

# Athelstan: England's Forgotten First King

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## Introduction

*Æðelstan cyning lædde fyrde to Brunanbyrig:* ‘Athelstan the king led the levy to Brunanburh.’ Nine hundred and thirty-seven years had passed since the birth of Christ. For the first time, a single king laid claim to the whole of Britain (Holland 3).

Athelstan was the first king to claim the title *Rex totius Britanniae* (King of all Britain). He succeeded to the throne in 924, captured York from the Danes in 927 and invaded Scotland in 934. In 937 Athelstan met an alliance of the Norse, the Scots and the Strathclyde Britons in The Battle of Brunanburh and emerged victoriously. It was this battle that unified all of England for the first time and “forged a political map of the future that remains with us [in modernity], arguably making The Battle of Brunanburh one of the most significant battles in the long history not just of England, but of the whole of the British Isles” (Livingston 1). Athelstan reigned until his death in 939.

Athelstan’s reign marked a pivotal period in the history of Britain and yet Athelstan is one of the most scarcely-recorded late Anglo-Saxon kings, both before and after the Norman Conquest. Scholars have highlighted the lack of historiographical sources concerning Athelstan and studied the king’s life using less conventional sources, such as contemporary poems and law codes<sup>1</sup>. Michael Lapidge notes the “pitiful collection of contemporary evidence” for Athelstan and comments that “whereas we also have sound evidence for the literary enterprise of Alfred's reign both in the pages of Asser and in the surviving Old English translations which were executed under Alfred's sponsorship, we have no comparable evidence for the reign of Athelstan” (49-50).

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Keynes, Simon. “Royal government and the written word in late Anglo-Saxon England.” *The uses of literacy in*

However, there has been no attempt, to the best of my knowledge, to unearth *why* Athelstan's life and reign are only sparsely recorded in history. The present paper will analyse the portrayal of Athelstan in a selection of medieval history texts to explain Athelstan's lack of prominence in history writing. The explicit, unabashed political agenda of much medieval writing explains to a great extent why Athelstan figures less prominently in history writing.

Major medieval chronicles like the early medieval *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* written in Old English, and twelfth-century works like William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* are key sources in the historiographical study of Athelstan's reign and will be the primary sources for the present study<sup>2</sup>. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is the primary source for the history of the Anglo-Saxons from the departure of the Romans until the Norman Conquest and also the first chronicle to document Athelstan's kingship. *Gesta Regum Anglorum* holds the single most important twelfth-century account of Athelstan's life and together with *Historia Regum Britanniae* provides a post-Conquest perspective on the portrayal of Athelstan.

This paper will start with an overview of medieval history writing relevant to the present study, followed by an analysis of the nature of medieval history writing that will provide the theoretical framework for this study. A contextual analysis of Athelstan's portrayal in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* will follow. Lastly, the depiction of Athelstan in twelfth-century histories will be

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<sup>2</sup> The study relies on the following editions and translations: "Swanton, Michael, ed. and trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. Orion Publishing Co, 2000.", "*William of Malmesbury: Gesta regum Anglorum* (Deeds of the English Kings), Vol. I, Edited and Translated by R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, Oxford University Press, 1998." and "Reeve, Michael. "Geoffrey of Monmouth." *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of the "De gestis Britonum"* [*Historia Regum Britanniae*] (2007)."

assessed through a contextual analysis of the king's portrayal in *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and *Historia Regum Britanniae*.

# 1. History Writing in Medieval England

History writing in medieval England comprised chronicles, narrative histories and biographies, including saints' lives. Some of the most important historical sources concerning the Anglo-Saxons are *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* and Asser's *Vita Ælfredi Regis Angul Saxonum*.

Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*<sup>3</sup> (*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) was completed in 731. Bede wrote in detail about the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from the Christian conversion of his people onwards and his work is the main narrative source for the seventh and early eighth century. Bede relied heavily on the Briton cleric Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (*On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*) (Yorke 3).

It is probable that *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*<sup>4</sup> started to be written in the ninth century during the reign of Alfred the Great (Swanton xviii). The Anglo-Norman chronicler Gaimar, during the twelfth century, wrote that Alfred had "caused a book to be written in English about events and laws and battles in the land and about kings who made war" (qtd. in Swanton xviii). The *Chronicle*, written in English rather than Latin, is the first national history of Western people in their own language. It consists of a collection of annals in nine manuscripts. Depending on the manuscript, entries and the amount of detail vary. As such, the *Chronicle* is believed to have multiple authors, all of which are unknown (Swanton xxi).

