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THE STENTON LECTURE 1967

THE GENUINE ASSER

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in the University of Cambridge

UNIVERSITY OF READING

1968

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It is no accident that we know more about King Alfred than about any other Anglo-Saxon king. He differed from all other kings in leaving writings of his own. He invited scholars to his court, and he was the sort of man to inspire one of them, the Welshman Asser, to write a biography of him.

Until 1904, it was difficult to separate the text of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* from sixteenth-century interpolations which had brought it into disrepute. These were finally cleared out of the way by W. H. Stevenson, in his excellent edition of 1904.¹ He was then able to answer criticisms levelled against the authenticity of the *Life* in a way that has convinced most scholars ever since, particularly since his refutation of the attacks was combined with a considerable amount of evidence pointing to contemporary writing. Nevertheless, the authenticity has since been called in question, and attempts have been made to find a likely fabricator of the alleged forgery.² The latest suggestion is that of Professor Galbraith,³ that the *Life* might have been forged by Leofric, who became bishop of Devon and Cornwall in 1046, with his see first at Crediton, and after 1050, at Exeter.

The main purpose of my lecture is to re-establish both the authenticity and the value of the work; and, in so doing, to clear Bishop Leofric from the accusation of being a forger, and W. H. Stevenson, a careful and judicious scholar, from an implied slur of gullibility.

First, I want to make two small points. The first is that when one has an extensive work from a period for which records are not very plentiful, it is no cause for suspicion if it contains some information not found in other sources; it would be strange if it did not. Secondly, one must remember that even a contemporary writer can be guilty of misunderstanding and exaggeration. We do not find them lacking from accounts of our own time.

To hold that a work is contemporary is not to claim that it is above criticism. The *Life* is written in an ornate and rhetorical Latin style; it uses recondite words; as Stevenson says, 'often his meaning is obscured by a cloud of verbiage' and the author has an 'unmethodical habit of anticipating events and then returning suddenly, without due notice, to the theme from which he has wandered away';⁴ his love of elaborating a parallel can deflect

¹ *Asser's Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots*, ed. William Henry Stevenson (Oxford, 1904); new impression, with article on *Recent Work on Asser's Life of Alfred* by Dorothy Whitelock, 1959.

² J. W. Adamson, in *The Illiterate Anglo-Saxon* (Cambridge, 1946), wished to attribute the work to Giraldus Cambrensis, but the *Annals of St. Neots*, which used it, survive in a manuscript a generation older than the time when he was writing.

³ V. H. Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Study of History* (London, 1964), pp. 85-128.

⁴ Stevenson, pp. lxxxix-xc.

him from his subject.¹ The work has been accused of shapelessness, sometimes excused on the ground that there were few models for a secular biography; but Dr. Marie Schütt showed in 1957 that this charge was exaggerated.² She believes, as did Stevenson, that the work is not in its final stylistic form, but a draft.³ However, it was circulated in this form.

In broad outline, we may summarise the *Life* as follows: it begins with the date and place of Alfred's birth, and with his ancestry on both sides (cc.1-2); it then gives an account of the history of the period in which Alfred was growing up, largely from the Chronicle, but with a lot of additional information about his father's reign which is of considerable interest, especially when we remember that at the time when Asser says he is writing, 893, there were persons living who would remember these events (cc.3-21). When this account has reached Alfred's eighteenth year, Asser leaves the Chronicle to describe Alfred's childhood and boyhood (cc.21-24), telling us much that would otherwise have been unknown, including the well-known incident in which his mother showed to her sons a book of Saxon poetry, with an illuminated initial, offering to give it to the one who could first learn it (c.23). Asser tells how in later life Alfred used to regret that in the years when he had youth and leisure and aptitude for study, he had no teachers, obtaining them only later when he was harassed with illness, with the cares of office, and with Viking invasions (c.25). It is a natural sequence to describe these invasions (cc.26-72), by using the Chronicle 867-885 (misdated 884), but in this section also he adds material, e.g. Alfred's Mercian marriage, and details concerning some of the battles. After 885, Alfred was able to devote more time to reforms and to study, and hence Asser leaves the Chronicle to give an account of these things (cc.73-81). He goes back to Alfred's marriage in 868, at which he had an attack of the illness which troubled him intermittently until the time when Asser was writing (c.74).⁴ This is followed by an account of Alfred's children and their upbringing, of his activities for the improvement of culture, his welcoming of foreign craftsmen, his encouragement of Saxon literature, and his invitation of Mercian and foreign scholars, of whom Asser was one (cc.75-79). Not unnaturally, Asser gives a long account of his own summons and reception, and of the conditions in Wales that led to his acceptance of the invitation and of the king's generosity to him (cc.79-81). After a brief return to the Chronicle for the events of 886 (the obtaining of London) and 887 (mainly Frankish affairs) (cc.82-86) we leave this record for good. The rest of the work comes from Asser's own knowledge.

We now learn how in Asser's presence, on 11 November 887, the king began to read and translate (from Latin); the beginning of the *Handbook*

¹ See *infra*, p. 5.

² Marie Schütt, 'The Literary Form of Asser's "Vita Alfredi"', *English Historical Review*, lxxii (1957), pp. 209-220.

³ She believes, however, that the draft 'had reached a stage of composition, in which most of the items, though not yet in their final stylistic form, had already been allotted a well-considered place in the work as a whole'; see *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁴ See *infra*, pp. 15-17.

is described, and we are told that 'he was straightway eager to read and to translate into the Saxon language, and hence to instruct many others' (cc.87-89). At this point Asser compares Alfred to the repentant thief on the Cross, and this in its turn leads him to enlarge on the king's tribulations (c.90), and we learn no more of his plans to translate for the good of others. But we do learn of his other achievements, of his buildings of towns and fortresses, in spite of lack of support, of his founding of two monasteries, in spite of the lack of enthusiasm among his subjects, of his division of his revenues, to ensure that a due proportion should be allotted for religious purposes, of his re-organisation of the service of his thegns at his court, and of his invention of a more accurate method of telling the time, so as to devote a proper share of his time to divine service (cc.91-94, 98-104). We learn also of his care for the poor, and his examination of the administration of justice, to prevent the oppression of the weak; he insisted that those in charge of courts should not go astray out of ignorance, but should learn to read, or get someone who could read to them (cc.105f.). The work ends here. As we shall see, many of these statements can find corroboration in contemporary sources; yet without the *Life*, there are many things which we should not have known, or only have dimly glimpsed.¹

In c.91, Asser says he is writing in Alfred's 45th year, i.e. 893. It is not difficult to find reasons why a man should choose to write about the king at some time in his life-time, rather than wait for his death. Asser could not know that he would survive the king; he may have wished to present him with a copy; he may have had a personal reason for writing just at this time. With Dr. Schütt, I think that he had in part Welsh readers in mind.² The long account of how he came to be at Alfred's court (c.79) reads to me like an apologia for the benefit of critics who disapproved of his leaving his own church in Wales to enter the service of a foreign king. He speaks of his long hesitation to accept Alfred's offer, and of his eventual agreement 'by the advice and permission of all our people, for the benefit of that holy place (St. David's) and of all dwelling in it' and also '*in order that it (Saxonia) should be benefited by the teaching of St. David*'³—surely a remark directed towards Welsh readers. He explains that he hoped for Alfred's help against the oppression of St. David's by King Hyfaidd, and describes how Welsh princes, one after another, had sought Alfred's support and had found it

¹ In this outline I have omitted two digressions: the story of the wickedness of Eadburh, Offa's daughter, suspected of having killed her husband, King Beorhtric of Wessex, in 802, and of her subsequent fate in the Frankish kingdom, told in part on the authority of Alfred (who had no reason to feel kindly to the house of Offa) in order to explain why the West Saxons would not allow the title of queen to the king's wife (cc. 14 f.); and the account of the attempted murder of John, abbot of Athelney, by members of his house (cc. 95-97).

