ANGLO-SAXON MYTHS: STATE AND CHURCH 400–1066

NICHOLAS BROOKS

THE HAMBLEDON PRESS

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LONDON AND RIO GRANDE

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4. *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed.S.R. Bassett (Leicester University Press, 1989), pp. 159–70, 275–7.

5. This appears here for the first time.

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12. *Romney Marsh: Evolution, Occupation and Reclamation*, ed. J. Eddison and C. Green (Oxford Committee for Archaeology, monograph 24, 1988), pp. 128–59.

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Abbreviations

ASC	Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.
BAR	British Archaeological Reports.
BCS	*Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, ed. W. de G. Birch, 3 vols (London 1885–93). References are to document numbers.
BL	British Library.
DB	Domesday Book.
EHD	*English Historical Documents*, i, *c. 500–1042*, ed. D. Whitelock (London, 1955, 1979).
KCD	*Codex diplomaticus aevi Saxonici,* ed. J.M. Kemble, 6 vols (London, 1839–48). References are to document numbers.
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historia.
S	P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968). References are to document numbers.

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Preface

This book is a companion to *Communications and Warfare, 700–1400* (London and Rio Grande OH, Hambledon Press, 2000); in the two volumes are gathered my principal studies on English history, which have been scattered in a wide variety of publications and some of which are now difficult to obtain. The essays reprinted here were first published at various times in the last twenty-five years and they reflect my long-standing fascination with the quality of the evidence for early English history. All historians have, of course, to develop the skill to detect the bias of their sources before they can set out their own interpretation of the past. But most of the written evidence for the early Middle Ages has been preserved by later writers with their own dynastic, monastic or antiquarian agendas, whether conscious or unconscious. Early medievalists therefore have to be expert in the thought-world of later periods, if they are to avoid being misled by the anachronisms of those who have transmitted the evidence; their researches may only throw light upon these later agendas and tell little or nothing of their chosen period. Some of the evidence has indeed been deliberately forged or adapted in order to provide a bogus antiquity and legality for particular claims; and much of it has been recorded selectively, or out of context, so as to create a misleading impression of Anglo-Saxon realities. Understanding why the extant evidence has been preserved and what may have been lost is therefore the constant preoccupation of the early medievalist, who has to steer a personal course between the Scylla of a self-defeating minimalist rigour and the Charybdis of blind acceptance of 'tradition' or maximalist interpretations of fragmentary evidence.

My 'inaugural lecture' at Birmingham sought to show how historians may elucidate myth and forgery and to link the world of the monastic forgers of the ninth and twelfth centuries with the literary, historical, archaeological or fine art forgers of our own age (Chapter 1). Myth has a central role in defining core beliefs about national and ethnic origins. Since in all periods the study of history has been closely associated with the development of national and local patriotisms, an English early medievalist has an obligation to consider the 'roots' of the English people and of the English language and culture (Chapter 2). When my colleague, Steven Bassett, gathered a team of scholars together to re-examine the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, I therefore had an opportunity to pursue these issues in relation both to the kingdom of Kent (Chapter 3) – which was claimed to have been formed during the

Adventus Saxonum itself, the first 'arrival' of migrant Germans in Britain – and to the Mercian kingdom, whose origins cannot be investigated through Mercian origin myths or heroic tales but only through the eyes of their neighbours and enemies (Chapter 4). The fact that in Kent and Mercia, as in other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the definition of the historical kingdom appears to belong to the generation before the conversion to Christianity may tell us more about the threshold of the historical evidence than the actual chronology of state-formation. For this reason it is worth re-examining the legend of Hengest and Horsa, the core story of the English origin legend, in order to see whether it is possible to detect, even in its later forms, traces of the praise of earlier rulers and their kingdoms (Chapter 5).

A trio of papers (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) are devoted to the Christian history of Canterbury. In Chapter 6 an early attempt was made to set out before an audience of European archaeologists how the early traditions of the Canterbury churches and their location in relation to what was then known of the topography of the Roman city suggested that Canterbury might provide an English example where the church formed the bridge between the late-Roman town and the medieval and modern city. It therefore helped to create the climate of opinion which led to the establishment of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust and to its series of dramatic excavations in the city. In Chapter 7 I sought (in 1993) not merely to summarize in a single chapter my interpretation of the early history of Canterbury cathedral (which I had first attempted in book length a decade earlier), but also to revise it in the light of subsequent archaeological excavations and of numerous studies of early manuscripts, charters, liturgical, legal and conciliar texts. Throughout my aim was to reconstruct the history from contemporary sources, manuscripts or from extant remains (architectural or archaeological) in order to test the later monastic versions of Canterbury's Anglo-Saxon history. A similar 'demythologising' aim underlies my attempt (Chapter 8) to use the evidence of contemporary or reliable charters to correct the picture of the career of St Dunstan which had hitherto been concocted on the basis of a pastiche of hagiographical sources of varying dates.