One of the most important biographies from medieval England is *Vita Ælfredi Regis Angul Saxonum* (*The Life of King Alfred*), written by the Welsh cleric Asser. The biography was

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<sup>3</sup> "Bede. *Ecclesiastical History, Volume I: Books 1-3*. Translated by J. E King, Harvard University Press, 1930", unless specified otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter also referred to as the *Chronicle*

completed in 893, during the reign of Alfred the Great. The text celebrates Alfred's cultural reforms and his victories over the Danes (Gransden, *Propaganda*, 371). It has been noted that the biography "may well have been shaped according to the king's wishes, and at the very least contained nothing to which he would have objected" (Scharer 186).

The Norman Conquest in 1066 was ultimately to cause an explosive increase in the production of historical texts in the twelfth century. The Norman invasion and occupation of England was a sudden event that marked the end of Anglo-Saxon culture and thus posed a great threat to local rituals, legends and traditional claims to authority (Southern, *Sense of the Past*, 247). William of Malmesbury, who claimed to be unbiased due to being of both Norman and English descent (*Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 425), wrote that written evidence of the Anglo-Saxon past had been "destroyed by the violence of enemies, so that only the names of saints remain and their modern miracles, if any" (qtd. in Southern, *Sense of the Past*, 248). This was problematic for Old English monasteries, as it weakened their claim to monastic lands and made them vulnerable to illegal seizures (Hollister 6). Furthermore, the dismissal of Anglo-Saxon saints and the loss of their reputation would have been a problem for religious houses. As Antonia Gransden notes, the cult of saints was a lucrative business and an important source of income; relics attracted pilgrims who gave offerings to monks (*Legends*, 108). The survival of the abbeys depended on historical research and writing (Hollister 7). All over England, monks turned to history writing to salvage what they could of the Anglo-Saxon past (Southern, *Sense of the Past*, 249). This proved to be a difficult task, as William of Malmesbury stated in *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* (*The History of the English Bishops*): "Here I am destitute of all help; I feel the palpable darkness of ignorance, and I have no lantern of an earlier history to guide my footsteps" (qtd. in Southern, *Sense of the Past*, 254). Though many manuscripts had been lost, a few ancient texts that outlined the old monastic

culture survived (Southern, *Sense of the Past*, 248). These documents revealed information about ancient saints and patrons and emphasised the connection between the prosperity of the kingdom and the glory of religious houses (Southern, *Sense of the Past*, 248). The juxtaposition of ecclesiastical culture and secular politics became characteristic of twelfth-century history writing (Hollister 5). There is little contemporary writing concerning the Norman Conquest and history writing had a delayed reaction to the episode (Otter 565-6). By the twelfth century, however, historians were widely engaged in establishing links with the past. Post-Conquest chroniclers faced a challenge, as Matthew Firth notes: “the abbeys of post-Conquest England produced numerous histories and chronicles attempting to make sense of an Anglo-Saxon past alien to a rapidly evolving Anglo-Norman culture” (69).

It was in this milieu that William of Malmesbury wrote *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (*The Deeds of the English Kings*). Malmesbury set out to record the history of his country and believed that, since Bede, historians had neglected to do so. He states this in his prologue of *Gesta Regum Anglorum*:

[T]wo hundred and twenty-three years after Bede ... history limps along  
 with no support from literature. It was therefore my design, in part moved by  
 love of my country and in part encouraged by influential friends, to mend the  
 broken chain of our history, and give a Roman polish to the rough annals of  
 our native speech (15).



Malmesbury completed *Gesta Regum Anglorum* by 1125, writing in detail about the history of the kings of England from the Saxon invasion until the reign of Henry I.

In a similar vein, Geoffrey of Monmouth completed *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*The History of the Kings of Britain*) around 1136. *Historia Regum Britanniae* is a narrative history spread out over eleven books. *Historia Regum Britanniae* chronicles the lives of the kings of the Britons over the course of two thousand years, from the Trojans founding the British nation up until the West-Saxons assume control of all of the English.