² *Op. cit.*, p. 210. If Asser had been writing solely for English readers, his reference to the Saxons as 'that people' would sound strange. Also, he adds geographical data on the sites of well-known English places which would be redundant, and he likes to give the British names of English places. See also pp. cl- cli of the 1959 reprint of Stevenson.

³ On the rendering of this passage, see G. H. Wheeler, 'Textual Emendations to Asser's *Life of Alfred*', *English Historical Review*, xlvii (1952), pp. 87 f.

valuable. If one purpose of his work was self-justification, there may have been some special reason why he began it when he did.

It is a much harder matter to find reasons why a later writer should pretend to be writing a *Life* in 893. If, in spite of continental parallels for the writing of a biography of a living ruler,¹ we were to persist in the view that this was an extraordinary thing to do, would we not then wonder why a writer, free to write a complete *Life*, should choose so strange a proceeding?

It is now time to look at Professor Galbraith's suggestion that Bishop Leofric of Devon could have fabricated the *Life* in the mid-eleventh century. The author of the *Life* is a Welshman, and there is much to suggest that he had spent some time in the Frankish kingdom.² Leofric was raised and educated in Lotharingia.³ Florence of Worcester calls him *Brytonicus*,⁴ and it is essential for Professor Galbraith's theory that we interpret this as 'Welshman'; indeed, this is definitely stated,⁵ and we are told that he was 'prompted by Welsh patriotism'⁶ and that 'he glorified Wales in the person of Asser'.⁷ Nevertheless, Professor Galbraith says later on that he was more probably a Cornishman.⁸ No other authority supports Florence,⁹ and Leofric is an English name. His motive for forgery is given as his interest in transferring his see from Crediton to Exeter and in getting the dioceses of Devon and Cornwall, which, like his predecessor, he was holding in plurality, united into one. To show that these were ancient arrangements, he makes the supposed author of the *Life* claim in c.81 that Alfred gave him Exeter, with all the *parochia* belonging to it, in Saxon territory and in Cornwall. Yet in the records which survive of Leofric's activities, there is not a hint that he ever used the argument that the forgery was meant to support. Leofric may have had a great admiration for King Alfred: one cannot prove that he had not; but there is no evidence that he had.

But why 893? Professor Galbraith would explain a certain amount of inconsistency between past and present tenses as resulting from Leofric's having started to write a *Life* purporting to be after the king's death, and then changing his mind and altering here and there some tenses into the present to make it appear that the king was still alive. This inconsistency had been noted by Stevenson,¹⁰ and explained as due to scribal alterations, which in several cases it probably is. But it has been exaggerated: in some cases the shift is natural, as when we are told in the past tense of monasteries

¹ Namely, Thegan's *Life of Louis the Pious* and, at a later time, the *Encomium Emmae*. See Stevenson, p. lxxx.

² See Stevenson, pp. lxxviii, xciii–xciv, 286.

³ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton, p. 201: *apud Lotharingos altus et doctus*.

⁴ *Chronicon ex chronicis*, ed. B. Thorpe, i, p. 199: *regis cancellario Leofrico Brytonico*.

⁵ Galbraith, p. 99.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119: 'Bishop Leofric, as a Welshman or more probably a Cornishman . . .'

⁹ It is not in the account of Leofric which precedes the *Leofric Missal*; see the edition by F. E. Warren, p. 2.

¹⁰ Stevenson, pp. xlix–l.

which the king founded, turn to the present when the attitude to monasticism of the English of the time is described, and go back to the past when we hear of what course this had made the king take when he founded his monasteries (cc.92f.). Other inconsistencies arise, I suspect, because Asser sometimes thought of the king as he then was, and sometimes thought of him in the years of their closer intercourse. The reason why the supposed forger changed his mind and pretended to write a work in 893, was because he did not know enough about the king's literary works to produce a full *Life*, nor could he date Asser's accession to the see of Sherborne. Leofric knew more about the Alfredian works than Professor Galbraith realised: though the Old English *Bede* is not included in the list of works which Leofric gave to Exeter, the manuscript of this work at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge,¹ has a note saying that it was given to that church by Leofric. It is difficult to uphold the claim that he knew only the Latin version of the *Cura Pastoralis*, if he is the writer of the *Life*; for how then are we to account for the undoubted correspondences in wording between the *Life* and the preface to Alfred's translation of this work?² Seeing that Leofric gave the Old English *Boethius* to Exeter, and that the author of the *Life* refers to Werferth's translation of the *Dialogues* (there is no ground for the view that Leofric confused these two),³ I doubt whether the forger would have been worried that his knowledge was so incomplete that other people would have suspected him of fraud. Nor is it clear why he should have felt safe with 893. The reason some modern scholars have dated the Alfredian works after this year is that they are not mentioned by Asser, but that would be a circular argument. In fact, there is good reason to date the *Orosius* before c.890.⁴ And as for the date of Asser's accession to Sherborne, the author was not obliged to commit himself; he is usually vague on dates except when using the Chronicle. As we shall see, the author of the *Life*, if not contemporary, must have had a truly remarkable set of sources at his disposal. Why should they have dried up for the last years of Alfred's reign? And why should the forger have supposed that his contemporaries would be better informed than he and in a position to note omissions and errors? The whole argument assumes that an eleventh-century forger expected his contemporaries to be able and willing to subject his work to the sort of minute scrutiny which modern scholars have given it. Finally, what prevented Leofric from mentioning Alfred's relief of Exeter when it was

¹ Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 41.

² See the 1959 reprint of Stevenson, p. cxlviii and add to the instances there given: *bigum ðisses kynerics: regiae potestatis sollicitudinibus*.

³ Galbraith, p. 101. The *Life* (c. 77) says Werferth translated *aliquando sensum ex sensu*; the preface to the *Boethius* says: *Hwilum he sette word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgite*. There is no reason to suppose that the author of the *Life* took his words from the *Boethius*; it was a well-known Latin tag, used by Jerome, among others, and Alfred has almost the same words in the preface to his *Cura Pastoralis*. It is possible that he learnt the expression from Asser.

⁴ On the dating of Alfred's works and their omission from Asser's account, see D. Whitelock, 'The Prose of Alfred's Reign', *Continuations and Beginnings*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 73-77.

besieged by the Danes in 893?¹ A bishop of Exeter as well-informed as the author of the *Life* would hardly be unaware of this event. The genuine Asser omitted it because it had not happened when he was writing; it occurred late in the year.