The study of Anglo-Saxon charters has indeed been a central interest of my researches since I first embarked on doctoral research on the charters of Christ Church Canterbury and discovered the joys of the light they throw on the growth of royal government, on ceremonial and political occasions, on the development of Latin learning, on the work of forgers (both skilled and unskilled) and on a host of fascinating problems of English topography. It was therefore a great honour to be invited to review modern scholarship on the charters for the new journal *Anglo-Saxon England* and to provide a guide through

the many traps that await the novice or uncritical studies (Chapter 9). Since 1973, however, the pace of work in this field has dramatically quickened, so I have sought to bring this chapter up-to-date with an extended postscript, in the belief that an introduction to charter studies is as much needed today as it was twenty-five years ago. The remaining three chapters show something of the excitement that the study of charters can generate. The deposit in Stafford Record Office of an antiquarian transcript of a charter of King Edgar provided a rare opportunity to add to the corpus of known Anglo-Saxon charters (Chapter 10); it proved to throw light on the king's continued use of a Mercian draftsman for some of his charters, on that writer's stylistic ambitions and on a remarkable assembly of northern nobles at Edgar's court; it also provided some clues to the estate history and toponymic riches of the Black Peak. The purported grant of 100 hides at Micheldever (Hampshire) by King Edward the Elder to the New Minster, Winchester (Chapter 11) provided, by contrast, an opportunity both to see a great monastic house protecting (or creating) its eleventh-century immunity with a superb forgery, and to explore some of the lasting features of the Hampshire landscape. Finally, in Chapter 12, an attempt was made to show how the evidence of charters can be combined with the evidence of geology and of archaeology to reconstruct the Anglo-Saxon landscape (and something of the estate history) of Romney Marsh. At least from the early eighth century, the marshland pastures were normally attached to distant Kentish estates, and a distinctive *Merscware* ('Marsh-people' was developing a sense of identity, in part perhaps from their common quest to protect their lands from floods induced both by climatic change and by their own drainage schemes.

These essays are here reprinted essentially as they were first published, apart from some correction of minor slips and misprints. They show the development of my thought successively as a postgraduate at Oxford, a lecturer at St Andrews and a professor at Birmingham. It has been a relief to find that their argument has very largely commanded support in subsequent scholarship and that large-scale revision is not (so far as I can judge) needed. As in the companion volume, however, I have added a postscript to some chapters, indicating the gist of subsequent work on the issues broached here. Twice, however, I have departed from this policy. One entirely new essay has been included (Chapter 5), because there seemed to be a gap in scholarly treatment of the legend of Hengest and Horsa (which I had hinted at in Chapter 4), which was so central to the theme of this volume that it were best filled here. It also seemed highly desirable to update my 1973 survey of charter scholarship (Chapter 9) with a brief analysis of the main currents of subsequent scholarship, if its judge-

ments were to be of more than historiographical interest for those who embark on the study of the charters today.

Thanks are due to Margaret Gelling and Douglas Johnson, my co-authors in Chapter 10, for agreeing to its reprint here; to the Universities of St Andrews and of Birmingham for support with study leave and travel grants to facilitate my researches and for the able assistance of their library staffs, and to Martin Sheppard for his patience during this book's gestation and his care with its production. It is dedicated to my colleagues and pupils in two departments of Medieval History, who have been a constant stimulus to new avenues of thought and challenge to old ones.

University of Birmingham Nicholas Brooks

For my Colleagues and Pupils in
the Departments of Medieval History
in the Universities of
St Andrews and Birmingham

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1

History and Myth, Forgery and Truth[1]

IN A TYPICALLY baroque and epigrammatical aside in his essay 'Oper und Drama' the composer Richard Wagner asserted that 'Myth is the beginning and end of History', in the same way as 'Song is the beginning and end of language' and 'sentiment (*das Gefühl*) the beginning and end of understanding'.[2] I am very happy to leave to the inaugurals of future professors of Music or Linguistics Wagner's dictum on song and language, and to professors of Philosophy or even of Psychology that on sentiment and understanding – such are the advantages for inaugural lecturers of the narrowing specialization of modern education! But I would like to pursue Wagner's triptych in as far as it concerns myth and history. For nineteenth-century thinkers, for whom history was very largely the political history of nation-states, or of nations in the making, it was clear enough that history 'began' with myth: the origin-stories of Germanic (as of Greek and Roman) peoples abounded in legend, and early history might therefore be thought to comprise the ordering and elucidation of myth. To a German in the generation after 1870 when the nineteenth-century nationalist interpretations of the legend of the sleeping Emperor Frederick in the Kyffhäuser mountain seemed to have been vindicated by the reunification of Germany, it might seem particularly apparent that myth was also 'the end of history'. Indeed this might well be the theme for a professor of Contemporary History, were such a chair to exist at Birmingham. Where indeed does history end and myth (politics or journalism) begin? If I seem to insult students of politics and the followers of the noble journalistic profession, it is as well to remember that we live in a society wherein the PR man is all powerful in laundering the 'image' (the television myth?) of the rulers and the powerful institutions (and even of universities), and we live in a society in which politicians no sooner retire than they (or their ghost-writers) launch their memoirs upon the long-suffering readers of the Sunday newspapers in an attempt to perpetuate their own image of

[1] Inaugural lecture delivered in the University of Birmingham on 23 January 1986 and first printed as ISBN 0 7044 0861 9.

[2] R. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (Berlin, 1914), iv, p. 69.

history, the myth that they wish to leave to posterity. Myth, then, might in various senses be said to be 'the end of History'. But if we are not to accept Napoleon Bonaparte's ironic and bitter comment from his island exile that 'History is a myth that men agree to believe' [the irony is particularly acute since Napoleon is known to have attempted to forge some of his own letters],[3] then we must conclude that the role of the historian is to puncture such myths and to explain the purposes that they have been devised to serve – in ancient, in medieval or in modern times. Myth then is not so much 'the beginning and end of History', as History is the elucidation and dispersal of Myth. For this reason what determines the quality of history is the historian's skill in detecting the motives and the assumptions of those who have left their record for posterity. For this same reason I shall not be too concerned tonight with the traditional chronological limits of the Middle Ages, nor with traditional thematic divisions within history (social, economic, political, religious, intellectual and so forth). I prefer to regard history as a 'seamless web', and to assert that the historian who is most aware of his own place in contemporary society and of the factors which have determined the survival to this day of his evidence is most likely to produce the most illuminating history.