Works of historical writing as described above would often be arranged in a chronological manner, which made it relatively easy to find information about a specific year or event (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 464). As such, retrieving information from historical texts gained popularity over turning to public records (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 464). With regard to this, it is important to note that historical texts must not be confused with factual histories. The term ‘chronicle’, strictly speaking, describes a factual written account of events in a chronological order. In medieval England however, any work that claimed to be essentially historical was described as a chronicle (Given-Wilson XIX). Medieval writers drew a fine line between chronicle writing and narrative or history writing. Gervase of Canterbury, around 1200, wrote about the difference between the historian and the chronicler. Canterbury states that the historian should “instruct truthfully, concerning deeds, manners, and the life which he describes”, while the chronicler should “reckon by true computation, the years of the Lord and the events listed under them” (qtd. in Given-Wilson 1). Canterbury further notes that “the intention of each is the same” as “each seeks the truth” (qtd. in Given-Wilson 1). Chroniclers knew their duty was to tell the truth and were careful to accurately record history with regard to exactitude, actuality, authenticity and chronology. However, chroniclers believed that “universal truths” (Given-Wilson 2) that

could be deduced from specific episodes were just as important as providing a factual recording of those episodes and took an approach that was not strictly historical, but also theological.

Ancient historians had long taken the liberty of selecting, arranging and padding out historical events and medieval scholars had followed their lead (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 178). When looking at the recording of various battles (Given-Wilson 2), chroniclers used a similar template to describe numerous victories and defeats, for example: well-disciplined armies with gracious leaders would emerge victoriously, while undisciplined armies would suffer a sorry defeat. Chroniclers self-proclaimed aim to tell the truth seems genuine, as they used authentic names, dates, places and correct chronology when recording history. However, as Richard Southern notes, the chronicler was “within limit ... a creator on a large scale” (*Classical Tradition*, 188).

The way history writing was approached varied for different reasons, whether political, religious, or both. While it is clear that certain liberties were taken when it came to the recording of history, such liberties “[were] those of a historical method rather than an individual” (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 187). As Southern argues, such liberties must be granted when analysing historical texts (*Classical Tradition*, 187). However, this means that “there is not a single speech, document, description or insinuation of motive in any of the works written in this tradition that can be accepted unreservedly by a modern historian in search of a fact” (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 187).

It was common for chroniclers to believe that specific episodes and God’s will were linked together. Gildas for example, believed that the sins of the British had provoked God’s vengeance in the form of barbarian attacks (Yorke 2). In this regard, he is similar to Bede: both men believed that the course of events would reveal God’s will. Bede set out to record the history of his people

as accurately as he could, carefully sifting his materials and providing himself with document sources before he wrote (Knowles viii). However, it is clear that he takes a Saxon stance on the affair of the Britons. He theologically rationalises the waning of the Britons in various passages. When writing about the settlement of the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes for example, Bede justifies the slaughter and burning of the Britons by comparing it to the Chaldean destruction of Jerusalem caused by the sins of God's people<sup>5</sup>:

[T]he fire once kindled in the hands of the pagans took God's just revenge of the wickedness of the people, not much unlike unto that fire which sometime kindled of the Chaldees, consumed the walls, nay rather all the buildings of Jerusalem (I, XV; 73).

Bede also uses the portrayal of the Britons as sinful people to establish a prophecy of the Saxons as God's chosen people:

Among other of their evil deeds not to be spoke of, which their historiographer Gildas doth lamentably set forth in writing, this also is added, that they never took care to preach the word of faith to the folk of the Saxons or English which inhabited the land along with them. But yet the goodness of God did not so forsake His people which He foreknew to be saved, but provided for the said folk much more worthy heralds of the truth, by whom they might be brought unto His faith (I, XXII; 101).

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<sup>5</sup> Specified in Gerald Bonner's translation in "Church and Faith in the Patristic Tradition Augustine, Pelagianism, and Early Christian Northumbria." (1996), p.7 .

The authors of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also embraced the belief that God's will revealed itself through the course of events. Annalists of the *Chronicle* were initially not concerned with the historical perspective. Much rather, they labelled years because they could have incidental temporal significance and because the Second Coming of Christ was expected (Swanton xiv-xi).

The didactic purpose chroniclers saw is explained by Bede:

For whether an history shall contain good things concerning good men, the careful hearer is thereby stirred up and provoked to follow after well-doing; or whether it shall report evil things concerning froward men, the devout and well-disposed hearer or reader none the less, by flying that is evil and noisome to his soul, is himself moved thereby more earnestly to follow after the things he knoweth to be good and acceptable to God (2-4).

Chroniclers of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also grew aware that what they wrote and how they wrote it mattered and as such, over time, entries became longer and provided more of a narrative (Swanton xvii).

Literacy could only be found among Church-educated people and thus a small group of literate people had a massive impact on what was written. Religious houses and secular authorities were strongly connected and their relationship was a reciprocal one. Monarchs regarded the establishment and support of monasteries as a means of economic and territorial consolidation

(Hollister 3). Abbeys were furthermore status symbols and a means of participating in “the greatest and holiest crusade of all: God’s war against the devil” (Hollister 3). Religious houses, in turn, relied on secular rulers for foundation grants and the protection of monastic properties (Hollister 3). As Charles Hollister notes: “the primary obligation of monastic life, the praise of God through the uninterrupted celebration of the liturgy, depended on the willingness and the ability of the abbey’s lord and protector to maintain order in the region” (4).