In fact, the evidence for connecting Leofric with the *Life* is meagre: a reference to a *parochia* of Exeter, tucked away in a late chapter, and capable of other interpretations; a very doubtful chance that he was a Welshman; a training on the Continent, by no means uncommon. He gave a copy of Sedulius's *Carmen Paschale* to Exeter, and this work is quoted in the *Life*; but it was a well-known work in the ninth century, one surviving manuscript of it having belonged to Frithestan of Winchester,² whom Asser must have known; Leland found a copy at Sherborne, Asser's see.³ It is dark to me why the use of Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, a work written between 814 and 821, should point to an eleventh-century writer, rather than to a late ninth-century writer whose work betrays knowledge of Frankish affairs.⁴ There is no evidence that Leofric even knew the work. When one adds that Professor Campbell suggests⁵ with good reason that the *Life* was used by the *Encomium Emmae*, which was written at St. Bertin's between 1040 and 1042, a few years before Leofric succeeded to the see of Crediton, and when, as we shall see later, a body of expert opinion dates the first hand of the Cotton manuscript (which was at least a copy of a copy of the original) at about 1000, one can clear Bishop Leofric of a charge of forgery.

In clearing Leofric, one has not proved the work genuine. I can here only select a few of the more striking examples of the way contemporary sources support the statements of Asser. Some are already in Stevenson's work. The

¹ This is recorded in the section of the Chronicle, annals 892-896, which seems to have been composed in one piece, and which was added after the Chronicle had begun to be circulated. There is no sign that the version of the Chronicle used by Asser went beyond 887.

² Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 173, ff. 57-83. It is bound up with the Parker Chronicle and Laws.

³ Stevenson, p. 163.

⁴ While there are, as Professor Galbraith says on p. 108, precedents and parallels in Einhard's account of Charles the Great for Alfred's love of Saxon poetry, his skill in hunting, his devotion to the liberal arts, especially reading and writing both for himself and his children, his wars, his alms to Rome and to poor Christians everywhere, his justice, and his division of his revenue, Asser did not need to take these things from Einhard, for most can be proved true of Alfred by contemporary evidence. Alfred himself composed in Saxon verse the *Metra* of Boethius; his writings show his devotion to the liberal arts; his wars are recorded in the Chronicle, and so are his alms to Rome, not to mention the *Elimo(sina)* coin; his concern with justice is seen in his laws, and an anonymous letter to his son shows how his judgements were respected. We cannot confirm in detail his division of his revenues, but we know of his distribution to monasteries from his laws; we are not told elsewhere of his skill as a huntsman, but he was inclined to use metaphor drawn from this field. Whether it is true or not, as Professor Galbraith says on p. 108, that it would never have occurred to anyone in the ninth century that Alfred and Charles were of comparable importance, Asser makes no such claim. His use as a model of the only secular biography known to him need not imply that he thought the two kings equal.

⁵ *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, ed. Alistair Campbell, Camden Third Series, lxxii (1949), pp. xxxv-xxxvii.

receipt by Alfred of letters from Elias, patriarch of Jerusalem, is supported by the survival of two letters to Frankish rulers which prove that Elias was sending at this time circular letters to western rulers, and also by the presence in a book of medical recipes of some sent by Elias to Alfred.¹ The *Life* adds to the Chronicler's reference to the eclipse of 29 October 878 far too exact a statement of the time of day at which it occurred for it to have been added at a much later date.² Frankish sources confirm what Asser says about the unusual honour paid to Judith when she married King Æthelwulf, and about her second marriage to her stepson Æthelbald.³ The account that Wessex was divided on Æthelwulf's return from abroad, his son Æthelbald receiving the western districts while Æthelwulf kept the eastern parts, is supported by regnal lists which give Æthelbald a reign of five years, though he survived his father only for about two and a half years.⁴ That it was the eastern parts which Æthelwulf kept (c.12) is in line with the statement of the *Annals of St. Neots* that he was buried in Steyning, Sussex;⁵ it is probable that this came from the very early manuscript of the Chronicle which the compiler of the *Annals* is known to have used. By the time the Parker manuscript was written, a little before 900, the body had been moved to Winchester, and any later writer would have placed it there. But Asser omits to mention the place of burial.⁶ He, too, had an early manuscript of the Chronicle, which could have said Steyning, but in 893 he might have been uncertain whether a proposed translation to Winchester had yet taken place. It is only Asser who names Werferth as the translator of Gregory's *Dialogues* (c.77), for he is not mentioned in the surviving manuscripts of this work; but his attribution is supported by the Mercian element in its language, especially in its vocabulary. Then there are the references to Welsh affairs, many of which can be confirmed from Welsh sources, while the friendly relations between Welsh rulers and Alfred is borne out both by the Chronicle *s.a.* 893 and the *Annales Cambriae s.a.* 894.⁷

We learn of Alfred's Mercian marriage only from Asser (c.29), but it fits in with all that we know, thanks to charter and coin evidence,⁸ of the friendly alliance with Mercia. Asser says that Alfred's mother-in-law, Eadburh, was descended from Mercian kings. Does not this afford a natural explanation why Alfred should have departed from the customary name-

¹ Stevenson, pp. 328 f. The corrupt reading in all versions (*abel* for *ab elia*) shows that the name of Elias was not familiar to the copyist.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 280-286.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 200, 212 f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-197.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁶ Neither the Cotton manuscript nor the first part of the *Historia Regum* mention the burial-place. Stevenson (c. 17) adds *sepultoque apud Wintoniam*, from Florence of Worcester, who probably took it from the Chronicle.

⁷ Stevenson, pp. lxxv, 316-318, and pp. cxlix-ccli of the 1959 reprint. I see no reason to regard Asser's account as a 'concise synthesis of Welsh history in Alfred's reign . . . beyond the mental grasp of a contemporary Welshman' (Galbraith, p. 120).

⁸ See F. M. Stenton, *The Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon*, pp. 25-27; C. E. Blunt, 'The Anglo-Saxon Coinage and the Historian' *Medieval Archaeology*, iv (1960), pp. 6-8.

giving of his family to give his eldest son a name beginning with *Ead-*?¹ Alfred's wife, Ealhswith, had a brother, the ealdorman Athulf, whose death about 901 is entered in the Chronicle.² He may reasonably be identified with the Mercian *dux* Æthelwulf, whom we find in a charter of 897³ concerned with the title-deeds and inheritance of Coenwulf, king of the Mercians. Æthelwulf presumably inherited through his mother, Eadburh, whose descent from Mercian royalty is mentioned by Asser.⁴ So Asser's claim was not an invention,⁵ and one may well wonder where a later writer could have picked up this information.

Several more points of this kind could be made,⁶ but it is more important to demonstrate how one can discern, under Asser's rhetoric, a picture of Alfred's character which agrees with what one can gather from his writings. The words in which Asser speaks of the king's laments and complaints to God for his lack of learning and his distraction from study by the cares of government (cc. 25, 76) may not stand up well to comparison with the king's own simple and dignified statements, but the sentiments are the same. For example, in his preface to the *Boethius* Alfred speaks of 'the various and manifold worldly cares which often harassed him both in mind and in body', adding 'It is very difficult for us to number the cares which in his days came upon the kingdom which he had received.'⁷ But most interesting is the preface to the *Soliloquies of St. Augustine*, in which, in a passage which calls to mind Asser's account of the making of the *Handbook*,⁸ he describes his collecting of passages from the Christian Fathers; he uses the metaphor of fetching from the wood pieces of timber for building a house; he advises

¹ Asser's naming of Alfred's mother as Osburh and her father as Oslac (c.2) receives support from the occurrence of the element *Os-* in the name of one of her grandsons and in that of a kinsman of Alfred whom he mentions in his will. See Stevenson, p. 163, n. 7 and p. 299, n. 4. Though a late writer could have learnt of Alfred's paternal ancestry from genealogies, which survive in several versions, there is no evidence for lists of descent on the female side.