In a typically seminal and incisive essay my predecessor, Ralph Davis, drew attention to the fact that the Normans (of whose military, political and architectural achievements in the eleventh and twelfth centuries medieval historians, especially British medieval historians, have waxed lyrical) were in fact only an identifiable nation because of the conscious fabrication of a Norman 'myth' by a succession of monastic and ecclesiastical authors from Dudo of St Quentin in the 1020s to Wace and Benoit of Sainte Maure in the 1160s and 1170s.[4] So far as we can tell the myth that the Normans were indeed 'Northmen', that is Scandinavian Vikings, was only put into writing at a time when the distinctively Scandinavian characteristics of the Norman ruling dynasty and aristocracy had (in so far as they had ever existed) entirely disappeared. The 'Normans' of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were in fact Christians not pagans; they spoke French, not Old Norse; and they fought as knights on horseback with the growing chivalric code of northern France, not on foot with round shield and axe in the time-honoured Viking fashion. It was therefore a myth to suppose that the people of Normandy at this time were in any real sense 'Norman'. Yet there was a characteristic, hitherto largely ignored, which did help to distinguish the Normans, and which does seem to derive from the Scandinavian Viking past. I refer, of course, to the Norman hairstyle! If

[3] Lord Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies* (London, 1907), pp. 363–4.

[4] R.H.C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London, 1976), pp. 49–69; for a critical assessment, see G.A. Loud, 'The *Gens Normannorum* – Myth or Reality', *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies*, 4 (1981), pp. 104–16.

we may trust the evidence of the Bayeux Tapestry (as here we surely may), not only the Norman knightly aristocracy but even Norman servants and grooms shared a distinctive hairstyle that was not found elsewhere in the Christian West.[5] Norman men shaved the back half of their heads entirely – everything behind a line drawn over the crown from ear to ear. On the front half of the head, forward of this line, the hair was left to grow long. By adopting this grotesque style – or at least it seemed grotesque to modern eyes until very recent years when we have grown accustomed to the self-mutilation of 'skinheads' or of 'punk' multicoloured cockatoos – the Normans were in fact proclaiming their Scandinavian 'roots'. Thus at the beginning of the eleventh-century an English writer wrote a letter in Old English chiding his 'brother' Edward:[6]

> by abandoning the English practices which your fathers followed and by loving the practices of heathen men who begrudge you life . . . [you show] that you despise your race and your ancestors, since in insult to them you dress in Danish fashion with *bared neck* and *blinded eyes* . . . I will say no more about this shameful mode . . . except that he will be accursed who follows heathen practices in his life and dishonours his own race.

In adopting this 'Danish' or rather Viking hairstyle we must therefore recognize that the Normans were making a conscious statement about their origins, however bogus. Any parent of a teenage son or daughter today is very conscious of the danger that the pressures of the child's peer-group may outweigh those of the family, and that hair-style is a particularly effective symbol of allegiance, a means of demonstrating membership of a particular community. The medieval world, like the ancient and like primitive societies the world over today, knew this well too. Hence the totally shaven heads of slaves (as of girls who collaborate with the enemy), hence the largely shaven heads of monks ('slaves of God'), and hence the long hair of free men and women and the ultra-long hair of king-worthy Merovingian princes. The Normans (like all the peoples of northern France) were in reality a mongrel stock of Celtic, Romance and Germanic elements. But since they liked to proclaim the national myth of their Norman origins and to reinforce it with a highly distinctive 'Northman' hair-style it is not surprising that they and their neighbours soon accepted their distinctiveness.

For a century and a half at least, the Normans enjoyed a successful national myth, though they had already abandoned the hairstyle in favour of 'effeminate' long hair before the end of the eleventh century.[7] But what of the English? Had they no national myth? Though the

[5] *The Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. D.M. Wilson (London, 1985), plates 9–20.

[6] F. Kluge, 'Fragment eines angelsachsischen Briefes', *Englische Studien*, 8 (1885), pp. 62–3; translated in *EHD*, no. 232, pp. 895–6.

discussion of English origins has not ben couched in Professor Davis's terms, it has recently been powerfully argued that the concept of a single English people (*gens*) was in fact a convenient and potent 'myth' foisted upon the politically fragmented Anglo-Saxons by the early medieval church – in the first place by Pope Gregory I, then by the church of Canterbury and most influentially of all by the Northumbrian monk and historian, Bede.[8] Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People (gentis)* was therefore not only a *tour de force* of research and organization which achieved immediate and deserved popularity; it also gave to all the Anglo-Saxon peoples a share in 'English' history and it provided other peoples with an influential model for national history. I confess, however, that I have my doubts how far this line of argument should be pursued and whether myth and historical reality have yet been successfully disentangled. Part of the problem lies in *our* inability to decide whether we ought to translate the single Latin word *Angli* as 'the Angles' or 'the English'. I sometimes perversely think that it would help us to avoid seeing early medieval history through the perspective of our modern nationalist preconceptions if we regarded Bede's great work as the *Ecclesiastical History of the Anglian People.* Such a version of Bede's title would make it clearer that this was the work of a Northumbrian Angle; it might also help to explain the extreme uncertainty of other early writers whether their subjects were Anglian or Saxon.[9] We might then be less surprised that the western and northern neighbours of the so-called 'Angles' of Mercia and Northumbria uniformly thought of them as 'Saxons' [and Sassenachs they remain to this day]; conversely, across the channel Pope Gregory I thought of the 'Saxon' or 'Jutish' inhabitants of southern England as *Angli.*[10] Since archaeologists have found no practical means of distinguishing Angles from Saxons in England, despite the acres of print devoted to the subject,[11] it seems to

[7] Ordericus Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, viii.10, ed. M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1973), iv, pp. 186–90; F. Barlow, *William Rufus* (London, 1983), pp. 105–8.