As such, kings often featured prominently in historical records such as saints’ lives, annals and biographies. However, as Southern notes, historians were also interpreters of their time and as kings were “the most conspicuous objects on the landscape” (*Classical Tradition*, 182), it is only logical historians wrote about them (*Classical Tradition*, 182). Kings furthermore drew themselves to events that mattered and needed to be written about such as battles, coronations and funerals (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 182). Additionally, people believed in the “sacred mission” of their kings and thought them to be “chosen by God” (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 182-3).

The influence that chronicles could have was apparent not only to chroniclers; kings, too, realised that historical texts could be used to their advantage. After all, the power of medieval rulers depended greatly on whether they were perceived as legitimate (Reynolds 11). Medieval histories had a tradition of promoting versions of the past that could help sustain favourable political and institutional arrangements. Charters, for example, would be rewritten to prove their owner’s claims and be used to reclaim lost lands (Yorke 21). The growing popularity of chronicles brought new opportunities. Many kings saw opportunities to increase their prestige by having information about their progenitors recorded, thus reinforcing their authority. They also saw chronicles as a way of presenting precedents that would justify their claims and acts

(Gransden, *Uses of History*, 463). Perhaps most importantly, kings saw historical texts as a great propagandistic tool (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 464).

Kings made use of this tool, which led to propaganda occurring in the form of official and unofficial histories. Official and unofficial histories shared many features. The difference between the two was that official histories were commissioned by authorities while unofficial histories were not, or at least did not acknowledge this (Gransden, *Propaganda*, 363). Official histories represented the monarch's point of view and justified their office. Such texts would often contain a eulogistic tone. *Encomium Emmae Reginae (Praise of Queen Emma)* for example, is a commissioned history and the author made no secret of having written the biography to serve the queen's honour (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 186). However, only a few histories were commissioned, as medieval England never established a tradition of official historiography (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 465). Unofficial histories were far more common and it is upon these texts that kings relied to spread their influence and rally support (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 465).

Biographies in particular became popular among kings. Biographies served as a perfect platform to represent the voice of the king, emphasize his importance by legitimating him as the rightful heir, and sustain power relations. Martin Kohli notes that biographies possess "a 'reconstructive character'—or in other words an element in which individuals reforge their conceptions of the past in the light of their present circumstances— [though] there also exists 'some specifiable relation between the narrative reconstruction and the events to which it refers'" (Jones 460). The purpose for which a biography was written thus greatly affected the narrative.

While kings influenced the writing of some historical texts, there were also many histories written without any direct influence from kings. In the Middle Ages after all, propaganda could only reach a limited audience. As such, it is likely that some histories were written to attract

favour from patrons such as kings (Gransden, *Propaganda*, 363). Other histories might not have been influenced by the monarch at all, as the central authority was often unpopular with monks due to the government imposing taxes on their houses (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 473). Janet Nelson notes that “history writing was the special mode in which the learned participated in counsel: it was associated with, not alternative to, speaking, and speaking out” (qtd. in Tyler 370).

Most chroniclers however, modified their work in favour of the great men of their times (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 474). In *De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae (On the Antiquity of Glastonbury)* for example, William of Malmesbury sought to defend Glastonbury’s reputation as a holy place of great antiquity to please Henry of Blois, a bishop who was closely connected to Glastonbury. Malmesbury defended Glastonbury through solid research, but lamentably added a forged charter to further strengthen his argument (Gransden, *Propaganda*, 365).

Chroniclers often had their own agenda; whether this was to teach ‘universal truths’, gain favour with authoritative figures or to enforce government views that coincided with their own. Historical texts in medieval England were biased to at least a certain extent. The bias found in historical texts, however, is not without limit. As Rhys Jones argues, “without a core which [is] based in fact, the themes of legitimation that [are] central to these narratives would have lost all their potency” (466-7). Medieval histories therefore provide great historical insights, but they must be studied with caution.

## 2. Athelstan's Portrayal in the Tenth Century

The earliest account of Athelstan's reign is attested in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Events of Athelstan's reign are accurately recorded and fall in line with the *Chronicle's* concern to "sustain loyalty to English kings and the royal dynasty and write the history of the English in such a way as to encourage a communal sense of Englishness" (Brooks 62). Yet despite its desire to promote a sense of Englishness, the *Chronicle* seems to have no special interest in eulogising Athelstan, the first king of all the English. This becomes particularly apparent when Athelstan's depiction in the *Chronicle* is compared to that of Alfred the Great's.