² 902 A; 903 B, C, D. The true date is probably 901.

³ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, No. 575.

⁴ The charter mentions previous title-deeds issued by Cynethryth and Ælflæd. The first is probably intended for Cwenthryth, daughter of Coenwulf, and the second is no doubt the daughter of his brother King Ceolwulf. Both kings died without male heirs.

⁵ Since Asser says he has met Eadburh, Alfred's mother-in-law, this passage is dismissed by Professor Galbraith, along with others in which Asser speaks of himself, as imaginary (p. 104 and n. 2). If the work is a late forgery, then such passages must be fiction; but they are not evidence in themselves that it is a forgery. Contemporary writers do sometimes refer to themselves.

⁶ For example, the existence of a Mercian scholar, Werwulf (c. 77), is shown by the grant by Bishop Werferth in 899 of an estate to a priest of this name *pro nostra antiqua sodalitate et sua fidei amicitia atque oboedientia* (Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, No. 580); that Plegmund also came from Mercia is supported by the Canterbury tradition which connected him with Cheshire; the choice of the unimportant place, Dean in Sussex, as the first meeting place of Alfred and Asser, is explained when we find from Alfred's will that he held estates there. See also Stevenson, pp. cxxvi-cxxviii, and pp. cxlix-cl of the 1959 reprint.

⁷ *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield, p. 1.

⁸ Asser speaks of collecting *flosculos* (cc. 88 f.); Alfred at the end of the first book of *Soliloquies* and both the beginning and end of the second book refers to his collection as *þa blostman*.

'each of those who is strong' to follow his example, 'so that he can plait many a fine wall, and put up many a peerless building, and build a fair enclosure, and dwell therein pleasantly and at his ease winter and summer.' He then adds the revealing and poignant words 'as I have not yet done,' and continues: 'But He who advised me, to Whom the wood was pleasing, may bring it to pass that I shall dwell in greater ease both in this transitory habitation by this road while I am in this world, and also in the eternal home which He has promised us . . .'¹

In many parts of Asser's *Life* one is aware of the deep sense of responsibility with which Alfred regarded his duties as a ruler. We may compare a passage which Alfred added in his rendering of *Boethius*; which begins: 'You know that covetousness and greed for worldly dominion never pleased me over much, and that I did not at all too greatly desire this earthly rule, but yet I desired tools and material for the work that I was charged to perform, namely, that I might worthily and fittingly steer and rule the dominion that was entrusted to me.'²

In relation to Asser's chapters on Alfred's care for the poor, and his concern to protect the weak from oppression in the courts (cc.105 f.), we may look at the compassionate clauses in his laws which afford protection to women,³ to the deaf and dumb,⁴ and to helpless dependents⁵ and at his grant to all slaves of the Wednesdays in the four Ember weeks;⁶ and at his expansion of Exodus xxiii. 3, in his introduction to his laws when he says: 'Judge thou very fairly. Do not judge one judgement for the rich and another for the poor; nor one for the more dear and another for the one more hateful.'⁷

When one reads the tactful remark in the letter to his bishops which accompanied a gift of an English translation of a Latin work: 'It is unknown how long there may be such learned bishops, as now, thanks be to God, are almost everywhere',⁸ one can easily accept Asser's claim (c.76) that Alfred showed kindness and pleasantness to all men. The piety so stressed by Asser is of course obvious in Alfred's own writings.

A later writer who could form so just an appraisal of the king's character would have to be a man of insight and of creative power. Yet the work as a whole does not leave on me the impression of a great intellect. He would also have to have a very remarkable number of ninth-century sources, English, Welsh and continental, which, oddly enough, seem to have given out before the later years of Alfred's reign. He avoided using late material,

¹ *King Alfred's Old English Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*, ed. H. L. Hargrove (Yale Studies in English XIII), p. 1; translated by D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042*, p. 844.

² Sedgefield, *op. cit.*, p. 40; translated by D. Whitelock, *op. cit.*, pp. 845 f.

³ Alfred 9, 11, 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Introduction, 43.

⁸ *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet, p. 8; translated by D. Whitelock, *op. cit.*, p. 819.

such as the story, already found in the archetype of all manuscripts of the Chronicle except the Parker, of Alfred's sending alms to India, or that of the martyrdom of St. Edmund, whose cult was well-established by the early tenth century,¹ or the legends connecting Alfred with St. Cuthbert,² or with St. Neot.³ It would be odd if he were ignorant of all these, and equally odd if he had the means of dating them, and hence rejected them with a modern attitude to non-contemporary records. He must have used his sources with great industry and care, presumably to avoid detection as a forger; and yet we are asked to believe that he betrayed himself by inconsistency in his use of tenses.

However, difficult as it is to postulate so well-equipped and conscientious a research-worker in Anglo-Saxon times, we should have to make the effort if any of the claims that the *Life* contains anachronisms could be substantiated. They can all be answered. Most of them have been answered, by Stevenson, Armitage Robinson, myself and others, but since they continue to be repeated, it will be necessary to cover some old ground. I can only deal here with a few of them.

It is by no means obvious why a mention of Offa's dyke, built in the late eighth century, should find a 'spiritual home' in the eleventh century.⁴ It must have been well known to ninth-century Welshmen. What is incredible in Alfred's attempts to see that his ealdormen and reeves in charge of his courts should learn to read?⁵ His son's first code begins: 'King Edward commands all the reeves that you give such just judgements as you know most right and as it stands in the law-book'.⁶ Alfred went to great pains to

¹ Herman, in his *De miraculis Sancti Eadmundi* (*Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, ed. T. Arnold, i, pp. 29 f), dates the translation of the relics to *Beadriceswyrth* in the reign of Athelstan, and at his court Dunstan heard Edmund's armour-bearer relate the story of the martyrdom, according to the preface to Abbo's *Passio* (*ibid.*, i, pp. 3 f). The St. Edmund pennies afford evidence of the cult in the Danelaw before the end of the ninth century.

² The tale of Cuthbert's appearance to Alfred before the battle of Edington is told in the eleventh-century anonymous *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*. (*Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, ii, 204-206).

³ The cult of St. Neot must have been widespread by the time his relics were moved from Cornwall to Huntingdonshire, before the composition of the tract known as 'The Resting Places of the English Saints', probably in the late tenth century (See F. Liebermann, *Die Heiligen Englands*, p. 13). Yet by the time of the Cotton manuscript of Asser the words *et nunc etiam Sanctus Niot ibidem pausat* had been added after the mention of the Cornish saint Gueriir (c. 74). This does not sound like the remark of an eleventh-century writer.

