstan was seen as an important and a distinctive characteristic of him and of his reign.

Whether the epithet ‘Aðalsteinsfóstri’ belongs originally to the eleventh century, to an earlier time, or to the thirteenth century, its repeated use in skaldic poetry, the sagas and the king’s lists in *Flateyjarbók*, has given it a secure place within Old Icelandic/Norse historical tradition. However, the main sources of information on Æthelstan as foster-father are found not in the skaldic verses, but in the sagas, *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga*.

Æthelstan’s Fostering of Hákon in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*

As was noted above, the narratives on Hákon’s fostering in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* follow a common pattern and use almost identical language but they also show significant differences in some of their detail. This may indicate they were basing their texts on different versions of the story; alternatively it may reflect their own choice of literary style, making their texts not just a record of traditional material, but a creative retelling of existing stories. In both texts the fostering story is included as part of a

³² *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquae linguae Septentrionalis*, ed. by Sveinbjörn Egilsson (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers, 1860), p. 125.

contest for power between Æthelstan and Haraldr hárfagri which Æthelstan is depicted as initiating. By sending Haraldr a messenger with a sword as a gift he tricks Haraldr into accepting the gift by taking hold of the sword by the hilt. The messenger then tells Haraldr that by placing his hand on the sword has accepted Æthelstan as his overlord.³³ No reason is given for Æthelstan's action. It appears to be unprovoked and intended by Æthelstan as a symbolic claim to be the more powerful king.

Haraldr, described as now in his seventies, is said to have already reigned in Norway for over fifty years. By contrast, Æthelstan is said to be young and to have acceded to the throne only recently. He is, however, depicted as already a king of considerable status:

<i>Fagrskinna</i>	
Penna tíma réð Englandi ungr konungr, Aðalsteinn góði, er þá var tignarmaðr einn enn mesti í Norðrlöndum. ³⁴	At that time, there ruled in England a young king, Æthelstan the good, who then was one of the highest rank in the northern lands
<i>Heimskringla</i>	
Aðalstein hét þá konungr í Englandi, er þá hafði nýtekit við konungdómi. Hann var kallaðr inn sigrsæli ok inn trúfasti. ³⁵	The king in England then was called Æthelstan and he had then newly taken over the kingdom. He was called the blessed in victory and the firm in faith.

In *Fagrskinna* Æthelstan is said to be of the highest rank of king ('var tignarmaðr') and given the epithet 'góði', 'good, honest, moral'. This epithet is used sparingly of kings in the sagas. The only two Norwegian kings to be described in this way are Æthelstan's foster-son, Hákon góði, and Magnús góði, the son of Óláfr helgi. Both these kings are celebrated in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* as just and great law-makers. *Fagrskinna*

³³ The term used is 'sverðtakari', 'sword-taker' or 'king's man'. For the symbolism of sword giving and taking, see David C. Van Meter, 'The Ritualized Presentation of Weapons and the Ideology of Nobility in "Beowulf"', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 95 (1996), 175-189 (p. 179).

³⁴ *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fórnrítáfélag 1984), 4, p. 71.

³⁵ 'Haralds saga ins hárfagra', in *Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fórnrítáfélag, 1941), I, 38, p.143.

and *Heimskringla* also use ‘góði’ of one other Anglo-Saxon king, Edward the Confessor. *Fagrskinna* further links Edward and Æthelstan, noting that with Edward’s death England ceased to be ruled by Æthelstan’s descendants.³⁶ Æthelstan is thus depicted as the founder of a royal dynasty and a noted example of good kingship. While *Heimskringla* does not use ‘góði’ of Æthelstan, it does describe him as militarily successful (‘sigrsæli’) and very committed to his Christian faith (‘trúfasti’). As will be seen below, both these characteristics are frequently associated with Æthelstan in the Icelandic and Norwegian texts.

Fagrskinna and *Heimskringla* both describe Haraldr interpreting Æthelstan’s gift of the sword as done ‘in mockery’, ‘með spotti’. By implication, Æthelstan is depicted as an arrogant young king who lacks any respect for Haraldr’s reputation and long years of reign. *Fagrskinna* adds that Haraldr decided to match Æthelstan’s trickery with a trick of his own, so signalling that the fostering of Hákon was intended as a way of mocking Æthelstan in return.³⁷ As I will show in my analysis below, *Fagrskinna* provides the more dramatic version of events and contains some details which are not found in *Heimskringla*.

The basic story in both texts can be summarized as follows:

Haraldr’s messenger, Haukr hábrók, finds Æthelstan in London and they exchange greetings. Haukr places Hákon on Æthelstan’s knee and tells him that Haraldr bids him foster the child. Æthelstan learns that Hákon is the son of a concubine. He takes up his sword to kill the child and Haukr warns him that if he kills Hákon he will have to face all Haraldr’s sons. Haukr returns to Haraldr who is pleased with the success of his plan. The saying is noted that whoever fosters another’s child is of lower status.

³⁶ ‘Þá hvarf konungdómr á Englandi ór ætt Aðalsteins góða konungs’, ‘Then the kingdom from the family of King Æthelstan the good, disappeared in England’. *Fagrskinna Noregskonunga Tal*, 58, p. 274.

³⁷ ‘Heldr at láta koma ráð ráði í móti ok orð orði’, ‘Rather to let plan match against plan and word against word’. *Fagrskinna Noregskonunga Tal*, 4, p. 72.

The main difference between the two texts is in the role played by Haukr. In *Fagrskinna* he is shown as deliberately humiliating Æthelstan. First, he conceals the purpose of his visit, telling the unsuspecting Æthelstan that he has brought greetings and a gift from Haraldr:³⁸

“Herra! Haraldr konungr Norðmanna sendi yðr góða kveðju, þar með sendi hann yðr einn hvítan fugl vel vanðan ok það yðr venja enn betr heðan í frá.”

“Your lordship, Harold king of the Northmen has sent you goodly greetings and in addition he has sent you a white bird well trained and bidden you henceforth train it better.”³⁹

Having placed Hákon on Æthelstan’s knee, Haukr does not immediately say who the parents are. A piece of dramatic dialogue follows by which Haukr gives the clearest indication that his mission is intended as an insult to Æthelstan:

Þá mælti Aðalsteinn konungr: “Hverr á barn þetta?” Þá svaraði Haukr: “Ambátt ein í Nóregi, ok mælti Haraldr konungr, at þú skyldir henni barn upp fœða.” Konungr svaraði: “Eigi hefir sveinn þessi þræls augu”. Haukr svaraði: “Ambátt er móðirin, ok segir hón, at Haraldr konungr sé faðirinn, ok er nú sveinninn þinn kné-setningr, konungr, ok er þér nú jafnvant við hann sem við þinn son.” Konungr svaraði: “Hví mynda ek fœða Haraldri barn, þó at þat væri eiginkonu barn, en hálfu síðr ambáttar barn,”⁴⁰

Then King Æthelstan said: “Who is the parent of this child?” Then Haukr answered “A concubine in Norway, and King Haraldr said that you should bring the child up for her.” The king replied: “This boy does not have the eyes of a thrall.” Haukr answered: “The mother is a concubine, and she says that King Haraldr is the father and the boy is now your fosterling, King, and you now have the same obligations towards him as towards your [own] son”. The king replied: “Why would I bring up a child for Haraldr, even if it was his own wife’s child, and much less so a concubine’s child?”

Haukr plays with Æthelstan, initially stating only that Haraldr has sent a concubine’s child to be brought up by him. When Æthelstan challenges this statement, using the saga tradition of the child’s eyes as a sign of status, Haukr reveals that the concubine

³⁸ *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal*, 4, p. 72.

³⁹ Finlay interprets the white bird as a hawk or falcon, referring to the skaldic use of describing a king or warrior in terms of a sharp-eyed hawk. She also notes that such birds were valuable exports and presented to European kings. The possible implications of this interpretation for the story are not explored by Finlay but, if her interpretation is correct, the instruction to Æthelstan is that he is to bring Hákon up to be a warrior king. Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁰ *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal*, 4, pp. 72-73.

claims Haraldr is the father of her child. It is only at the end of the conversation that Haukr states that Haraldr is the father, by warning Æthelstan that even if he kills Hákon, he cannot kill all of Haraldr's sons. Haukr completes Æthelstan's humiliation by telling him that the task of bringing up another's child is a sign of lower status. In *Heimskringla* this statement is not addressed directly to Æthelstan but included later to explain Haraldr's satisfaction at what he had achieved.

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta also contains a version of the fostering story based on *Heimskringla* but which introduces Haukr hábrók as the main character.⁴¹ The wording reflects many saga openings where the main character is introduced by a quick character sketch:⁴²

Sa madr var med Haralldi konungi er het Haukr habrok. Hann var framkuęmdarmadr mikill j sendiförum þo at toruelldar væri ok hinn kærastu konungi.

There was a man with King Haraldr who was called Haukr hábrók. He was a very enterprising man on missions, however difficult they were, and he was very dear to the king.

The fostering event is also recalled in the short *Hauks þáttur hábrók* which forms part of the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. In this, Haraldr praises Haukr for his highhanded action in successfully getting the better of the leading men of Eiríkr, King of Sweden, and smiles when Haukr compares the achievement to his putting Hákon on Æthelstan's knee in England.⁴³ Commenting on the story in both *Heimskringla* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, Alan Berger concluded that both draw independently on a lost saga of Haraldr hárfagri, parts of which are retained as a *Þáttur Haralds hárfagra* in *Flateyjarbók*.⁴⁴ A further possibility not considered by Berger is

⁴¹ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Text by Snorri Sturluson in 'Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta'*, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: University College, 2001), pp. lvi-lxi.

⁴² 'Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta', in *Flateyjarbók*, I, 8, p. 46.

⁴³ 'Hauks þáttur hábrók', in *Flateyjarbók*, I, 577-83 (p. 578).

⁴⁴ Alan J. Berger, 'The Sagas of Harald Fairhair', *Scripta Islandica*, 31 (1980), 14-29. The 'þáttur Haralds hárfagra', merely records that Haraldr had a 'sveinn', 'a boy', by his maidservant Þóra morstǫng and that he was called Hákon. *Flateyjarbók*, I, 567-76 (p. 576).

that the fostering story may also have formed part of a lost saga about Haukr hábrók.

The possibility that the story formed part of other lost texts suggests that the tradition of Æthelstan fostering Hákon was well-established.

For a king to act as foster-father was less common but not unusual.

Heimskringla records that Eiríkr blóðøx's son was fostered by King Haraldr blátönn of Denmark and in *Egils saga* Eiríkr fosters Fródi, a relative of the royal family. The statement that Æthelstan as foster-father would be of lower social status may have been included to reinforce Haraldr's superiority in the power-contest initiated by Æthelstan. It could also have been a direct reference to the tradition, noted in the chapters on the Anglo-Norman and the Continental texts that Æthelstan's own birth was of inferior status. Given the long history of Scandinavian links with England the alleged circumstances of Æthelstan's birth are likely to have been known. If so, Hákon, having a father who was a king and a mother who was a concubine, provides Æthelstan with a mirror image of himself. The story of Hákon's fostering then carries a further touch of mockery. In avenging his earlier humiliation, Haraldr compels Æthelstan to foster a child whose presence would be a continual reminder to him of his own origins and lower status.

Despite this, the conclusion of the narratives in both *Fagrskinna* and

Heimskringla declares that the contest between Æthelstan and Haraldr was a draw:

<i>Fagrskinna</i>	<i>Heimskringla</i>
Í þvílíkum viðskiptum konunga fannsk þat, at hvárr þeira vildi heita meiri en annarr, ok er ekki gørt misdeili þeira tignar fyrir þessa sök, ok var hvárr þeira konungr yfir sínu ríki til dauðadags. ⁴⁵	Í þvílíkum viðskiptum konunga fannsk þat, at hvárr þeira vildi vera meiri en annarr, ok varð ekki misdeili tignar þeira at heldr fyrir þessar sakir. Hvárrtveggi var yfirkonungr síns ríkis til dauðadags. ⁴⁶
In such dealings between the kings it could be seen that each wanted to be greater than	

⁴⁵ *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal*, 4, p. 73.

⁴⁶ 'Haralds saga ins hárfagra', in *Heimskringla*, I, 39, p. 145.

the other but no undue preference in the honour they held was caused because of this and each of them was supreme king of his realm up to the day he died.

By their summing up, both texts depict Æthelstan and Haraldr as equal in kingly status with neither subservient to the other and both the most powerful king in their own country.⁴⁷ Magnús Fjalldal has suggested that the story should be read as a moral tale reflecting ideas about power politics and the importance of establishing mutual respect between two kings in order to prevent future acts of aggression.⁴⁸ This, however, does not do justice to the ways in which *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* continue to depict Æthelstan's familial relationship with Haraldr and his status as an Anglo-Saxon king of some standing in Norwegian history. As will be seen below, the continuing narratives in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* depict Æthelstan as a devoted foster-father. He educates Hákon for kingship, supports him in returning to Norway, retains contact with him and acts to protect him from any hostility from his elder brother, Eiríkr blóðøx.

Hákon's return to Norway

Hákon's return to Norway is briefly recounted in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* and some of the background only emerges later. The comparison of the texts below illustrates the differences in their content and emphasis:

<i>Fagrskinna</i>	<i>Heimskringla</i>
Einum vetri síðarr en Haraldr konungr hafði andazk, spurðisk andlát hans til Englands vestr, ok á því sama sumri með ráði Aðalsteins fósturföður síns fór Hákon til Nóregs. ⁴⁹	Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri var þá á Englandi, er hann spurði andlát Haralds konungs, föður síns. Bjósk hann þá þegar til ferðar. Fékk Aðalsteinn konungr honum lið ok góðan

⁴⁷ Rowe comments that in *Heimskringla* Snorri repeatedly depicts English kings as superior to those of Scandinavia while the reverse is true in the family sagas. Here, however, Snorri only assigns equality while *Egils saga* (possibly also written by Snorri) provides an example of a family saga which also assigns superiority to the English king. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Helpful Danes and Pagan Irishmen: Saga Fantasies of the Viking Age in the British Isles', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 5 (2009), 1-21.

⁴⁸ Magnús Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005), p. 35.

⁴⁹ *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal*, 7, p. 75.

<p>One year later when Haraldr had died, news of his death came west to England and as a result, the same summer, with the advice of his foster-father Æthelstan, Hákon went to Norway.</p>	<p>skipakost ok bjó hans f̊or allvegliga, ok kom hann um haustít til Nóregs.⁵⁰ Hákon, Æthelstan's fosterson, was then in England when he heard of the death of king Haraldr, his father. He thereupon at once made preparations for his journey. King Æthelstan provided him with men and a goodly naval force and made splendid preparations for his voyage and he reached Norway at harvest time.</p>
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In both texts Hákon's return to Norway follows the account of Eiríkr blóðøx inheriting his father's throne and precedes the description of Hákon deliberately courting and winning the support of the jarls and bonders and so making himself king. In recounting Hákon's return, neither text mentions any direct contact by the Norwegians, merely stating that the news of Haraldr's death reached Hákon in England. They do, however, give Æthelstan a role in Hákon's return. *Fagrskinna* describes the decision to return as made with Æthelstan's advice; *Heimskringla* implies that it was Hákon who took the initiative once he learned of Haraldr's death but that Æthelstan provided him with ships and men and made splendid arrangements for his return. Given the context of these passages, their narratives depict Æthelstan personally involving himself in Norwegian politics by supporting Haraldr's younger son in returning to challenge his elder brother for his father's throne.

Although few details are provided, Æthelstan's actions can be seen as fulfilling his expected role as foster-father. In *Fagrskinna* he provides Hákon with advice and guidance on the future direction of his life, while in *Heimskringla* he gives practical support and, as a generous foster-father, makes splendid, 'allveglëga', preparations for Hákon's return, furnishing him with men and a goodly naval force, 'lið ok góðan

⁵⁰ 'Hákonar saga Góða', in *Heimskringla*, I, 150.

skipakost'.⁵¹ Mention of a naval force may have been intended to suggest an element of danger and the need for a serious show of strength by Hákon, either to impress the Norwegian jarls and win their support or because some military opposition was to be expected. If so, it depicts Æthelstan prepared to support Hákon's bid for kingship by force, if necessary. The Scandinavian texts provide no dates for Hákon's return. However, it is possible, by analysing the information available on the ages and length of reign of Haraldr hárfagri, Eiríkr blóðøx and Hákon, to arrive at a median date of c. 934 for Hákon's arrival back in Norway. If this could be validated, it may be possible to identify more reliably a link between the Old Icelandic/Norse texts on Hákon's return and the Anglo-Norman accounts of Æthelstan's military expedition to Scotland. This would help explain the northern account found in Symeon of Durham, that Æthelstan's ships sailed to Viking territory in Caithness, a Norwegian stronghold with sea links across to Norway.

Fagrskinna and *Heimskringla* also depict Æthelstan's generosity as a foster-father by describing his gift of an exceptional sword to Hákon:

<i>Fagrskinna</i>	<i>Heimskringla</i>
Aðalsteinn gaf honum sverð þat, er hjóltin váru af gulli ok Hákon reyndi svá hart, at hann hjó í kvernstein einn ok beit allt til áugans. Þat var kallat síðan Kvernbiti. Þat sverð hefir Hákon allt til dauðadags. ⁵²	Aðalsteinn konungr gaf Hákonni sverð þat, er hjóltin váru ór gulli ok meðalkaflinn, en brandrinn var þó betri, þar hjó Hákon með kvernstein til augans. Þat var síðan kallat Kvernbitr. Þat sverð hefir bezt komit til Nóregs. Þat átti Hákon til dauðadags. ⁵³
Æthelstan gave him that sword which had a hilt made from gold and Hákon tried it out so fiercely that he hewed into a quern-stone and	King Æthelstan gave Hákon that sword which had a hilt and haft made out of gold but even so the blade was the better part. With it Hákon

⁵¹ *Ágrip* mentions only two ships. *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal* relates that a storm destroyed some of the ships and separated others so that Eiríkr was erroneously told that Hákon must have been drowned. The two ships could be Hákon's own and that of the men bringing Eiríkr their false news.

⁵² *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal*, 6, p. 75.

⁵³ 'Haralds saga ins hárfagra', in *Heimskringla*, I, 40, p. 146.

caused the sword to bite all through it to the hole. The sword after that was called Quern-biter. Hákon had that sword right through to his dying day.	hewed through a quern-stone to the hole. From that time it was called Quern-biter. That sword is the best that has come to Norway. Hákon had that sword until his dying day.
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Æthelstan's gift is given considerable prominence in both texts. From a literary perspective the story of Hákon's fostering starts with Æthelstan's gift of a sword to Haraldr and ends with Æthelstan's gift of a sword to Hákon on his return to Norway. Both are described as having a hilt and grip of gold and therefore of great value. Hákon's sword, however, is distinguished by its excellent blade. It is the sword of a warrior and treasured by Hákon who, we are told, 'sverð hefir [...] allt til dauðadags', 'had the sword right up to the day he died'.⁵⁴ The sword's quality and its effectiveness in battle are later referred to in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. In *Heimskringla*'s account of Hákon's death, he is buried fully armed, presumably with the sword, and it is specifically referred to in the poem *Hákonarmál*. Æthelstan's gift depicts him as not only generous but wealthy, a warrior king who both valued and had access to swords of the highest quality. His gift depicts him giving special honour to Hákon as the future king of Norway

These depictions of Æthelstan actively supporting Hákon's return to Norway are reminiscent of the descriptions in the Continental texts of his actions in securing the safe return of Louis and Alan Twistedbeard to their home territories. So far, textual analysis has not identified any direct links between the Continental and the Norse saga texts but *Heimskringla* refers to established links between Norway and Normandy and on two occasions mentions that the jarls of Normandy were descendants of Rolf the Ganger, son of Rögnvald earl of Möre who was a close friend of Haraldr hárfagri.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ 'He had it right up to his dying day'.

⁵⁵ Exiled by Haraldr for making a shore raid in Norway, Rolf and his descendants are described as having retained their kinship links with leading Norwegians to whom they gave hospitality in Normandy 'Óláfs saga helga', in *Heimskringla*, II, 20, pp.26-27.

Given the Viking reputation for travel, trade and mercenary activity, it is quite possible that knowledge of Continental versions of events did circulate either orally or through written texts. A possible source could be the *De Moribus et Actis Primorum Normanniae Ducum* of Dudo or the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* of William of Jumièges and Robert Torigni which describe Æthelstan's friendship with Rolf (Rollo) and his liaising with William Longsword to secure the return of Louis to West Francia and Alan Twistedbeard to Brittany.⁵⁶ The saga accounts of Æthelstan supporting Hákon's return to Norway may, therefore, reflect Continental traditions of his involvement in ensuring the successful return of Louis and Alan to positions of power.

Both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* describe how the people turned against Eiríkr blóðøx because of his arrogant conduct and, in particular, that of his wife Gunnhildr, and how Eiríkr, having been forced to leave Norway, made his way to the British Isles where Æthelstan made an agreement with him and gave him Northumbria to rule. As will be seen below, this incident is also narrated in the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. The accounts of Æthelstan's links with Eiríkr blóðøx have generated much speculation with most scholars discounting any such contact on the grounds that it was anachronistic.⁵⁷ Versions D and E of the *ASC* record a Scandinavian Eiríkr ruling in York in 948 and during 952-54 and the coins minted in his name have consequently been assigned to these later dates. What is significant for the purposes of this thesis is not the historical accuracy of the sources and scholarship on Æthelstan's contact with Eiríkr blóðøx but how the saga texts assign to Æthelstan a role in wider Norwegian politics and depict him providing a balance of power between Eiríkr and Hákon.

⁵⁶ See Chapter 3 on Æthelstan in the Continental Tradition.

⁵⁷ For overview and analysis see Clare Downham, 'The Chronology of the Last Scandinavian Kings of York, AD 937-954', *Northern History*, 40: 1 (2003), 25-51 and Gareth Williams, *Eirik Bloodaxe* (Hafersfjord: Saga Books, 2010).