Alfred's propagandistic use of history writing is undeniable and perhaps most obvious in *Vita Ælfredi Regis Angul Saxonum*, a work that is believed to have been commissioned by Alfred himself (Gransden, *Uses of History*, 465). Anton Scharer notes that Asser dedicates the biography to Alfred in terms that emphasize Alfred's overlordship over Britain (185) and Gransden argues that it is likely "Alfred felt the need of literary support to strengthen his position among the Anglo-Saxons so he could better resist the Vikings" (*Uses of History*, 465).

*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, too, features propagandistic elements that suggest Alfred's influence on the writing of the *Chronicle*. Gransden notes that the *Chronicle* focuses on the achievements of the House of Wessex in general and on Alfred himself in particular, legitimising his kingship and emphasising his military triumphs (Gransden, *Portrayal*, 370). As discussed earlier, it was common for kings to increase their prestige by having information about their progenitors recorded. Such was also the case for Alfred. The Winchester manuscript includes a preface in which Alfred's genealogy is outlined. Alfred's first mentioned ancestors are Cerdic and Cynric and it is written that "they conquered the West Saxons' kingdom; and these were the first



kings who conquered the West Saxons' land from the Britons" (2). The preface goes on to list a long line of kings and their reigns, and concludes by stating that "Alfred succeeded to the kingdom [...] and it was 300 and 96 years since his ancestors had first conquered the West Saxons' land from the Britons" (4). The *Chronicle* thus establishes Alfred's royal lineage and underpins his right to lead the English.

The first indication of Alfred's blatant propaganda within the manuscripts can be found in the entry of 853: "King Æthelwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome. *Dom* Leo<sup>6</sup> was pope in Rome then, and he consecrated him as king and took him as son at confirmation" (64). At the time of the alleged consecration, Alfred was a child with three older brothers that would have claim to the crown before him. The annal suggests that from a young age, Alfred was recognised as the rightful king and thus reinforces Alfred's authority. The propagandic nature of this annal becomes even more evident when considering that no such consecration took place. A letter from Pope Leo IV himself proves Alfred was not crowned but "decorated [...] as a spiritual son with the dignity of the belt and the vestments of the consulate" (Davis 40). Propaganda can also be found in the 886 entry concerning Alfred's reconquering of London from the Danes: "King Alfred occupied London fort and *all the English race* turned to him, except what was in captivity to Danish men" (81, emphasis my own). By 886 the English had suffered many Viking attacks and invasions. Having "all of the English race" turn to Alfred thus portrays him as a strong leader and stresses his political supremacy.

When it comes to the portrayal of Alfred's grandson however, no such propaganda seems to be in order. With the exception of the *Brunanburh* poem, which will be discussed later on, annals concerning Athelstan are comparatively sparse. A couple of annals to illustrate this are the following: "924. In this year King Edward passed away and Athelstan, his son, succeeded to the

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Leo IV

kingdom” (105), “927. Here Athelstan drove out King Guthfrith” (927), “933. Here King Athelstan went into Scotland with both a raiding land-army and a raiding ship-army and raided across much of it” (107).

While annals concerning Athelstan are brief, events concerning his reign are accurately documented and it may be argued that to his contemporaries, such entries were enough to signify his importance. An example hereof can be found in the Worcester manuscript. The author writes that in 924 Athelstan was “chosen as king by the Mercians and consecrated at Kingston” (105). Athelstan had thus not only been crowned king of the West Saxons, but of the Anglo-Saxons, as the Mercians were his subjects too. It is furthermore noteworthy that Kingston, the location of Athelstan’s coronation, is mentioned. Kingston-upon-Thames is said to have been an important royal holding and the traditional crowning place for West-Saxon kings (Swanton 104), which signifies the political supremacy the kings of Wessex gained over the English.

