

### III: Archbishop Plegmund and the Court of King Alfred 890–923

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#### Introduction

**A**lthough he was Archbishop of Canterbury for over thirty years, it is remarkable that we know so little about Archbishop Plegmund and have so limited an impression of his pontificate, especially given the role that he played for Alfred both in education and in the administrative re-arrangement of the West Saxon church. He prepared the way for the reforms that transformed the English church from the mid-tenth century onwards; he was regarded as a saint (Farmer 1978, 333), but did not attract the attention of any hagiographer, nor did any significant cult develop in his memory. Although described as scholarly, he left no writings that can safely be said were his, although Alfred acknowledged his guidance elsewhere. Sure facts are scarce; references to him by contemporary or later writers are gathered together in the Appendix.

Of near contemporaries, Asser and Aethelweard mention him, but the only early record of his appointment as archbishop in 890 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Garmonsway transl 1984) is in Text F (Canterbury); it was later interpolated into Text A (Winchester) and in Latin into Text E (Peterborough). His death is recorded by an interpolation into Text A alone, under the year 923. Apart from that the *Chronicle* does not refer to him at all, not even reporting his journey(s) to Rome. It is a remarkable silence. Simeon of Durham makes two contradictory statements about Plegmund's accession. One, attributing it to 889, is formal but is near the right year. The other is under 884; this may be significant in two ways. Firstly, it may mark the year in which Plegmund moved south to Alfred's court, even though he had not yet become archbishop. Secondly, for the years up to 887 Simeon was drawing largely from northern annals which are now lost (Whitelock ed 1979, 127), and the amplified description may reflect a genuine northern appreciation of the archbishop rather than an enthusiastic expansion of Asser. Gervase of Canterbury, writing towards the end of the twelfth century, provides more detail although even he does not say much. Of other later writers, William of Malmesbury and Florence of Worcester give him little more than passing mention. All this is surprising given the role Plegmund must have played to earn swift promotion from hermit to archbishop. The purpose of this paper is to consider why such an eminent and apparently competent archbishop has received so little acknowledgement from his contemporaries and from later generations. Even among modern historians Dumville gives him limited mention as the king's executive (1992, 193), and only Brooks gives him due credit in comparison with more famous successors such as Dunstan (1984, 152–4, 170–4, 210–14).

### **Known facts of Plegmund's life**

What we know of Plegmund's career can be summarised briefly:

1. Asser stated that he was 'a Mercian by birth and an estimable man richly endowed with learning'. Gervase of Canterbury added that he had been a hermit in Cheshire, or possibly in Chester itself, before coming to Alfred's service. I return below to the inconsistency of this assertion when matched with other evidence. We do not know when that service started but Keynes and Lapidge suggest that it was in the early 880s (transl 1983, 26).
2. He was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 890, possibly as second choice after Grimbold of St Bertin had declined the post (Grierson 1940, 529–61) and without having previously held any known post in the church.
3. Shortly after his consecration he corresponded with Pope Formosus in what appears to have been a wide-ranging report on the English church. His appointment was well received by Fulk of Rheims, presumably speaking for the Frankish church establishment.
4. At some time in his reign he went to Rome; the date or dates on which he went are considered below.
5. He seems to have been a supporter of the cult of the Virgin Mary, for in 908 he dedicated a tower at Winchester in her honour. He had also earlier been a witness to the foundation charter of the New Minster, possibly doing so in the absence of a bishop (Brooks 1984, 214).
6. If we can rely upon the terms of the letter from Pope Formosus, he had been urging an assault on paganism and irregularities in the English church.
7. He was said by Gervase to have crowned Edward, Alfred's son and successor, at Kingston-upon-Thames in June 900. Gervase nevertheless expressed uncertainty about this being the case.
8. He appears as witness to a number of charters and issued coins as archbishop, being the last to do so.
9. In his will King Alfred left 100 mancuses to 'the archbishop'. According to Whitelock (ed 1979, 534) the will was written between the succession of Bishop Werferth and the death of Archbishop Ethelred. Since the will was apparently not altered on Ethelred's death, it is probable that the king's intention was to make an impersonal gift to the incumbent at the time rather than a personal gift to a particular man.
10. The date of his death is uncertain but 923 is commonly accepted. If Gervase is right in saying that he had been a hermit 'for many years' before joining Alfred and as he also described him as old when he died, Plegmund may well have lived to over seventy.

What was Plegmund's background? Asser (Appendix, 4) tells us that he was a Mercian by birth but says no more either about his birthplace or earlier residence. Aethelweard, Florence of Worcester, Simeon of Durham and William of Malmesbury (Appendix, 1, 7, 14a, 15a respectively) neither confirm nor deny his Mercian birth. It is Gervase of Canterbury (Appendix, 10a) who states that he spent many years as a hermit at an island in Cheshire. There is no obvious reason to doubt what he says, although he does give the place name as *Plegemundesham*. The connection with Plemstall through St Plegmund's Well (Matthews 1996, 2–4) is admittedly late (the earliest reference dating to 1302) but that village must remain the principal contender, for it derives from the first element of his name plus a variant of *stowe* = holy place (Dodgson 1972, 135–6). In addition, the dedication of the church there to St Peter is commonly an early one, and there may be some significance in the fact that it belonged to St John's, Chester, itself an early foundation. A possible alternative site is the village of Ince, the name deriving from the Welsh for 'island', a geographical feature stressed by Gervase and as visible there as at Plemstall, but there is no other reason to associate Ince with early religious settlement. Asser also described Plegmund as 'an estimable man richly endowed with learning', and this judgement appears to be supported by the approving terms adopted by Fulk of Rheims in writing to Plegmund himself and King Alfred (Appendix, 6). Florence copied this and William accepted it by implication by the break in his list between Plegmund and his mediocre predecessors as archbishop (Appendix, 7, 15a). Gervase followed suit but added the other details given above.