The following summary shows that while there are differences in the ways in which these events are presented in the saga texts, there is unanimity on Æthelstan's pivotal role in preserving peace between the two brothers:

Fagrskinna: Eiríkr took the advice of wise men in Norway and went to see King Æthelstan in response to the friendly words he had sent by his foster-son Hákon that he would be welcome as long as he did not fall out with his brother Hákon or fight against him. Æthelstan gave him asylum and authority in Northumbria and Eiríkr was baptised. *Fagrskinna Nóregskonunga Tal*, 7, p. 76.

Heimskringla: Æthelstan sent word to Eiríkr, who was raiding in the north of England, offering him a kingdom in England because Eiríkr's father, King Haraldr, was a good friend of his. The two negotiate. Eiríkr agrees to hold Northumbria and defend it against Danes and Vikings. Eiríkr, his family and men were baptised. 'Hákonar saga Góða', in *Heimskringla*, I, 3, p. 152.

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta: As soon as Æthelstan heard of Eiríkr's raids, he sent messengers asking Eiríkr to accept land from him saying that he would strive to prevent Hákon from committing any outrage on it. Eiríkr, his family and men were baptised. 'Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar', in *Flatneyjarbók*, I, 16, p. 50.

In *Fagrskinna* Æthelstan is depicted as keeping in touch with his foster-son, sending him a message and supporting his kingship by seeking to deter Eiríkr from hostility towards him. His offer of a place of refuge is made on condition that Eiríkr keeps the peace. In *Heimskringla* Æthelstan negotiates directly with Eiríkr, who has already left Norway and is carrying out raids in the north of England, giving as his reason the friendship which he had shared with Eiríkr's father, Haraldr. The saga *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* also refers to Eiríkr carrying out raids but differs from *Heimskringla* by depicting Æthelstan undertaking to protect Eiríkr against retaliation by Hákon. These variations indicate the existence of different versions of the same story but all three texts agree in depicting Æthelstan as central to ensuring peace between Eiríkr and Hákon and thereby strengthening Hákon's position as king.

Fagrskinna and *Heimskringla* depict Æthelstan as making an astute move in offering Eiríkr the kingdom of Northumbria. Both texts point out that Northumbria had long been settled by Norsemen. The version in *Heimskringla* is typical of both:⁵⁸

Norðimbraland var mest byggt Norðmönnum, síðan er Loðbrókarsynir unnu landit. Herjuðu Danir ok Norðmenn optliga þangat, síðan er vald landsins hafði undan þeim gengit. Mörg heiti landsins eru þar gefin á norrœna tungu, Grímsbær ok Hauksfljót ok mörg önnur.

Northumberland was mostly peopled by Norsemen. After the sons of Lodbrok had won the land, Danes and Norsemen often harried there when they had lost power in their own land. Many names are in the Norwegian tongue, such as Grimsby and Hauksfljot and many others.

Heimskringla also states:

Norðimbraland er kallað fimmtungr Englands. Hann hafði atsetu í Jórvík, þar sem menn segja, at fyrr hafi setit Loðbrókarsynir.

Northumbria is called the fifth part of England. He [Eiríkr] had his seat in York, there, just as men say the sons of Loðbrók had their seat before.

Northumbria is represented as likely to appeal to Eiríkr because of its Norse history and Anglo-Scandinavian culture. The repeated references to the sons of Loðbrók can also be taken to imply that, by his action, Æthelstan is recognizing the long established historic links between Scandinavia and Northumbria which made the appointment of a Scandinavian *subregulus* particularly appropriate. It is possible that this is a memory which reflects the Anglo-Norman accounts of Æthelstan's links with Sihtric who is also described as ruling Northumbria from his base in York.

This picture of Æthelstan negotiating a friendly settlement with Eiríkr is obliquely supported by later events narrated in the sagas. The *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* states that Eiríkr held Northumbria until Æthelstan's death but left once Edmund was on the throne because of Edmund's animosity towards him.⁵⁹ As a result, Eiríkr's wife and sons were said to have sought support in Denmark. From there, with the backing of Haraldr blátönn, Eiríkr's sons launched the military attack which ended in Hákon's death and their inheriting the throne of Norway. These accounts of events

⁵⁸ 'Hákonar saga Góða', in *Heimskringla*, I, 3, pp. 152-53.

⁵⁹ 'Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta', *Flateyjarbók*, I, 51.

following Æthelstan's death reinforce the depictions in the Kings' Sagas of Æthelstan as a personal friend of Haraldr hárfagri and his sons and a devoted foster-father to Hákon. Edmund, having no direct familial and friendship links with Hákon, is depicted as destroying what Æthelstan had achieved.

Æthelstan in *Egils saga*

Egils saga provides a more detailed and more varied picture of Æthelstan than the Kings' Sagas. To aid analysis of the saga material I have adopted the following framework:

The historical background to Æthelstan's reign provided by the saga

Æthelstan as Christian king and his initial contact with Egill

Æthelstan as military leader

Æthelstan's style of kingship

Æthelstan as foster-parent.

Historical background to Æthelstan's reign

Æthelstan is introduced in saga fashion through a brief synopsis of his family history contextualised by reference to the reign of the Viking King Haraldr hárfagri:

Elfráðr inn ríki réð fyrir Englandi; hann var fyrstr einvaldskonungr yfir Englandi sinna kynsmanna; þat var á dögum Haralds ins hárfagra Nóregskonungs. Eptir hann var konungr í Englandi son hans Játvarðr; hann var faðir Aðalsteins ins sigrsæla, fóstura Hákonar ins góða. Í þenna tíma tók Aðalsteinn konungdóm í Englandi eptir föður sinn; þeir vóru fleiri bræðr, synir Játvarðs.⁶⁰

Alfred the Mighty ruled over England; he was the first absolute king over England of his kinsman; that was in the days of Haraldr hárfagri king of Norway. After him the king of England was his son Edward; he was father of Æthelstan the very victorious, foster-father of Hákon the Good. At this time Æthelstan took over the kingdom in England, after his father; there were more brothers, sons of Edward.

Chronologically the saga aligns the reigns of Alfred and Haraldr hárfagri and credits

Alfred, not Æthelstan, with being the first king of all England. Æthelstan is said to have

⁶⁰ *Egils saga*, 50, p. 71.

taken control of the kingdom after the death of Edward his father and is described, as in *Heimskringla*, as very victorious (‘sigrsæla’) and the foster-father of Hákon the Good. Although it is noted that Edward also had other sons, nothing more is said on this but it may have been intended as an explanation of the unrest the saga depicts Æthelstan facing early in his reign. Egill’s introduction to Æthelstan is said to have been caused by Æthelstan’s need for mercenary support following unrest among the British, Scottish and Irish nobles who wished to win back the lands which had been taken from them by Æthelstan’s father and grandfather.⁶¹

En Aðalsteinn konungr safnaði herliði at sér ok gaf mála þeim mönnum öllum er þat vildu hafa til féfangs sér, bæði útlenzkum ok innlenzkum. Þeir bræðr Þórólfr ok Egill heldu suðr fyrir Saxland ok Flæmingjaland; þá spurðu þeir at Englandskonungr þóttisk liðs þurfa ok þar var ván féfangs mikils; gera þeir þá þat ráð at halda þangat liði sínu.⁶²

But King Æthelstan gathered troops around him and gave service to all those men who wanted it for booty for themselves, both those coming from outside and those resident in the country. The brothers Þórólfr and Egill made their way south along Germany and Flanders. Then they heard that the king of England might think he needed troops and that there was the prospect of great booty; they then took that decision to head there with their men.

This account of Æthelstan facing opposition early in his reign is not found in the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon texts. It may however reflect memories of Æthelstan’s action in taking York and Northumbria following the death of his brother-in-law Sihtric and recounted by some of the Anglo-Norman writers.

Æthelstan as Christian king and his initial contact with Egill

The saga draws specific attention to the fact that Æthelstan was a staunch Christian both by using the epithet ‘trúfasti’ and by describing his requirement that Egill and Þórólfr take the ‘prímSIGNAN’ as a pre-requisite for entering his service:

England var kristit ok hafði lengi verit þá er þetta var tíðenda; Aðalsteinn konungr var vel kristinn; hann var kallaðr Aðalsteinn inn trúfasti. Konungr bað Þórólfr ok þá bræðr at þeir skyldu láta prímSIGNASK, því at þat var þá mikill siðr bæði með kaupmönnum ok þeim mönnum er á mála gengu með kristnum

⁶¹ *Egils saga*, 50, p. 71.

⁶² *Egils saga*, 50, p. 71.

mönnum, því at þeir menn er þrimsignaðir vǫru hǫfðu allt samneyti við kristna menn ok svá heiðna, en hǫfðu þat at átrúnaði er þeim var skapfelldast. Þeir Þórólfr ok Egill gerðu þat eptir bœn konungs ok létu þrimsignask báðir. Þeir hǫfðu þar þrjú hundruð sinna manna, þeira er mála tóku af konungi.⁶³

England was Christian and had been so for a long time then when these events took place. King Athlestan was a good Christian: he was called Æthelstan firm in Christian faith. The king asked Þórólfr and then his brother that they should have themselves primesigned, because that was then very much the custom both with merchants and those men who took service with Christian men, because those men who were primesigned had full rights of association with Christians and heathens too, but held that belief which was most agreeable to them. They, Þórólfr and Egill, did that according to the king's request and both let themselves be primesigned. They had there three hundred of their men who took service from the king.⁶⁴

Æthelstan is depicted as using an established Christian method acceptable to both sides for ensuring loyalty from Egill, Þórólfr and their men. While the saga uses this as evidence of Æthelstan's strong Christian commitment it also depicts him as initially cautious and anxious to ensure that Þórólfr and Egill will prove trustworthy. Subsequently he entrusts leadership of his army to Egill and Þórólfr for the battle at *Vínheiðr*, or Wen Heath, a trust they are portrayed as loyally fulfilling.

Æthelstan as Military Leader

Although the saga places the battle early in Æthelstan's reign, *Vínheiðr* is generally taken to refer to Brunanburh, largely because of the similarity of the name with the Wendune of Symeon of Durham and the use of the name Óláfr, or Anlaf, to describe the enemy leader.⁶⁵ In the Table below, I compare the information contained in *Egils saga*

⁶³ *Egils saga*, 50, pp. 71-72.

⁶⁴ John Hood, relying on later ecclesiastical records and on saga evidence, describes prime-signing as having lasted in Iceland until at least the mid-fourteenth century: 'pagans engaged in trade with Christians, and servants in Christian households [...] let themselves be prime-signed (with the Cross) without being fully baptised or renouncing their old faith. Some of those thus prime-signed became catechumens and proceeded to baptism. But in any case they were admitted to part of the Mass (primsignara messa), and after death could be buried at the edge of consecrated ground.' John C. F. Hood, *Icelandic Church Saga* (London: SPCK, 1946), p. 22.

⁶⁵ *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Alistair Campbell, p. 68. Scandinavian coins for Óláfr of York use the form Anlaf, providing another link between the Scandinavian and English texts on Brunanburh. Archibald and Blunt, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* 34, pp. xxiv-xxv. See also Mark Blackburn, 'The Coinage of Scandinavian York', in *Aspects of Scandinavian York*, ed. by R. A. Hall and others, (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2004), pp. 325-49; C. E. Blunt with B. H. I. H. Stewart and C. S. S. Lyon, *Coinage in Tenth-Century England* (Oxford:

with the versions in the Old English and Anglo-Norman texts considered in Chapters One and Two above. This shows a number of similarities which may indicate that either the Anglo-Normans were aware of the saga text or the writer of the saga was drawing on Anglo-Norman material. Alternatively, both may have drawn on a common source whether oral or written. As will be seen from the Table, the main differences lie in the prominence the saga material gives to the part played in the victory by Egill, Þórólfr and their Viking troops, the details of the strategies involved before the battle and the role of Æthelstan as overall military leader:

Table 15. *Vínheiðr* and Brunanburh in *Egils saga* and the Old English and Anglo-Norman Texts

<i>Egils saga</i>	Old English and Anglo-Norman Texts
1. Æthelstan enlists Viking mercenaries into his army under the leadership of Egill and his brother Þórólfr.	1. Æthelstan's army is made up of West Saxons and Mercian troops. (ASC poem)
2. King Óláfr is described as king of the Scots.	2. Anlaf comes from Dublin and links up with Constantine, king of the Scots. (all)
3. On hearing of the invasion, Æthelstan immediately marches north. Advised by his counsellors he returns south to move north gradually gathering troops.	3 a) Latin poem depicts Æthelstan taking no action initially. (WoM) b) Æthelstan 'ex consulto cedente', deliberately retreats to make his victory the greater. (WoM)
4. The English camp is positioned to make Æthelstan's army appear very large.	4. Nothing similar.
5. Parleying is used as a delaying tactic to enable Æthelstan to arrive with the main army.	5 Nothing similar.
6. Egill and Þórólfr foil a night attack led by two rebel Northumbrian earls. Æthelstan had not yet arrived.	6. Æthelstan moved camp to avoid the threatened night attack but Anlaf killed the bishop who later encamped there and then moved on further to attack the king. (WoM)
7. Æthelstan firmly rejects Óláfr's bargaining but gives him the option of ruling in Scotland as under-king.	7. Nothing similar.
8. Æthelstan plans the battle strategy and stations the troops, insisting on splitting those led by Þórólfr and Egill despite Egill's spoken opposition to this.	8. Nothing similar.
9. Þórólfr is killed by Aðils' men; Egill avenges his death, killing Aðils and putting his	9. Nothing similar.

Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 223-28. See also A. Keith Kelly, 'Truth and A Good Story: *Egils Saga* and Brunanburh', in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Livingston, pp. 305-14.

<p>men to flight.</p> <p>10. Æthelstan is active on the battlefield, encouraging his troops.</p> <p>11. Æthelstan personally leads the final attack on Óláfr and his men.</p> <p>12. Óláfr is killed with most of his men.</p> <p>13. The account ends with the simple statement ‘Fekk Aðalsteinn konungr þar allmikinn sigr’ ‘There king Æthelstan achieved a large victory’. Æthelstan leaves the field and his troops pursue any survivors.</p>	<p>10. Æthelstan and Edmund are dominant in the battle (ASC poem).</p> <p>11. Nothing similar.</p> <p>12. Constantine’s son killed. (ASC poem). Constantine is killed (WoM). Anlaf escapes (all).</p> <p>13. Æthelstan and Edmund, exult in their valour (ASC poem). Æthelstan was enriched by a great victory (Annals of Ulster). Æthelstan and Edmund leave the field to the birds and beasts of carrion. (ASC poem).</p>
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The saga material makes no mention of Constantine, describes Óláfr/Anlaf as the king of Scotland and records that he was killed on the battlefield, while the Anglo-Norman and Irish sources record his escape back to Ireland. Although William of Malmesbury describes Constantine correctly as King of Scotland, he also records his death at Brunanburh. This has been interpreted as suggesting that William was unaware of the Brunanburh poem in the ASC but it is also possible that William and *Egils saga* were both reflecting a different version of events.⁶⁶

Egils saga presents Æthelstan as a heroic warrior king of a type familiar to a Norse or Anglo-Scandinavian audience. As king he has drawn together an army made up of detachments of his own troops and Viking mercenaries under their own leaders. As commander-in chief he decides how the different detachments are to be deployed on the battlefield and he takes an active part in the action, encouraging his men and leading the final onslaught. Æthelstan is also depicted as consulting and listening to advice from his counsellors. As a result he delays the battle in order to build up his forces. The deceptions practised on Óláfr, by the layout of Æthelstan’s camp at the battle site and the drawn-out parleying, are described as the actions of Æthelstan’s men. This prompts the British Earl Aðils, now supporting Óláfr, to characterise the English as ‘brögðottir’

⁶⁶ See the section on Brunanburh in Chapter 2.

or ‘cunning’, something which in the sagas is praised as a sign of wisdom.⁶⁷ In contrast to the delaying tactics, Æthelstan is portrayed as making quick, firm decisions when dealing face to face with Óláfr’s messengers, demanding that Óláfr return to Scotland and rule there as his representative.⁶⁸

Despite this picture of Æthelstan as an astute warrior king, the saga depicts his success as heavily dependent on the military acumen, courage and skill of Þórólfr and Egill. It is they who set guards and so intercept Óláfr’s earls on the surprise dawn attack and it is their fighting prowess which turns the battle in Æthelstan’s favour.⁶⁹ Egill’s wish to avenge the death of Þórólfr proves central to the overall outcome. He kills Adils and routs his forces causing the Scottish earls to flee. The saga later depicts Æthelstan as recognizing that he is indebted for his victory to his Viking mercenaries and he richly rewards Egill with honours and generous gifts. The death of Þórólfr, however, threatens to undermine Egill’s relationship with Æthelstan, for Egill had openly opposed Æthelstan’s decision on the battle placement of Þórólfr and his men and been over-ruled.

Æthelstan’s Style of Kingship

After pursuing the stragglers and burying his brother, Egill returns to the fortress where Æthelstan and his men are feasting. On Egill’s return Æthelstan immediately gives orders for the lower bench to be cleared for Egill’s men and gives Egill the high seat of honour facing him.⁷⁰ Egill is still angry and upset at his brother’s death and sits glowering and refusing to accept anything to drink. Æthelstan decides to defuse the situation by publicly rewarding him with a gold arm ring. This he does by putting a fine

⁶⁷ *Egils saga*, 52, p. 76. Ármann Jakobsson, *Í Leit að Konungi* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), p. 315. In the English Tradition it is Anlaf who practices deceit.

⁶⁸ *Egils saga*, 52-54, pp. 74-79.

⁶⁹ *Egils saga*, 53-54, pp. 76-79.

⁷⁰ This description is borne out by the arrangements Haraldr hárfagri is said to have made for his poets, whom he held in the highest regard and who sat on the bench opposite his high seat which was the highest place after the king. See Jacqueline Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age* (London: Batsford, 1967), pp. 71-72.

gold ring, taken from his own arm, onto his sword. He then walks across to give it to Egill over the fire. Egill then gets up and takes the ring onto his own sword before returning to his seat. It is difficult to understand fully the symbolism involved but a number of aspects are clear. Æthelstan gives a personal gift, not from his store but something he himself wore. He takes the initiative in getting up first to take the gift to Egill rather than summoning Egill to receive it. These aspects alone depict Æthelstan as wishing to honour Egill as an equal. By the ceremony with the sword he acknowledges Egill as a fine warrior and honours Egill by personally initiating these actions. This is also how Egill is shown as interpreting it. In response, Egill utters a verse in Æthelstan's honour, praising him for his action:⁷¹

Hrammtangar ⁷² lætr hanga	The god of the coat of mail lets
hrynvirgil mér brynju	the rattling halter of the tang of the bear's paw
Höðr á hauki troðnum	hang about my hawk-trodden
heiðis vingameiði.	falcon's gallows-tree.
Rítmæðis kná ek reiða,	I can twist the cord of the shield-exhauster's staff
ræðr gunnvala bræðir,	on my spear-battering, battle-choices, gallows,
gelgju seil á gálga	the feeder of the battle-hawk
geirveðrs, lofi at meira.	has the greater praise.

He turns the compliment back on Æthelstan describing him as 'the god of the coat of mail' and 'feeder of the battle-hawk' who has the greater praise because of the gift of the arm-ring (halter, cord) which he has let Egill take with his sword (shield-exhauster's staff) and which he therefore puts on his sword arm. This he describes as 'my hawk-trodden falcon's tree' and 'spear-battering, battle-choices gallows'. The language throughout emphasizes that Egill receives the gift as an acknowledgement of the contribution he has made as a warrior to Æthelstan's victory.

⁷¹ *Egils saga*, 55, pp. 81-82.

⁷² 'Hrammtangar': 'tangar' technically refers to the tang of the sword where it enters the hilt. Combined here with 'hramm' it literally means 'bear's paw'. Snorri refers to 'paw' being used to describe any part of the arm from the elbow to the finger tip. 'Hrammtangar' here may just mean 'hand', but I have translated it more descriptively to refer to Egill's hand grasping the hilt which contains the sword's tang. The kennings can then be interpreted as describing the arm ring rattling down from Æthelstan's sword onto Egill's, and so onto his arm. This seems possible linguistically and captures the action better. *Egils saga*, 55, p. 81.

Æthelstan then presents Egill with two chests of silver as compensation for his brother's death and offers Egill the opportunity to stay with him in England. This action depicts Æthelstan as accepting legal responsibility for Þórólfr's death and paying blood-money as reparation to his family. Egill then composes a further verse in praise of Æthelstan's generosity:

Gramr hefir gerðihömrum ⁷³ grundar upp um hrundit, sá er til ýgr, af augum, armsíma, mér grímu.	The king has folded up the fence-cliffs of the plain of my mask from my eyes, he is very stern towards arm-ring(s).
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In these lines Egill acknowledges Æthelstan's action as taking responsibility for Þórólfr's death and fulfilling the legal requirement of making restitution. As a result the king is described as having smoothed Egill's brow from grief (folded up the fence-cliffs of the plain of my mask) and to have been generous in his gifts (literally, 'very stern', from the poetic convention of the generous man being a destroyer of wealth). The saga describes Egill and his men remaining with Æthelstan throughout the winter during which Egill composed a *drápa* in praise of Æthelstan and the victory at *Vínheiðr* which contained the following verse and refrain:

Nú hefir foldgnárr fellda, ⁷⁴ fellr jorð und nið Ellu, hjaldrsnerandi, harra höfuðbaðmr, þrjá jofra. Aðalsteinn of vann annat, allt er lægra kynfrægjum, hér sverjum þess, hyrjar hrannbrjótr, konungmanni.	Now the earth-towerer, the land falls under Ella's kinsman, the hard battle-shocker, of kings the lead branch, has felled three princes. Æthelstan achieves more than that; all is lower, here we swear to this, O breaker of the fire's wave, than the king, the man of famous kindred.
Nú liggr hæst und hraustum hreinbraut Aðalsteini	Now lies the highest reindeer road under valiant Æthelstan.

In this *drápa* Egill celebrates several attributes of Æthelstan as king: he towers over the land; he is a fierce warrior (hard battle-shocker); he is the most important descendant of kings (of kings the lead branch); he is generous with his gold (breaker of the fire's

⁷³ *Egils saga*, 55, p. 82.