It is remarkable though, that The Battle of Brunanburh, too, only gets a short description in the Peterborough and Canterbury manuscript, as this battle signified “a turning- point in which political supremacy was gained by the kings of Wessex over the ethnically different people within the country” (Cavill 102). It is simply stated that “King Athelstan led and army to Brunanburh” (107). However, The Battle of Brunanburh is otherwise recorded in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the form of a lengthy poem. While there are many accounts of this battle, the poem found in the *Chronicle* is the earliest and most important one (Cavill 102). Paul Cavill notes that the author of the poem seems to rely on the audience knowing the basic story line, as only the name, and not the location of the site is given (102). The poet however, seems to have been more focused on the narrative than on the historical documentation. *The Battle of Brunanburh* is written in the style of Old English poetry, with its focus lying on the battle and the glory hereof. Heroic poetry tends to

glorify its heroes, as can be seen in the first lines of verse in *Brunanburh*: “Here King Athelstan, leader of warriors, / ring-giver of men, and also his brother, / the ætheling Edmund, struck by life-long glory” (1-3). Another element often found in Old English poetry is the mention of animals at the battlefield, with their presence serving to embellish the battle scene (Bonjour 564). Adrien Bonjour has classified this theme as “ornamental rather than essential” (564). In *Brunanburh* too, animals are mentioned to signify a scene of carnage, as can be read in the following lines:

They left behind to divide the corpses,  
to enjoy the carrion, the dusky-coated,  
horny-beaked black raven,  
and the grey-coated eagle, white-rumped,  
greedy war-hawk, and the wolf,  
great beast in the forest (60-5).

The animals are mentioned solely to express the magnitude of the slaughter, as the poet goes on to glorify the battle: “Never yet in this island / was there a greater slaughter /of people felled by the sword’s edges” (65-7). The poem, with its heavy focus on the glory of the battle, is thus regarded as a panegyric; “a song of praise and victory, [which] in its delight at the outcome of the battle, may seem to lack subtlety” (Cavill 109). This furthermore adds to the notion that *The Battle of Brunanburh* was written not to be historically accurate, but rather to express Anglo-Saxon pride and victory and to emphasize the importance of the event.

It was Athelstan who lead the levy to Brunanburh, yet in the poem he is only mentioned by name once. The glory, instead, goes to the Anglo-Saxon people:

[S]ince Angles and Saxons  
 came here from the east,  
 sought out Britain over the broad ocean,  
 warriors eager for fame, proud war-smiths,  
 overcame the Welsh, seized the country (69-73).

This is very telling of Athelstan's character, as Cavill clarifies: "[t]his shows us a king who is confident that his people's glory is his glory, his people's victory is his own, and their heroic spirit is his also" (110-11). Athelstan, it seems, was not concerned with his personal legacy, but rather "let the traditional art of poetry tell the story for posterity" (Cavill 111). As such, The Battle of Brunanburh is well-remembered, while this is much less the case for Athelstan.

The analysis of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* indicates that the political achievements and military exploits of both Alfred and Athelstan were well-documented during their time. The way both men are portrayed confirms that *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was indeed written in a way favourable to the West-Saxon kings, as various propaganda techniques were applied. Alfred seems to have been well aware of the propagandistic use that history writing could have and keenly made use of this, as can be concluded from *Vita Ælfredi Regis Angul Saxonum*. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* strongly focuses on Alfred's achievements in particular, which indicates that the *Chronicle* was commissioned by Alfred to increase his prestige and thus underpin his authority. As for Athelstan, his political supremacy is clear from what is written about him, but there is no propaganda concerning Athelstan in particular. Even the recording of Athelstan's most famous victory, The Battle of Brunanburh, does not focus on him, but rather on the Saxons as a victorious

people. The difference between Athelstan and Alfred then, is that while the reigns of both men were recorded, Alfred's portrayal had a clear propagandistic aim that Athelstan's did not.

### 3. Athelstan's Portrayal in the Twelfth Century

Athelstan is sparsely documented in twelfth-century histories. This can be attributed to his scarce presence in contemporary histories, as twelfth-century historians had few sources that they could draw from. The Norman Conquest furthermore marked a period of political change, which meant that the political agenda of post-Conquest historians changed too. William of Malmesbury and Geoffrey of Monmouth were major historians during their time, and their respective works *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and *Historia Regum Britanniae* provide the basis of my discussion of Athelstan's representation in twelfth-century history writing.

#### 3.1 *Gesta Regum Anglorum*

In *Gesta Regum Anglorum* William of Malmesbury provides an unprecedented account of Athelstan's life. Malmesbury retains great respect among modern historians (Faletta 61) and is praised for his characteristic "love of truth" (Thomson 2: xl). Malmesbury is critical of his sources and transparent about their credibility, as he demonstrates in the following extract:

What follows I have learnt more from popular songs which have suffered in transmission than from scholarly books written for the information of posterity. I have added it here not to defend its veracity, but in order not to keep any knowledge from my readers (225).