Leaving aside the location, an occupation of hermit seems unlikely for several reasons. The first is that Asser, in a rather muddled passage (Appendix, 4), refers to Alfred's gifts of land to both Plegmund and Werferth, already Bishop of Worcester when called to the king's service. Asser says that Alfred summoned four distinguished Mercian clerics and showered them with honours and entitlements in Wessex, not counting those which Archbishop Plegmund and Bishop Werferth already possessed in Mercia. Alfred undoubtedly did give them land: in 889 Alfred and Ealdorman Aethelred gave Werferth 'a court in London', a city the king had restored in 886 (Gelling ed 1979, no 212), and although we have no record of a similar gift to Plegmund there could have been a matching 'golden hello' for him. Later, in a grant of 898x899, he gave to Plegmund and Werferth one *iugerum* each, again in London, at Queenhithe. However, although it is certain that Werferth owned land both before and after joining Alfred's court (Hart ed 1975, no 51; Finberg ed 1961, nos 84, 85, 87, 88, 89, 90), we have no other record of Plegmund's ownership and no evidence that Werferth gained any of his other possessions from Alfred. The inadequacy of the charter evidence prevents us from telling whether Asser exaggerated the scale of the gifts or whether numerous others were made. Alfred could have made gifts in Mercia from the early 880s onwards as his influence there grew.

If Asser was exaggerating, Plegmund could well have been landless whilst in Mercia, but there need be no real discrepancy between his remarks and those of Gervase, for a hermit, secular or monkish, could still have owned land. Whilst this might contravene vows of poverty, charter evidence demonstrates that it was still a fact. For example, in 948 King Eadred sold land in Dorset to 'the religious lady Alfhriht' and a little later, in 955, some in Somerset to AElfgiht, a nun of Wilton (Finberg ed 1964, nos 593 and 469). Plegmund

may therefore have received land from Alfred before 890, and we must bear in mind that there is no evidence that he had taken monastic or any other vows of poverty.

Brooks has demonstrated the extent of the archbishop's influence in the improvement in the standard of basic literacy and calligraphy in Canterbury. This calls for skill in practical education and administrative capacity, neither of which are likely attainments for a man who had spent many years as an isolated hermit on an island. They are of course important skills for a reforming archbishop.

A third indication of Plegmund's background is the terms in which Fulk and Formosus referred to him on or after his appointment (Appendix, 6b, 8). The pope exhorted the English bishops to follow Plegmund's lead and root out heresy and lax living and convert the 'pagans'. If we are right in assuming that the papal letter was written in response to one notifying him of Plegmund's appointment, it can only refer to missionary activity that he had undertaken before that appointment. We do not know what that missionary activity amounted to. In her translation of Fulk's letter Whitelock (ed 1979, no 225; Appendix, 6a) had him congratulate Plegmund upon his 'good exertions', a phrase which suggests physical activity. The Latin is *bonis eius studiis*, which, following Latham (1965), implies more of a theoretical or literary role, that of a propagandist rather than a missionary in the field. Wherever its precise location, an island in Cheshire would have been within the rump of Mercia left after the expulsion of Burgred by the Danes (Higham 1993, 104–7), and Plegmund may have been urging missionary effort from there before becoming archbishop; indeed, his zeal may have led to his promotion. It is hard to reconcile this with Gervase's picture of the scholarly recluse.

At this point we must stop to consider what Gervase meant. By his time the distinction between an anchorite and a hermit had hardened. It was summarised tersely by Gerald of Wales in a letter to Stephen Langton: 'Hermits wandering around on their own .... and anchorites shut up in seclusion' (Wharton 1691, 435). That distinction may well not have held in the ninth century. We do not know how carefully Gervase chose his words but he does not say that Plegmund was a hermit, which by his time was a term that had acquired a certain status, but that he lived an eremitical life. This could mean no more than that he kept an austere life style of the kind commonly described in medieval saints' lives, beginning with Eddius' description of the austerities of his otherwise worldly hero, Wilfrid (Colgrave ed 1985, 25, 45). Whilst not being an anchorite it is quite possible that Plegmund did spend some time in retreat, but all later evidence indicates that he was a scholar, a translator, and as suggested above, a preacher of reform. Together, these require a library, a scriptorium and an established base from which his views could be made known more widely, not only to Alfred's court but beyond, to the empire and Rome. An eremitical life on an island in the Mersey marshes is unlikely to provide any of them and we must conclude that the retreat, if it existed at all, was either short-lived or else it was periodic over a longer span. The most likely explanation remains that Gervase, knowing little or nothing about his subject's life before his appearance in the 880s, either created a likely explanation to account for the silence, or exaggerated a tradition that he had received; if oral it would by that time be unreliable, and if written, it is now lost. Altogether, his picture does not match that of Asser's land-holding cleric or the papal and

Frankish views of him. It does seem most likely that Plegmund was not a reclusive anchorite but a priest in some ecclesiastical centre, almost certainly in Chester or very close to it, given to occasional periods of retreat and contemplation. This fits better with his rapid promotion to Canterbury, for a saintly, perhaps unworldly, anchorite would be an unlikely choice for such a demanding and critical post.