⁷⁴ *Egils saga*, 55, pp. 82-83.

wave); a descendant of famous ancestors (Ella is mentioned by name), he is now superior to everyone and everything around him (all is lower here than the king). By combining these descriptors, commonly found in skaldic verses, and applying them to Æthelstan, Egill depicts him as a good and powerful Viking king.⁷⁵ Æthelstan responds to the *drápa* in the traditional Viking way, rewarding Egill with two valuable gold rings and an expensive cloak which the king himself had personally worn.⁷⁶

The reference to Ella as Æthelstan's ancestor has provoked some scholarly debate as to which king Ella is meant. Christine Fell favours Ælle, king of the South Saxons, quoting Bede who describes him as having been the first to rule all of England south of the Humber. She mentions as a possible alternative Ælle of Deira 'instrumental in inspiring the missionary zeal of Pope Gregory'.⁷⁷ Both of these suggestions assume that Egill's reference was intended to honour Æthelstan. Sveinbjörn Egilsson identifies Ella as the Ælle, King of Northumbria, said to have been responsible for the death of Ragnar Loðbrok and killed by the Vikings at York in 867.⁷⁸ The Scandinavian sagas depicted Ælle's death at York as bringing honour to them by avenging the killing of Ragnar. The saga narratives and the frequency of the references to Ella/Elle in skaldic verse has suggested that in Scandinavian literature Elle's death was seen as a Norse victory over the English and one which could be used to justify Scandinavian right to rule in Northumbria.⁷⁹ It could be that Egill's verse was deliberately exploiting these ambiguities by naming Ælle as Æthelstan's famed ancestor. Both Anglo-Scandinavian and Norse audiences could then interpret the reference as reflecting honour on

⁷⁵ Diana Whaley 'Skaldic Poetry', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 479-502 (pp. 481-84).

⁷⁶ This personal gift of an expensive cloak, which the king himself had worn, can be seen as a sign of special honour and friendship.

⁷⁷ Christine Fell, *Egils saga*, (London: Dent, 1975), p. 187, n. 6.

⁷⁸ ASC A states that Ælle was not of royal descent but the reference to Northumbria associated with Ælle's name may have been sufficient reminder that Æthelstan currently held Northumbria as *Rex totius Britanniae*.

⁷⁹ Matthew Townend, 'Ella: An Old English Name in Old English Poetry', *Nomina*, 20 (1997), 23-25 (p. 25). Susanne Kries, "'Westward I Came Across the Sea": Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes', *Leeds Studies in English, New Series*, 34 (2003), 47-76.

themselves.⁸⁰ A Norse audience, if not an Anglo-Saxon one, might have enjoyed the humour latent in the double meaning.⁸¹

Interpreting Egill's short refrain, 'Nú liggr hæst und hraustum hreinbraut Aðalsteini', has also caused difficulty. The choice of 'hreinbraut', 'reindeer road', seems to refer to the land or mountains of Scotland suggesting that the poem assumed that Scotland was now part of Æthelstan's kingdom. However, there are examples of reindeer being used to describe a ship, and a path or road to describe the sea.⁸² If this is the meaning to be taken from 'hreinbraut', the poem could be reflecting the same tradition as Æthelweard's *Chronicon*, noted in Chapter 1, that Æthelstan had won total control of the seas around England by his victory at Brunanburh. Whatever the exact meaning the poet intended, the refrain seems designed to emphasize the description that 'allt er lægra kynfrægjum konungmanni', that Æthelstan was the dominant king in the whole country, perhaps mirroring the Anglo-Saxon claim that he was *Rex totius Britanniae*.

Æthelstan as foster-parent

Egils saga also contributes to the picture of Æthelstan as foster-father found in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. Æthelstan is said to have willingly agreed to support Egill and his friend Þorsteinn in their separate disputes over land inheritance in Norway and to have given Egill messages and tokens to take to King Hákon in support of his claim. Hákon is described as responding positively to both requests while making it clear that he is only willing to let Egill pursue his claim in the Althing because of Æthelstan's involvement:

⁸⁰ Kries, "Westward I came across the Sea", pp. 64-67.

⁸¹ Sveinbjörn, however, provides several examples of the name Ella being used very simply to mean English or England. For example: 'Ellu konr', 'descendant of Ella', referring to Magnus the Good whose mother was believed to be English; 'Ellu niðr', 'kinsman of Ella, king of England'; 'Ellu ættleifð', 'patrimony of Ella', 'England'. Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquae linguae Septentrionalis* (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers, 1860), p. 133. Egill's *drápa* may, therefore, merely be describing Æthelstan as England's king.

⁸² Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*.

Konungr segir: ‘Ekki muntu, Egill, gerask mér handgenginn; miklu hafi þér frændr meira skarð hoggit í ætt vára en þér muni duga at staðfestask hér í landi. Far þú til Íslands út ok ver þar at fǫðurarfi þínum; mun þér þá verða ekki mein at oss frændum, en hér í landi er þess ván um alla þína daga at várir frændr sé ríkastir. En fyrir sakir Aðalsteins konungs fóstura míns þá skaltu hafa hér frið í landi ok ná lofum ok landsrétti, því at ek veit at Aðalsteinn konungr hefir mikla elsku á þér.’

The king said, ‘You will not, Egill, become my retainer: you and your kinsmen have too much deeply wronged my family for you to be able to settle down in this country. Go out to Iceland and there look after your inheritance from your father; you will not there be harmed at my hands or those of my kinsmen, but in the land here you can expect my family to remain the most powerful in this country for all your days. But for the sake of King Æthelstan, my fosterfather, you will have here peace and win justice and your land rights, because I know that King Æthelstan has great feelings of attachment towards you.’⁸³

Æthelstan can be seen in this passage as a traditional foster parent, prepared to use his relationship with his foster-son to influence events. Hákon’s willingness to respond depicts his fostering relationship with Æthelstan as close and based on affection and respect.⁸⁴ The picture, noted above in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, of Hákon giving the same priority as Æthelstan to law and justice, is found also in Egill’s statement that Hákon is introducing a code of law and individual rights for all, and in his description of Hákon’s reputation as a just king who obeyed his own laws.⁸⁵ Because Æthelstan rates Egill highly, Hákon puts on one side the history of violence perpetrated on his family by Egill and his ancestors and allows him to seek justice for his land claim.

The complimentary picture of Æthelstan in *Egils saga* has to be understood within the wider context of the saga as a whole. In tracing the history of Egill and his family over four generations, the saga describes their experiences with four different kings who each exemplify a different type of kingship. Haraldr hárfagri, ambitious to make himself the first sole ruler of Norway, is portrayed as using the traditional

⁸³ *Egils saga*, 65, p. 116. *Heimskringla*, p. 136.

⁸⁴ *Egils saga*, 64-65, pp. 114-15. Æthelstan tries to persuade Egill to stay in England and take charge of the army. He gives Egill a merchant ship and cargo and they part as great friends.

⁸⁵ *Egils saga*, 65, 70, pp. 116, 126. See the section above on Hákon’s fostering in skaldic verse. The theme of Hákon as law-maker is repeated in *Fagrskinna* where, King Óláfr inn helgi is said to have respected and made use of Hákon’s laws, and in *Heimskringla* where Óláfr is described as regularly listening to a recitation of the laws which Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri had established at Trondheim.

strategies of rich reward and ruthless punishment to achieve his ends. He causes great hostility and several of the leading families, including Egill's grandfather, leave Norway in protest and settle in Iceland. This hostility is maintained through their descendants and poses a continuing threat to stability in Norway.

Haraldr's son Eiríkr displays some of the characteristics of his father Haraldr, showing the same ruthlessness, especially in his acts of violence, but overall he is depicted as a weaker person. He is volatile and inconsistent, compromises on his ideals and is unpredictable in his decisions. Considered too easily influenced by his evil wife Gunnhildr, there are occasions when he even earns her contempt by ignoring her goading. To Egill he is an object of scorn.

Hákon is the antithesis of his half-brother, Eiríkr. He is depicted as calm, reflective and decisive. He almost makes a fatal mistake by suspecting Þorsteinn, a friend of Eiríkr's henchman, of duplicity but acknowledges his error and makes amends. He marks a move away from a kingship based on fear to one based on justice and equality under the law.⁸⁶ Æthelstan is the only king whom Egill respects and willingly serves. Æthelstan is depicted as generous in acknowledging and rewarding Egill's skills as a warrior and as a poet. Æthelstan values Egill as a person and as a military leader and Egill enjoys both security and friendship with him while in England

Commenting on the different concepts of kingship depicted in the saga, John Hines sees a direct contrast being made between Haraldr's early inexperience and Eiríkr's weaknesses as king compared with the 'surefootedness' shown by Æthelstan and Hákon. He characterises Egill as craving 'a king who will fulfil the royal role properly', seeking in his dealings with Eiríkr, Æthelstan and Hákon, 'a strong, benign

⁸⁶ Hines, 'Kingship in *Egils saga*', in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. by Hines and Slay, p. 30.

and paternal figure [...] a king to give law, favour, praise and reward.’⁸⁷ Æthelstan is the only one in the saga who fits this description and as a result he earns Egill’s lasting loyalty and gratitude. Æthelstan’s reputation is further enhanced by the saga’s depiction of Hákon. He shows the same sense of fairness and justice as his foster-father and exemplifies the ideal kind of relationship between foster-son and foster-father praised elsewhere in the sagas.

The depiction of Æthelstan in *Egils saga* has resonances with Dudo’s depiction of him and his relationship with Rollo. Both texts provide a Viking perspective of Æthelstan as king. In both, it is the Viking leaders, Rollo and Egill, who are the dominant characters, advising Æthelstan and helping him to overcome his enemies. Æthelstan is depicted as valuing their support and wanting both to stay with him in England, Rollo to rule part of his territory and Egill as leader of his military forces. He is depicted as a generous friend, providing food and other supplies for Rollo in Francia and using his influence as foster-father to support Egill’s land request to Hákon. In these ways both texts depict Æthelstan as an English king who understood Viking customs and values and a man with whom Viking leaders could do business and form a lasting friendship. That Æthelstan should have been the English king chosen to be represented in this way is intriguing and is an area that deserves fuller analysis than is possible in the present thesis.

Although dismissed by historians as fiction, the saga and skaldic material analysed above provides an intimate picture of Æthelstan as king and foster-father. As written texts they provide a record of how the Norwegians and Icelanders traditionally regarded Æthelstan and how they wished future generations to remember him. The roles assigned to Æthelstan in these texts are also recorded in the formal synoptic histories of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Their accounts, however, are very brief and, although

⁸⁷ Hines, ‘Kingship in *Egils saga*’, in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. by Hines and Slay, pp. 30-32.

partly influenced by the saga material, they provide a different view and interpretation of events. It is not clear whether these differences represent separate traditions or are a deliberate way of challenging the saga versions of events. The synoptic writers had a clear ecclesiastical purpose in writing their texts and, as the following section will show, this influenced how they selected, ordered and interpreted memories of Æthelstan.

Æthelstan in the Synoptic Histories: *Historia Norwegie*, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum*, *Ágrip*

The *Historia Norwegie*, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum* and *Ágrip* may reflect their saga roots by including the same events over the same time-span as the saga narratives for Æthelstan.⁸⁸ *Ágrip* is the only one of the texts written in the vernacular and, as I will show, its depiction of Æthelstan more clearly reflects the influence of the vernacular sagas.

Historia Norwegie

The author of the *Historia Norwegie* claims in the prologue that his task has been given to him, presumably by the Agnellus whom he addresses and whom he describes as his teacher.⁸⁹ He says that his intention is to provide a genealogy of the kings, tell of the coming of Christianity to Norway and provide information on the current position of Christianity and paganism. The surviving text is incomplete. It traces the history of the kings down to the return of Óláfr inn helgi from England but does not include the account of the Christianization of Norway mentioned in the prologue.

⁸⁸ Stefanie Würth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by McTurk, pp. 155-72 (pp. 159-61).

⁸⁹ There has been considerable debate about the identity of the author of the *Historia* but at present it is still unclear who composed the text and for what audience. *A History of Norway and the Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr*, ed. and trans. by Devra Kunin and Carl Phelpstead (Viking Society for Northern Research (London: University College, 2001), pp. xix-xx. Stefanie Würth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by McTurk, p. 159.

The dates proposed for the composition of the work range from the 1150s to c.1300 with most scholars opting for a date between 1170 and 1220. However, an earlier date of 1140-1150 has recently been proposed by Inger Ekrem based on her close study of possible sources. She has suggested that the purpose of the text may have been to support the establishment of the Archdiocese of Niðaróss in 1152/3 and that the work was left unfinished once the Archdiocese was established. She derives her argument from the opening sections of the text which provide descriptions of Norway, Greenland, the Hebrides, Orkney, the Faroes and Iceland, all of which were incorporated into the Archdiocese.⁹⁰ If correct, this makes the *Historia Norwegie* the earliest of the synoptic texts.

The text recognizes Æthelstan as a very Christian king of England, who brought Hákon up as a Christian and as his own son, and who later was responsible for the baptism of Eiríkr blóðøx and his appointment as earl over Northumbria. Hákon, however, is depicted as an apostate whose Christian upbringing by Æthelstan is seen as a failure so that Hákon plays no part in the Christianization of Norway. The central role in introducing Christianity is ascribed instead to the later actions of Óláfr Tryggvason. This contrasts strongly with the accounts of Hákon in the saga texts and Ekrem, commenting on the heavy emphasis in the text on the life and work of Óláfr Tryggvason, has suggested that the text may also be an attempt to support a claim for Óláfr Tryggvason to be venerated as a saint.⁹¹

The combination of geographical and historical information in the *Historia* has suggested that the content was probably modelled on Adam of Bremen's *Gesta*.⁹² As the church in Norway was originally under the metropolitan of Hamberg-Bremen, it is

⁹⁰ *Historia Norwegie*, ed. by Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, trans. by Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2003), pp. 157-68.

⁹¹ Kunin and Phelpstead, *A History of Norway*, pp. xx-xxi. *Historia Norwegie*, pp. 207-10.

⁹² *Historia Norwegie*, pp. 168-69. Würth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by McTurk, p. 159.

likely that Adam's work would have been available and known in ecclesiastical circles. Phelpstead has taken this further and suggested that the *Historia Norwegie* was designed to counter Adam's attempts to maintain German ecclesiastical control in Scandinavia, commenting

Whereas Adam emphasised the role of Hamburg-Bremen in the Christianisation of Scandinavia in an attempt to maintain the archbishopric's hold on its northern dioceses, *Historia Norwegiae* implicitly supports Norwegian ecclesiastical independence⁹³

This interpretation of the *Historia Norwegie* may also help to explain the author's emphasis on Hákon's apostasy as his Christian upbringing by Æthelstan took place outside Norway and within the tradition of the English Church.

Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium

From internal evidence this text is generally dated to 1177-87. The author describes himself as Theodoricus, a monk. He claims that in his day no written account existed for the history of Norway and that he wished to hand down a record for future generations. He terminated his history with the events of 1130, claiming that he did not wish to recount the civil violence and ecclesiastical discord which followed the death of King Sigurðr, son of Magnús berfœtr.⁹⁴

The twelfth century was a period of struggle between the church and kings over ecclesiastical independence. Theodoricus dedicates his work and pledges his loyalty to Eysteinn, Archbishop of Niðaróss, who was strongly committed to freeing the church in Norway from royal control and aligning it fully with Rome and the papacy.⁹⁵ In his account Theodoricus portrays the introduction of Christianity into Norway as a divine

⁹³ Kunin and Phelpstead, *A History of Norway*, pp. xxi-xxii. *Historia Norwegie*, pp. 162-68.

⁹⁴ David and Ian McDougall, *The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: University College, 1998), p. vii.

⁹⁵ Wurth suggests Theodoricus may also have intended his work to support the establishment of the archdiocese at Niðaróss. Wurth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by McTurk, p. 160. See also Sverre Bagge, 'Theodoricus Monachus: Clerical Historiography in Twelfth Century Norway', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 14 (1989), 113-33 (pp. 114-15, 128-33).

work achieved through two outstanding kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi and sustained despite the weaknesses of individual rulers.

Theodoricus, like the author of the *Historia Norwegie*, provides only a brief overview of the early kings. Out of thirty-four chapters, six cover the early history of Norway from the time of Haraldr hárfagri to the death of Gunnhildr. Within this, there is a brief mention of Hákon being fostered by Æthelstan and of his return to Norway. He is depicted as a good king whose reign was peaceful but there is no reference at all to his Christian upbringing by Æthelstan or to any attempt by Hákon to bring Christianity to the country. These omissions are in keeping with Theodoricus's overall emphasis on Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi as God's chosen agents for the evangelization of Norway.

The *Historia Norwegie* and the *Historia de Antiquitate Regum* are the earliest surviving examples of national ecclesiastical histories of Norway. The use of Latin indicates that they were intended for an ecclesiastical, or well-educated, audience. The negative picture they provide of Hákon's Christian upbringing by Æthelstan may have been dictated by the overall purpose of these works. As a result they appear in conflict with popular tradition and in particular with the version of events provided in *Ágrip*, the only synoptic text written in the vernacular.

Ágrip

The date of c.1190 generally given to the composition of *Ágrip* makes it the latest of the synoptics and the earliest of the vernacular texts. Matthew Driscoll suggests that the extant manuscript, which covers the years c.880-1136, is only part of an original text which narrated the reigns of the kings from the accession of Haraldr hárfagri up to the time of Sverrir.⁹⁶ If so, *Ágrip* covered the same period of history as *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* and, as will be seen below, my own study of the text suggests that the

⁹⁶ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* ed. by M. J. Driscoll, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: University College, 1995), p. x.

author not only used the other synoptic texts for his work but drew some of his material from saga sources.

The late twelfth century, during which *Ágrip* is thought to have been written, was marked by considerable tension between King Sverrir Sigurðsson and the Norwegian episcopate. Magnús Stefánson describes Nicholas Breakspear's papal legation of 1152/3 to establish the Archbishopric based on Niðaróss as part of papal policy to bring Scandinavia into closer union with Rome.⁹⁷ Based on his analysis of the content and use of language, Driscoll characterises the text as non-aristocratic in origin and Norwegian in its sympathies but still supporting a clerical agenda on ecclesiastical independence.⁹⁸

Würth also argues for a Norwegian rather than an Icelandic origin for the work on the grounds that the text makes little reference to Iceland and gives some prominence to Niðaróss.⁹⁹ Her comments, however, appear to overlook the fact that, like the *Historia Norwegie*, the text credits Óláfr Tryggvason, rather than Óláfr inn helgi, with bringing Christianity to Norway. When the 1152 papal legation designated the church where Óláfr inn helgi was buried as the metropolitan centre in Niðaróss for the new archbishopric, the Icelandic church was incorporated into the archdiocese and lost its previous independence. The major role assigned to Óláfr Tryggvason in *Ágrip* may, therefore, also have been a deliberate move by the author to celebrate Icelandic ecclesiastical status and support Óláfr Tryggvason's rival claim to sainthood.

⁹⁷ This was led by the English prelate Nicholas Breakspear, later Pope Adrian IV. For details see Anders Bergquist, 'The Papal Legate: Nicholas Breakspear's Scandinavian Mission', in *Adrian IV: The English Pope (1154-1159)*, ed. by Brenda Bolton and Anne J. Duggan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 40-48; Magnús Stefánson, 'Church Organisation and Function' in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and others (London: Garland, 1993), pp. 88-92 (p. 89). For continuing ecclesiastical links between Norway and England see Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 100-04, 111-12. Antonia Gransden, *A History of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds, 1182-1256* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 18-19 and n. 11.

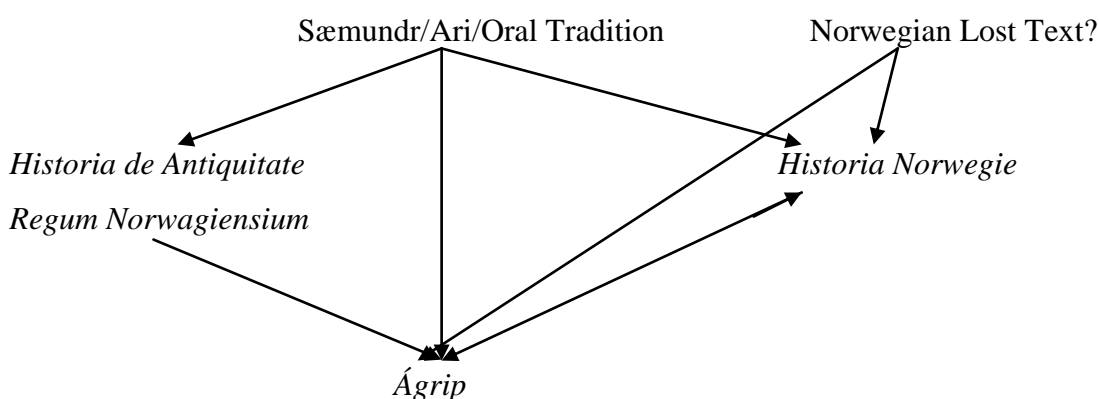
⁹⁸ Driscoll, *Ágrip*, pp. xi-xii.

⁹⁹ Würth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by McTurk, p. 160.

Ágrip is the only synoptic text to ascribe a significant role to Hákon in introducing Christianity to Norway. In this, the author departs from the ecclesiastical models provided by the *Historia Norwegie* and the *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium* and has more in common with the version of events found in the *Heimskringla*. Nevertheless, *Ágrip*'s depiction of Æthelstan as Hákon's foster-father is very limited compared with the saga texts, and this further supports Driscoll's view that, overall, the author was writing his history from an ecclesiastical point of view.