Though Athelstan is sparsely recorded in the twelfth century, post-Conquest chroniclers seemed to have thought highly of the king. Malmesbury wrote that “[c]oncerning this king there is a vigorous tradition in England that he was the most law-abiding and best-educated ruler they have ever had” (211). Such a tradition is indeed detectable when looking at various chronicle sources<sup>7</sup>. However, while such chronicles state that Athelstan was a virtuous king, they provide little detail to demonstrate this (Firth 78).

Malmesbury, unlike his contemporary historians, provides a detailed record of Athelstan’s life and reign. However, like all medieval histories, *Gesta Regum Anglorum* cannot be trusted unreservedly. Malmesbury writes the following about Athelstan’s consecration at Kingston:

Athelstan was elected with the overwhelming support of the nobles, and crowned in a royal town called Kingston, despite the opposition of a certain Alfred and his supporters (for sedition is never in want of support), whose end I shall report later in the king’s own words. The ground of this opposition, it is said, was Athelstan’s origin as the son of a concubine; but apart from this blemish (if there is indeed any truth in it), there was nothing ignoble about the man himself, who outdid all his predecessors in religious devotion, while the splendour of his victories put all their triumphs in the shade (207).

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<sup>7</sup> For example Chronicle 925 and 940 in “Darlington, R. R., and P. McGurk. “The Chronicle of John of Worcester, II: the Annals from 450 to 1066.” 1995”, 937.6 and 939.6 in “Mac Airt, Seán, and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, eds. *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131): Text and translation*. Dublin Institute for advanced studies, 1983” and 5.18-19 in “Greenway, Diana E., ed. *Historia Anglorum: the history of the English people*. Vol. 53. Oxford University Press, 1996”.

Malmesbury elaborates on an established event, but also acknowledges a unfavourable rumour: Athelstan's possible illegitimacy. However, Malmesbury is quick to invalidate this rumour by casting doubts upon its legitimacy and adding the following: "So much more excellent is it that that for which we are renowned should be inherent, rather than derived from our ancestors; because the former will be judged exclusively our own, the latter to belong to others" (207). Malmesbury also uses Athelstan's legacy as a source, as he writes:

Yet to judge by the splendour of the city, the wealth of the inhabitants, and the number of visiting strangers, every form of merchandise so plentiful there that you would not search in vain for anything that would contribute in your view to a civilized life. Numerous reminders of Athelstan are to be seen both in the city and in the country round (217).

Malmesbury furthermore occasionally shifts into hyperbole. His account of Athelstan includes a praise poem (210-13) and a particularly dubious account of a battle involving Athelstan:

His sword by chance fell from its scabbard. At this moment of universal fear and blind confusion, he called upon God and St Aldhelm, reached again to his scabbard, and there found the sword, which is still preserved among the royal treasures as evidence of the miracle (209).



Malmesbury's account of Athelstan's life is thus "a complex literary construction that demonstrates an intrinsic interrelation between source documents, local tradition, and material history" (Firth 71). Malmesbury often proves himself to be critical of the veracity of his sources, yet unquestionably relies on dubious source material when convenient for his narrative. Firth argues that Malmesbury's account of Athelstan may have been influenced by Athelstan's unique connection to Malmesbury Abbey - "the Anglo-Saxon king had gifted the abbey lands and relics in life, and in death had been laid to rest there" (69) - which caused Malmesbury to eulogise his abbey's Anglo-Saxon benefactor (70). Additionally, the fact that Malmesbury was partly of English descent may further explain Malmesbury's Anglo-Saxon bias. *Gesta Regum Anglorum* thus reflects the persistent bias in history writing as well the challenge faced by Anglo-Norman historians to "examine the historical content of material which had never been used in [such a] way before, and to extract from unpromising documents a new picture of antiquity" (Southern, *Sense of the Past*, 249) .

### ***3.2 Historia Regum Britanniae***

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* enjoyed great fame and influence in the Middle Ages (Faletra 61). Monmouth differed greatly from his predecessors in the following way: his accounts of the distant past were far fuller than those found in any earlier works. His work overflows with detail, and distant characters of the past are given "an independent, almost a plausible, life of their own" (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 194).

*Historia Regum Britanniae* largely relies on *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* and *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Reeve lvii). Monmouth also acknowledges an unknown ancient history book of the kings of the Britons as his main source:

[T]he book in British which Walter, archdeacon of Oxford brought from Brittany, and whose truthful account of their history I have here been at pains in honour of those British rulers to translate into Latin (280).

Southern states that it is likely that Monmouth used the “freedom of invention that the literary tradition of historical writing allowed” (*Classical Tradition*, 194).