[8] C.P. Wormald, 'Bede, the Bretwaldas and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*', in C.P. Wormald et al., eds, *Ideal and Reality: Studies in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon History presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 99–129.

[9] Bede, *Historia Eccleasiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors and B. Colgrave (Oxford, 1969), passim. For other eighth-century writers' usage compare 'Eddius' Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927), ch. xxi where 'Saxons' refers to the men of Lindsey, and ch. xxx where Wilfrid calls himself 'bishop of the Saxons', with Felix's *Vita Guthlaci*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1956), ch. xxxiv where the Mercians are referred to first as 'Angles', then as 'Saxons'.

[10] For the usage of continental and papal writers, see W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 92–3 and C.P. Wormald, 'Bretwaldas and the *Gens Anglorum*', pp. 122–4; for Welsh and Scottish usage, see *Annales Cambriae* in *Nennius' British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. J. Morris (Chichester, 1980), pp. 85–91 and Adomnan, *Vita S. Columbae*, ed. A.O. and M.O. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1961), passim.

me hazardous to suppose that the church for its own purposes imposed a myth of a single English *gens* upon divergent ethnic stocks. On the contrary it is likely to have been the warrior-kings and dynasties of the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries that imposed their own myths asserting that their peoples were distinctively Angle, or Saxon or Jutish when in fact this was at most true only of their own dynasties. The confusion of the English sources may rather reflect the fact that the Anglo-Saxons were a more or less uniform mongrel stock from the start; many of the crucial differences, linguistic, material and ethnic, only developed long after their settlement in Britain. If so, we must be very careful how we identify which are the myths that need to be explained.

The myths of other peoples have had fluctuating histories. It is difficult to know what the original function of the myth of the sleeping Emperor Frederick in the Kyffhäuser Mountain was.[12] In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it was held that the Emperor would return to reform and prune a corrupt church. That may not have been the first form of the myth; it is certainly a far cry thence to the nineteenth-century assumption that the Emperor in question was Frederick I Barbarossa and that he would awake to reunite the German *Volk* and recreate a German Empire. It is a feature of certain myths to be infinitely adaptable. In the mid-1980s when German reunification and German nationalism were uneasy subjects, however, Frederick seemed to sleep very soundly in his East German mountain, effectively buried it seemed by myths of much more recent origin controlled by the regime. By contrast the legends of King Arthur of Britain are known to have enjoyed enormous popularity already in the twelfth century, particularly once Geoffrey of Monmouth had dressed up as serious history what William of Malmesbury had dismissed as 'ditties burbled by Britons'.[13] The *History of the Kings of Britain* is a brilliantly conceived pastiche of myth, song and outright invention masquerading as straightforward history. But its effect was not significantly to strengthen a British belief that they would rise again and oust the Saxons under the leadership of a new Arthur recovered from his long healing in the Isle of Avalon. As British national myth it failed in the face of the realities of the political disunity and the relative poverty of British and Breton principalities. The phenomenal popularity of Geoffrey's *Historia* and of the songs of the Arthurian cycle was a reflection not of their success as a national

[11] For recent discussions, see J.N.L. Myres, 'The Angles, Saxons and Jutes', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 56 (1972), pp. 145–74; C. Hills, 'The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England in the Pagan Period', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), pp. 313–17.

[12] P. Munz, *Frederick Barbarossa* (London, 1969), pp. 3–22.

[13] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. A. Griscom (New York, 1929); William of Malmsbury, *Gesta Regum*, Rolls Series (London, 1887–9), i, p. 11. For the development of the legend see R.S. Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London, 1963).

myth but as an international or class myth. The Arthurian myths became the literature of the knightly class throughout the Romance and Germanic speaking worlds and (whatever Geoffrey's intention) this myth was acceptable to courts and to noble halls both in England and throughout *le douce France*, as well as across the Alps and the Rhine, precisely because its political message was defused.

It is easy to adopt a patronizing attitude to the more outlandish adoptions of myth that we find in the early Middle Ages – such as the seventh-century Fredegar's use of the legends of ancient Troy to create a mythical antiquity for the Franks,[14] or the inclusion of Caesar in the genealogy of an eighth-century ruler of East Anglia, or the claim that virtually all the eighth-century royal dynasties in England were descended from the mythical warrior-god Woden.[15] We may be good enough historians to reject such absurdities but we need to recognize that new or young nations in our own day still feel the need for myths that justify the present. Fortunes are being made today, as never before, by those who are inventing a history for the American people before Christopher Columbus, with even less material evidence than was available to Geoffrey of Monmouth. Though the Kensington Stone and the Vinland Map are now known in the scholarly world to be forgeries,[16] the pace of 'discovery' of supposed runic inscriptions in the USA and of claimed decipherments of nonexistent runes grows year by year and is spread over an ever larger proportion of the North American continent. Not content with developing a Viking myth for the Americans, 'Professor' B. Fell and his associates – despite their total lack of philological or epigraphical expertise – have gone on to 'discover' Ogam, Punic and hieroglyphic inscriptions throughout the Americas and thus to add entirely mythical Celtic, Carthaginian and Egyptian settlers to the proto-American mix.[17] The lunatic fringe of archaeology and of history is rich indeed and it is but a short step thence to the visitations of extra-terrestrial inter-galactic beings championed by Erik van Daniken and his ilk. Nor should we suppose that it is only the Americans who have an inexhaustible taste for myth. Last Sunday a full-page advertisement was placed in the Observer magazine for a

[14] Fredegar, *Chronicarum Libri IV*, ed. B. Krush, (MGH, Scriptores rerum merovingicarum, II (Hanover, 1885) ii.4–8, iii.2.