Textual Inter-relationships of the Synoptic Histories

Phelpstead in his introduction to the *Historia Norwegie* notes 'the exceptionally complex scholarship debate' which surrounds the interrelationships between the different synoptic histories and between these and Icelandic historical writing. Drawing on Andersson and Ulset, he summarises the main theories on the relationships between the synoptic texts and earlier written or oral sources,¹⁰⁰ and I have represented these diagrammatically below:



In his detailed analysis of the different theories, Andersson discusses the implications of a 'Norwegian Lost Text' as a source for *Historia Norwegie* and *Ágrip* which was independent of the Icelandic texts of Sæmundr and Ari and of oral tradition. He has concluded that the attempt to identify a separate Norwegian tradition founders, as do all

¹⁰⁰ Kunin and Phelpstead, *A History of Norway*, pp. xiii-xvi.

the other theories, on lack of any conclusive evidence, commenting that, ‘we are obliged to conclude that the last fifty years of kings’ saga research have left us empty-handed’.¹⁰¹

Because these analyses concentrated on the links between the synoptic texts, they failed to take account of the links between the vernacular *Ágrip* and the vernacular saga texts. I will argue later that the way in which *Ágrip* sometimes follows the Latin texts and sometimes the vernacular, helps to identify the existence of separate traditions and to emphasize the differences in the interpretation given to the same events by the ecclesiastical and the saga narratives. It also highlights how scholars have sometimes, perhaps unwittingly, promoted one tradition over another depending on the texts they have chosen to use.

Æthelstan in the Synoptic Histories

Compared with the saga texts the synoptics provide very brief details on Æthelstan and then only as part of the historical overview of kings before Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi who are their main focus. All three texts record Hákon being brought up by Æthelstan, his return to Norway to take the throne and Æthelstan’s negotiations with Eiríkr over Northumbria.

Æthelstan’s Fostering of Hákon

As I show in the following analysis, there is a lack of clarity in the synoptic accounts of Hákon’s fostering over whether Hákon is an elder or younger son of Haraldr hárfagri, whether Hákon was fostered or adopted and whether Haraldr or Æthelstan initiated the arrangement:

¹⁰¹ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘Kings’ Sagas’, in *Old Norse Icelandic Literature*, ed. by Clover and Lindow, p. 211.

TEXT		
<i>Historia Norwegie</i>	Secundus Hacon, quem Adalstanus rex Anglorum sibi in filium adoptauit ¹⁰² [Haraldr's] second [son was] Hákon whom Æthelstan, king of the English, adopted as his son.	The <i>Historia Norwegie</i> describes Hákon as Haraldr's second son, and makes Æthelstan the main actor, claiming that he adopted Hákon as his own son, possibly reflecting the fact that Æthelstan was traditionally said to have had no son of his own.
<i>Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium</i>	praedictus vero Haraldus miserat unum ex filiis suis Halstano regi Anglorum, Hacon nomine, ut nutriretur et disceret morem gentis ¹⁰³ But the aforementioned Haraldr had sent one of his sons, called Hákon, to Æthelstan king of the English to be brought up (there) and learn the customary ways of the people.	The <i>Historia de Antiquitate</i> describes Hákon as one of Haraldr's sons. Haraldr is made the author of the action, sending Hákon to Æthelstan to be brought up in England and learn the customs of the country. Haraldr fostered other sons with leading men in Norway and no reason is given for his choosing a Christian king in England to bring up Hákon.
<i>Ágrip</i>	Var Eiríkr blóðøx [í] elzta lagi sona hans, annarr Hákon í yngsta lagi , er Aðalsteinn Englands konungr tók í sonar stað , ¹⁰⁴ Eiríkr blóðøx was the eldest of his [Haraldr's] sons and Hákon the youngest whom Æthelstan king of England took as a son. en Hákon bróðir hans var vestr í Englandi með Aðalsteini konungi, er faðir hans lífs hafði hann sendan til fósturs . ¹⁰⁵ and Hákon his [Eiríkr's] brother was west in England with King Æthelstan, to whom his father, while alive, had sent him to be fostered	<i>Ágrip</i> describes Hákon as Haraldr's youngest son and this is also how he is described in <i>Fagrskinna</i> and <i>Heimskringla</i> . The text then has two separate references: the first states that Æthelstan 'tók í sonar stað' 'took [Hákon] in the place of a son', echoing the entry in <i>Historia Norwegie</i> ; the second refers to Haraldr 'sendan til fósturs', sending Hákon for fostering, as in the <i>Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium</i> .

The inconsistencies noted above may reflect a lack of importance given by their authors to the relationship between Hákon and Æthelstan. Alternatively, the apparent confusion over whether Hákon was adopted or fostered may reflect a tradition, articulated only in Saxo Grammaticus, that Hákon had a right of inheritance to the throne of England.

Fostering and Adoption

Jacqueline Simpson has noted that in Norway the earliest laws recognised that a child who was adopted had the same legal rights as those born into the family and that this

¹⁰² *Historia Norwegie*, 11, pp. 80-81.

¹⁰³ 'Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium', *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae Latine Conscripta*, ed. by Gustav Storm (Kristiania: Brøgger, 1880), 2, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík: Íslenzka Förritafélag, 1984), 2, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ *Ágrip*, 5, p. 7.

was often used to give illegitimate children the same rights as a man's legitimate offspring.¹⁰⁶ Thomas Charles-Edwards, commenting on the use of adoption in Anglo-Saxon England has stated that unrestricted rights of inheritance by an adopted child do not appear to have existed in Anglo-Saxon England and any such inheritance could be challenged by other children or collateral kin.¹⁰⁷ This means that if Hákon had been adopted by Æthelstan he would be considered in Norway entitled to inherit the English throne on Æthelstan's death; in England he would not, unless Æthelstan specifically left the kingdom to him in his will. Even then it would still have been open to challenge from Æthelstan's children, if he had any, or from his brothers as collateral kin.

Commenting on J. Goody's studies and theory of 'strategies of inheritance', Charles-Edwards has drawn attention to how adoption could be specifically used as a method for determining inheritance and by-passing collateral kin:

Throughout Europe and Asia in antiquity, so far at least as the evidence will take us, men might use adoption to ensure that they had lineal heirs when otherwise their property would pass to collateral heirs. The adopted son would have the right to inherit to the exclusion of brother or cousin.¹⁰⁸

Adoption is here seen as a way for a childless man to ensure his inheritance passed to a person of his own choice rather than to other members of his wider family. Æthelstan's childlessness seems to have been well known. As will be seen later, Saxo Grammaticus specifically refers to Æthelstan adopting Hákon so he could have an heir of his own choosing to whom to leave the throne of England in his will. This appears to be either a Danish tradition or something created by Saxo and there is nothing to support it in the English, Continental or Norse sources. Hákon is not even mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman texts but an entry added into William of Malmesbury's *Gesta*

¹⁰⁶ Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age*, pp. 141-42.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Anglo-Saxon Kinship Revisited', in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration to the Eighth Century*, ed. by John Hines (Weighbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), pp. 171-210 (p. 173).

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 76. J. Goody, *Production and Reproduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 86-98; *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), pp. 71-73, 120-23.

Regum comments on Æthelstan's childlessness, claiming that he deliberately did not marry but made arrangements for his half-brothers to inherit the throne.¹⁰⁹

The same ambiguities over rights of inheritance appear to apply if Hákon was fostered rather than adopted. The rights of inheritance for a fostered child in Anglo-Saxon England appear to have been very limited. Charles-Edwards has commented that although fosterage 'did generate kinship, it was of vastly less importance than in Celtic countries', and he notes that surviving evidence of foster-children benefiting through legal inheritance was rare.¹¹⁰ The rights of inheritance for a fostered child appear also to have been restricted in Norway. The earliest surviving codified laws distinguish between the rights of inheritance of legal heirs and those of foster-children with foster-children's rights being set at a minimum financial level and anything beyond that needing the agreement of the foster-father's legitimate heirs in order for it to be legally binding.¹¹¹

It would appear, therefore, that Hákon would not have had any rights to the English throne as Æthelstan's foster-son while as an adopted son, his rights to succession would have been open to different interpretations. The Norse texts make no claim for him to be seen as Æthelstan's heir and the only Norse textual evidence for a king of Norway claiming the right to rule in England is found in the saga accounts of Magnús góði, the son of Óláfr helgi. He is said to have challenged Edward the Confessor for the throne but to have honourably withdrawn his claim in Edward's favour.

While the only claim that Hákon was Æthelstan's intended heir is in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, the ambiguity in the synoptic versions on whether

¹⁰⁹ *Gesta Regum*, ii, 140, I, 228-29 and Appendix 1, pp. 824-25.

¹¹⁰ Charles-Edwards, 'Anglo-Saxon Kinship Revisited', in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration to the Eighth Century*, ed. by Hines, p. 179.

¹¹¹ Laurence M. Larson, *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), pp. 119, 337.

Hákon was fostered or adopted may be an echo of an earlier tradition of Norse right to rule in England. As noted above, both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* refer to a history of Danish and Norse rule in Northumbria by way of comment on the appropriateness of Æthelstan giving Eiríkr the right to rule there. It would seem, therefore, that by the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries any Norse tradition on a claim to the English throne had ceased to be a central theme and been replaced by the saga representations of Haraldr hárfagri and Æthelstan as friends and kings of equal standing and power.

Hákon's Return to Norway

Hákon's return to Norway to take his father's kingdom from Eiríkr is very briefly recounted in the synoptic narratives. All three texts imply that there was political unrest in Norway because of Eiríkr's rule and the unacceptable behaviour of his wife,

Gunnhildr. As a result, Hákon was asked to return to take over the throne:

<i>Historia Norwegie</i>	<i>De Antiquitate Regum</i>	<i>Ágrip</i>
Hic cum annum regnasset, <et> ob nimiam insolenciam uxoris nemini placuisset, a fratre suo Hacone, alumpno Adalstani regis Anglie, idem consiliantibus Norwegie primatibus, regno privatus in Angliam profugus secessit. ¹¹² He [Eiríkr], when he had ruled for a year, <and> because of the extreme insolence of his wife had pleased no-one, deprived of the kingdom by his brother Hákon, the foster-child of Æthelstan King of England, the leading men of Norway advising the same, withdrew to England as a fugitive.	quem Norvagienses revocaverunt propter crudelitatem fratris et praecipue uxoris ejus Gunnildar et constituerunt sibi regem. ¹¹³ [Hákon] whom the Norwegians recalled because of the cruelty of his brother, and in particular of his wife Gunnildr, and installed as their king.	Þá kvøddu vitrir menn Hákon aptr í land með leynd tveim vetrum eptir andlát Haralds hárfagra, ok hann kømr tveim skipum vestan [...] ¹¹⁴ Then wise men called Hákon back to Norway in secrecy two years after the death of Haraldr harfagri, and he came with two ships from the West [...]

The accounts in the synoptic texts differ from *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* in two important respects: they describe Hákon returning in response to the wishes of his own people while the saga texts describe him returning on his own initiative and spending almost a year winning support for his bid for the throne; secondly, the synoptics make

¹¹² *Historia Norwegie*, 12, pp. 82-83.

¹¹³ *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium*, 2, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ *Ágrip*, 5, p. 7.

no mention of Æthelstan's involvement while the sagas give him an active role in securing Hákon's return. These differences in emphasis reflect the different purposes and intended audiences of the saga writers and the synoptic historians. The saga writers were writing for, and using the traditions of, a people used to travelling and living in a wider North Sea world. The synoptic historians were seeking to break new ground by providing a history of the Christianization of Norway through the Norwegian kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi.

Æthelstan and Eiríkr blóðøx

<i>Historia Norwegie</i> : Eiríkr, deprived of his kingdom, came to England as a fugitive; there he was well received by his brother's mentor and having been washed in the font of baptism was put in charge of the whole of Northumbria as earl. ¹¹⁵

<i>Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium</i> : Eiríkr sailed to England and having been received by the king with honour, he died there. ¹¹⁶

<i>Ágrip</i> : Eiríkr blóðøx, when he fled the country, went west with his ships to England and there spent his time raiding and plundering. There he asked for the mercy of the English king, just as King Aðalsteinn had promised him and received from the king an earldom in Northumbria. ¹¹⁷
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The two Latin texts describe Eiríkr being honourably received by the king in England. Although neither names Æthelstan, the reference to his being well-received by 'his brother's mentor' in the *Historia Norwegie* obliquely identifies him.¹¹⁸ The vernacular *Ágrip* represents Eiríkr as a fugitive and raiding in Britain before throwing himself on Æthelstan's mercy 'sem Aðalsteinn konungr hafði hönunum heitit'.¹¹⁹ The reference to Eiríkr having already been promised mercy ('miskunnar') depicts Æthelstan as actively in contact with Eiríkr to make a deal with him, a detail which provides a link with *Fagrskinna* where Æthelstan is said to have sent friendly words to Eiríkr through his foster-son. The *Ágrip* text also suggests that Æthelstan made a deal because of Eiríkr's raiding in Britain, reflecting the similar statements in *Heimskringla* and *Óláfs saga*

¹¹⁵ *Historia Norwegie*, 12, pp. 82-83.

¹¹⁶ *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium*, 2, p.7.

¹¹⁷ *Ágrip*, 7, p.12.

¹¹⁸ 'a pedagogo fratris sui bene susceptus'. *Historia Norwegie*, 12, pp. 82-83.

¹¹⁹ 'Just as King Æthelstan had promised him'. *Ágrip*, 7, p. 12.

Tryggvasonar en mesta. The *Historia Norwegie* is the only synoptic text which refers to Eiríkr being baptised, something which is found in all three Kings' Saga texts. It seems therefore that although the synoptics reflect the saga version of events, Eiríkr's exile to England was a minor detail and this is further underlined in the *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium* which makes no mention of Eiríkr as earl of Northumbria and merely records that he died in England.

Æthelstan as Christian King

Given the ecclesiastical background to the synoptic texts, it might be expected that they would provide some information on Hákon's upbringing and education by Æthelstan which had enabled him to return to Norway as its first Christian king. Far, however, from celebrating this fact, the synoptics treat it as a blot on the history of Norway. The *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norvagiensium* makes no mention of Hákon's Christianity, while the *Historia Norwegie* is very explicit and roundly condemns Hákon for abandoning the faith in which he had been brought up by Æthelstan:

Hic a christianissimo rege in Anglia officiosissime educatus in tantum errorem incurrit, ut miserrima commutatione eterno transitorium preponeret regnum ac detinende dignitatis cura —proh dolor— appostata factus, ydolorum seruituti subactus, diis et non deo deseruiet. Qui quamuis labilis regni ceca ambitione a durabili dignitate eternaliter labefactus, cunctis tamen in paganismo degentibus diligencius leges patrias et scita plebis obseruabat regibus.¹²⁰

He, very dutifully educated by a most Christian king in England, was involved in such great error that by a most wretched change he preferred a transitory kingdom to an eternal one and through his concern for retaining his position — alas — he became apostate, conquered by slavery to idols, and zealously served gods and not God. And he, although from blind ambition for a fickle kingdom he eternally slipped away from a lasting position of glory, nevertheless, complied with the laws of his country and the decrees of the people more diligently than all the kings who passed their days in pagan times.

Æthelstan is praised as a most Christian king, who brought Hákon up with great care within the Christian faith, but Hákon proved a failure, preferring worldly success to eternal life. This damning criticism of Hákon as an apostate is further extended in the

¹²⁰ *Historia Norwegie*, 13, pp. 82-83.

account of Hákon in the *Historia Norwegie* where his death as the result of a boy's spear is described as a righteous punishment for his apostasy.¹²¹ For the author of the *Historia* Hákon becomes a warning of the dangers of worldly ambition and the eternal punishment it brings.

Ágrip, is more moderate in its judgement and in its account of Hákon as Christian king is closer to the details found in *Heimskringla*. *Ágrip* describes Hákon initially making converts, building churches and bringing a bishop and priests from England. The writer comments that the burning of the churches and the killing of the clerics by those opposed to Christianity brought Hákon's missionary work to a standstill, 'hann mátti eigi því halda fyr illvirkjum þeira'.¹²² Hákon's heathen wife is also said to have been a main cause of Hákon's religious difficulties and he is depicted as trying to compromise his religious practices in order to preserve his Christian beliefs and at the same time fulfil his kingly duties. An area of particular difficulty for him was the expectation that he would lead the blood sacrifices to ensure the fertility of the crops and the safety of the kingdom.¹²³ *Ágrip* also follows the accounts of Hákon's death in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* where Hákon is described as acknowledging his failures

¹²¹ 'Quod factum diuina ulcione tali euentu accidisse lippis et tunsoribus liquido apparet, ubi puerum Christum denegare ausus hic deuictis hostibus ab ignobili puero deuinceretur.' 'It is clearly visible to the whole world that this action occurred with such a consequence through divine vengeance, when he who had dared to reject the Christ child, although his enemies had been subdued, was completely defeated by an obscure child.' *Historia Norwegie*, 13, pp. 84-85, 140, n. 10. The saying 'lippis et tunsoribus liquido apparet', 'clearly visible to the nearly blind and the barbers', was a satirical idiom to describe something known by everyone. In Roman times barbers were reputed to know everything that was happening from the chatter of their customers.

¹²² 'he could not continue this activity as a result of their evil work'. *Ágrip*, 5, p. 8.

¹²³ *Ágrip*, 5, p. 8. For a detailed discussion, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *A Piece of Horse Liver: Myth, Ritual and Folklore in Old Icelandic Sources*, trans. by Terry Gunnell and Joan Turville-Petre (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan Félagsvísindastofnun, 1998), pp. 57-80. The picture of Hákon's efforts to keep his faith by judicious compromise is reminiscent of a similar account in *Íslendingabók* in which the Icelanders reach a compromise at the Althing by agreeing to adopt Christianity while retaining the existing laws on the exposure of children and the eating of horse-flesh and allowing the right to sacrifice in private. *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), I, 14-17.

to live up to his Christianity and seeking God's mercy.¹²⁴ However, *Ágrip* also reflects the harsher judgement of the *Historia Norwegie* by describing Hákon's apostasy as the cause of the many difficulties he experienced during his reign.

The dismissal of Hákon's Christianity in the two Latin texts can be seen as in keeping with their overall aim of maintaining ecclesiastical orthodoxy by celebrating Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi as the true founders of Christianity in Norway. The vernacular *Ágrip*, while still celebrating the centrality of the Óláfr's for the history of Christianity in Norway, also follows the saga tradition in recognizing Hákon as the first Christian king who tried to introduce Christianity gradually, starting with those around him. His failure is ascribed, not to Hákon's wanton abandonment of his good Christian upbringing by Æthelstan, as implied in the *Historia Norwegie*, but to the opposition to his new religion among the leading men in Norway. The people are depicted as not yet ready for such a radical change to their religious practice and the introduction of Christianity is later depicted as successful only when imposed by force by the two Óláfrs.

Although, compared with the saga and skaldic texts, the synoptic histories are low-key in their depiction of Æthelstan, they still retain his significance in Norwegian history as the foster-father of Hákon. Æthelstan is recognized as a very Christian king who had baptized Hákon and brought him up to be a Christian and a good king. The main difference between the saga, skaldic and synoptic texts is in the emphasis they give to Æthelstan's role and influence. In this they can be seen as demonstrating the

¹²⁴ *Fagrskinna* and *Ágrip* both describe Hákon's response to friends who offer to take his body to England for burial at a church: 'Ek em eigi þess verðr, kvað hann, svá lifða ek sem heiðnir menn í mǫrgu, skal mik ok fyr því svá jarða sem heiðna menn. Vætti ek mér þaðan af meiri miskunnar af guði sjálfum en ek sjá verðr', "'I am not worthy of that'", he said. "In many ways I have lived like the heathens, therefore I should be buried like the heathens. In this way I could hope for greater mercy than I deserve at God's hands". *Ágrip*, 6, p. 11. *Fagrskinna Nóreghskonunga Tal*, 13, pp. 93-94.

same kind of authorial individuality of purpose noted in the Anglo-Norman and Continental sources.

The positive depictions of Æthelstan in the Old Icelandic/Norse texts are challenged by the Danish version of events provided by Saxo Grammaticus. He portrays Æthelstan as morally corrupt, weak and concerned more about social niceties than kingly virtues. The following section provides a study of Saxo Grammaticus and his *Gesta Danorum*. It identifies how he fits his depiction of Æthelstan into the broader narrative he provides of the historical relationships between Denmark and Britain. This he portrays as one of Danish superiority—military, political and moral.

Section Three: Saxo Grammaticus and His Depiction of England and Æthelstan in the *Gesta Danorum*

Introduction

Birgit Sawyer has described Saxo Grammaticus as ‘Denmark’s most important medieval author’, but one about whom there is very little information.¹²⁵ Saxo gives only a few details about himself and his family in the *Prefacio* to his work. There he describes himself as a *clericus* attached to the household of Absalon, Bishop of Roskilde and Archbishop of Lund, and mentions that his father and grandfather served with the army under King Waldemar (Valdemar) I (1157-1182), but gives no further details.¹²⁶ He states that he wrote the *Gesta Danorum* at the request of Archbishop Absalon, during the reign of Waldemar (Valdemar) II to whom he dedicates his work.¹²⁷ His narrative covers the history of the kingdom of Denmark from its legendary foundation by the eponymous hero, Dan, down to 1185 and the reign of Kanutus (Canute) VI, son of Waldemar I and elder brother of Waldemar II, Saxo’s patron. In his

¹²⁵ Birgit Sawyer, ‘Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et D’Histoire*, 63 (1985), 685-705.

¹²⁶ *Saxonis Grammatici Historie Danice*, ed. by Alfred Holder (Strassburg: Trübner, 1886), ‘Prefacio’, p. 4.

¹²⁷ *Historie Danice*, ‘Prefacio’, pp. 1, 3.

text Saxo traces the various actions taken by the rulers of Denmark to establish and maintain an empire, celebrates the emergence of Denmark as a major centre for Christianity in Scandinavia and describes how a balance between the powers of Church and king was achieved through the actions of Absalon and Waldemar I.