⁴ Galbraith, p. 120. The same claim made for the mention of Alfred's maternal grandfather, Oslac, as the king's cupbearer, perhaps depends on Stevenson's statement (p. 164) that 'this mention of Oslac, a man of most noble descent, and therefore not a noble by service, as fulfilling the office of butler raises suspicions of the ascription of later Frankish or English customs to Æthelwulf's court'. But Stevenson sees that this depends on negative evidence, and that the absence of contemporary support does not justify us in rejecting the passage as the work of a forger. It is conceivable that on great occasions an important nobleman may have fulfilled this function, without this being mentioned in other early sources. *Beowulf*, probably depicting English court customs in the eighth century, shows that a man who is a prince of his own tribe does not consider it beneath his dignity to be a king's *ombiht* 'attendant' (l. 336).

⁵ Galbraith, loc. cit.

⁶ I Edward, preface. This is one of the passages which I used in 1959 (pp. cxliv-cxlvii) to show that the 'serious difficulties' found by Stevenson in c. 106 were imaginary. Professor

compile 'the law-book' (his own laws with those of Ine appended), and it is natural enough that he should wish those presiding in the courts to be able to read it. His preface to the *Cura Pastoralis* shows clearly that he did not think that the ability to read English need be confined to ecclesiastics.

Asser says that when the king wished to restore monastic life he could not find Englishmen willing to become monks. He says there were many monasteries remaining, but not properly observing the rule of this way of life (c.93). Professor Galbraith says: 'This means in fact that the state of things brought to light at the time of the Dunstan revival was already in force.'¹ Yes, it does mean that. The only reason given for doubting that this state of things was in force is that 'the continued existence of the monasteries in Alfred's reign, whatever their personnel, is vouched for by Alfred's Laws, where, if there is not much about monks, there is a good deal about nuns'. But Asser is not here speaking of nuns,² nor does he deny the continued existence of monasteries; on the contrary. Since the laws which speak of monasteries or monks³ do not in any way suggest that these were following what Asser would regard as a proper rule of life, there is no disagreement between Asser and the laws on this matter.

When we find the same two places, Congresbury and Banwell, which Alfred gave to Asser, appearing together in the eleventh century in connexion with the church of Wells, this is not a strange case of 'history repeating itself'. As Armitage Robinson showed in 1919, the church of Wells was Asser's heir.⁴ After Asser's death, his see of Sherborne was divided into three, Sherborne, Crediton and Wells, the latter church receiving the Somerset estates of Sherborne. Thus Wells kept in its archives the charter by which Edward the Elder gave to Asser the estates of Wellington, Buckland and Bishop's Lydeard, Somerset, in exchange for the monastery of Plympton, Devon;⁵ Wells was holding these estates in Domesday Book. It was less successful in keeping continuous control of Congresbury and Banwell. It may be that the claim was less secure, since these had been given to Asser as a personal gift before he became bishop of Sherborne, but in any case, churches often lost their lands in the tenth century. But churches have a long memory for their rights or alleged rights, and the gift of these two places to Duduc of Wells⁶ may

Galbraith (p. 121) says that this chapter has not been called into service by our legal historians, but it is used by Doris M. Stenton, *English Justice between the Norman Conquest and the Great Charter, 1066-1215* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 55.

¹ Galbraith, p. 96.

² There is, however, much to suggest that the monastic life had a greater appeal to women than to men in the days before the monastic revival. See F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 439.

³ We learn of the rights of sanctuary belonging to the monastic houses to which the king's food-rent belongs, or to other privileged communities (Alfred 2); of the risk of loss run by anyone who entrusts property to another man's monk, without the permission of the monk's lord (20); while Alfred 21, concerned with a priest in a monastery who commits homicide, shows that he might have bought for himself a place in the monastery.

⁴ J. Armitage Robinson, *The Saxon Bishops of Wells* (British Academy Supplemental Papers IV), pp. 52-54.

⁵ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, No. 610.

⁶ A letter of Giso, Duduc's successor, embodied in a history of the bishopric of Somerset

have been a recognition of the claim of that church to them. Wells had later troubles over these places, which need not detain us.¹ In order to explain why Bishop Leofric of Exeter should refer to them in his forgery, Professor Galbraith is forced to assume that a claim recorded in a questionable source of the reign of Henry II, that Congresbury had once been the see for Somerset, was known and believed in the eleventh century.² Thus Leofric's readers would at once understand that Alfred, by giving Asser a monastery there, was making him bishop of Somerset. The forger, if so, went to work in a roundabout way, for, if he did want to boost Asser, what was there to prevent him from directly referring to a grant to him of a diocese of Somerset, similar to his reference to Exeter?

The notion that the mention of a *parochia* of Exeter is an anachronism in the ninth century dies hard. Even supposing that *parochia* means diocese, which is uncertain,³ the reference is not necessarily to the permanent see of Exeter moved from Crediton in 1050. Stevenson showed that the creation of a see for the British areas in the South-West, with a Celtic-speaking bishop, was not new.⁴ A Cornish bishop called Kenstec made his profession to Ceolnoth, archbishop of Canterbury, 833 – 870. There is nothing remarkable in Alfred's deciding to renew or continue the practice by placing another Celtic speaker over a separate see, and Exeter, which as Professor Finberg has reminded us, had had a monastery from the late seventh century, was a suitable centre. Such a temporary see under Asser would merge again with that of Sherborne on Asser's appointment to that see. The temporary carving out of a small diocese, and then letting it merge again with the larger diocese, is not an isolated phenomenon in Anglo-Saxon times.⁵ It is also possible, however, as Professor Finberg suggests, that Asser was meant to serve as a *chorepiscopus*, using the endowments of the monastery of Exeter to provide him with an income.⁶

Unnecessary heavy weather is made of the title *rex Angulsaxonum* given to Alfred.⁷ In the shortage of genuine charters from his reign we do not know

drawn up in the reign of Henry II (see Rev. Joseph Hunter, *Ecclesiastical Documents*, Camden Society, 1840) says that Duduc gave to St. Andrew (Wells) in Edward's reign the possessions which he had been given by the king before he became bishop, including the *villa* of Congresbury and another called Banwell. Even if Giso was correct in believing that all Duduc's possessions were acquired before he succeeded to the see, he could have already been intended for the see at Wells when Congresbury and Banwell were granted to him.

¹ J. Armitage Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 53 n.

² Galbraith, p. 97. See Joseph Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 10. The claim that Congresbury was the see of Somerset in early times, and that Bishop Daniel removed the see to Wells in the reign of Ine, comes among the wild and romantic stories at the beginning of the account.

³ As Professor Galbraith admits on p. 98 n.

⁴ Stevenson, pp. 322 f. and p. cxliii of the 1959 reprint.

⁵ Sigeferth, bishop of Lindsey, signs from 997–1004, when there was no vacancy at Dorchester, in which diocese Lindsey was normally included. Cynesige, once called bishop of Berkshire, appears about 930–942, and presumably was bishop over a portion of the diocese of Ramsbury.

⁶ H. P. R. Finberg, 'Sherborne, Glastonbury and the Expansion of Wessex', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th. series, iii (1953), pp. 115 f.