If Plegmund had been active in the conversion of the pagans, or an advocate of it, it is surprising that the fact has not been recorded elsewhere. By contrast, the policy of another of Alfred's circle is revealed by the charters. As Bishop of Worcester, Werferth clearly looked after the interests of his diocese. He was an active land manager, as a number of examples will show. In 872 he raised '200 mancuses of gold' to pay off the Danes by granting a long lease at Nuthurst; no doubt that was a blow but better than a forced sale. In 875 he granted King Ceolwulf a lease at Daylesford in an instrument which also freed the diocese from 'the obligation of feeding the king's horses and those who lead them'. In 896 he fought hard to reverse encroachments upon his land at Woodchester (Finberg ed 1961, nos 51, 82 and 85). As a last example, in about 903 he attempted unsuccessfully to recover land at Sodbury let on terms that one of the occupying family would take priestly orders when none was willing to do so. Ealdorman Aethelred imposed a compromise (Finberg ed 1961, no 89). This shows a degree of diocesan activity that Plegmund was not in a position to match. If Werferth was such a capable administrator and a fine scholar, or at least translator, he might have been a candidate for the archbishopric, but at that date episcopal translation was not the custom. In that respect, Plegmund had the advantage.

### **The papal background**

In trying to understand the poor press that Plegmund has received, we need to look not only at England but at Rome, for the turbulence of papal politics and the rise, humiliation, re-instatement and ultimate rejection of Pope Formosus had a profound influence upon the ability of an English archbishop to govern. In the following summary I have relied heavily upon Llewellyn (1971), Mann (1925) and Hefele (1911).

Pope Formosus had been involved in missionary activity, having headed the Bulgarian mission and sought its archbishopric for himself; this is important in assessing the correspondence between Canterbury and Rome in the early 890s. He had played a major and divisive role in papal politics before finally becoming pope in 891, but for all that his interest in missionary activity in England was probably genuine. He died in April 896 and his successor, Stephen VII, was of the opposing faction. The result was a macabre trial in which Formosus' exhumed body, propped in a chair, was accused and condemned. In 898 the swing was reversed and the more judicious Pope John IX and his successors upheld Formosus' reputation, finally holding a synod in Rome in February or March 898 when the condemnation was annulled. That remained the position through the brief reigns of Benedict IV and Leo V but was ended when Sergius III was elected in January 904. So strong was his reaction that he even dated his reign from the disputed election of late 897 when he had lost to John IX. Almost immediately Formosus was again disgraced by the decisions of another synod, though later the constraints of Roman politics forced a more accommodating stance.

The result of these gyrations was that from the death of Formosus in 896 until his return from Rome in 908/9, Plegmund was intermittently uncertain of his authority. He had received his *pallium*, by whatever means, from a pope who was ultimately degraded, and for much of the time there must have been considerable doubt about the validity of his own ordinations. This leads us to the curious story appearing first in Dunstan's letter (Appendix, 5) that Plegmund and King Edward were rebuked by Formosus for leaving Wessex without a bishop for seven years and that this was immediately remedied by the ordination of five bishops in one day. This story was uncritically accepted by William of Malmesbury's time and firmly dated by him in the *Gesta Regum* (Appendix, 15b) to 904, although in a marginal note to his *Gesta Pontificum* (Appendix, 15a) it is dated to 909. This may be the result of confusion with his journey to Rome, attributed by Aethelweard (Appendix, 1) to 908.

The story is plainly wrong as it stands, although how far it is a misunderstanding rather than a deliberate fabrication is arguable. Formosus could not have written to King Edward in 904, for by that time he had been dead for eight years. Likewise there is no seven-year gap in the sequence of West Saxon bishops. However, Lamb regarded the letter as genuine in part, including the visit to receive the *pallium*:

While it records factual matters concerning Plegmund's visit to Rome and after his return, the consecration of seven bishops on the same day, and their dioceses, the remainder is of doubtful validity and must be regarded as spurious. (1971, 180)

Brooks (1984, 212) is more dismissive, describing the whole story as a fabrication. Nevertheless, although Dunstan grasped the wrong end of the stick, the story may not be a complete fabrication; behind it there is probably a stick to be grasped. That something dramatic happened is suggested by the terms in which Simeon of Durham referred to the episode two centuries later in relation to the assembly of 1107:

There was certainly no one at that time who remembered so many pastors having been elected and ordained together in England in former days, except in the time of Edward the Elder, when Archbishop Plegmund had ordained in one day seven bishops to seven churches. (Stevenson ed 1987, 173; Appendix, 14c)

It would seem that something had happened in Edward's reign which was of sufficient importance to remain in the common ecclesiastical memory two centuries later, since the reference seems to be more than a purely literary embellishment. Whatever the truth of the story, and whether he was right or not, Formosus seems to have believed that there were gaps in the episcopal succession in at least some areas for he dwelled upon it in his letter to the English bishops.