[15] D.N. Dumville, 'The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and King-Lists', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 5 (1976), pp. 23–50.

[16] E. Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* (Columbia, 1958); J.R. Redmond, *Viking Hoaxes in North America* (New York, 1980).

[17] B. Fell, *America BC* (New York, 1976); idem, *Saga America* (New York, 1980); idem, *Bronze-Age America* (New York, 1982) and the 'Occasional Publications' of the so-called 'Epigraphical Society of America'. For some critical assessments, see *Antiquity*, 54 (1980) pp. 154–5, 57 (1983) pp. 84–5.

volume entitled *Did the Virgin Mary Live and Die in England?*[18] With bold wishful thinking the author claims to be a millionaire and author of numerous books on business psychology. He calls himself Victor Dunstan thereby linking with Glastonbury's greatest abbot. In a series of improbable assertations about the maternal kin of Jesus being resident in 'England' (which did not exist at the time) he claims the authority of ancient manuscripts and unpublished documents in a variety of English and continental libraries. So far as can be seen from this advertisement – a splendid subject for a first-year School of History 'Principles and Methods' seminar – this example of the genre is heavily based upon the 'Glastonbury legends' which were invented in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as the need of the largest monastery in England to develop itself as a prime centre of pilgrimage led to ever more implausible claims for its Christian antiquity.[19] But at least the medieval Glastonbury myth-makers knew and respected their bibles, unlike Mr Dunstan. Human gullibility, then, takes different forms in different ages. The skill of the myth-maker lies in attuning the myth so closely to the desires and standards of the age that it is accepted, however improbable: *Mundus vult decepi, ergo decipiatur* – the world wishes to be deceived, and therefore is deceived.[20]

I have mentioned in passing the Kensington stone and the Vinland map, two forgeries which played a crucial role in consolidating the idea that America had been settled by western European peoples long before Columbus. Here then we pass to forgery, and we find it most effective when it is in the service of a potent myth.

Amidst the numerous archaeological forgeries of the last hundred years, by far the most successful was the dramatic 'discovery' and reconstruction between 1908 and 1913 of the so-called 'Piltdown Man' (*Eoanthropus Dawsoni*) which seemed to provide the 'Missing Link' between ape and man for which palaeontologists had been looking ever since Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) and *the Descent of Man* (1871).[21] 'Piltdown Man' would have been inconceivable without the

[18] *Observer* 'Magazine Section', 19 January 1986.

[19] J. Armitage Robinson, *Two Glastonbury Legends: King Arthur and St. Joseph of Arimathea* (Cambridge, 1926); R.F. Treharne, *The Glastonbury Legends* (London, 1967); A. Gransden, 'The Growth of Glastonbury Traditions and Legends', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 27 (1976), pp. 339–46.

[20] For the antiquity, but uncertain origins of this epigram, see G. Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism in the Middle Ages', *Archiv für Diplomatik*, 29 (1983), pp. 1–41 at 1.

[21] C. Dawson and A.S. Woodward, 'On the Discovery of a Palaeolithic Skull and Mandible in a Flint Bearing Gravel Overlying the Wealden (Hasting) Beds at Piltdown, Sussex', *Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society of London*, 69 (1913), pp. 117–44. For the exposure of the forgery, see J.S. Weiner, K.P. Oakley and W.E. Le Gros Clark, 'The Solution of the Piltdown Problem', *Bulletin of the British Museum (Natural History) Geology*, 2, no. 3 (1953), pp. 225–87 and also J.S. Weiner's popular account in *The Piltdown Forgery* (London, 1955) to which I am heavily indebted for what follows.

intellectual tumult stirred up by Darwin which had converted two generations of Victorian and Edwardian gentlemen into avid fossil-collectors, geologists and archaeologists. Not until 1953, when the fashion for fossil-collecting had subsided in Britain and the leading participants (both the duper and the duped) had long passed into the grave did three scientists pool their expertise and collaborate in a series of tests that quickly exposed the fraudulent association of a semi-petrified human skull with an artificially stained and hardened orang-utan jaw which had had its most distinctive features removed. Not until 1955 in J.S. Weiner's popular account was the finger of suspicion tentatively pointed at Charles Dawson, the respected Uckfield solicitor and antiquarian polymath known as the 'Wizard of Sussex' from the amazing series of discoveries with which he was associated. Even now doubts remain, and it has been suggested that Dawson was an innocent enthusiast who was duped by his colleague – the hitherto irreproachable Sam Woodhead, schoolmaster and Public Analyst in Brighton.[22]

When new theories are about to be presented, caution might be advised. But I must confess that the preliminary publication of the attempt to clear Dawson seems to me utterly unconvincing. It was Dawson who identified the stratum of gravel in the road-workings beside the Piltdown road as a potential fossil-bearing level and who warned the workmen in 1908 to keep their eyes skinned for fossils. It was Dawson who then collected the broken skull fragments when they had duly turned up, and who asserted that the level was of Pleistocene or Pliocene formation. It was Dawson who found the jaw, and it was he who involved the learned palaeontologist Arthur Smith Woodward and the young Teilhard de Chardin in the excavations where they discovered other vital fragments, and who enthused Woodward to produce the reconstruction of the head of Piltdown Man and to publish the find jointly with him. None of this proves his guilt – merely that he had the opportunity. Nor should we pay too much attention to the fact that Dawson was distrusted throughout Sussex archaeological and geological circles.[23] *Odium academicum* for the apparently successful amateur is not unknown even today. Dawson was certainly a notable geologist and a justly-famed fossil-collector,[24] though doubts are today beginning to be expressed about some of his 'discoveries'. Nor should we necessarily

[22] See the preliminary statement of P. Costello, 'The Piltdown Hoax Reconsidered', *Antiquity*, 59 (1985), pp. 167–73. For further speculation on the identity of the hoaxer(s), see G. Daniel, 'Piltdown and Professor Hewitt', *Antiquity*, 60 (1986), pp. 59–60.