⁷ Galbraith, pp. 92 f.

the range of his royal styles, but the coin legend, REX ANGLO,¹ however we expand it, shows that he did not invariably call himself 'king of the West Saxons'. But in any case we have no right to assume that Asser felt obliged to limit himself to the king's official styles. His work shows several signs of Frankish influence. The words he uses of Alfred in the dedication, *Anglorum Saxonum regi*, are in agreement with normal eighth- and ninth-century Frankish usage, as Levison showed in 1946;² they were, for example, applied to Ceadwalla of Wessex by Paul the Deacon, and to Alfred's father in the *Annals of St. Bertin's*. The step from this to the compound *Angul-Saxonum*, used by Asser in the text, had already been taken by Hrabanus Maurus in the first half of the ninth century. Asser may have adopted the continental usage, by which the Saxons in England were differentiated from the Saxons on the Continent. Alternatively, he may already have given the word the meaning which it came to bear in England, i.e. to refer to a combination of Saxons and Angles. He rendered *Angelcyn* of the Chronicle 886 as *Angli et Saxones*. As this annal says that all the English race which was free from captivity to the Danes submitted to Alfred, he could well be called *rex Angulsaxonum*. Asser did not, as is claimed by Stevenson, misrender *butan hæfniede* 'free from captivity' as *sub captivitate*; he wrote correctly *sine captivitate*; *sub* for *sine* is an editorial emendation, for which Asser cannot be blamed.³

The title 'archbishop', given to Nobis of St. Davids, if it implied metropolitan authority, would of course be an anachronism in the ninth century; it would also be an anachronism in the eleventh. There is, however, evidence that the Celtic churches⁴ used *archiepiscopus* as a mere honorific title.⁵

I have postponed until now the question of Alfred's illnesses, because I suspect that dislike of Asser's account of them underlies much of the desire to

¹ Stevenson, p. 152 and p. cxxxvii of the 1959 reprint.

² *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, p. 92 n.

³ The Cotton MS. and Florence both read *sine*, and this must underlie the expansion *aut a captivitate liberati* in the *Historia Regum*. In any case it would be no argument against the authenticity of the work if a Welsh author made some errors in translation or in the case-endings of proper names; but in fact, there are fewer errors than Stevenson thought (pp. lxxvii–lxxviii); Asser was probably right to take *þritiga sum* to mean 'with thirty men', not in its older sense of 'with twenty-nine men', for the Old English *Bede* renders *cum XII lectis militibus* (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, c. 1) as *twelfa sum*; *ceastre* is correct as the accusative of *ceaster*, though in place-names it is often *-ceaster*; the dative of place-names after *qui dicitur* is sometimes found in native writers.

⁴ See Sir John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, 3rd. edition (London, 1939), pp. 203 n., 204 n., 480–482, 486. For the use of archbishop and comparable terms in Ireland, see Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966), pp. 79 f., 84 f., 111–120.

⁵ Professor Galbraith's objections not answered elsewhere in my text can be dealt with briefly. He objects (pp. 98 n., 120) to taking *Wintonia* (c. 79) as Caerwent 'to save Asser's credit,' but the difficulty of taking it as Winchester still remains if the work is a later forgery, since it is no more likely in the eleventh century than in the ninth that Asser should be said to lie ill for a year in Winchester without the king's knowledge; if one rejects Stevenson's suggestion of Caerwent, one should note that Asser only says that the fever attacked him in *Wintonia*, and it is possible that its onset was not at once so violent as to prevent him from continuing his journey. On p. 104 it is implied that a reference to the thorn tree on the site

discredit his work. We need not, in my opinion, believe that Alfred's achievements were impossible for a man subject to recurrent attacks of illness, and worried by the fear of them in the intervening periods. Great things have been done by persons not in robust health. It is not the general picture of ill-health which troubled Stevenson, but the details of the story.¹ He criticised Asser's chapter (c.74) both for confusion and contradiction. It has been rescued from the latter charge by Dr. Schütt,² who claims that *infantia* need not in Asser's time mean 'infancy', but merely 'youth'. The confusion lies in Asser's departure from chronology: he speaks first of the illness which attacked Alfred at his wedding-feast, and then speaks of an earlier illness. Put in chronological order, the story is that Alfred had prayed in his youth for an affliction that would enable him to preserve chastity before marriage, with a proviso that it should not appear outwardly and make him an object of contempt, thus interfering with the duties of his position. A little later, he prayed at the shrine of St. Gueriir in Cornwall that the affliction he had received might be changed to something lighter, with a similar proviso. In answer to this prayer the illness disappeared. It was a new illness which attacked him at his marriage feast, and, intermittingly, afterwards.

Stevenson, who clearly found all this repellent, attributed it partly to Celtic exaggeration and rhetoric, partly to Asser's misunderstanding of what Alfred had told him. To use words like 'morbid' and 'neurotic' in relation to the story is to view it from a modern, rather than a contemporary standpoint. Alfred was brought up in a very pious household; we know of his father's piety, which included belief in visions and portents, from sources besides Asser;³ from Asser we learn that his brother ran the risk of losing battle rather than break off divine service (c.37). Alfred would receive a normal religious upbringing; he would learn to abhor the sin of unchastity, and probably be told lurid accounts of what lay in store in Hell for those guilty of the sins of the flesh. If more historians read the homiletic literature of the Anglo-Saxons, there might be less surprise at Asser's story. With Dr. Schütt, I can believe that Alfred in adolescence might pray to be helped to preserve himself from this sin even at the price of illness, and that he would believe that he could obtain relief from suffering by prayer to an effective saint. If one prefers to believe that Asser greatly exaggerated the story, perhaps

of Ashdown, and familiarity with the site of Cynuit (which is now usually identified with Countisbury) are suspicious, though Asser was able to see the sites and talk with those who had fought. On p. 106 he accuses Asser of being ready 'to out-Einhard Einhard' when he did not repeat Einhard's statement that he cannot write of his hero's childhood and boyhood because no one survived who knew of them; Asser was better placed, and could learn these things from the king and others, so naturally he did not borrow this remark. On p. 108, the claim that the growth of Alfred's reputation is first attested in the late tenth century should be compared with my *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042*, p. 33. Any argument based on the Cotton MS. being written in several hands (p. 119) is valueless when the manuscript is a copy of a copy. Lack of humour (p. 121) will not condemn the work, and that it lacks 'immediacy' is an opinion which not everyone will share.

¹ Stevenson, pp. 294-296.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

³ See especially *Annales Bertiniani*, s.a. 839.

inspired by a wish to make his hero more like a saint, the fact remains that exaggeration is not necessarily a sign of later writing.¹ It is difficult to see how this account of the king's illnesses would advance a forger's purpose.