Monmouth wrote *Historia Regum Britanniae* in a period of political instability. Henry I died in 1135 and the reign of his contested successor Stephen of Blois deemed ineffective, as “Norman expansion into Wales not only came to a halt but actually began to lose ground” (Faletra 61). A few Norman castles were lost, which “tipped the balance of power away from the Normans” (Faletra 61).

*Historia Regum Britanniae* thus takes a political stance on the affairs of Norman Wales and narrates the past of Britain in a way that legitimates Norman sovereignty (Faletra 61). Monmouth narrates the history of the Britons as a story of decline and destruction that was the result of treachery and barbarism (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 194). He then adopts an approach similar to the one taken by Bede (I, XXII; 101): in describing the demise of the Britons, Monmouth presents the Normans as God's chosen people. After Book Six, Monmouth pauses his narrative to insert a series of prophecies, the “*prophetias Merlini* (prophecies of Merlin)” (143). These prophecies “[open] up the promise of a still greater future for [the Normans], predestined

by God for universal rule” (Southern, *Classical Tradition*, 194). It may be fair then, that *Historia Regum Britanniae* has been described as “a serious patriotic Tory pseudo history ... a latter-day propagandistic Aeneid designed to please the Anglo-Norman top-brass” (qtd. in Faletra 69).

Monmouth mentions Athelstan only once. As *Historia Regum Britanniae* finishes when the West-Saxons seize control of all of England, Athelstan only appears at the end of Monmouth’s work. Monmouth describes the assaults of Yvor and Yni, the last kings of the Britons, against the Saxons. Monmouth states that the Britons had weakened, while on the other hand, he praises the Saxons:

The Saxons acted more wisely, living in peace and harmony, tilling the fields and rebuilding the cities and towns; thus, with British lordship overthrown, they came to rule all Loegria, led by Athelstan, who was the first of them to wear its crown (280).

Monmouth stresses the victory of the Anglo-Saxons, and therefore the defeat of the Britons. However, Monmouth’s concern lies not in recording Anglo-Saxons history, but in the legitimation of the Norman present. Monmouth’s work is therefore representative of the political agenda of twelfth-century histories.

## Conclusion

In medieval England, literacy was exclusive to Church-educated people, which meant that history writing was too. A select group of people thus decided what was written. Chroniclers were careful to record history with conformity to fact, but they also believed that histories should contain ‘universal truths’, whether political or religious. Chroniclers’ political and religious agenda thus significantly affected the content of their histories, as they wrote in a way that served their preferred narrative.

Monasteries relied largely on secular authorities for grants and protection and thus, chroniclers often wrote to please and legitimise their superiors. Kings could therefore influence what was written and use histories as a propagandistic tool. It is likely that Alfred the Great influenced the agenda of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, as the *Chronicle* strongly underpins Alfred’s authority. However, there are no sources providing propaganda on behalf of Athelstan. The *Brunanburh* poem in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* suggests that rather than emphasising his supremacy, accounts of Athelstan focussed on the glory of his people. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* then, is the only tenth-century history text to write about Athelstan and entries concerning him are only brief.

The lack of contemporary historical sources of Athelstan’s life made it challenging for later historians to write about the king. Though post-Conquest chroniclers stated that Athelstan was a virtuous king, they provided no detail to elaborate on his virtues. *Gesta Regum Anglorum* is the only chronicle to provide a detailed account of Athelstan life, though William of Malmesbury’s entries are dubious at times. The challenge of providing an account of Athelstan’s life thus proved to be a difficult one and also one that chroniclers were generally not concerned

with.

Furthermore, the political agenda of histories changed after the Norman Conquest. As can be seen in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Anglo-Normans wrote about the history of the Anglo-Saxons to establish a link with their past and thus legitimise the presence of the Anglo-Normans.

Athelstan's lack of prominence in history writing can thus be traced back to his portrayal in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Emphasising Athelstan's supremacy was not particularly relevant to the agenda of the *Chronicle*. The lack of contemporary evidence about Athelstan in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* thus laid the groundwork for the a scarce historical record, as later chroniclers had little material to draw from. The agenda of post-Conquest chronicles furthered the silence of Athelstan's historical record, as they focused on the legitimation of the Normans rather than the history of the Anglo-Saxons.

Though the present study has outlined Athelstan's portrayal in medieval histories, the study is limited to a selection of historical texts. Athelstan's kingship could further be studied through a broader selection of medieval histories; twelfth-century historians after all, produced a body of historical writing unprecedented in terms of quality and quantity. The first king of England, though a shadowy figure in history, may not be forgotten yet.

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