[23] Weiner, *Piltdown Forgery*, pp. 155–9, 169–88. Compare L.G. Salzman's acid footnote in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, p. 85 (1946), 38, n.. 1: 'His name was later given to the Piltdown Man (*Eoanthropus Dawsoni*), the lowest known form of human being, with the discovery of whose remains he was associated.'

[24] Weiner, *Piltdown Forgery*, pp. 82–5.

convict Dawson because even by the standards of the day he was a poor archaeologist whose chaotic excavation of the Lavant caves (1893) produced (or were said to have produced) Neolithic flints, Roman finds and medieval woolseals, but were never published.[25] Nor should we convict Dawson because he published in his own name a *History of Hastings Castle* some of which copies verbatim an unpublished manuscript of the antiquary, William Herbert;[26] nor should we be disturbed if his account of the Wealden iron industry for his exhibition of 1903 proves to be (like many exhibition catalogues) second-hand and hasty work.[27] Hasty scholars with too many irons in too many fires are not necessarily forgers!

Two things damn Dawson in my eyes. Firstly he was associated not just with Piltdown Man but with an astonishing series of 'discoveries' between 1893 and 1913. Some were published by others from material provided by Dawson, some were published by Dawson but were said to have been discovered by others who had died meantime. Several were said to have disintegrated shortly after discovery but not before they had been conveniently drawn by Dawson or by their finder. All are odd; several are incredible; and no less than four have been proved independently to be forgeries.

In 1893 Dawson exhibited a supposedly Roman cast-iron figurine reputedly found 20 years earlier with Hadrianic coins; it was dismissed at the time and seems to have been a nineteenth-century casting.[28] In 1894 he published a boat exposed on the Sussex coast after storms. This extraordinary boat was, Dawson boldly claimed, 'transitional' between a British coracle and a Viking long-ship, but it had disintegrated soon after he had drawn it.[29] In the same year he published a neolithic axe with its carbonized and decorated wooden haft (handle) still intact, but this too had conveniently disintegrated after drawing.[30] Dawson's interest in Sussex iron-work led him to acquire about the turn of the century the Ashburnham ironworks clock, which at some stage in

[25] Hadrian Allcroft's critical account of Dawson's excavation in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 57 (1916), p. 65, was delivered in July 1916 when Dawson was on his deathbed (he died on 10 August 1916).

[26] C. Dawson *History of Hastings Castle*, 2 vols (London, 1909) which was critically reviewed in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 53 (1910), p. 282. For Manwaring-Baines discovery of the plagiarism, see Weiner, *Piltdown Forgery*, pp. 176–7. Costello's brief defence of Dawson ('Piltdown Hoax', p. 168) does not meet the criticisms.

[27] C. Dawson, 'Sussex Iron-Work', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 46 (1903), pp. 1–54, see further Weiner, *Piltdown Forgery*, pp. 181–2.

[28] Ibid., pp. 182–3; despite its reception it was exhibited by Dawson again in 1903 (*Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 46 (1903), pp. 4–5).

[29] C. Dawson, 'Ancient Boat Found at Bexhill', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 39 (1894), pp. 161–3.

[30] 'Neolithic Flint Weapon in a Wooden Haft', *ibid.*, pp. 97–8.

its history received an engraved face now known to be an anachronistic forgery rather than a contemporary depiction of remarkable ironworking techniques.[31] In 1906 he was associated with the discovery of forged 'Roman' tiles which had been planted in the excavation of the Roman Saxon Shore fort of Pevensey and which bore stamped inscriptions with the name of the Emperor Honorius.[32] A supposed Norman prick-spur which is now believed to be nothing of the sort and a remarkable fossil fish claimed to be a 'cross' between a carp and a goldfish followed in 1909,[33] and a supposedly eighteenth-century (but actually forged) map of Maresfield forge in 1911.[34] In this cumulatively incredible list we can find patterns that recur at Piltdown: a concern with evolutionary or technical advances, original discovery by 'workmen', a 'shepherd', 'fisherman' or the like, recognition by Dawson, the association of established scholars in the ultimate discovery or in the publication, and the planting of forged evidence on excavation sites. If Dawson were indeed duped at Piltdown in 1911–12, then we should also need to suppose that skilled hoaxers had been deceiving him for the previous twenty years.

The second piece of damning evidence lies in that work of Dawson's where I first encountered him. In 1907 Dawson published an article on the restorations of the Bayeux Tapestry.[35] Dawson here had hit upon a most important problem: how do we establish the authority of the Tapestry today when it does not conform with the earliest (eighteenth-century) engravings? Dawson's solution – to charge the antiquarian artist Stothard and the 1842 restorers who followed his designs with fraudulent forgery – in fact proves to be totally unacceptable when one compares the earliest engravings and the nineteenth-century drawings with the Tapestry itself.[36] Again and again the eighteenth-century

[31] J.H. Cambridge, 'The Ashburnham Ironworks Clock', *Antiquarian Horology*, Autumn 1977; J.G. McDonnell, 'The Ashburnham Clock', *Ryedale Historian*, 8 (1976), pp. 44–5. The clock is illustrated in E. Straker, *Wealden Iron* (London, 1932), pp. 75–7.