Any attempt to make sense of the story must rest upon speculation, but with that caveat I offer the following explanation. Formosus' initial disgrace had not lasted long and his rehabilitation by Theodore II must have been known in England by the spring of 898. The later synod under John IX reinforced that, and Archbishop Aethelbald of York could accept consecration from Plegmund with a clear conscience. John's successors maintained the

*status quo*, but by the spring of 904 came the news that once more ordinations dependent upon Formosus were at risk. There was no break in the sequence of West Saxon bishops but everyone consecrated by Plegmund could be regarded as improperly appointed. Can we speculate that there was not, as was later thought, a mass ordination but instead a mass re-confirmation following some correspondence with Rome, conducted sometime between 904 and 908? William of Malmesbury implied in his *Gesta Regum* (Appendix, 15b) that there was a papal legation, but if that was the case there is no other surviving record. In connection with that, Plegmund, either on his own or the king's initiative, or in response to a demand from Rome, had to go to Rome himself to come to terms with the new regime. That may have been the price demanded for the proposed earlier recognition. He left in 908, possibly later in the year, and returned in 909 with the news that settlement had been reached and that existing appointments were finally safe. The interval between Formosus' trial and the proposed settlement of 904 was nearly eight years. That is not so different from the seven-year period of uncertainty when the West Saxons were said to be without a bishop.

This reconstruction of events is obviously speculative but not unreasonable, for Sergius had not only to overcome opposition in Rome but obtain support — and money — from elsewhere in the western church. We must remember that Aethelweard gives the taking of alms as the reason for the visit, whilst Gervase dwelt upon the purchase of the relics of St Blaise (Appendix, 10a). Both these transactions indicate the establishment of normal relations. It must have been all very confusing at the time; Dunstan can hardly be blamed if more than half a century later he passed on such a garbled account.

### **The English background**

We can now turn to consider the domestic English context within which Plegmund had to operate. The obvious local source for information, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, all but ignores him, as indeed it also ignores the other royal reformers, noting only the death of Grimbold. Nor is there any nearly contemporary *Life*. This takes us straight to the most obvious feature of his career: Plegmund was a Mercian, brought in from outside to do the king's will and rapidly rewarded and promoted for doing so. Asser tells us that he had been well rewarded with lands even before he was made archbishop. We may with hindsight accept William of Malmesbury's verdict upon his predecessors as a sub-standard group and may believe that there was no one within the existing Wessex church worthy of promotion, but neither opinion would necessarily have been accepted by any of them at the time. There must have been other contenders for the see, in their own eyes wrongly passed over. That would not have made Plegmund popular nor would it have strengthened his position. The statement in the Latin interpolations into the *Chronicle* — that Plegmund was elected or chosen by God and all the people — is unusual, but we cannot assume from it that he was a popular choice. The words must reflect his formal acceptance by an assembly of notables; that is itself significant, but anything more enthusiastic would be contradicted by the Anglo-Saxon text A, which refers to acceptance by his saints (*halechen*). When later the *Chronicle* refers to other archbishops, the appointment is given simply as the king's will: Wulfhelm simply 'became archbishop of Canterbury' and Dunstan 'succeeded to the archbishopric'. The interpolations do suggest that Alfred insisted upon a formal show of obedience to his new archbishop to strengthen his position.

Formosus' letter to the bishops of England (891x896) asserting the primacy of the see of Canterbury must be read in this context and also in the context of Alfred's own grip on the throne. We see the king through Victorian eyes as the noble predecessor of Prince Albert, beloved of all and the embodiment of all the virtues. This is the picture that Asser has given us — a piece of secular hagiography if ever there was one — but is it a true picture?

Alfred can never have expected to be king, and events early in his life must have taught him how fragile the reins of government could be. In 856 on his return from Rome with his father, Aethelwulf, there had been a conspiracy to unseat the king, only resolved by a compromise which reduced his power. That threat came from within the ruling family, as did the later opposition to Edward's accession when he was challenged by Ethelwold. In the initial campaigns against the Danes, when Alfred was at the lowest point of his career, there was apparently little loyalty shown by many of his subjects, who recognised what appeared to be a *fait accompli* and made peace (but see Davis 1971, 170–2). Alfred must have known that he was fighting for his survival all the time: obedience and conformity to his will were the tests for his subjects to pass, and even when his position seemed assured there was always the danger of a reverse. For all his intellectual and cultural interests, Alfred was a warrior king and ultimately everything was subordinate to that.

Formosus' letter has been given less than its full due as a measure of Plegmund's importance. It was later used to demonstrate the superiority of Canterbury over York — hence its survival — and seems to have been considered only in relation to that controversy. Partly for that reason it has been seen as a forgery, although a forger could have done a better job: the wording is adequate for that purpose, but a little more invention could have invoked a better known archbishop and a more respectable pope. Indeed, could it be that its relationship to a little known archbishop and a disgraced pope points to the basic authenticity of the text? To understand its original purpose we must consider it in the light of the difficulties facing Plegmund when he became archbishop. If we read it simply in the context of Plegmund as Alfred's servant invoking papal help in seeking to impose control over the English church and point it in the way of reform and missionary activity, there is little need to regard any part as a forgery — however useful its vague terms might later have proved in a different cause. It is cast in very similar terms to the earlier and authentic letter from John VIII to Ethelred in which the pope urged the authority of Canterbury. All that is added of substance is the name of the archbishop. Alfred had to establish a grip on the kingdom; his archbishop had to establish a grip on the church.