I have left to the end the technicalities of palaeography and textual criticism. They are not suitable topics for oral delivery, but I will try to summarise the results. The only manuscript to survive into modern times, Cotton MS. Otho A. xii, which formed the basis of Archbishop Parker's edition, was examined by the great palaeographer Wanley before it was burnt in 1731. He dated the first hand, with a rare precision, as being about 1000 or 1001, and one of his letters shows that he did so because of its close resemblance to the hand of a charter of 1001; the other hands he dated as approximately the same time.² The edition by Wise included a poorly drawn 'facsimile' of the first page.³ Poor though it is, the resemblance to the hand of the charter of 1001 has been recognised by our leading palaeographers, Dr. Kenneth Sisam, Dr. Neil Ker, Mr. T. A. M. Bishop, and Professor Wormald. The latter has told me that he thinks the hand of the charter is in fact rather old-fashioned for 1001. Moreover in 1963 he drew attention to the similarity in general layout of the facsimiled page to that of two Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of about 1000.⁴

The textual criticism is simply ignored by critics of the *Life*. What is involved is a detailed comparison of the *Life* with three works which used it,⁵ namely the *Chronicon ex chronicis* which goes under the name of Florence of Worcester,⁶ the *Annals of St. Neots*,⁷ and the first part of a composite work,

¹ Other charges of exaggeration are made by Stevenson, p. cxxx, quoted by Galbraith, p. 125. Gold-covered and silver-covered buildings (c. 91), if taken literally, do not belong to the eleventh century any more than to the ninth (but cf. Stevenson, pp. 329 f.); in stating that Alfred could have become king before his brother (c. 42), Asser, and perhaps his informants, may have been exaggerating, some twenty years later, Alfred's early popularity. This would be a no greater exaggeration than that in the Chronicle, repeated by Asser, that Pope Leo had consecrated the child Alfred king in 853, when all he had done was to invest him with the honorary dignity of a Roman consul.

² Stevenson, pp. xlv-xlv, and pp. cxxxii-cxxxiii of the 1959 reprint.

³ Reproduced by Stevenson, opposite p. xxxii.

⁴ See 'Anglo-Saxon Initials in a Paris Boethius Manuscript', *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, July, 1963, p. 64. The manuscripts are Paris, Bibl. Nat., Fonds latin, 6401 A and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. F. i. 15.

⁵ Material from Asser is also found in the *Textus Roffensis* (see Stevenson, p. 158) of 1122/3, and some forgers of charters after the Conquest use information from the *Life* (ibid. pp. 192 f., 201, n.4, 210, 304 and n.8); but they use what is in Florence, and until we know more about how his work circulated we cannot assume that they used the *Life* itself. On the question whether William of Malmesbury knew the *Life*, see 'William of Malmesbury on the Works of King Alfred', an article which I have contributed to a volume in memory of G. N. Garmonsway.

⁶ Ed. B. Thorpe, 1848. A new edition of this work is one of the chief desiderata of Anglo-Saxon scholarship. On the question whether the earlier portion of this work is by Florence, who died in 1118, or whether up to 1141 it is all by John of Worcester, who used to be regarded as merely a continuator, see *The Vita Wulfstani of William of Malmesbury*, ed. R. R. Darlington, Camden Third Series xl (1928), pp. xv-xviii.

⁷ Since Stevenson in his edition of this work omits the passages derived from the *Life*, and the complete text in Gale, *Quindecim Scriptores*, i, pp. 141-175, sometimes tacitly amends the text to bring it into line with the *Life*, the correct readings are available only in the textual notes to the *Life*. The compilation was probably later than 1104, and the surviving manuscript is in a hand of the second quarter of the twelfth century.

the *Historia Regum*, usually cited as Symeon of Durham.¹ The second part of this work made use of Florence of Worcester, and hence takes its sections from Asser at second hand, though in one place it seems to have consulted the manuscript of the *Life* which had been used by the first part.²

The text of the Cotton manuscript is full of corruptions. Florence of Worcester used a text with some of its errors;³ where he avoids them it is possible that he had himself corrected them, and Stevenson concluded that he actually used the Cotton manuscript. It would be safer merely to say that Florence used a manuscript which had some of the errors of the Cotton manuscript.

One cannot agree with Stevenson's introduction⁴ when he suggests that it was the Cotton manuscript which was also used by the first part of the *Historia Regum*, for this contradicts his textual apparatus, and his note on p.293, where he recognises that the manuscript used by the first part of that work and once consulted by the second part, shared with the manuscript used by the *Annals of St. Neots* a better reading than that in the Cotton manuscript.⁵ There are other reasons, recently produced by Mr. Hunter Blair, to prove that the *Historia Regum* used a manuscript which was not Cotton;⁶ the place-names where it is using Asser are in a more archaic form. In particular, the preposition *et* (for *æt*) is attached to several names, e.g. 'the place which is called *etsandwic*' (for *Sandwic*), 'the place which is called *etcippenhama*' (for *Cippenhamme*), etc.⁷ We must agree that we cannot see

¹ *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, ii, pp. 1-283. The part which directly used Asser is on pp. 66-89. There is an important article on this composite work by P. Hunter Blair, 'Some Observations on the "Historia Regum" Attributed to Symeon of Durham', in *Celt and Saxon*, ed. N. K. Chadwick, 1963.

² c.70. The conclusions to be drawn from the variant readings are important enough for these to be given here. The basis is the Chronicle, 885: *se Hloþwig was þæs aldan Carles sunu, se Carl was Pippenes sunu* 'that Louis was son of the old Charles, that Charles was Pippin's son'. The Cotton MS. and Florence share a telescoped reading, Florence having: *Luduwigus uero ille filius Pippini*; Cotton (according to Wise): *Hlothuuic uero ille filius Pipini sive Caroli*. The *Annals of St. Neots* have a better reading: *Hloduuicus filius Karoli magni et antiqui atque sapientissimi, qui etiam fuit filius Pipini*. This was not merely a correction, with expansion, from the Chronicle, as is shown by the partial agreement with the second part of the *Historia Regum*, which has: *Lodowicus uero ille filius fuit Caroli magni illius, famosi atque sapientissimi, qui fuit filius Pipini regis*; neither *magni* nor *sapientissimi* are from the Chronicle. This second part of the *Historia Regum* usually takes its material from Florence, but cannot have done so in this place. Nor can it have consulted the first part of the *Historia Regum*, which has not got the passage. The most likely explanation is that the manuscript of the *Life* used by the first part of the *Historia* was still available, and was consulted by the later writer who saw that Florence's text was corrupt. It then follows that the manuscript used by the first part of the *Historia* had a better reading than that in the Cotton MS., and one that agreed fairly closely with that used by the *Annals of St. Neots*.

³ See Stevenson, p. xlvii. The list could be longer: e.g. in c. 56. 29 Florence shared the faulty reading *elmuuuit*, and did not correct to *eleuauit*, the reading of the *Annals of St. Neots*; in c. 56. 25, when this work and the Cotton MS. omit the numeral after *hebdomas*, Florence supplies wrongly *septem*, instead of the three in the Chronicle. On the other hand, I think that Asser probably wrote *cultu* in c. 100. 5, 11, 21, and that he deliberately omitted the heathen holy ring in c. 49, substituting Christian relics.

⁴ Pp. xlviii-xlvix.

⁵ See *supra*, n. 2.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 100-102.

⁷ This usage is implied by Bede, e.g. *in loco qui dicitur Adbaruæ* (Barrow), and is common in eighth- and ninth-century charters. In the usage of the clerks who produced royal charters from the time of Athelstan to that of Edward the Confessor it was almost the rule. See

a copyist introducing into his work an outmoded formula not present in his source. Even more important, Mr. Hunter Blair concludes that all the early part of the *Historia Regum* is based on good sources, and, wherever appropriate tests can be made, on earlier rather than late versions of those sources. He claims: 'there is no point . . . where it is possible to show the use of a source, or of a particular manuscript of a source, of a date later than c. 900, the date by which a copy of Asser's *Life of Alfred* could have reached the North.'¹ It follows, then, that if one takes Asser's *Life* as a late forgery, the author of this part of the *Historia Regum* must be assumed, in this one instance, to have used a late source, while denying himself the use of other late records. This would be strange.