Saxo depicts his patron Absalon as such a key figure in Denmark's political, ecclesiastical and military success that Sawyer has suggested Saxo's overall purpose was to celebrate Absalon and his achievements.¹²⁸ Saxo himself claimed a wider and more important role for his work stating in his *Prefacio* that he was writing a history of Denmark from earliest times up to his own day so that the Danes were seen to have a history of equal status with that of other countries.¹²⁹ His narrative includes accounts of Denmark's relationships with Norway, Sweden, Germany and Eastern Europe and traces the development of Danish involvement in Britain. Despite this, Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* has been the subject of relatively little scholarly study in this country. His text was seen as having little direct relevance for the study of British history. This may have been because his use of poetry, saga and oral tradition as major sources, his patently Danish version of events and his factual inaccuracies were regarded as undermining any claim for his work to be regarded as historically reliable.¹³⁰ Although written to give Denmark a history of at least equal status to its neighbours, his work is equally important as a twelfth-century version of the history and nature of Danish-English relationships which deserves closer attention than has been the case in English scholarship so far. The following sections analyse Saxo's choice of content and show how he develops the history of Anglo-Danish relationships from one of Danish military superiority to one based on political authority and finally claims of legal possession. In this narrative, Æthelstan acts as a catalyst. His reign is presented as a turning point

¹²⁸ Birgit Sawyer, 'Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo', pp. 691-93.

¹²⁹ *Historie Danice*, 'Prefacio', p. 1.

¹³⁰ Peter Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD 700-1100*, pp. 14-17.

leading eventually to the loss of any Danish hopes of holding territorial power in Britain.

Saxo as National Historian

Saxo's claim to be the first to write a national history of the Danes, also gives his work a special role in establishing and transmitting a national sense of Danish identity. His use of oral and saga material enables him to record and transmit traditional memories of the past handed down through generations. Wodak and others have noted in their research into modern day views on nationality that, 'historical or mythicised recollections which are stored in the collective memory of social groups are of particular importance for the construction of national identity'.¹³¹ James Fentress and Chris Wickham have described the importance of such social memories in creating meaning and preserving a people's feelings and beliefs about the past.¹³² They comment 'whether or not to accept a certain tradition or version of that tradition was, to a large extent, a question of authority'.¹³³ Saxo claimed to have that authority based on his researches and use of Icelandic sources, for he claimed that the Icelanders were famed not only for their interest in the history of others but, more importantly, for the accuracy of their memories.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Ruth Wodak and others, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 157.

¹³² Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, pp. 71-78.

¹³³ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 78.

¹³⁴ 'Cunctarum quippe nacionum res gestas cognosse memorieque mandare, uoluptatis loco reputant: non minus glorię iudicantes alienas uirtutes disserere, quam proprias exhibere', 'Indeed they reckon it a form of pleasure to find out the histories of all peoples and commit them to memory: judging it no less glorious to disseminate the virtues of others than to exhibit their own'. *Historie Danice*, 'Prefacio', p. 4. Bjarni Guðnason, 'The Icelandic Sources of Saxo Grammaticus', in *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author*, ed. by Friis-Jensen, pp. 79-93 (p. 81).

Saxo's narrative employs a number of the strategies of sameness and difference which Wodak identified as key constituents of discourse on national identity.¹³⁵ Starting with the story of Dan as the founder of the Danish race and kingdom and continuing from the heroic past to contemporary events in the reign of Waldemar II, Saxo creates a sense of a common past, present and future, a common culture and a common territory. His narrative also develops the concept of a *homo nationalis* both by portraying the virtues which lay behind Danish achievements and by emphasizing the superiority of the Danes compared with the Norwegians, Swedes, Saxons, Britons and English.¹³⁶

Eric Christiansen has noted that Saxo, in his narrative, provides continuity between Viking and Christian *mores* by stressing the virtues of courage, integrity, loyalty, generosity, law-abidingness and discipline and condemning the corresponding vices of cowardice, trickery, treachery, avarice, deceit and indiscipline.¹³⁷ The duty of avenging the death of family or a friend is depicted as common to both Viking and Christian times, while cunning is praised or censured depending on the individual circumstances. Christiansen has also commented on the use of *fortuna* as a key concept. Saxo variously interprets this as 'the blind revolutions of the wheel of fate, the personal luck of a ruler or hero, or the qualities and attributes of success—courage, wealth, strength', depending on the context. Christiansen added that while the fortune of the king and his people were depicted as inextricably linked across Viking and Christian

¹³⁵ Wodak's definition of the constituent parts of discourse on national identity include the construction of a common past, present and future; a common culture; a common territory; and the concept of a *homo nationalis*. Wodak and others, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, p. 186.

¹³⁶ Wodak has identified this use of a 'discourse of difference' and a 'discourse of sameness' as complementary ways in which peoples construct a sense of their own common heritage and national identity. 'The discursive constructs of national identities emphasise foremost national uniqueness and intra-national uniformity, and largely tend to ignore intra-national difference (the discourse of sameness). Above all, however, the greatest possible differences from other nations are frequently simultaneously constructed through discourses of difference, and especially difference from those foreign nations that seem to exhibit the most striking similarities.' Wodak and others, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, pp. 3, 187.

¹³⁷ *Saxo Grammaticus Danorum Regum Heroumque Historia, Books x-xvi*, trans. and commentary by Eric Christiansen, British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 84, 3 vols (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1980-81), I, 144-48.

contexts, Saxo portrayed Christianity as enhancing the fortune of king and people by testifying to the work of Providence and providing support in adversity.¹³⁸ Leaders and kings who promote Danish territorial power and espouse Christianity are praised and shown to be successful, while those guilty of military and political lethargy, or opposition to Christianity, are dismissed as unworthy kings who usually face adversity and defeat.¹³⁹ From Christiansen's perspective, therefore, Saxo's work can be seen as portraying a continuum celebrating the national qualities, values and beliefs exemplified in Denmark's heroic past and in its Christian present.

Inge Skovgaard-Petersen has shown that Saxo's *Gesta* can be interpreted both as reflecting the ecclesiastical tradition of history as a moral agent while at the same time fulfilling literary and ideological purposes for his own time.¹⁴⁰ Sawyer similarly saw Saxo's work as motivated from a number of different standpoints. She has suggested that he should be seen as 'a man of independent ideas', but one who still needed to keep the support of his patrons.¹⁴¹ These analyses of the underlying aspects of Saxo's text demonstrate that in creating a national history that might appeal to ecclesiastical, secular and political audiences, Saxo left a somewhat complicated text, open to different interpretations by his readers. In this, Saxo's work reflects both classical and medieval concepts of the formative and moral purposes of history.

Saxo and his Sources

Saxo's own description of his sources mentions only letters acquired by Absalon's successor, Archbishop Andreas Sunesøn, while travelling abroad, poems in the old language of Denmark, oral accounts provided by Archbishop Absalon and traditions

¹³⁸ Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, I, 144.

¹³⁹ For example, Saxo's praise of Ericus Barn's change in behaviour after conversion, *Historie Danice*, ix, 94, pp. 315-16. Haraldus Blaatand's conversion which brings him rewards and the account of Sueno, his son, who is first punished for his paganism but later rewarded when he converts to Christianity, *Historie Danice*, x, 99-101, pp. 332-38.

¹⁴⁰ Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Saxo, Historian of the Patria', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, 2 (1969), 54-77.

¹⁴¹ Birgit Sawyer, 'Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo', p. 705.

handed down by the Icelanders. In claiming to be the first to write a Latin history of the Danes, Saxo makes no mention of a number of Latin texts which Christiansen has shown Saxo used but without making acknowledgement.¹⁴² These are very likely to have been easily available to him: the *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* of Adam of Bremen, the Latin chronicles of Roskilde and Lethrense and the *Brevis Historia* being written by his contemporary at Lund, Sven Aggesen. Instead Saxo chides others as slothful and sluggish and comments that if Latin had been available earlier, there would have been innumerable books in existence recording the history of Denmark and its people.¹⁴³ It may be that Saxo regarded his work as replacing any previous attempts at a history of Denmark. He could reasonably claim that the monastic chronicles and Sven's work provided only limited coverage while his work was designed to trace the history of the Danes from the beginning of their kingdom up to his time. Adam of Bremen's text provided a wider range of material than the other Latin sources but Saxo, or his patrons, may have considered it too German in its perspective. Denmark had only relatively recently detached itself from the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Hamburg-Bremen with the establishment of the Archbishopric at Lund. Accredited to the efforts of King Ericus the Good, Saxo describes the event as a welcome release from foreign ecclesiastical control by the Saxons and one which gave papal recognition to Denmark as a strong and independent centre of Christianity by conferring on it ecclesiastical jurisdiction over both Norway and Sweden.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, I, 152-56.

¹⁴³ *Historie Danice*, iv, 35, p.117. 'Quod si patriam hanc fortuna Latino quondam sermone donasset, innumera Danicorum operum uolumina tererentur', 'But if fortune had at some time bestowed this fatherland with Latin speech, innumerable volumes of the deeds of the Danes would be commonplace'.

¹⁴⁴ Ericus is described as sending legates to the Roman curia to request an archbishopric for Denmark, 'Ne enim Dani sub externo pontifice sacrorum munera celebrarent,' 'So that the Danes might not be celebrating the sacred rites under a foreign archbishop'. Saxo comments, 'nec solum eam Saxonica ditione eruit, sed eciam Suetie Noruagieque, religionis titulo, magistram effecit', 'he not only wrested Denmark from Saxon control but also made her mistress of Sweden and Norway in the title of religion'. *Historie Danice*, xii, 120, p. 406.

Saxo has been criticised for his eclectic choice and treatment of the written sources available to him. Birgit Sawyer has commented that, ‘Saxo took great liberties with them, treating them as in effect quarries from which to draw material for his own work’.¹⁴⁵ Christiansen also considered that Saxo treated existing material with considerable license:¹⁴⁶

There can be no comprehensive or exact list of the sources from which Saxo concocted his history. He used his material in such a way that the connection between his text and its most probable source appears tenuous.

Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out that all historians, whatever their objectives, can be said to contribute consciously or not ‘to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past’ as part of their contribution to a people’s sense of nationhood.¹⁴⁷ Saxo can certainly be said to have made a contribution to the Danish people’s sense of nationhood. His narrative celebrates the achievements of the Danish kingdom from its foundation to Saxo’s own day and does so in a style which preserves cultural traditions about Denmark’s past. His work depicts the Danish people as one nation united by a shared descent, shared cultural past and shared values.

Saxo’s Narrative and Linguistic Styles of Composition

Stylistically Saxo’s Latin reflects the Roman and medieval concept of written history as a branch of rhetoric and he exemplifies many of the rhetorical techniques found in the teachings of Priscian and the classical tradition.¹⁴⁸ Karsten Friis-Jensen has also demonstrated how, in his use of Latin, Saxo draws directly on the works of Curtius, Justin, Martianus Capella and Sallust. At times, his choice of phrase, or use of descriptive language, indicates he had access to the works of Horace, Vergil, Lucan,

¹⁴⁵ Birgit Sawyer, ‘Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo’, p. 687.

¹⁴⁶ Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, I, 152.

¹⁴⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-14 (p. 13).

¹⁴⁸ Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, I, 148-52.

Ovid and Prudentius, either directly or through compendia and glossaries.¹⁴⁹ Most striking, however, is his heavy linguistic dependence on the *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* of Valerius Maximus of which Absalon is known to have possessed a copy.¹⁵⁰

Henry John Walker, commenting on the popularity of Valerius's text throughout the Middle Ages, placed it on a par with the Bible. Like the Bible, Valerius used story very effectively to point a moral and claimed that his work was intended to provide an easily accessible collection of deeds and sayings which exemplified both virtues and vices for the benefit of future generations.¹⁵¹ Friis-Jensen's comprehensive analysis of Saxo's text demonstrates how consistently Saxo modelled his Latin phrases and descriptors on Valerius's text sometimes combining elements from different parts, sometimes reflecting rather than accurately transcribing, a sentence or phrase.¹⁵² Using Friis-Jensen's schedule of examples, I was able to establish that these links were mainly linguistic rather than contextual. Although Saxo drew on sections of Valerius which dealt with a similar theme, there is no conclusive evidence that Saxo intended to make a comparison between the event he was describing and the particular story, event or character in Valerius's text.

Nevertheless, Valerius provided Saxo with a useful literary model for his work. Saxo's narrative takes the form of a consecutive series of stories about the heroes, kings and, later, the archbishops of Denmark which provide his only chronological framework. As in the collections of sagas, Saxo's use of story includes accounts both favourable and unfavourable to an individual, provides variant versions of an event or

¹⁴⁹ *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum*, ed. by Friis-Jensen, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2005), I, 55-54.

¹⁵⁰ Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum*, I, 50-53.

¹⁵¹ *Valerius Maximus: Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, trans. by Henry John Walker (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), pp. xxi-xxiii.

¹⁵² Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum*, I, 51-53, 57-58; II, 550-625.

ascribes the same actions to different characters at different times. In his *Prefacio*, Saxo claims to have used the narrative skills of the Icelanders as a model for his own work:¹⁵³

Quorum thesauros historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosius consulens, haud parvam praesentis operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui, nec arbitros haere contempsi, quos tanta vetustatis peritia callere cognovi.

Consulting with considerable curiosity their treasuries, stuffed with tokens of historical events, I have woven together no small part of this present work from imitation of their narrative, nor do I esteem lightly as judges those whom I know practice with such great skill of long standing.

Saxo's choice of words in describing his debt to Icelandic sources is instructive. He describes them as 'treasuries' filled with individual items recalling past events and claims to have imitated their approach very successfully, having 'woven together' parts of his narrative in such a way that he does not fear criticism from the Icelanders who have long experience in this kind of composition.

From the analyses above, it is clear that Saxo wished to be seen as breaking new ground. In his combination of Scandinavian and Latin traditions he has managed to preserve essential aspects of both so that the reader can enjoy both saga-style story and Latin rhetorical text. Saxo's ability to combine these two strands makes Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* a product of its own times, designed through the author's selection and presentation of content both to raise the profile of Denmark in Scandinavia and Europe and engender feelings of national unity at home.

Saxo's Depiction of Britain and England

Previous scholarship has explored how Saxo's work promoted the concept of *patria* as a unifying concept for Denmark, with its overseas empire (*imperium*) founded through the patriotic achievements of its heroes and kings. Saxo's portrayal of Britain and

¹⁵³ *Historie Danice*, 'Prefacio', p. 3. E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion in the North* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1964), pp. 27-34. Bjarni Guðnason, *Um Skjöldungasgu* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóðs, 1963), pp. 314-25; 'The Icelandic Sources of Saxo Grammaticus', in *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author*, ed. by Friis-Jensen, pp. 79-93.

England as part of this concept deserves greater attention. Saxo assigned considerable importance to recording Danish rule in Britain and England and as a result Anglo-Danish relationships can be seen as an important part of Danish national identity.

Saxo opens his first book with the apparently simple statement:¹⁵⁴

Dan igitur et Angul, a quibus Danorum cepit origo, patre Humblo procreati, non solum conditores gentis nostre, uerum eciam rectores fuere.

And so, Dan and Angul, from whom the Danes took their origin, begotten of their father Humblus, were not only the founders of our race but also its rulers.

Saxo's linking of the names of Dan and Angul is significant to the rest of his narrative.

They are brothers, begotten by the same father and both are important as the founders and rulers of the Danish race. He describes each of their descendant peoples, telling first how Angul gave his name to the territory and people he governed and how their descendants gained possession of Britain, changing its name to England. Only then does he describe Dan's role as founder of the royal line in Denmark.

The pre-eminence given to Angul is further emphasized by Saxo using Bede as a witness to the truth of his statement:¹⁵⁵

Cuius successores post modum Britannia potiti priscum insule nomen nouo patrie sue uocabulo permutarunt. Magni id factum a veteribus estimatum. Testis est Beda, non minima pars diuini stili, qui in Anglia ortus, sanctissimis suorum uoluminum thesauris res patrias sociare cure habuit, eque ad religionem pertinere iudicans, patrie facta literis illustrare et res diuinis conscribere.

His successors after a time gained possession of Britain and replaced the old name of the island with a new word from their own fatherland. That deed was considered very important by men of old. A witness is Bede, no insignificant writer on divine revelation, who, born in England, took care to include a history of his fatherland with the most holy treasury of his works, judging that to describe in his writings the achievements of his fatherland and at the same time write on matters of a divine nature were equally related to religion.

At the very beginning of the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo emphasizes that Denmark and England are linked by a common descent which is recognized in both countries and it is

¹⁵⁴ *Historie Danice*, i, 1, p. 10.

¹⁵⁵ *Historie Danice*, i, 1, p. 10.

Bede's English birth which Saxo uses as evidence of the trustworthiness of this. The details Saxo includes also suggest that he may have intended his readers to see a parallel between himself and Bede. Although he does not indicate that he had direct access to the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Saxo refers to Bede writing a history of his *patria* and undertaking the task from a sense of religious duty. This may be intended, obliquely, to mirror his own task of writing a history of his *patria* at the request of his Archbishop. Like Bede's history of the English Church, Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* traces how Christianity was established in his country and how the Church grew and developed in union with Rome through the actions and support of individual kings. Having set the scene in this way, Saxo includes Danish-English relations as a recurrent theme within his narrative until the time of the Norman invasion.

Saxo's account of Denmark's relationship with Britain and England can be divided into three sections: early Danish relationships up to the time of Regnerus Lodbrog (Ragnar loðbrók); the period from Regnerus to the marriage of Gormo Grandeuus (Gorm the Old) to the English princess Thire (Thyre); the reign of Haraldus Blaatand (Haraldr blátönn) and his successors up to 1066. Each section provides a different perspective as Saxo develops his theme from early Danish military superiority over the British to direct Danish rule in Britain and finally the establishment of legal rights to the English throne.

Denmark and Britain up to the time of Regnerus Lodbrog

Table 16 below summarizes Saxo's account of the main events in Danish-English relationships up to the point where he recounts the story of Regnerus Lodbrog. It provides the background and context for his theme of the Danish right to rule in Britain by showing how the Danes repeatedly established their military superiority in the land which took its name from the Danish Angul. In this first section Saxo uses the terms Britain and British rather than England and English and his narrative generally does not

make clear where the action is taking place. An exception is his description of Frotho I capturing London by a trick. He also does not name any of the British kings although he does refer to Haraldus Hyldetan defeating an (unnamed) king of the Humbrians.¹⁵⁶ At the close of his account of the reign of Frotho III, Saxo refers to the birth of Christ and the establishment of a period of universal peace.¹⁵⁷ This indicates that the whole of his narrative up to the reign of Haraldus Hyldetan takes place in Roman and pre-Roman Britain, giving the Danes a long history of association with the island.

¹⁵⁶ No dates are provided but Haraldus Hyldetan has traditionally been seen as an eighth-century king of Denmark.

¹⁵⁷ *Historie Danice*, v, 51, p. 170.

Table 16. Denmark and Britain: Summary of the Main Events, Outcomes and Key Descriptors in the *Gesta Danorum*, Books i-ix.¹⁵⁹

Hero/King	Designation	Main Events	Key Descriptors	Outcomes
Frotho I	King of the Britons	Attacks the Scots. British come up from South. Frotho scatters treasure to hold them back. The British king cannot control his men's greed. (Bk II)	The British exhibit: 'obscene auiditatis ingenium' an indecent disposition for greed 'immoderatum cupiditatis exemplum' an unbridled example of avarice.	The British are defeated. Frotho captures London by his cunning. The <i>prefectus</i> lets in the Danes believing false news of Frotho's death.
Amlethus	King of Britain	Fengo sends a letter to his friend, the king of Britain, to have Amleth killed. Amleth avoids death by rewriting the letter. Later, to avenge Fengo's death, the king of Britain uses a letter to have Amleth killed. Amleth again escapes by rewriting the letter. (Bks III-IV)	The King of Britain 'servilibus oculis' has the eyes of a slave. 'condicionis sue rubore confusus' troubled by the shame of his lowly birth.	Amlethus terrifies the Britons with the size of his army, by propping up the corpses of those earlier killed in battle. The king of Britain is killed.
Fridleuus the Swift	N/A	Fridleuus takes Dublin. Defeated in Britain. Uses corpses to deceive the Britons about the size of his army. (Bk IV)	[Fridleuus] 'fiduciam abstulit' Fridleuus robbed them of their confidence 'carpende fuge cupidinem incussit' he imprinted a desire to take flight.	British put to flight.
Frotho III son of Fridleuus	King of the island	The king of the island promises submission, taxes and wealth and a banquet. Frotho suspects treachery and successfully counters it. (Bk V)	[Frotho] 'dolum in auctores retorsit' Frotho turned guile back on the instigators of guile.	Frotho destroys the king and his men.
Haraldus Hyldetan	King of the Humbrians	Haraldus wins Aquitania and goes to Britain. (Bk VII)	'Humbroorum rege prostrato promptissimos quosque deuicte iuuentutis adciuit.' Having overthrown the king of the Humbrians, Haraldus gathered all the most resolute of the defeated youth.	Haraldus overthrows the king of the Humbrians. Enrols the best of the warriors in his army, chief of whom is Orm the Briton.

¹⁵⁹ *Historie Danice*, ii, 15, pp. 50-52; iii, 29, pp. 92-96; iv, 36, pp. 117-20; v, 50-51, pp. 164-69; vii, 74, pp. 248-51.

In each of the events outlined above, the Danish leaders and their men are depicted as superior militarily and in strategy and cunning. They avoid defeat or death by clever deception, successfully countering the guile of the British and turning initial defeat into victory. Their followers are disciplined, obedient and loyal. In contrast, the British leaders are characterized as weak. Their attempts at guile are easily seen through, their men are avaricious, ignore their leaders' advice and are easily deterred from battle by the appearance of greater numbers opposed to them. Saxo depicts these differences in national characteristics as at the heart of Danish success.

None of these early Danish leaders are depicted by Saxo as ruling in Britain. Having secured victory over the British they return to Denmark to rule there or undertake campaigns in the east or operate as Viking warriors supported by an army of mercenaries. Saxo's account of the Danish occupation of Britain begins with the story of Regnerus Lodbrog.

Denmark and England from Regnerus Lodbrog to Gormo Grandeuus (Gorm the Old/løghæ)

Saxo's version of Regnerus Lodbrog's achievements in Britain can be summarised as follows:¹⁶⁰

Regnerus Lodbrog decided to attack Britain where he killed King Hama, father of Hella, and the Earls of Scotland, Pictland and the southern or meridian islands, appointing his own sons to rule in their place. There follows a long account of Regnerus's campaigns including in the Orkneys and Scotland. When he returns to Denmark he finds that his wife Swanloga has died but his grief is cut short by the arrival of his son Iuarus (Iwar or Ivar) who is said to have been driven out of his kingdom by the Gauls who had made

¹⁶⁰ Saxo drew on the *Ragnars saga loðbrók* and the *Ragnarssona þáttr* for his account of Regnerus and his sons but, as Rory McTurk has shown, he also included details not found in the saga and analogue sources. Rory McTurk, *Studies in "Ragnars saga Loðbrókar" and in its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, Medium Ævum Monographs, New Series, 15 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediæval Languages and Literature, 1991), pp. 87, 107-08, 212-35, 221-24.