### **Gervase's description**

Gervase clearly knew very little about his subject: his sources are considered in Stubbs' *Preface* (Appendix, 11) but they contained little about this particular archbishop. The reference in his *Gesta Regum* does no more than confirm Plegmund's role as Alfred's assistant but in the *Actus Pontificum* (Appendix, 10a) he gives three facts apart from the description of Plegmund's life in Mercia. The first is a description of a journey to Rome undertaken before 896. The second is his understanding that the archbishop crowned Edward at Kingston in 901. The third is an account of a second journey to Rome ostensibly to buy the relics of St Blaise for Christ Church Canterbury.



### *The visits to Rome*

Little though this is, we have to challenge the first of these events. Did Plegmund go to Rome before 896 to obtain his *pallium* from Pope Formosus? Gervase went out of his way to emphasise that Plegmund did so and that he was confirmed in metropolitan authority by him. Was he right in saying this? In the *Actus*, Gervase uses either a conventional wording, a variant of '*et a Johanne Papa pallium suscepit*' or he gives specific detail to describe the journey or make clear that it was made. Unfortunately, he was not always correct: Sigeric, for example, most certainly went in 990, but Gervase gave him only the conventional wording '*et suscepit pallium a papa Johanne*'. If he can be as misleading as that it is impossible to rely upon his wording as to whether a journey was made or not, without other evidence.

Given the information he had, Gervase would not have mistaken the name of the pope. He then linked Plegmund's return with the episode of the mass episcopal consecration, specifically done with the consent of King Edward. Either Plegmund was remarkably slow in carrying out the papal order or Gervase was confused. If he was confused, is there any reason to suppose that the 890 visit was made at all as opposed to an exchange of letters? In this I have to follow Brooks, who implicitly rejected the visit (1984, 153) and disagree with Lamb (1971, 177) who argued for an early journey to Rome to collect the *pallium* in person:

Of Plegmund's consecration no record is to be found in the *Chronicle*. This may be because neither the aged Wulfhere, Archbishop of York, nor Plegmund's com-provincials were able to consecrate him owing to the unsettled conditions prevailing at the time. It seems most probable that since Plegmund intended to visit Rome to receive the pallium he delayed his consecration until Pope Formosus was able to consecrate him, after which the Pope bestowed upon him the *pallium*.

It is perhaps unwise to base too much upon the *Chronicle*'s silence because, as we have seen, it virtually ignored Plegmund's entire career; nevertheless it is surprising that if a Roman visit were made that it was not mentioned.

Archiepiscopal visits to Rome to collect the *pallium* in person did not become customary until later in the tenth century. The last archbishop of Canterbury to go before Plegmund had been Wulfred in 812, and he went some time after consecration for quite a different reason. None of Plegmund's immediate predecessors had gone, as far as we know, and it is hard to understand why an archbishop returning from Rome with the *pallium* and the full weight of papal approval would have needed the support of a letter such as that written by Formosus. Surely the letter, which is designed to proclaim and support Plegmund's authority, is evidence that the archbishop did not go to Rome in 890 and therefore needed some other form of support. The messenger who brought it probably brought the *pallium* as well in the traditional way. It is possible that Plegmund went to Rome later than 890 but before 908, but it is again hard to see why he should have needed to do so, especially given the turbulence in the papacy after the disgrace of Formosus. It may indeed be Plegmund's need to establish his own position once those difficult years were over that helped to form a precedent for later journeys.

If Plegmund had gone it is all the more remarkable that the *Chronicle* did not record the fact. Around that time, annual visits were regularly noted and the names of the principals were given. In 887 the party was headed by Ealdorman Aethelhelm; in 888 by Ealdorman Beocca and Queen Aethelswith. In 889, no major figure went, and the two couriers went on their own. In 890 Abbot Beornhelm was the principal. The record then stops, although such evidence as there is suggests that the journeys did not. We do not know why later journeys were not recorded, but it may be significant that at precisely that time there was a change of scribe for Text A following the initial creation and distribution of the text (Garmonsway transl 1984, xxxi). If the end of that first phase reflects a change in the authorship of the record it may be that in the new view such journeys were no longer considered important enough for entry. It may also be that it was the novelty of the regular sequence that drew attention and once the annual visit became normal whoever compiled the *Chronicle* lost interest. It would nevertheless be expected that the journey of a new archbishop would have been of sufficient note to be recorded either along with that of the abbot in 890 or on his own in 891. It seems more likely that Plegmund followed tradition by not going in person, but instead sending messengers with news of his appointment and a report on the state of the church, perhaps with some form of profession. The messengers would then return with the surviving papal letter.

Gervase's reference to the second visit probably relates to that of 908 recorded by Aethelweard. Having already sent Plegmund to Rome for his *pallium*, Gervase had no real idea what the second visit was about. Clearly it was not just to buy relics, although that was a normal secondary purpose. Aethelweard's explanation is also true but not the whole explanation: Peter's Pence could be carried by more ordinary couriers, as they were in 889, and did not require the presence of a busy archbishop. There must have been some other reason, and that is most probably the restoration of Plegmund's own authority and the relations of the English church with Rome. Gervase's assertion in the *Gesta Regum* that Plegmund was sent by the king reinforces this. It is not too cynical to say that the archbishop's overtures would be considerably enhanced by his bringing the gift of the alms of the West Saxons. Paradoxically, Gervase was on the right lines: Plegmund did ultimately have to see the pope in person, but later, and another pope.