There is no doubt that Stevenson was right to claim that the manuscript available to the *Annals of St. Neots* has some better readings than the Cotton manuscript.² The manuscript used seems still to have been available at Bury-St.-Edmunds in the late twelfth century, when an entry from it was made into the margin of the Bury manuscript of Florence.³ I do not think that there is evidence to let us decide definitely whether it was a different manuscript from that used for the *Historia Regum*. It does not have the archaic place-name forms, but this could be modernisation.⁴

Though the *Historia Regum* and the *Annals of St. Neots* both had access to a rather better text than the Cotton manuscript, yet both have some of its errors,⁵ of a type which is due to miscopying, and not the sort of error an

F. M. Stenton, *Introduction to the Survey of English Place-Names*, i, part 1, p. 46. It was not confined to charter usage in Alfred's reign; not only is there the well-known instance of *æt Heþum* in the *Orosius*, but it is found five times in the Old English *Bede* where it does not depend on Bede's wording, e.g. when *quae Candida Casa uocatur* is rendered *þe is geceged æt hwiſtan ærne*, or when the translator adds after *Traiectum* the words *we cuedað æt treocum*. It occurs a few times in the Old English Martyrology, e.g. *Trecassina . . . þæt is on ure geþeode æt Tricicum*. Yet it was going out of use, as is shown not only by its comparative rarity, but by the tendency of tenth- and eleventh-century manuscripts of the Old English *Bede* to omit the *æt*. The early Chronicle has it once, *æt Searobyrg*, in the original reading of the Parker MS *s.a.*, 552 (*æt* was later erased, but retained in the eleventh-century copy of this manuscript, Otho B. xi); already the archetype of versions B and C read *Searoburh*. Version D has 'the place which called *æt Eamotum*' in annal 926. One single instance *æt Riopan*, occurs in 'The Resting Places of the English Saints', the simple nominative appearing in fourteen examples.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

² See p. 18 notes 2 and 3 above, and Stevenson, pp. xlix, lvii–lviii. For example, it had in c. 49. 20 *equites . . . occidentem versus in Donnaniam . . .* where both the Cotton MS. and Florence read: *equites . . . occidit, versusque inde . . .*, thus making the Danes kill their horses. Stevenson sometimes admits into his text the reading of the *Annals of St. Neots*, instead of that of the Cotton MS., e.g. in c. 96. 13, c. 97. 4, 6.

³ Stevenson, p. 252. In spite of his cautious wording on pp. 100–103, he makes a strong case for Bury as the place where the *Annals of St. Neots* were written, and since then Mr. T. A. M. Bishop has shown that the manuscript is written in Bury hands. See p. cxli n. of the 1959 reprint of Stevenson.

⁴ A manuscript still available for consultation by the author of the second part of the *Historia Regum* after he had received Florence's Chronicle extending to 1119 seems unlikely to have reached Bury in time to be used by the compiler of the *Annals of St. Neots*, but the latter could have had a copy of it.

⁵ The nonsensical reading of the Cotton MS. in c. 67. 9, *dormiret*, probably for *domum iret*, must have been in the manuscript used by the *Historia Regum*, which has *ubi dormiebant somno inertii*. Florence's *rediret* may be his own correction. The *Historia* shares with the Cotton MS. erroneous forms of names, *Belde* (c. 1. 20), with omission of -g), *Cetwa* (c. 1. 36, with t

author can himself make. Neither work, then, had access to an author's original. This means that the Cotton manuscript, with its additional errors, is at least two stages away from that original. And expert opinion dates the Cotton manuscript about 1000. Thus, if you want a forger, you will have to look for him at some time before 1000.

And that brings me back to motive. If the work is a forgery, whom was it intended to benefit, and, equally important, whom was it intended to deceive? A long work in difficult Latin is not going to reach a wide public; it would take so long to copy, that even among the learned it could circulate only slowly. Hence Stevenson was right to dismiss all theories that it was intended as political propaganda.¹ It is not a broadsheet. Not that any of the suggested theories had anything to recommend them: they never at best accounted for more than a small portion of a long work. Secondly, it has no resemblance to the spurious works produced by individual churches to increase the importance of a local saint, or of a founder, or to establish claims to endowment of their house. Such works certainly do not show the restraint exercised by the author of the *Life* in confining himself to datable contemporary records and rejecting legendary matter. The nearest approach to a miraculous element in the *Life* is the claim (c.74) that Alfred's prayers to St. Gueriir were answered. This is a very obscure saint, whose name had been replaced at his own shrine by that of St. Neot already by the date of the Cotton manuscript of the *Life*.² He was certainly an odd choice for a later fabricator, and no church could gain by this reference to him. Thirdly, I do not believe that the answer to the question of motive is to be found in an unemphatic remark late on in the work. If this were the motive, the forger ran a great risk that his reader might have given up before he got there. Why should the forger undertake a great amount of troublesome research work in order to precede this entry, so important for his purpose, by a mass of mainly irrelevant material? If he did want to show the early existence of a see at Exeter, he would surely have been wiser to make much more of it, and bring it in earlier on in his work. It would have been a great deal simpler to have forged a charter, and such would have been less easy to overlook. If we reject the view that the *Life* was composed to enshrine a mention of a see at Exeter, there seems to be no church that stood to gain by the fabrication of the *Life*.

misread as *c*), *Eadredo* (c. 75. 7, for *Ætheredo*); *Amund* (c. 47. 10) probably arose in the common source from a misreading of the five minims *nui* of *Anuind* as *mu* (*Anandus* in the *Annals of St. Neots* is perhaps a later form of *Anuind*, but the compiler may have used the Chronicle). The manuscript used by the *Historia* shared also the corruption *abel* (c. 91. 16 for *ab elia*), and like Cotton, omitted *et Lundoniam* (c. 4. 4), which Florence and the *Annals of St. Neots* could supply from the obvious sense, or from the Chronicle. Many errors in numbers are common to the Cotton MS. and the *Historia*. The *Annals of St. Neots* shared with the Cotton MS. the errors *subsequatricibus* (c. 13. 21, for *subsequatricibus*), *ultimum* (c. 16. 24, for *ultimam*), *fultus* (c. 42. 13, for *fultum*); and the omission of *nisi* (c. 42. 13) and *tres* (c. 56. 25). Cotton, the *Historia Regum* and the *Annals of St. Neots* all omit *duo* (c. 35. 8), and Florence may have added it from the Chronicle.

¹ Stevenson, pp. cviii, cxxiv, cxxviii.

² See *supra*, p. 12 n. 3

I hold then that Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is simply what it claims to be, and I do not think I am alone in holding this opinion, which is one that Sir Frank Stenton never relinquished. Asser used a few written sources, but wrote largely from personal knowledge and from what he learned from his contemporaries, including King Alfred. He gives us a lot of valuable information. However, if people wish to regard it as the work of a forger, written for some unknown purpose, they must allow that forger access to an amazing number of sources for ninth-century history up to 893, including many which have not come down to us. In that case, the work would still not be valueless to an historian. Its author must have been a talented researcher.