[32] The Pevensey tiles were published in good faith by L.F. Salzmann in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 51 (1908), pp. 112–13. For their exposure as forgeries, see D.P.S. Peacock, 'Forged Brick-Stamps from Pevensey', *Antiquity*, 47 (1973), pp. 138–40.

[33] Weiner, *Piltdown Forgery*, p. 186.

[34] P.B.S. Andrews, 'A Fictitious Purported Historical Map', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 112 (1974), pp. 165–7; see also J. Petit, 'No absolution [for C. Dawson]', *Sussex Archaeological Newsletter*, 15 (1975).

[35] C. Dawson, *The 'Restorations' of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London, 1907).

[36] N.P. Brooks and the late H.E. Walker, 'The Authority and Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry', *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies*, 1 (1978), pp. 24–6 (reprinted in Brooks, *Communities and Warfare 700–1400* (London, 2000), pp. 175–218, at 205–6). In D.M. Wilson's magnificent full-colour reproduction (*Bayeux Tapestry*, London, 1985) it is possible to distinguish original work from the principal restorations.

engravings can be shown to be inaccurate by comparison with the unrestored parts of the Tapestry. Again and again detailed comparison confirms Stothard's scholarly accuracy. Dawson did not have the advantage of the recent superb colour reproductions of the Tapestry, but in his article we can surely see the mentality of the compulsive forger who himself flings out accusations because that is exactly the way his own mind works.

The climate of gentlemanly scholarship and of public fame that kept Dawson immune from exposure long after his death in 1916 despite the individual resentments and suspicions of local scholars can be almost exactly paralleled in the career of Dawson's younger contemporary, Sir Edward Backhouse, as indeed can many of their methods of work.[37] Backhouse with a brilliant oriental linguist and an amazing charlatan. Just as Dawson was a most generous benefactor of museums, so Backhouse made the Bodleian Library the richest Western European repository of Chinese manuscripts and printed books (not to mention of forgeries). Like Dawson, Backhouse denounced the forgeries published by other Sinologists. Like Dawson, Backhouse made sure that his most extravagant and successful forgery was published not just in his own name but also in that of the respected journalist, J.O.P. Bland – namely the diary of the Chinese courtier Ching-San, which formed the principal source of Bland and Backhouse's *China under the Empress Dowager* (1910). Like Dawson, Backhouse perpetrated an ever growing series of hoaxes – spurious ship-building contracts for the long suffering John Brown & Co. of Clydeside, spurious and huge arms deals as a secret agent of the British Government in the Great War, spurious currency deals for the American Bank Note Company and so on and so on. Those he duped proved to be so embarrassed that he was never publicly denounced. He was not indeed exposed until the manuscript of his deathbed memoirs – full of plausible but excessive sexual adventures with the literary figures of his youth in England and France and with all the Chinese politicians of his maturity – came into the sceptical hands of the Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford for safe transfer to the Bodleian. H. Trevor-Roper (now Lord Dacre) could not read a single Chinese character, but he could piece together an amazingly damning picture from the papers of those who knew and suffered from Backhouse's fraudulent schemes.

Similar lessons can be drawn from the careers of other warped and thwarted near-geniuses who also worked in fields where public interest was great but expertise was very rare. We may cite fine-art forgers like Van Meegeren and his bogus Vermeers or Tom Keating and his

[37] H. Trevor-Roper, *A Hidden Life* (London, 1976).

Samuel Palmers;[38] or Thomas Wise, book collector and book thief, and compulsive forger of 'first editions' of English poets;[39] or the great forger of classical texts and inscriptions François Lenormant;[40] and it is not without irony that it should have been Trevor-Roper, the brilliant exposer of Backhouse's frenetic Walter Mitty career of endless hoaxes, who should recently have given his tentative blessing to the publication of the forged *Diaries of Adolf Hitler*. With the pressures and temptations of television and in areas beyond our true competence, which of us would not prove equally credulous?

For the modern historian forgery of documents or of texts is a rare phenomenon amongst the enormous mass of the surviving archival and narrative records; when forgery is detected, I suspect it provides a pleasant diversion along unusual paths. For medievalists, however, or more correctly for the early medievalist, forgery is an ever present problem, affecting a high proportion of the surviving evidence. Thus for example the great German student of diplomatic, Heinrich Bresslau, pointed out that over 50 per cent of the extant diplomas in the names of the Merovingian Frankish kings [that is those of the seventh and eighth centuries] are in fact forgeries.[41] In England Dr Clanchy has drawn attention to the fact that of the writs and charters attributed to the eleventh-century ruler, Edward the Confessor, scarcely 40 per cent are generally accepted as being authentic.[42] Of course certain famous kings and popes were particularly favoured by forgers [and Edward was amongst these], but it is otherwise broadly true that the older a medieval document claims to be, the more likely it is to be forged. This is not because age was in itself a desirable quality, but because few people in the Middle Ages knew (or could prove) what an early document ought to look like. The risk of detection was therefore proportionately less the older it claimed to be.

The pattern of the incidence of medieval forgery has been well studied in recent years by British and continental scholars and there is general agreement that whilst we can find forgeries of various types in every medieval century, the pattern is not an even one.[43] A brief but

[38] P. Coremans, *Van Meegeren's Faked Vermeers and De Hooghs* (London, 1949); T. Keating, *The Fake's Progress* (London, 1977).

[39] J. Carter and G. Pollard, *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth-Century Pamphlets* (London, 1934).

[40] H. Roehl, 'In Franciscum Lenormant inscriptionum falsarium', *Hermes*, 17 (1882), pp. 460–6 and 18 (1883), pp. 97–103.