### *Edward's coronation*

In the *Gesta Regum* Gervase stated without reservation that Plegmund crowned Edward at Kingston (on Thames) but in the *Actus Pontificum* (Appendix, 10a) he introduced a qualifying *ut fertur*, in a position where it is not clear whether the reservation related to the coronation itself, wherever it took place, or whether there was doubt only about the location. There is no apparent reason for the change, and it has not been a matter for comment; Stenton for example makes no reference to a coronation at all (1971, 319–20). Was Gervase muddled? Kingston was a West Saxon centre, there having been a council there in 838 (Stenton 1971, 234, n 2), and according to Adelard of Ghent, Athelstan was later crowned there on 4 September 925 (Brooks 1984, 215). Did Gervase simply muddle the two kings? That is a possible explanation. Another is that the change is purely stylistic, but whilst that is possible, it is not entirely satisfying. We cannot completely ignore the possibility that, for whatever motive, in one version Gervase intended to cast doubt upon

Plegmund's role in the ceremony and we may speculate upon this in the context of the changed relationship between the archbishop and the new king.

Plegmund had been Alfred's choice, but for Edward he was a long-standing incumbent. The two men had quite different interests: Plegmund, chosen by Alfred for his scholarly attainments, was a marked contrast to the new king, who in the general view of the later writers was inferior to his father in literary skills (and presumably less interested) but greater in regal power. A new king involves a shifting of allegiances and advisers. It is possible that Edward had doubts about the propriety of being crowned by an archbishop who derived his authority from a pope who had been disgraced. If the English bishops could be uncertain of their legitimacy, so might the king have doubts, mirroring the refusal of William the Conqueror, a century and a half later, to be crowned by Stigand. Unfortunately the new Archbishop of York, Aethelbald, was no better qualified, having almost certainly been consecrated by Plegmund. Gervase's cautious words may contain the echoes of a royal concern which Plegmund overcame but only after an argument which left a faint memory.

After many years as archbishop Plegmund may have patronised the new king, who would understandably want to choose his own advisers, and it is likely that there was resentment of Plegmund's activities elsewhere and earlier, even during the reign of Alfred, from his own contemporaries. There must have been others who saw themselves as fit candidates for the archiepiscopal see and who felt wrongly passed over in favour of a Mercian outsider who was not one of their own. All this may have put an unsuccessful pressure upon Edward to be crowned by someone else, leaving another argument of which Gervase was only dimly aware. At first glance the charter evidence suggests that the archbishop was close to the king, but many of the royal transactions which he was supposed to have witnessed cannot be trusted: they are later forgeries. Plegmund failed to witness a number of authentic charters dating to the early 900s relating more to laymen, but towards the end of the decade he does appear more often, in charters relating to ecclesiastical grants. This might indicate that he was not close to the king on his accession, and, to build straw upon straw, that there had been some question over the coronation.

### **The court circle**

Asser refers to the imported Mercian and continental scholars in terms which make us accept their presence as normal, but to contemporaries the appointments would seem quite different. Alfred was unsure of the support he would get from the West Saxon church in his programme of reform; all the indications are that the hierarchy had become slack, complacent and content with low educational standards. He might also have remembered that an earlier bishop of Sherbourne, Eahlstan, had been among the leaders in the conspiracy against his father on his return from Italy. Security and reform were both ensured by the employment of outsiders who were not only more competent but whose loyalty would be to him and not to a network of West Saxon relationships. The two needs went together, and their employment reveals Alfred's potential weakness (Campbell 1986).

One further question is whether these outsiders themselves formed a cohesive group. Grimbold seems to have appreciated Plegmund's qualities, for he apparently recommended

the latter for Canterbury after refusing the post himself. If this is true, it incidentally demonstrates that there were other candidates, or those who saw themselves as candidates, for if Alfred had been reserving the post for Grimbald or Plegmund, no recommendation would have been needed. We know nothing of the feelings of John, Werferth, or the other Mercians, but Asser reveals much by his silence. Despite all that Plegmund did, Asser did not refer to him except in the brief passage in chapter 77 of the *Life*. Admittedly, Asser wrote early in Plegmund's reign but there must still have been much to report for the years up to 893. He may have intended his description of the archbishop to be less appreciative than it seems, for the Latin adopts what may be an ironic *scilicet*, which could thereby impart an edge to the comment, suggesting that Asser regarded Plegmund as not as learned as others thought, anyway not as skilled as Asser himself (Matthews 1996, 7). However, the force of this argument is diminished by the use of *scilicet* in the descriptions of both Werferth and John the Old Saxon; respectively:

*'At tunc Deus.... transmisit Werfrithum, scilicet Wigernensis ecclesiae episcopum, in divina scilicet scriptura bene eruditum...'* (ch 77)

and

*'Johannem, presbytum et monachum, scilicet Eald-Saxonum genere'* (ch 94)

If the intention is ironic it is hard to believe that Asser would be so critical of all his peers. At this point we have to go behind the printed text, for Stevenson in commenting upon the manuscript sources accepted the superior accuracy of the transcription by Florence of Worcester (Stevenson ed 1904, introduction). He made a distinction in print between the Florence text and the variants, putting the former in Roman as opposed to italic type. The only *scilicet* originating from Florence was that used for Plegmund; all the others are from variants and potentially less reliable. This could reinforce Matthews' suggestion, as that could be the only use of the word that Asser intended.

Whatever the significance of *scilicet*, Asser's description of the archbishop has been variously rendered. Keynes' and Lapidge's more glowing version is reproduced in the Appendix as are also the less robust translations by Giles and Joseph Stevenson.