Hella, son of Hama, king. Regnerus, with Iuarus's help, lands at Norwich, and defeats Hella in a battle which causes heavy losses to the English but little to the Danes. Regnerus spends a year consolidating his power in England, goes to Ireland, captures Dublin and spends a year there before heading for the Hellespont. On his return from the East, Regnerus attacks Hella in Ireland but is captured and thrown into a snake pit to die. Hella, realising from Regnerus's own words that he has sons still alive who could avenge his death, orders Regnerus to be released, but it is too late.

Saxo ends the story by drawing a moral lesson from the event. He first describes Regnerus's defeat and capture by Hella as a just punishment from God for having destroyed and replaced with paganism the practice of Christianity which had been introduced into Denmark in his absence by Haraldus Klak.¹⁶¹ Saxo also uses his central theme of *fortuna* to comment that Regnerus's experience illustrated two very different aspects of *fortuna*, a successful life which resulted in power and status and a death which was the very opposite. From this he draws a moral for the reader:¹⁶²

Itaque ex speciosissimo uictore ad miserabilem captiui sortem deductus, nequis nimium fortune credat, docuit.

And so, brought down from being a most spectacular victor to the wretched fate of a captive, he has taught us that no-one should trust too much in fortune.

Saxo's account of Regnerus's association with England has significance on three counts: Regnerus's death is the first example Saxo provides of a Danish king's power being cut short through the military action of an English king; Regnerus Lodbrog is the first of the Danish kings described by Saxo as establishing Danish sovereignty in Britain and it is at this point in his narrative that Saxo begins to use the term 'Anglia'. Saxo does not define whether 'Anglia' refers to the whole country or to parts of England, for

¹⁶¹ 'iusta omnipotentis animaduersione manifestas detracte religionis penas pependit', 'by the just punishment of the Almighty, he paid the clear penalty for destroying religious practice'. *istorie Danice*, ix, 94, p. 314.

¹⁶² *Historie Danice*, ix, 94, p. 314.

example East Anglia or the Danelaw, but he describes how Regenerus's sons continued to rule in England in their father's place. Iuarus is said to have ruled for two years and on his return to Denmark Regnerus's son Agnerus was put in charge of England. It is not clear whether England formed part of the territory of the next Danish kings—Siuardus, Ericus and Kanutus I—but Saxo's account of the following king, Frotho VI, implies that direct links of some kind were maintained with England.¹⁶³ Frotho is said to have been baptized in England and to have re-established Danish power across all former provinces. That this included England may be deduced from Saxo's account of Frotho's son, Gormo. He was known as Gormo Anglus, Gorm the Englishman, because he was either born in England or of English descent and Saxo records that he ruled in England on his father's death. His rule there, however, was cut short by the need to attend to matters in Denmark:¹⁶⁴

Huius filius Gormo, cui, quod ex Anglia oriundus extitit, Anglici cognomen incessit, patre extincto, prompciore fortuna quam diuturniore, apud insulam regiam adeptus est arcem. Dum enim Daniam disponende eius gracia petisset ex Anglia, longam paruuli secessus iacturam expertus est. Quippe Angli, libertatis sue fortunam in eius ausencia reponentes, publicam a Danis defeccionem moliendo precipitem rebellandi fiduciam induerunt. Sed quo eum Anglia inuidencius spreuit, hoc Dania fidencius coluit. Itaque dum ad duarum prouinciarum utramque auidas imperii manus porrexit, altera potitus, alterius irreuocabiliter dominacionem amisit, nihil umquam fortiter pro ipsius recuperacione conatus.

His son Gormo, to whom, because he was of English extraction, the epithet of 'The Englishman' accrued, on his father's death, by a fortune that was more immediate than long lasting, obtained the royal seat of power in the island. For while he made for Denmark from England in order to set its affairs right, he very soon experienced a long period of loss because of his very short period of withdrawal. The English, of course, trusting on their chance of freedom in his absence, assumed a headlong confidence in rebellion by devising defection as a

¹⁶³ The *ASC* refers to Halfdan, Ivar's brother, settling in Northumbria in 874/5/6. Adam of Bremen, drawing on Continental chronicles, records that Ivar was succeeded by Gudredus who subdued Northumbria, adding 'ex illo tempore Fresia et Anglia in ditone Danorum esse feruntur. Scriptum est in Gestis Anglorum', 'from that time Frisia and England are said to be under Danish rule. It is written in the Deeds of the English'. Adam von Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. by Bernhard Schmeidler, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 3rd edn (Hannover: Hahn, 1917), I, 39. See also Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 246 and n. 2. Saxo makes no mention of Halfdan or Gudredus.

¹⁶⁴ *Historie Danice*, ix, 94, p. 318.

people from the Danes. But the more enviously England spurned him the more loyally Denmark supported him. And so, while he stretched out to each of the two provinces hands keen to rule, he obtained control of one and irretrievably lost dominion of the other, having never courageously made an effort to recover it.

By his use of ‘quippe’ Saxo portrays the English as acting true to expectations in taking advantage of Gormo’s absence. English resentment and envy over Danish rule is contrasted with the great loyalty shown to Gormo by the Danes. By criticising Gormo’s lack of courage in not attempting to retake England, Saxo implies he could have done so successfully. He uses the episode to make a political point on the difficulties inherent in holding together an overseas kingdom, ‘adeo difficile pregrandia continentur imperia’, ‘with such difficulty are very large empires held together’.

Gormo is depicted as losing England and Saxo implies that England also formed no part of the kingdom of Gormo’s son, Haraldus, who achieved nothing outstanding, preferring to preserve, rather than add to, his existing kingdom.¹⁶⁵ It is from the reign of Haraldus’s successor, Gormo Grandeus (Gorm III), that Saxo begins to redefine the relationship between Denmark and England. It now moves from being one of occupation and kingly rule to one based on legal rights of inheritance.

Denmark and England from Gormo Grandeus to the Norman Invasion

The starting point for this shift in emphasis is Saxo’s account of Gormo’s marriage to an English princess, Thira, daughter of an English king named by Saxo as Hedelradus (Æthelred).¹⁶⁶ Saxo depicts Æthelred as designating as his heirs his grandsons, Kanutus

¹⁶⁵ *Historie Danice*, ix, 95, p. 318.

¹⁶⁶ Saxo’s description has led scholars to assume that the king he refers to is Æthelred II. However, the traditional dates for Gorm III would place his marriage in the reign of Edward the Elder. Eric Christiansen suggests that Saxo may have been confused by the similarity of names in the West Saxon dynasty. Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, p. 161. Another suggestion by Niels Lukman, which does not seem to have been followed up further, is that Saxo is referring to Æthelred of Mercia. Niels Lukman, ‘Sagnhistorien Hos Saxo’ in *Saxostudier*, ed. by Ivan Boserup (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1975), pp. 117-27 (p. 120). Æthelstan is said by William of Malmesbury to have been brought up in Mercia. *Gesta Regum*, 133, pp. 210-11; Æthelred issued charters in his own name although there is no evidence that he issued coins. Æthelred was succeeded by his wife Æthelflæd, providing an example of female ruling power

and Haraldus Blaatand (blátönn), sons of Gormo and Thira. However, Hedelradus's grandsons fail to acquire their inheritance. Kanutus dies and Saxo describes how Haraldus decides to make a reputation for himself by Viking raids in the east and so loses the opportunity to take control of England. Instead, Hedelradus's son Adelstenus is said to have seized the throne after his father died, deliberately setting his father's will aside:¹⁶⁷

Siquidem Hedelradi filius Adelstenus, patris testamento preter[r]itus, indignacionem suam literis, quibus Haraldus heres scribebatur, opposuit, re<s>cissoque parentis arbitrio, proprium emulatus est.

Because of course, Hedelradus's son Æthelstan, bypassed by his father's will, opposed in his indignation the document in which Harald was inscribed as heir and having abrogated his father's decision, enviously made the kingdom his own.

Adelstenus's action is a turning point in Saxo's narrative. From this point onwards Danish kings are depicted as making repeated attempts to acquire the English throne which Adelstenus had seized illegally. Saxo's condemnation of Adelstenus takes the form of a number of derogatory pen-pictures. Haraldus of Norway is said to have so objected to Adelstenus, a man 'obtusi cordis', 'of weak heart' or 'lacking courage', being in charge of a kingdom like England, that he mounted an invasion.¹⁶⁸ Saxo illustrates Adelstenus's lack of courage by first depicting him as weakly avoiding

similar to Saxo's account of Thira. *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes*, ed. by Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. by Peter Fisher, 2 vols (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979-80), II, 165 (n. 88).

¹⁶⁷ *Historie Danice*, x, 96, p. 322. The text of the first edition reads 'testamento perterritus', 'terrified by his father's will'. While this makes perfectly good sense in both Latin and English it has been altered in later editions to take account of Valerius Maximus's use of 'preteritus' (from 'pr(a)eterire', 'to pass over') in a case where a father's will had been rescinded in favour of a son who had been bypassed in the will after being adopted by an uncle. *Valerius Maximus: Memorable doings and Sayings*, ed. and trans. by D. R. Shackleton Bailey (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), vii, 7, 2. See Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, I, 3, 161, n. 2-3. Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum*, I, 622.

¹⁶⁸ *Historie Danice*, x, 96, p. 322. 'Igitur Noruagie rex, obtusi cordis homini amplissime rei summam cessione ingemens, potiende eius spe armata insulam classe peciit', 'And so the king of Norway, lamenting that the highest power in a most rich kingdom had been yielded to a man of weak courage, made for the island with an armed fleet in the hope of gaining possession of it'.

military action, undertaking instead to provide tutelage at his own expense for Haraldus's son Haquinus and to leave Haquinus his kingdom in his will:¹⁶⁹

quo salubrius patriam armis hostilibus liberaret, filio eius Haquino, ad modum tenero, educacionis impensam pollicitus, regnum se pariter testamento legaturum promittit.

in order more easily to free his country without harm from hostile weapons, he promised to meet the cost of the education of his [the king's] son, Haquinus, who was still quite young and he promised that he would also leave him his kingdom in his will.

Adelstenus, depicted as having disregarded his father's will, is now described as leaving England in his own will to the heir of the kingdom of Norway, a traditional rival and enemy of Denmark. Saxo comments that Adelstenus, being childless, preferred to have an heir of his own choosing rather than one forced upon him and trusted that Haraldus, as a result of the fostering of Haquinus, would assist him in resisting any attempt by Haraldus Blaataand to seize the throne.¹⁷⁰ Saxo then describes how, on the death of Haraldus of Norway, Haquinus prepared to return to Norway to inherit the throne there. Just as he was about to sail he was urgently recalled to be given last minute instructions by Adelstenus. These Saxo depicts as superficial guidance on how to behave at a banquet, again portraying Adelstenus as a man of poor judgement, more concerned with social niceties than the important matter of Haquinus's return to become king of Norway.¹⁷¹

Saxo immediately follows this account with the brief statement that

At cui parentis mors Noruagiam cessit, paulo post preceptoris occasus Angliam patefecit.¹⁷²

But to him whose father's death had yielded Norway, the death of his tutor shortly afterwards left England wide open.

¹⁶⁹ *Historie Danice*, x, 96, p. 322.

¹⁷⁰ *Historie Danice*, x, 96, pp. 322-23.

¹⁷¹ Christiansen comments on Adelstenus's advice and notes that keeping a cheerful face was 'a medieval commonplace' and found in King Canute's Military Law. Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, I, p. 162, n. 9.

¹⁷² *Historie Danice*, x, 97, p. 323.

Saxo's use of 'patefecit' implies that, following the death of Adelstenus, England was there for the taking while at the same time avoiding any endorsement of Haquinus's right to inherit. Saxo depicts Haraldus Blaataand exercising considerable forbearance by not seizing England by force but avoiding any charge of cowardice by supporting an attack on Haquinus in Norway by Haquinus's brothers. Saxo depicts this as a clever piece of strategy designed to secure England for Haraldus in the future.¹⁷³

Noruaigice rei turbacione primam Haquino iacturam inferendam constituit,
domesticis eius uiribus debellatis, externas facilius obterendas existimans

he decided that a first defeat should be inflicted on Haquinus by disrupting the Norwegian state, thinking that once his [Haquinus's] power at home had been defeated, his power abroad could be more easily obliterated.

From this point the legal right of the Danish kings to rule England becomes a recurrent theme in Saxo's narrative. Table 17 summarizes this, tracing Saxo's depiction of Danish-English relationships from the reign of Edward the Martyr to the time of the Norman invasion. It also compares the information provided by Saxo with the version of events in the *Gesta* of Adam of Bremen and the Roskilde Chronicle.¹⁷⁴ Key elements are shown in bold type. These reveal how Saxo repeatedly stresses the Danish right to rule in England based on inheritance and legal agreement.

¹⁷³ *Historie Danice*, x, 97, p. 323.

¹⁷⁴ *Historie Danice*, x: 100, p. 336; 103, pp. 342-44; 107, pp. 358-61; 108, pp. 361-62. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. by Schmeidler, ii, 34, pp. 94-95; ii, 53, p. 113; ii, 74, p. 134; ii, 78, p. 136; iii, 12, pp. 151-53; iii, 14, pp. 154-55; iii, 52, pp. 196-97. 'Chronicon Roskildense', ed. by M. C. Gertz, *Scriptores Minores Historiae Danicae Medii Aevi*, 2 vols (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1917-22), I, 14-33 (pp. 18, 20, 22). This period is not covered by the 'Chronicon Lethrense', ed. by M. C. Gertz, *Scriptores Minores Historiae Danicae Medii Aevi*, 2 vols (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1917-22), I, 43-53.

Table 17. Anglo-Danish Relations in the Ninth-Eleventh Centuries recorded by Saxo, Adam of Bremen and the *Chronicon Roskilde*

English King	Saxo Grammaticus	Adam of Bremen	<i>Chronicon Roskilde</i>
Ethuardus son of Edgar (Edward 'the Martyr')	Eric of Sweden drives out Sueno (Forkbeard) son of Haraldus Blaatand. Sueno goes to England for protection. King Ethuardus rejects him suspecting he is trying to reclaim the kingdom. Sueno makes a treaty with Adelstenus to inherit the throne on Adelstenus' death.	When Suein seeks help, Adelrad, son of Edgar, drives him away remembering how the Danes had attacked the Angles in the past.	
Adelradus		Suein invades England, wins many battles, expels Edilredus but dies 3 months later.	Svein invades England, drives out Adelradus and gains possession of Britain.
Eduardus or Eadmundus son of Edeldradus (Edmund Ironside)	After Sueno's death the English reject Danish rule and choose Eduardus (Edmund) as king. Kanutus (Magnus) invades England and defeats Eduardus (Edmund) who agrees to share the kingdom with him and to bequeath it to him wholly on his death. Eduardus is later murdered and Kanutus assumes sole rule.	After Suein dies Chnud makes war on England for three years. Adelrad dies besieged in London, paying the penalty for killing his brother Eduardus.* He leaves a young son, Eduardus. His brother Edmund is poisoned. *In Scholia 38 (39) corrected to Afilrud.	Adelradus is succeeded by Eadmundus and Eadmundus by his son Adelradus. Knud invades England. He fights for three years with Adelradus who dies besieged in London, leaving a son Edward.
	Haraldus son of Kanutus acts as regent for his father and rules in England for two years. On his death, Kanutus II (Harthacnut) inherits the throne of England. Sueno Estrithson acts as his military commander in England.	Haroldus inherits England and rules for three years. Hardechnud prepares to invade and on Haroldus's death holds Denmark and England.	Harald inherits England from Knud. Harthe Knut prepares to invade. Harald dies. Harthe Knut holds Denmark and England.
Eduardus (the Confessor)	Kanutus II shares rule with Eduardus to curb any ambitions Eduardus might have to rule England alone. Kanutus II rules for two years. On his death, Sueno (Estrithson) goes to Denmark to claim the throne.	The English chose Eduardus as king. Eduardus made peace with Chnud's son Suein Estrithson, paid tribute and made him heir to his kingdom.	
Haraldus Godewinus	Sueno (Estrithson) leaves England in the hands of his nephew Haraldus Gudvin (Godewinson). Harald seizes power for himself but allows Eduardus (the Confessor) to hold the throne because of his royal birth. Later he kills Eduardus and takes the throne. He destroys Danish power in England, defeats an invasion by Haraldus Malus, King of Norway, and is himself defeated by the Normans.	Gudvin's sons lead a rebellion and hold power with Eduardus as a figurehead. Eduardus dies and Gudvin's son Haroldus takes the throne, defeats an invasion by Haroldus king of Norway but is defeated by the Normans.	

Saxo's account omits details of the reign of Æthelred II, confuses the names of Edward and Edmund Ironside, fails to identify Edward as the Confessor and makes him Edward's son, and fails to distinguish clearly between Sueno Forkbeard and Sueno Estrithson. Christiansen has provided a helpful commentary on Saxo's faulty historical chronology for this period and pointed out that Saxo's information came largely from Adam of Bremen and the Danish Latin Chronicles which provided only a few, mainly inaccurate details.¹⁷⁵ Saxo's overriding concern appears to have been to reinforce the theme of the Danish kings having a legally enforceable right to rule England based on Hedelradus's legacy to his grandson Haraldus Blaatand.

As part of this narrative Saxo recounts how Edgar's son, Ethuardus, rejected a genuine request for help from Haraldus Blaatand's son Sueno Forkbeard, because he suspected Sueno was trying to 'reclaim' ('repetere') his father's legacy.¹⁷⁶

auxilii petiorem ambicionis nota perculit, existimans, non tam opem a profugo peti, quam exilii simulacione regnum a callido repeti

[Ethuardus] branded the one seeking help with the stigma of ambition, thinking that it was not so much assistance which was being sought by a fugitive as a kingdom being reclaimed by a cunning man under the pretence of exile.

Saxo then provides a mirror version of the earlier inheritance story by describing how once Sueno had gained possession of Norway, England lay open to him and he formed an agreement with a king called Adalstenus (sic) that 'eo decedente, regis bonis ac nomine frueretur', 'on the death of the king he would enjoy the king's possessions and title'.¹⁷⁷ Saxo does not record that Sueno became king of England but he implies it by stating that when Sueno died both the Norwegians and the English took the opportunity

¹⁷⁵ Saxo does not use Adam's statement that Edward the Confessor made peace with Sueno Estrithson, paid him tribute and made him heir to the throne. *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. by Bernhard Schmeidler, iii, 12, p. 152.

¹⁷⁶ *Historie Danice*, x, 100, p. 336.

¹⁷⁷ *Historie Danice*, x, 102, p. 341. 'Nec Noruegiam sibi subiecisse contentus, patita Anglia, pactum cum Adalstano habuit: ut eo decedente regis bonis ac nomine frueretur', 'And not content with having subjected Norway to himself, England lying open, he made an agreement with Adalstanus that when Adalstanus died he would enjoy the possessions and name of king'.

to reject Danish rule and choose kings from their own people, accusing them both of ‘abrogato Danici nominis respectu’, ‘totally setting aside their respect for the Danish name’.¹⁷⁸ Sueno’s son Kanutus is then depicted as using force to recover England by organising a major invasion of Britain. Saxo portrays the subsequent agreement between Kanutus and Edmund Ironside (called Edward by Saxo) as a Danish moral victory which Kanutus forced on his defeated enemy:¹⁷⁹

Ita uictor a uicto extudit, ut is sibi consorcionem imperii uiuens cederet, totum moriens testamento legaret.

Thus the victor forced from the defeated king that while he was alive he would yield him partnership in his rule and on his death bequeath it all to him in his will.

Saxo’s record of Danish rule in England continues with his account of Kanutus’s two sons, Haraldus and Kanutus (Harthacnut). He depicts Kanutus as compelled to share rule with his half-brother, the English prince Edward (later the Confessor), not from any brotherly feeling, but to avoid an English challenge to his own position:¹⁸⁰

Eduardum fratrem, quem eiusdem nominis pater ex Imme matrimonio sustulit, in regni societatem ad<s>ciscit, non quod fraterno illum affectu coleret, sed ut eius ambicionem munificencia ac liberalitate precurreret, regnique parte potitum totum cupere prohiberet. Itaque non tam ueneracione carum, quam popularium ambicione paternique generis auctoritate suspectum, consortem imperii facit.

His brother Edward, whom a father of the same name begat from his marriage to Emma, he (Kanutus) received into co-partnership of the kingdom, not because he cared for him from brotherly love but so he might forstall his ambition by his liberality and generosity and prevent him, once he had control of part of the kingdom, from wanting the whole of it. Therefore he made him a partner in his rule, not as one dear to him because of his quality of character but as one mistrusted because of the high regard in which he was held by the people and the influence of his descent from his father.

¹⁷⁸ *Historie Danice*, x, 102, p. 342. ‘Mortuo Suenone, Angli et Norvagienses, ne rerum summam alieno imperio haberent, reges ex suis legere quam a finitimis mutuari sacius rati, abrogato Danici nominis respectu, Eduardum et Olauum in maiestatis fastigio locauerunt’, ‘After Sueno died, the English and Nowegians, to prevent their holding overall power under foreign rule, thought it preferable to choose kings from among themselves rather than obtain them from their neighbours and placed Eduardus and Olauus in the highest position of sovereignty, wholly abrogating respect for the Danish name’. ‘nomen’ when linked with the name of a people, e.g. ‘nomen Romanum’, is also used to delineate power or dominion.

¹⁷⁹ *Historie Danice*, x, 103, p. 344.

¹⁸⁰ *Historie Danice*, x, 107, pp. 360-61.