[41] H. Bresslau, *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre* (3rd edn., Berlin, 1958–60), i, p. 15.

[42] M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (London, 1979), pp. 248–9 citing the evidence gathered in P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968), pp. 298–343.

[43] H. Silvestre, 'Le problème des faux au moyen age', *Moyen Age*, 66 (1960), pp. 362–6. C.N.L. Brooke, 'Approaches to Medieval Forgery', *Journal of the Society of*

dramatic peak is reached in the ninth century with a group of astonishing forgeries: the Donation of Constantine (as we now have it) forged by John the Deacon 'of the maimed fingers' in order to promote the independence and the burgeoning territorial claims of the Papacy;[44] or the 'Pseudo-Isidoran' collection of bogus papal decretals produced in a north-French episcopal centre [?Rheims];[45] or the great series of multifarious forged texts and documents produced at Le Mans to support its bishops' territorial ambition.[46] But the great age of forgery is agreed to lie between the late eleventh and the late twelfth century.

At this time, as Morey and Brooke have written: 'Respectable men and respectable communities forged as they had not forged before and would never forge again.'[47] The phenomenon is Europe-wide, not limited to any one kingdom, province or region. It is undoubtedly a reflection of the growing use of written records and therefore of the growing awareness of the inadequacy of the records already possessed. The enormous growth in the provision of every level of schooling in twelfth-century Western Europe and the consequent growth of literacy and development in the keeping of archives are all, as Clanchy has taught us, part and parcel of a major transformation of medieval society: the gradual switch from reliance predominantly on human memory to reliance predominantly on the written record.[48] Initially this development gave a great boost to forgery as churches found that their records no longer satisfied the requirements of a new age, and they sought to provide what was lacking. But in the longer run, the twelfth-century renaissance contained the seeds of the decline of forgery. As governments and courts became more used to written records they devised means of making documents more difficult to forge; they later went on to ensure that a record was maintained of settlements and judgements reached and of documents issued. Of course bureaucracies were by no means always efficient in finding particular documents in

Archivists, 3(8) (1968), pp. 377–86 reprinted in idem, *Medieval Church and Society: Collected Essays* (London, 1971), pp. 100–20; H. Fuhrmann et al., 'Die Falschungen im Mittelalter', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 197 (1963), pp. 529–601; Clanchy *Memory to Written Record*, pp. 119–20, 248 ff; G. Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', *Archiv für Diplomatik*, 29 (1983), pp. 1–41.

[44] H. Fuhrmann (ed.), *Constitutum Constantini*, MGH Fontes iuris Germanici antiqui, X (Hanover, 1968); for the identity of the forger, see the donation of Otto III to the Roman church in 1001 which is conveniently translated by B. Pullan, *Sources for the History of Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 121–2.

[45] H. Fuhrmann, *Einfluss und Verbreitung der pseudoisidorischen Fälschungen*, MGH Schriften, XXIV (Stuttgart, 1972–4).

[46] W. Goffart, *The Le Mans Forgeries* (Cambridge, MA, 1966).

[47] A. Morey and C.N.L. Brooke, *Gilbert Foliot and his Letters* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 127.

[48] Clanchy, *Memory to Written Record.*

their registers and rolls; but the mere fact that such records were known to exist made documentary forgery less safe. The tide of forgery of charters, then, reflects broad developments in European cultural history. It is clear that the new 'age of government records' – which in England, France and at the papal curia begins at the very beginning of the thirteenth century or just before – marked the end of the great age of forgery, or at least it partially closed certain avenues for the forgers.

If we turn from the broad pattern of medieval forgery to the individual forgers, then we immediately encounter a great contrast to the forgers of the modern era. Medieval forgers – in so far as we can yet know them – were not quirky intellectual misfits with giant chips on their shoulders. There were some professional forgers in the Middle Ages and there were also forgers of coinage to parallel the normally faceless forgers of banknotes or credit cards of today. But forgery was a serious crime, both in secular and in canon law, and for laymen it was a very dangerous one. At his Christmas court in 1124 Henry I had all the moneyers of England gathered together and mutilated by cutting off their right hands and by castrating them – a radical means of demonstrating his wrath – because many of them had been forging or debasing the coinage. He thereby enforced a penalty that went back to late-Roman legislation on counterfeiting gold coins and to the laws of the Lombard kings of Italy of the seventh and eighth centuries;[49] but forgers who were in holy orders avoided mutilatory sentences by virtue of their cloth. They faced simply loss of office and of their orders. Gregory of Tours records how Bishop Egidius of Rheims was deposed when the documents he had presented to a court of bishops at Metz were shown to be forgeries by the referendary; and in 1095 Pope Urban II deposed Bishop Humbald of Limoges for forgery.[50] If forgery was then a serious crime, it is difficult for the scholar of today not to be shocked by the realization that the vast majority of extant medieval forgeries were fabricated by, or on behalf of, monks. The 'servants of God' prove to have included amongst their number a significant proportion of master criminals. We may mitigate our shock by pointing out that monastic archives of the twelfth century have survived rather better than episcopal, let alone than secular, muniments. But we should surely be cautious before deducing from the proliferation of twelfth-century forgery that it was lightly regarded, that everyone knew that it

[49] ASC, E. s.a. 1125, ed and trans D. Whitelock et al. (London, 1961), 191. P. Grierson, 'The Roman Law of Counterfeiting', in R.A.G. Carson and C.H.V. Sutherland, eds, *Essays in Roman Coinage presented to H. Mattingly*, (Oxford, 1956), pp. 255–6. See further Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', p. 17, n. 82.

[50] Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, I, x.19; for Humbert of Limoges, see H.E.J. Cowdrey, *The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform* (Oxford, 1970), p. 94.