Was there simply a degree of academic rivalry between the two men or did Asser resent Plegmund's success in the constant battle for the king's favour? The *Life* shows that he saw himself as a key figure and he also may have had higher ambitions, but other evidence indicates that he may not have been as important or as capable as he thought or would have liked to be. In describing Asser's writing, Keynes and Lapidge could just as well have been describing the whole man:

The list of works known or cited by Asser is not suggestive of exceptional learning by any means. The quality of his Latin prose supports a similar conclusion: it shows Asser as a man with considerable stylistic pretensions but without any mastery of prose style. (transl 1983, 54)

In the introduction to his edition of the *Life* Stevenson (ed 1904, lxviii) pointed to a revealing tradition:

A later writer, William of Malmesbury, tells us that Asser explained to the King the difficult passages in Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and that the King made his translation from this simplified version (*Gesta Regum* ch 122). The King in his preface to this version stated that he had rendered the work sometimes word for word, sometimes by paraphrase, making no mention of Asser's assistance. Malmesbury's account of Asser's share in the work agrees curiously with the statements in the *Life* that the author read and interpreted to the King. What grounds Malmesbury may have had for his statement it is now impossible to say. He was acquainted with the King's Handbook but we know too little of the nature of the contents of this work to confirm or deny the possibility of its containing information concerning Asser's share in the learned labours of Alfred.

Asser may well have deliberately inflated his importance relative to others, according to the audience for whom he was writing. Whatever the relationship between the two men — and the others — we cannot assume that Alfred's chief advisers were always in harmony; rather that rivalry and jockeying for position in a competitive court were the norm.

With all his failings our view of Alfred's court inevitably centres on Asser: he wrote the record and, although we can modify and interpret it, we start with his perspective. He tells us little about the relationship between Plegmund and the other outsiders, although a little may be added from other sources. John 'the Old Saxon' joined Asser and Plegmund in the translation of the *Pastoral Care* and may have contributed to other works, as well as probably being the same John who became Abbot of Athelney, an important appointment for Alfred (but see Bateley 1966, 2). We have considered Werferth in an administrative context and his career may have been longer than suggested here (Sturdy 1995, 194 ff) but he was also a scholar, described by Asser as 'a man thoroughly learned in holy writing' (ch 77) and he has left us a translation of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (Keynes & Lapidge transl 1983, 34). To judge by the terms of his letter to Alfred, (Appendix, 9) Fulk of Rheims may have envisaged that Grimbald would become archbishop, or if not that see, would hold another of some seniority. The letter, incidentally, stresses the poor standards that Fulk believed to pervade the English church and the favour he was doing Alfred by parting with Grimbald. According to tradition, Grimbald refused that post, recommending Plegmund instead, and seems to have remained more concerned with monastic affairs, being involved in the foundation of New Minster, Winchester (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 260, also Grierson 1940 and Bateley 1966). There is also a suggestion that he proposed the creation of a 'national' chronicle on a continental model (Keynes & Lapidge transl 1983, 40). If he did, it is remarkable that the resulting narrative made no mention of the archbishop whom he had recommended. Perhaps the idea was his but editorial control lay elsewhere, for it was almost certainly started before his death in 903, which it does report (Garmonsway transl 1984, xxxi). Of the other two Mercians, Aethelstan and Werwulf, we know nothing more than the brief mention by Asser.

## Conclusion

To judge by his effect upon the Canterbury scriptorium Plegmund was both a fine scholar and teacher, a fact confirmed by Alfred himself. Whatever the actual sequence of events, he did re-establish the West Saxon church. He limited the damage of Formosus' disgrace and re-established relations with the new papal regime. He may have attempted some reform of the West Saxon monasteries, although without apparent success. Both before and after his promotion he co-operated with the king in the royal programme of moral and educational reform. He had a dramatic effect upon the standard of scholarship in Canterbury, and Alfred's comments in the Preface to the *Pastoral Care* suggest that his influence was far wider. Finally, his issue of coinage and the genuine charters which remain show that he played a normal role in public affairs. His career as archbishop lasted for thirty-three years, itself no mean achievement.

One would expect that all that activity would lead to acclaim and at least one *Life*, but instead the contemporary record is meagre and modern recognition slight. Why?

Among modern historians, Plegmund has been given less than full credit because we have been beguiled by Asser into concentrating upon the king and we discount the innate ability, and perhaps the inspiration, of his instruments. Alfred was a warrior king whose life was dominated by military necessity. It does not in any way belittle him to observe that, whilst the leadership and direction of the reforms were his, he lacked the education and the know-how to bring them about. For that he needed more than just capable executives. Asser has blinded us to that.

Why did Plegmund's achievements attract so little contemporary notice? We have to remember a general principle, that outsiders who undertake a reforming role are rarely appreciated by the society that they seek to change, and once they are gone the record closes against them. Plegmund's successors were all bishops from the West Saxon establishment; the *Chronicle* reflected the same West Saxon bias and neither had any reason to honour or remember the Mercian who had prepared the way for their later reforms. Plegmund had a poor press because of who he was, irrespective of what he did.