Saxo describes Edward the Confessor in very uncomplimentary terms:¹⁸¹

Verum Eduardo humilior origine animus fuit; siquidem, **obtusi** ad modum **cordis**, obscuriorem indolis experientiam prebuit..

But Edward's spirit was more lowly than his birth; since indeed, being of quite weak courage, he gave no clear evidence of ability.

Saxo continues his denigration of Edward, describing him as lacking in intellectual ability and content with the empty show of kingship based on family descent.¹⁸²

This negative picture of the English kings is continued by Saxo in his account of how Haraldus Godew(ou)ini abused the trust placed in him by his uncle Sueno Estrithson by seizing power for himself:¹⁸³

ita Suenonis credulitatem Anglica perfidia circumuentam oppressit. Nam post eius ab Anglia profectionem Godouini filius Haraldus spe improba tocus Anglie regnum complexus,

So English treachery, ambushed and crushed Svein's trusting confidence. For, after his departure from England, Harald, son of Godewin, [filled] with impious hope seized the kingdom of all England

He states that Haraldus, led by envy and greed, murdered Edward and so finally seized the title of king for himself.¹⁸⁴ Haraldus is accused of annihilating the Danish garrisons in England and of ending Danish rule in England forever:¹⁸⁵

[...]. Ea nox parvulo temporis momento uetustam Danorum dominacionem diuque maiorum uirtute elaboratum finiuit imperium. Sed neque id postera nostris fortuna restituit. Ita Anglia dominandi ius, ignavia perditum, scelere recuperauit. Igitur Haraldus, Danice oppressionis simulque domestice libertatis auctor, Eduardo summam, facta non animi eius, sed sanguinis estmacione,

¹⁸¹ *Historie Danice*, x, 107, p. 361. The use of the phrase 'obtusi cordi' to describe Edward is particularly telling. Saxo uses the phrase only five times, first of Adelstenus and then of Eduardus. Its later uses are of Scandinavian figures held to be of no account: Haraldus son of Sven Estrithii and brother of Kanutus Divus who is described as completely slothful; Eric son of Jurisius, a man of noble birth but weak mind and another Haraldus said to be of royal blood but with a speech impediment. *Historie Danice*, xi, 113, p. 378; xiv, 183, p. 586; xvi, 194, p. 658.

¹⁸² *Historie Danice*, x, 108, p. 362. 'Non prudentie ratione munitus; titulo rex patrie [...] contentus', 'not supported by a rational sense of good judgement; a king content with his country's title'.

¹⁸³ *Historie Danice*, x, 108, p. 362. Adam of Bremen says of Haraldus, 'quidam Anglorum dux, vir maleficus, sceptrum inuasit', 'a certain duke of the English, a vicious man, usurped the royal power'. Adam von Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. by Schmeidler, iii, 52, p. 196.

¹⁸⁴ *Historie Danice*, x, 108, p. 362.

¹⁸⁵ *Historie Danice*, x, 108, p. 362.

permittit, quatinus ille nominis, ipse rerum usurpacione regnaret, et, quo nobilitate peruenire non posset, potencia uallatus assurgeret.

That night, in a very small moment of time, ended the ancient domination of the Danes and their rule, long achieved by the courage of their ancestors. And nor did later fortune restore it to our people. Thus England recovered by crime the right of rule lost through cowardice. And so, Harald, responsible at the same time for the overthrow of the Danes and liberty at home, left the supreme position to Edward, based not on his intellectual achievements but from respect for his lineage, in as much as Edward ruled in name but Harald himself reigned through his illegal seizing of control, and, entrenched by his power, he ascended to a height which he could not attain through nobility of birth.

Although Haraldus is depicted as the agent responsible for ending Danish rule, Saxo accuses England as a whole of the crime.

Following the Norman victory, Saxo makes no further direct reference to the kings of England.¹⁸⁶ He does, however, make one further reference to England as rightfully a Danish possession. Canute IV (St Canute) is described as contemplating claiming his lost inheritance of England:¹⁸⁷

Vtque eius animum cercius representaret, non contentus studia sua orientalibus decorasse uictoriis, Angliam, infelicitate amissam, hereditatis duxit nomine repetendam. Recolebat, enim, bellicam maiorum gloriam cumque opibus imperii fines nullo magis quam Anglicis creuisse titulis, maioremque eis ex unius insule quam tocius orientis spoliis incessisse splendorem.

And so that he might show his courage more surely, not content with having adorned his exploits with victories in the East, he held that he should recover, in the name of his inheritance, England, lost by ill-fortune. For he recalled that the military glory of his ancestors and the boundaries of their rule along with their wealth had been increased more by their English titles than by anything else, and that greater distinction had accrued to them from the spoils of one island than from the spoils of the whole of the East .

Here England is described as having been a source of military glory, territorial expansion and material wealth which had brought Danish kings greater renown than their other conquests. The high status given to England compared with other countries is echoed in Saxo's later comment that the shame Waldemar I felt in owing allegiance to

¹⁸⁶ This may be because the Normans claimed Danish descent through their founder Rollo. See Chapter 3, 'Æthelstan in the Continental Tradition'.

¹⁸⁷ *Historie Danice*, xi, 115, p. 387. His attempt was undermined by his brother's treachery and came to nothing.

the overlordship of Frederick Barbarossa was offset by the King of Britain owing a similar kind of servitude to the King of France:¹⁸⁸

Cuius seruicij pudorem minuere uidebatur Gallorum dicioni in consimili famulatus genere Britannie regis inclinata maiestas.

The royal power of the king of Britain having been brought into a similar kind of servitude to the power of the Gauls, seemed to diminish the shame of his servitude.

Although Saxo depicts England as a high status possession, he has consistently portrayed England's kings as inferior to the Danes. There is no English king in Saxo's narrative who could be described as 'good'. The English are also depicted as inferior to other peoples. The Norwegians, Swedes and Saxons are sometimes subject to Denmark, sometimes rule Denmark and sometimes act as allies. The Finns and peoples of Eastern Europe are sometimes potential enemies or a welcome source of land, resources and trade. All are ready to rebel against Danish rule, all are denigrated but the English alone are depicted as consistently cowardly, treacherous and deceitful. The contrast drawn between the English and the Danes, and between the English and other peoples, can be seen as part of Saxo's 'discourse of difference' contributing to his positive portrayal of Danish national identity. By emphasizing the negative qualities of the English, Saxo is able to portray the Danes as militarily and morally superior.

A possible explanation of why Saxo chose to present such a negative picture of the English may be found in the opening lines to the *Gesta*. There Saxo describes England as founded and named by Angul's Danish descendants. By right, therefore, England should have been recognized as Danish territorially. Instead, the Danes had to fight for possession and even when their legal rights of inheritance were recognized, they were consistently challenged or denied. Saxo's stated task of glorifying Denmark's

¹⁸⁸ *Historie Danice*, xiv, 159, p. 538. Christiansen suggests that Saxo knew this reference to the agreement between Henry II and Louis VII was not strictly analogous as Henry did not do homage. Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 804, n. 335.

past required him to explain away Denmark's difficulties in holding England as part of its North Sea Empire.

Finally, although Haraldus Godwinson is portrayed as the final cause of Denmark losing its claim to England, Adelstenus is depicted as the catalyst. His immoral action in setting aside his father's will is depicted as depriving Haraldus Blaatand of his legal inheritance and denying the Danes the opportunity to possess the land first settled by, and named after, their ancestor Angul.¹⁸⁹ While Saxo's version of events in no way satisfies modern criteria of historical writing, it can be valued as a twelfth-century attempt to establish a national identity for Denmark at home and abroad.

Conclusion

The Old Icelandic/Norse and Danish sources all agree in depicting Æthelstan as Hákon's foster-father and a significant figure in the history of their countries. However, these sources give very different accounts of Æthelstan's character and role as king. In the Old Icelandic/Norse vernacular texts, Æthelstan is depicted as a positive force for good. The upbringing he provided for Hákon produced one of the most respected kings of Norway, noted for his laws and sense of justice. In supporting Hákon's return to Norway and negotiating to prevent hostilities between him and his brother Eiríkr, Æthelstan is depicted as making a significant contribution to the history of Norway.

¹⁸⁹ Kurt Johannesson in his literary analysis of Saxo's *Gesta* has identified that the separate books are linked through Saxo's themes of courage (*fortitudo*), justice (*iustitia*), foresight (*prudentia*) and moderation (*temperantia*). Kurt argues that Saxo uses his narrative to provide positive and negative examples of these virtues in action and that books nine to twelve, which contain the narrative on Æthelstan, demonstrate an aspect of *iustitia* he names as *pietas*. Using Kurt's analysis, it can be seen that Saxo's account of Æthelstan's usurping of the throne depicts him lacking the *pietas* demanded by *iustitia*. It is possible, therefore, that Saxo in his narrative deliberately counters the depictions of Æthelstan as *rex pius* found in the English tradition. Kurt Johannesson, 'Order in *Gesta Danorum*', in *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author between Norse and Latin Culture*, ed. by Friis-Jensen, pp. 95-104 (pp. 98-100).

This is signalled very positively by Hákon being known as as *fóstri Aðalsteins* or *Aðalsteinsfóstri* in preference to his other epithets of *inn góði* or Haraldsson.

By contrast the Latin synoptics depict Æthelstan's role as minimal and his impact is diminished by their description of Hákon's apostasy. In Saxo's text Æthelstan is depicted as morally corrupt and an enemy of Denmark. His fostering of Hákon is seen as an act of cowardice, undertaken to protect himself against invasion by Haraldr hárfagri who was angry at Adelstenus having seized England for himself. These contrasting narratives illustrate very clearly how their authors sought to transmit, or create, social memories of the past from their own national or ecclesiastical standpoints.

Egils saga provides another contrasting picture of Æthelstan. Reminiscent of Ælred's depiction of Æthelstan as a model of good kingship for the future Henry II, *Egils saga* depicts Æthelstan as an ideal king by Viking standards. The saga contrasts the actions of Haraldr hárfagri and Eiríkr blóðøx as king with Æthelstan and makes clear that Æthelstan is the only one who fits Egill's concept good kingship. His respect for Æthelstan, compared with his contempt for Haraldr hárfagri and his son Eiríkr, depict Æthelstan as a king who knows how to win and hold the loyalty and support of his Viking allies. This portrayal of Æthelstan in the *Egils saga* is commensurate with the epithet 'inn góði' given to him in *Fagrskinna*.

These Old Icelandic/Norse depictions of Æthelstan are in direct contrast to Saxo's. In his narrative Saxo frequently appears to contradict the depictions of Æthelstan in other sources. For example, in the *Gesta Danorum* Æthelstan is the very opposite of the 'pius', 'Christianissimus' or 'trúfasti' king of the English and Norse texts. He is a man of weak courage ('obtusi cordis') and more concerned with the social appearances of kingship than providing just and lawful rule. Saxo's account is so different that it raises questions as to whether he is reflecting traditions ignored by the Old Icelandic/Norse sagas, or drawing on lost Danish accounts hostile to Æthelstan and

Norway or creating a version of his own to explain why the Danish kings did not secure the English throne for themselves.¹⁹⁰ Given Denmark's contacts with Saxony, it is possible that his version was influenced by the negative portrayals of Æthelstan found in Hrotsvit and Widukind. Although Saxo makes no reference to the negative accounts of Æthelstan's birth found in Hrotsvit, and referred to by William of Malmesbury, they may have formed part of Danish traditions on Britain. His narrative certainly depicts Æthelstan as a king who lacked the qualities and moral fibre expected of those of royal birth.

As noted above, there are other aspects within the Scandinavian tradition as a whole which seem to echo or reflect sources within the other traditions. The following Table details these more fully:

Table 18. Suggested Similarities in Content between Traditions

Scandinavian Tradition	Other Traditions
Haraldr hárfagri made himself king of all Norway.	Æthelstan was 'rex totius Britanniae'. (William of Malmesbury).
Æthelstan was forced to foster Haraldr's son by a concubine.	Æthelstan was of ignoble birth (Hrotsvit). His mother was a concubine (Anglo-Norman texts).
Hákon fostered on Æthelstan in England.	Norwegian king Haraldus sent a ship with messengers to Æthelstan in York. (William of Malmesbury).
Æthelstan's ships supported Hákon's return to Norway.	Æthelstan's fleet sailed to Caithness (Symeon of Durham).
Æthelstan ensured Hákon's return to Norway as king and continued to support him.	Æthelstan ensured the safe return of Louis to be king of Francia and continued to support him. (Continental texts).
Æthelstan offered Northumbria to Eiríkr who then ruled the territory for him based in York.	Æthelstan made a marriage agreement with Sihtric who ruled Northumbria from York. (William of Malmesbury)
By the battle of <i>Vínheiðr</i> Æthelstan achieved secure overlordship of Britain.	By the battle of Brunanburh Æthelstan established total peace on land and sea. (Æthelweard).

¹⁹⁰ See above. Saxo claimed to have used the Icelanders for the early history because their memories were trustworthy. Saxo's depiction of Adelstenus is very different from the saga and skaldic traditions from Iceland and Norway and it is possible that he has confused Adelstenus with Æthelred II.

There could be many reasons for these echoes and apparent references between sources. If they arose from one tradition having access to the texts of another, it would be reasonable to expect a closer correlation in the information and details between them, whether the Scandinavian drew on the English and Continental sources or they drew on the Scandinavian. It is also possible that the similarities noted above emerged from common access to oral or written texts now lost or that they formed a traditional part of Scandinavian memories of the past. It is important, however, that these similarities are not allowed to distract attention from the significant differences in the Scandinavian texts. These indicate either that a strong and varied tradition existed which was collated into the written sagas and histories as we have them now, or that the writers of these texts wished to create a version of events for future generations which included Æthelstan as a significant figure in the history of their country.

CONCLUSION

Using close textual analysis, this thesis has identified similarities and differences in the ways in which Æthelstan is depicted in a range of sources from different genres, across four centuries and three regions. The thesis does not argue for the historical veracity of any one version over another but for the individual narrative ‘voices’ to be heard and understood as part of their own historical, national and contemporary backgrounds. In my analyses I have identified how different authors selected and presented their material in order to record and create memories of Æthelstan in ways which reflected their purpose or those of their patrons and communities. Based on my literary analysis of the texts I have questioned some generally held historical hypotheses, suggested alternative interpretations of my own and identified further areas for research.

The Intertextuality of the Thesis Sources

As noted in the Introduction to the thesis, Robinson has commented on the lack of primary sources which provide a cohesive account of Æthelstan and his reign and suggested the need to bring together the disparate sources which exist. My thesis has adopted this approach, but by comparing rather than amalgamating the sources’ content I have preserved their independent character. This has highlighted the relationships, or lack of them, between texts both within and across traditions. My summary in the diagram below illustrates this. No tradition has a single, cohesive account of Æthelstan and his reign, although, in the English tradition, John of Worcester, who combines different versions of the *ASC*, and William of Malmesbury in his biographical account of Æthelstan, can be said to have come closest.

Both Monika Otter and Robert Stein have emphasized the importance of acknowledging the intertextuality between medieval historical sources, arguing that all texts build on previous texts.¹ The diagram of the texts which form the basis for this thesis shows the intertextual relationships identified through scholarly research but inevitably cannot tell the full story. The writers considered above either make no acknowledgement of their use of other texts or refer to them in general terms as annals, chronicles and historical sources. Only William of Malmesbury identifies the specific sources he has used in his account of Æthelstan, and on occasions includes his own personal evaluation of their veracity. It would appear that most writers preferred to be seen as authorities in their own right. As a result, key texts tended to be used for purely practical purposes, to provide an overview, or as a background for the author's own main work and edited to fit with the author's overall aims.² The diagram shows the centrality of certain texts and the apparent isolation of others, both within traditions and, more obviously, between them. The following overview of my textual analysis of the sources on Æthelstan summarises how the choices made by individual writers influenced the memories they provided of Æthelstan.

The English Tradition

As the diagram shows, the *ASC* was a main source for the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman periods. Because it was not in the form of a single text but in a number of different versions, the narratives produced by the tenth-century and Anglo-Norman writers differed considerably depending on which regional version they chose or were

¹ 'In other words, the historian's history is a narrative creation of his or her own making: and it is a text woven largely out of other texts.' Otter, 'Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, p. 113. 'To put it directly, every reading takes place in the context of other reading; every writing takes place in the context of other writing; and every text makes its meaning intertextually, that is to say, in the context and subject to the influence of other texts'. Stein, 'Literary Criticism and the Evidence for History', in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. by Partner, p. 77.

² As Fentress and Wickham have observed, 'Every time a tradition is articulated, it must be given a meaning appropriate to the context, or to the genre, in which it is articulated.' Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 85.

able to access. While Version A was Winchester-based in its content, Versions B, C and D incorporated Mercian material and Versions E and F included more from northern sources.³ In addition writers edited their material to fit their overall purpose in writing. Thus in the tenth century Æthelweard based his account of Æthelstan on the account found in a Version A of the *ASC*, or a variant of it, which no longer survives. His narrative, therefore omits any reference to Æthelstan's Mercian election and he puts greater emphasis on Edward's, rather than Æthelstan's, achievements either following his source or to provide more family information for his cousin Matilda. Apart from his victory at Brunanburh, Æthelstan appears in his account to have achieved very little.

The Anglo-Norman writers derived their work from a wider range of versions of the *ASC*. John of Worcester provides a Latin narrative drawing on Versions A-D. This he edits by re-ordering the events in *ASC* Version B to support his depiction of Æthelstan as Edward's direct heir, perhaps to safeguard the legality of the Worcester land charters in Æthelstan's name. John's work was used by his contemporaries and by later writers but more as a convenient summary of events. Thus Symeon of Durham copies John's text for the overview he provides in his *Historia Regum* while Roger of Hoveden and Roger of Wendover use it, with minor emendations and additions, as the introductory basis for their more contemporary histories.

At the same time as John was compiling his *Chronicon*, Gaimar was composing his poem on the history of the English kings in vernacular French for those who could not, or did not wish to access the Old English or Latin texts. He appears to have used mainly Version E of the *ASC*, and so provides a very brief account of Æthelstan's reign notable only for the expedition to Scotland and Brunanburh. By contrast, meanwhile, Symeon of Durham, William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon were writing extended histories on Anglo-Saxon England. Each included Æthelstan but from a

³ See the section on primary sources in Chapter 1 above.

different perspective and for different purposes, either selecting their source texts accordingly or influenced by the sources most easily available to them. Thus, in his *Libellus de Exordio*, Symeon draws extensively on Northumbrian material to depict Æthelstan as the fulfilment of St Cuthbert's promise of Wessex greatness and an example of the royal patronage due to the Community of St Cuthbert and the cathedral in Durham.

Henry of Huntingdon, by his limited use of sources, depicts Æthelstan as a fairly minor king. He draws on the Mercian material in *ASC* Versions B, C, D for Æthelstan's succession but then confines himself to the brief accounts in Version E, so omitting any reference to the key events in Version D—the marriage arrangement with Sihtric, the peace agreement at Eamont and Æthelstan taking power over Northumbria. His rhetorical embellishment of the reference to Guthfrith in Version E emphasises his depiction of Æthelstan as a king who was never defeated by his enemies. By adding his own Latin translation of the Brunanburh poem he also depicts Æthelstan as a king honoured for his victory but in a heroic style which he characterizes as quaint and old-fashioned. For Henry, Æthelstan provided by his early death an example of the transience of worldly success.

William of Malmesbury draws briefly on Versions B, C, D of the *ASC* at the beginning of his narrative on Æthelstan but relies mainly on a combination of saga, charter material, song and the text of an old book he claimed to have found. As a result he goes well beyond a factual account of the events of his reign to depict Æthelstan as a very personable, high status king, magnanimous to his enemies, well-educated and generous in his gifts to the Church. By discounting, or countering, negative accounts of Æthelstan's birth and his treatment of his half-brother Edwin, William promotes a very positive depiction of Æthelstan as a royal patron who chose to be buried at his Abbey of Malmesbury.

From the diagram above it is also evident that other tenth-century sources had little influence on the narrative histories of the English tradition. Æthelstan's tenth-century charters, coins, book dedications and poems are particularly important because they are contemporary, or near contemporary, sources and can claim to be authorised statements of Æthelstan's status as king. As a group, they provide a joined-up depiction of Æthelstan as God's ordained king. As *Rex totius Britanniae*, Æthelstan is powerful, successful and pious, supported by God in defeating his enemies and in bringing peace to his people. These images of him are further endorsed in the early eleventh and twelfth centuries by Ælfric of Eynsham and Ælred of Rievaulx who both quote Æthelstan as an example of a model Christian king who was successful because he had won God's favour. Yet these sources appear to have been ignored by the Anglo-Norman writers and so failed to provide any lasting image of Æthelstan as King of all Britain.

The Continental Tradition

The individuality among writers in the English tradition in their depictions of Æthelstan is also found in the texts from the Continent. The division of the Carolingian empire into separate kingdoms and regions encouraged the writing of new national and dynastic histories. These were evidently heavily dependent on societal and family memories and traditions as well as ecclesiastical records and written documentation which no longer exists. As a result it is difficult to identify examples of intertextuality in the written sources. It is clear, however, that by their choice of material each author depicts Æthelstan from a specific point of view in line with the overall aims of their historic or dynastic narratives.

Hrotsvit states that her poem was written to praise the achievements of Otto I. While she praises Æthelstan's half-sister Eadgytha as Otto's bride and queen, she dismisses Æthelstan as being of inferior birth, not only to his half-sister but also to Otto. Widukund claims he is writing his history to provide Saxony with its first national

record of events but does not include Æthelstan apart from acknowledging him as Eadgytha's brother. As a result, Æthelstan is written out of later Saxon histories. Of the ecclesiastical texts, the *Libri Confraternitatum* of St Gallen and the *Libri Vitae* of St Gallen, Reichenau and Pfafers provide for their own monastic communities their accounts of Æthelstan's generosity and his pious wish to be remembered in prayer. Similarly Folcuin provides for his own monks and the future community at St Bertin, a record of Æthelstan's gratitude and request for prayers following their burial of his half-brother Edwin after he drowned at sea.

Flodoard undertook his *Annales* to provide a contemporary account of his own time, supported by records of Frankish Carolingian history. As part of this he depicts Æthelstan actively safeguarding the Carolingian hereditary rights in West Francia through his guardianship and support for his nephew, Louis IV. He also records his actions in securing long-term support for Louis through the protection afforded by his cousin Arnulf of Flanders and by the restoration of his godson Alan Twistedbeard as Duke of Brittany. Richer uses Flodoard's account but significantly enhances it by the use of speeches and dramatic reconstructions of events. As a result he considerably enhances Æthelstan's standing by depicting him as politically astute and strategically competent in his meticulous arrangements for Louis's return to inherit his father's throne.

Dudo, writing a dynastic history of the lives and achievements of the Dukes of Normandy, provides a different version of events. He depicts Æthelstan as inexperienced and somewhat ineffective as a king. He becomes a friend and ally of the Viking, Rollo, who helps Æthelstan defeat his enemies in England, refuses the offer of half of Æthelstan's kingdom in reward and turns down Æthelstan's offer of help abroad, reminding him of his duties to England as its king. Later, Æthelstan's friendship with

Rollo is said to gain him the support of Rollo's son, William Longsword, for restoring Louis to West Francia and Alan Twistedbeard to Brittany.

The works of Dudo, Flodoard and Widukind were regarded as seminal works. Thietmar based his early history closely on Widukind; Flodoard's narrative, as noted above, was used by Richer and later incorporated into the English tradition; Dudo's text was edited and continued by William of Jumièges, Robert of Torigni and Maistre Wace. Through them Dudo's work became known to Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury although they made no direct use of the content in their depictions of Æthelstan.

The Scandinavian Tradition

In the Scandinavian tradition, the late date for the written histories emphasizes their authors' heavy dependence on oral saga and poetry. No one text can be confidently identified as a key source as similarities between texts can equally well indicate a common origin whether oral or written. The use of oral sources resulted in the texts sharing an element of commonality in the events they record but this did not ensure cohesion between the written texts. In the Old Icelandic/Norse synoptic histories Æthelstan is briefly depicted as a very Christian king who fostered Haraldr hárfagri's son Hákon and brought him up a Christian. But Hákon is described as an apostate who gave up his Christianity for worldly success and this supports the texts' overall messages that Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi were the kings who achieved the Christianization of Norway. A distinction, however, needs to be made between the Latin synoptics and the vernacular *Ágrip*. This provides a version more in line with the narratives in the vernacular Kings' Sagas which describes Hákon's attempts to retain the faith he had been brought up in by Æthelstan and to introduce Christianity into Norway.

By contrast, the authors of the Old Icelandic/Norse vernacular sagas chose to depict Æthelstan as a king of similar status to Haraldr hárfagri. As foster-father to

Hákon he is depicted as providing Norway with a just law-maker and a Christian king whose efforts to convert his people were thwarted by the powerful landowners.

Æthelstan is depicted as playing an active part in Norwegian history not only by supporting Hákon's return to Norway to take the throne but by protecting his position there through negotiating for his brother, Eiríkr blóðøx, to rule over Northumbria. This picture of Æthelstan as an influential foster-father is also found in *Egils saga* where Hákon is described as responding positively to Æthelstan's request to allow Egill to seek to recover his family lands. *Egils saga* is also about kingship. Critical of both Haraldr hárfagri and Eiríkr blóðøx as violent and unpredictable, the author has chosen Æthelstan as a contrasting model of good kingship. He is depicted as just, fair-minded, generous and appreciative of his Viking allies.

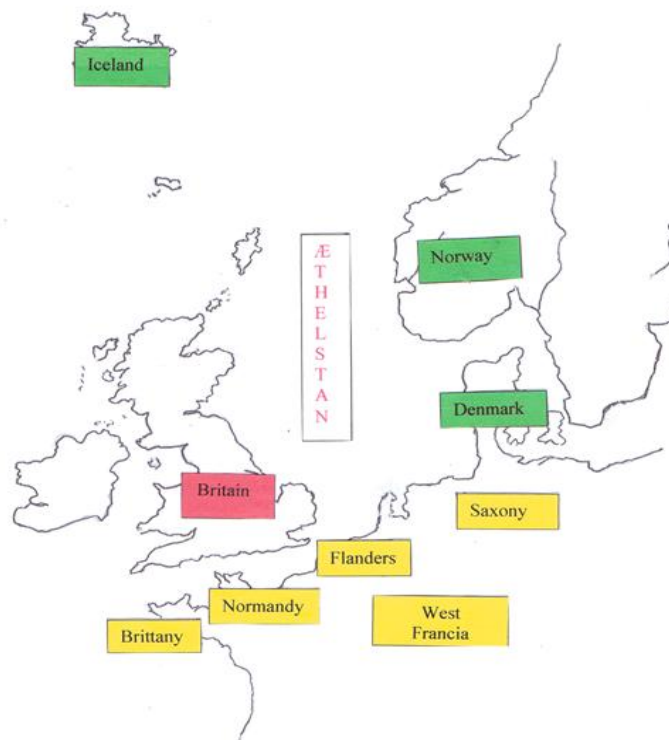
The *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus provides a very different picture. Claiming to draw on Icelandic and Danish sources, Saxo depicts Æthelstan as cowardly, treacherous and deceitful, cheating Haraldr Blaatand of the throne of England left to him in his grandfather's will and weakly giving way to Haraldr of Norway even to the point of making his son, Hákon, heir to the English throne. This picture of Æthelstan has to be set within the context of Saxo's work as a whole. Saxo claimed to be writing the first national history of the Danes. Æthelstan's action in taking the throne of England is central to Saxo's argument that the English kings denied to the Danes the land they had originally settled and named. Saxo's denigration of Æthelstan and the English can be seen as part of his 'discourse of difference' designed to emphasize the superiority of the Danes as part of their national identity.

Æthelstan as a King of the North Sea Region

The variety of ways in which Æthelstan is depicted across and within all three traditions emphasizes the lack of cohesive accounts of his achievements and reign and how differently he was remembered as king. It illustrates how national, regional,

ecclesiastical and local contexts influenced the written memories of Æthelstan which were passed down to later generations. Taken together they also show that Æthelstan was an Anglo-Saxon king whose memory was part of the traditions and histories of a wide area geographically linked by the North Sea. The following map illustrates this.

Map of the Geographical Spread of Texts Depicting Æthelstan



The distribution of the texts suggests that there may have been much more sharing and exchange of stories, texts and memories in the North Sea region than the surviving evidence suggests today. Some support for this exists in the shared themes which my thesis has identified in the ways in which Æthelstan was depicted across traditions. The following section sets these out in greater detail.

Similarities of Themes on Æthelstan across Traditions

The Table below sets out the main similarities in the themes by which Æthelstan is depicted in all three traditions. The sources from the different regional traditions are colour coded and listed in chronological order. As a result it is possible to see how they are grouped both geographically and by century. I have used the following five headings for the Table, generated by my analyses in the thesis of key aspects in the texts from each tradition: Æthelstan's birth status; his success as military leader; his reputation as 'rex pius'; his claim to be King of all Britain; his role as king maker and his association with Viking leaders. As will be seen in the commentary which follows, a tradition may not depict a particular aspect or may do so only partially.

Table 19. The Main Similarities in Depictions of Æthelstan as King across Traditions and Centuries.

Date	Birth Status	Successful Military Leader	Pious Christian King	Viking Associate	King Maker	King of All Britain
10th century	Hrotsvit	ASC Versions A and B <i>Chronicon Æthelweardi</i> Flodoard Richer	Charters, Book Dedications, Poems Folcuin <i>Libri Vitae</i>	Dudo	Flodoard Dudo	Charters Coins Book Dedications Poems
11 th century		ASC Versions C and D <i>La Chronique de Nantes</i>	Ælfric	ASC Version D	<i>La Chronique de Nantes</i>	ASC Version D
12 th century	William of Malmesbury	ASC Versions E and F Gaimar John of Worcester Symeon of Durham Henry of Huntingdon William of Malmesbury Roger of Hoveden	Symeon of Durham William Malmesbury Ælred of Rievaulx	John of Worcester William of Malmesbury Roger of Hoveden Saxo Grammaticus	John of Worcester MS B William of Malmesbury Roger of Hoveden Saxo Grammaticus	Symeon of Durham William of Malmesbury
13 th century	Roger of Wendover	Roger of Wendover <i>Egils Saga</i>	Icelandic/Norse Sagas Synoptic Histories	Roger of Wendover Icelandic/Norse Sagas Synoptic Histories	Roger of Wendover Icelandic/Norse Sagas	<i>Egils Saga?</i>

■ Anglo-Saxon
 ■ Anglo-Norman
 ■ Continental
 ■ Scandinavian

The Table illustrates that depictions of Æthelstan as military leader and ‘rex pius’ are fairly strongly represented across all three traditions; Hrotsvit’s emphasis on the lowly status of Æthelstan’s birth is replicated only by William of Malmesbury and Roger of Wendover; depictions of Æthelstan as king-maker and Viking associate appear first in the Continental texts; the depiction of Æthelstan as King of all Britain is largely restricted to the English diplomatic, numismatic and dedicatory sources of the tenth century and to Symeon of Durham and William of Malmesbury.

Æthelstan's Birth Status

One aspect where there are similarities across two, but not three, traditions is the status of Æthelstan's birth on his mother's side. Hrotsvit's claim that Æthelstan's mother was of low status lacks support in the Anglo-Saxon sources and was variously interpreted by the Anglo-Norman writers, with John of Worcester and Ælred describing her as a 'noble lady' and Roger of Wendover stating that she was a concubine. William of Malmesbury took a middle course. He notes the tradition but expresses his doubts, stating that even if Æthelstan was the son of a concubine his outstanding qualities as king made the status of his birth irrelevant. The Scandinavian sources make no direct reference to Æthelstan's birth status but it is possible that the Old Icelandic/Norse story of Æthelstan fostering Haraldr's son by a concubine contains a reference to it.

Æthelstan as Military Leader, *Pius Rex* and Viking Associate

The depictions in all three traditions of Æthelstan as military leader reflect the emphasis on his military achievements found in the brief entries in the *ASC* and the *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, the poem on the battle at Brunanburh, the battle of Vínheiðr in *Egils Saga* and the Continental accounts of Æthelstan's support for Louis and Alan Twistedbeard of Brittany. His reputation as a pious Christian king is challenged by Saxo Grammaticus in his account of Æthelstan's double-dealing but is otherwise very evident across the three traditions. It is strongly supported by the writings of Ælfric and Ælred, the monastic land charters and records of Æthelstan's monastic foundations, the lists of his donations of relics, books and gifts to monastic and ecclesiastical centres in England and on the Continent, his educating his foster-son Hákon as a Christian, his insistence on his Viking forces being prime-signed and on the baptism of Eiríkr blóðøx and his family. Depictions of links between Æthelstan and the Vikings are found not only in the Scandinavian texts but in the accounts of his marriage arrangement with Sihtric in *ASC* Version D and the Anglo-Norman texts, and in Dudo's narrative of his friendship with

Rollo and William Longsword. This picture of Æthelstan as well-disposed to the Vikings proved enduring. In the thirteenth century, John of Wallingford, giving a brief overview of Æthelstan's reign, refers to Æthelstan's efforts to be on the friendliest terms with the Scandinavians and alleges that, while his father was alive, he had spent some time in Dacia and as a result had adopted many of their customs.⁴

Æthelstan as *Rex totius Britanniae*

Perhaps surprisingly, Æthelstan's claim to be *Rex totius Britanniae* is largely dependent on the Anglo-Saxon charters, coins, book dedications and poems produced both during his reign and later in the tenth century. This image is to some degree perpetuated by the Anglo-Norman writers. Symeon of Durham depicts Æthelstan ruling over Britain more widely than any of his predecessors in fulfilment of the promise made to King Alfred by St Cuthbert. William of Malmesbury does not call him King of all Britain but perhaps implies it by his description of Æthelstan's success in extending his kingdom across England and setting its boundaries in the south west and with Scotland.

Similarly the Scandinavian sagas by equating Æthelstan's power and status with that of Haraldr hárfagri, king of all Norway, may be indirectly reflecting his title as king of all Britain. *Egils saga* may also imply a reference in the description in *Aðalsteins drápa* of Æthelstan's rule extending over the whole land. The Continental writers, because of Æthelstan's Carolingian family links might have been expected to be aware of the tenth-century image of Æthelstan as *Rex totius Britanniae*. If so, they chose not to use it but, apart from Hrotsvit and Widukind, they may reflect this status and position through their depictions of his extensive influence with key leaders and rulers in Flanders, West Francia, Brittany and Normandy.

⁴ *The Chronicle Attributed to John of Wallingford*, ed. by Richard Vaughan, Camden Miscellany, 21 (London: The Royal Historical Society, 1958), p. 40.

The limiting of Æthelstan's official title of *Rex totius Britanniae* to sources from the time of his reign, or shortly after, could suggest that it was not regarded as relevant or appropriate by later writers. This may reflect the fact that in historical records Æthelstan was not the first Anglo-Saxon king to be described as King of Britain. Earlier examples go back to the time of Edwin and Oswald of Northumbria. The *Annals of Tigernach* describe Edwin of Northumbria as 'qui totam Britan[n]iam regnavit',⁵ while Bede states that Edwin ruled over the English and British people except for Kent.⁶ Adomnán describes Oswald as appointed by God to hold power over the whole of Britain, 'totius Britanniae imperator a deo ordinatus'.⁷ Bede too ascribes overall sovereignty to Oswald but describes him receiving, rather than taking, power and designates the areas he ruled by the language people spoke rather than by geographical boundaries.⁸ Later, Æthelbald of Mercia, granting land to Cyneberht at Ismere, witnessed his charter as 'rex Britanniae', although there is considerable doubt as to the extent of his influence and control outside Mercia.⁹ Both Version A of the ASC and Æthelweard depict Edward as achieving the same extension to his kingdom as is claimed for Æthelstan while Henry of Huntingdon describes Edmund as first achieving overall kingship in Britain. It would seem from these examples that titles claiming to rule all Britain could be a form of hyperbole used to praise and exalt the memory of kings. What makes Æthelstan's claim different is that he was the first English king to be consistently designated in this way on his charters and to be depicted on his coins and in

⁵ W. Stokes, 'The Annals of Tigernach. Third Fragment', *Revue Celtique*, 17 (1896), 199-263 (p. 181).

⁶ 'Anglorum pariter et Brettonum populis praefuit, praeter Cantuariis tantum'. 'He ruled at the same time over the peoples of the English and the Britons, except only for Kent'. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ii, 5, I, 224-25.

⁷ *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. by Alan Orr Anderson, rev. by Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), i, 1. 9a, p. 16.

⁸ 'omnes nationes et provincias Britanniae, quae in quattuor linguas, id est, Brettonum, Pictorum, Scottorum et Anglorum divisae sunt, in ditione accepit', 'He received into his power all the peoples and provinces which are divided into four languages, that is, the Britons, Picts, Scots and English'. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii, 6, I, 350-51.

⁹ Electronic Sawyer, S89.

a manuscript portrait as a crowned king. These diplomatic, numismatic and portrait sources were apparently unknown or ignored by later writers. If known, it may be that they did not regard them as historical records but as artistic and legal artefacts celebrating monarchy, safeguarding commercial and property rights and promoting feelings of national unity. This interpretation may have been further strengthened by the use of these official designations in Æthelstan's book dedications and in the poems written to confer praise and enhance his reputation.

Æthelstan as King Maker

The depiction of Æthelstan as king maker is based largely on the Continental and Scandinavian accounts of his actions in ensuring the safe returns of the three young heirs in his care to their positions of power—Louis to the throne of West Francia, Alan Twistedbeard to the Dukedom of Brittany and Hákon to the throne of Norway. No references to these have survived in the Anglo-Saxon and early Anglo-Norman texts but in the twelfth century, as noted above, Flodoard's account of the return of Louis and Alan was inserted into the Bury St Edmunds' MS B of John of Worcester's *Chronicle*. William of Malmesbury also contributes to the depiction of Æthelstan as king maker when he quotes Æthelstan as saying that it was better to make a king than to be one as an example of Æthelstan's magnanimity in restoring Constantine and Owain to their thrones after Eamont.

Thesis Overview

The different versions of Æthelstan across and within the three traditions can be seen as partisan accounts, bolstering or undermining Æthelstan. But they are also historical statements in their own right, recording social memories of past events, however inaccurately, or deliberately creating memories for the future. Fentress and Wickham have drawn attention to this important distinction between our response to the veracity of social group memories and the response of those who held them, stating that 'the

question of whether *we* regard these memories as historically true will often turn out to be less important than whether *they* regard their memories as true'.¹⁰ Although their statement referred to oral traditions it can equally well be applied to written texts.

All the English, Continental and Scandinavian authors considered above claim to be providing truthful accounts, either explicitly or implicitly, usually by claiming to have used only trustworthy written or oral sources. One exception is William of Malmesbury. The veracity of his own writing exercised him and he resolved it by claiming that he had faithfully reproduced the content of his sources, which he had selected for their trustworthiness, but that responsibility for their veracity rested with the source authors. In addition he stated that his readers should also make up their own minds about the truthfulness of his account.¹¹ By his comments William shows himself keenly aware of the power of the written text as a way of creating and perpetuating memories. In his prefaces he is very critical of those writers who deliberately avoided criticism by omitting what was bad about a person or event and won praise by inflating, or inventing, what was good.¹²

Partner has pointed out that the Anglo-Norman historians wrote their narratives as literary works, using many rhetorical and stylistic features, inventing speeches, quoting poetry, and seeking to entertain their readers with stories.¹³ My analysis of the sources in all three traditions illustrates how their authors chose to write in a particular literary genre and used a variety of literary techniques, editing existing material, using rhetoric, speeches, hagiography, verse and story to depict Æthelstan and aiming to

¹⁰ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 26.

¹¹ Spiegel has drawn attention to the role of the reader as literary critic of historical texts reminding us that the study of historical sources is one of interpretation. The interpretations noted above from secondary scholarship, and in my own commentary, highlight this role of the reader searching for and finding meaning. Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, p. xix.

¹² 'scriptor obvia mala propter metum praetereat, et, bona si non sunt, propter plausum confingat', 'The writer omits through fear the evil he meets, and, if there are no good things to report, invents them because of the applause they bring'. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, iii, 'Prologue', I, 424-25.

¹³ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, pp. 194-211.

entertain as well as to inform. Fentress and Wickham have cautioned against trying to distinguish between the historical information and its literary presentation seeing this as a false dichotomy. They argue that ‘only by regarding the “objective” and the “subjective” as indissoluble can we understand the relationship between the world as it empirically was, and the world as it was represented by writers.’¹⁴ While content and style are clearly interconnected, my thesis has also shown that literary analysis of source texts can make a positive contribution to the study of a text as a historical resource.

In Chapter 1, for example, my application of codicological studies to the account of Æthelstan’s succession in Versions A and B of the *ASC*, showed that the brief entries on Æthelstan and his half-brothers were all written as one block entry in the mid- to late tenth century. Rather than their brevity implying hostility to Æthelstan, the entries appeared to be an attempt to update the *ASC* after a gap of some twenty five years. Based on literary analysis of the formulaic and paratactic structure of the *Chronicle*, I argued that the sequence of events in Version B, in which Æthelstan’s succession followed Ælfweard’s death, could equally well be denoting a temporal rather than a causative relationship. I was able to support my argument by reference to Version A of the *ASC* and the Wessex regnal lists. By bringing texts on Mercia and Wessex together I was also able to suggest that political rivalry between Mercia and Wessex could lie behind the textual differences in Versions A and B of the *ASC*. This close examination of interrelated texts made it possible to consider their content more closely and to question some of the traditional ways in which they had been read. A further, and perhaps more important, example was my analysis of Æthelstan’s formal designations in his contemporary charters, coins and book dedications. By bringing the charter and *ASC* texts together and looking for other, independent dating information for

¹⁴ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 145.

Æthelstan's reign, I identified links which suggested that Æthelstan may have undergone a later coronation to legitimize his claim to be King of all Britain.

My analysis of the sources on Æthelstan has demonstrated the importance of reading historical sources as literary texts and shown how these source texts derive their meaning from their own times and their own contexts. By using a comparative approach I have shown that concentration on only one source, or one group of texts, would have provided a picture of Æthelstan which was specific to a particular region or time. Instead, I have shown that there was not one way, but many ways, in which Æthelstan was depicted, all claiming to be accurate representations. At one level this is not surprising. It is no different from the diversity of views which exist about people both in literature and in real life. However, perhaps more important than the depictions the texts provide of Æthelstan is the information they give on his importance as a status figure whether for a national community, a religious community or an individual.

For example, the fact that Ælred assigns Æthelstan's success in Scotland to the intervention of John of Beverley, and Symeon assigns it to St Cuthbert, need not be seen as something which has to be resolved in favour of one or the other. Whether Æthelstan sought the help of one or both saints is less important than the fact that both Beverley and Durham wished to claim that their saint was the king's helper and record that as a result they both benefited from Æthelstan's generosity. Their accounts confer status on Æthelstan and by association on their communities.¹⁵ Ælred was then able to use Æthelstan's actions as a positive example of Christian kingship for the young prince Henry to follow, while Symeon's account preserved, or created, a tradition linking Cuthbert and Wessex and emphasizing Durham's historic national status. As a result,

¹⁵ 'The "social logic of the text" is a term and a concept that seeks to combine in a single but complex framework a protocol for the analysis of a text's social site—its location within an embedded social environment of which it is a product and in which it acts as an agent [...]'. Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, p. xviii.

Æthelstan is still commemorated today by a statue in Beverley Minster and by the display at Durham Cathedral of his gifts to the St Cuthbert community.

My thesis has shown the extent to which depictions of Æthelstan were similar across centuries and across traditions during the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. It has also highlighted significant differences both within and between traditions and identified how historical, cultural, contextual and literary influences impacted on writers and their texts. It has queried some traditionally held scholarly views about Æthelstan and identified a number of areas for further research. Above all it has shown how literary analysis can support historical studies by subjecting sources to closer analysis, by linking related texts, by identifying areas of meaning previously overlooked and by seeking to interpret historical texts as part of their authors' own complex historical and cultural contexts.

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