**Table III.1**  
Charters issued to or by Plegmund

638	1288	924	Plegmund	Byrhtraed	Authentic*
572	1627	895	Plegmund	ChristChurch	Authentic**
577	1628	898/899	Alfred	Plegmund/Werferth	Genuine basis **

\* The dates for this charter are open to question: 890, 905 and 920 have all been proposed

\*\* This is held to be an earlier and altered version of Sawyer 1288

\*\*\* This is the grant of land at Queenhithe to the archbishop, bishop and their cathedrals

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**Table III. 2**  
Analysis of royal charters

Birch	Sawyer	Date From	Parties to		Witnessed by Plegmund	Status
561	346	889	Alfred	Werferth	No	Mixed view
567	348	892	Alfred	Aethelhelm	No	Mixed view
568	356	871x899	Alfred	Malmesbury	No	Mixed view
571	349	895	Alfred	Bishop Rochester	No	Spurious
576	350	898	Alfred	Sighelm	No	Suspicious
581	355	898x899	Alfred	Deormod	No	Authentic
583	224	900	Aethelflaed	Alchelm	No	Authentic?
587	221	901	Aethelflaed	Much Wenlock	No	Authentic
588	364	901	Edward	Wihtbrord	No	Authentic?
589	363	901	Edward	Malmesbury	No	Authentic
594	359	900	Edward	Winchester	No	Authentic?
595	362	901	Edward	Awthelwulf	No	Authentic
596	360	900	Edward	New Minster	No	Unreliable
597	360	900	Edward	New Minster	No	Doubtful
598	366	901	Edward	New Minster	No	Doubtful
602	370	903	Edward	New Minster	Yes	Spurious
603	367	903	Edward	Aethelgyth	Yes	Authentic
604	374	904	Edward	St Peters, Winchester	Yes	Mixed views
605	1443	c900	Denewulf	Edward	No	Authentic
606	371	904	Edward	Aethelfrith	No	Authentic?
607	361	904	Edward	Wigferth	No	Authentic?
610	380	899x909	Edward	Asser	No	Mixed view
611	1286	904	Denewulf	Edward	Yes	Authentic
612	373	904	Edward	Denewulf	Yes	Authentic
613	372	904	Edward	Denewulf	Yes	Authentic
620	3776	909	Edward	Frithestan	Yes	Unreliable
622	385	c909	Edward	Denewulf	Yes	Authentic
623	375	909	Edward	Frithestan	Yes	Doubtful
624	378	909	Edward	St Peters, Winchester	Yes	Spurious
625	377	909	Edward	Winchester	Yes	Spurious
626	377	909	Edward	Winchester	Yes	Spurious
627	382	ND	Edward	Winchester	Yes	Spurious
628	383	ND	Edward	Winchester	Yes	Spurious
629	381	ND	Edward	Winchester	Yes	Spurious
635	379	921	Edward	Wulfgar (Minister)	Yes	Spurious or interpolated

## Appendix

### References to Plegmund and other relevant documents

1. Aethelweard's *Chronicle* s a 908 (Campbell ed 1962)

*Post triennium vero archiepiscopus Plegmund enceniavit in Vuintona urbe arduam turrim, quae noviter fuerat sita in honore genetricis Dei Mariae. Pontifex praefatus in eiusdem anni scilicet decursu pro populo Romam quin eleemosynam duxit, Eduuardo quoque pro rege.*

After a period of three years Archbishop Plegmund dedicated a very high tower in the city of Winchester. Its foundations had been laid a little before that time in honour of Mary, Mother of God. In the course of the same year the bishop just mentioned conveyed alms to Rome for the nation and also for King Edward.

2. Extract from King Alfred's will (Keynes & Lapidge transl 1983, 177)

*Insuper archiepiscopo do centum marcas, et Esne episcopo, et Werfertho episcopo, et illi de Schyborn.*

'And to the archbishop, 100 mancuses, and to Bishop Esne and to Bishop Werferth and to the Bishop of Sherbourne'.

3. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, texts A, E and F s a 890 (Garmonsway transl 1984)

Text A (interpolation) 'In this year Plegmund was chosen [as Archbishop] by God and by all his saints'.

Text F '....chosen by the whole nation to the archiepiscopal see of Canterbury'.

Text E (interpolation) *Hic Plegmundus archiepiscopus a Deo et omni populo electus est.*

'Archbishop Plegmund was elected by God and all the people'.

4. Asser *Life of Alfred*, ch 77 (Stevenson ed 1904)

*At tunc Deus quaedam solatia regiae benevolentiae tam benevolam et iustissimam querelam illius diutius non ferens, veluti quaedam luminaria, transmissit Werfrithum, scilicet Wigernensis ecclesiae episcopum..... deinde Plegmundum, mercium genere, Dorobernensis ecclesiae archiepiscopum, venerabilem scilicet virum, sapientia praeditum, Aethelstan quoque et Werwulfum, sacerdotes et capellanos, Mercios genere, eruditos. Quos quattuor Aelfred rex de Mercia ad se advocaverat, et multis honoribus et potestatibus extulit in regno Occidentalium Saxonum, exceptis his, quae Plegmundus archiepiscopus et Werfrithus episcopus in Mercia habebant*

At that point God being unable to tolerate so well intentioned a complaint any longer sent some comforts for this royal intention — certain luminaries as it were: Werferth, the bishop of Worcester ...then Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, a Mercian by birth and an estimable man richly endowed with learning; and also Aethelstan and Werwulf, both priests and chaplains, Mercians by birth and learned men. King Alfred summoned these four men to him from Mercia and showered them with many honours and entitlements in the kingdom of the West Saxons, not counting those which Archbishop Plegmund and bishop Werferth already possessed in Mercia'. (Transl Keynes & Lapidge 1983, 92–3)

Giles ed 1912, 70: 'a venerable man, and endowed with wisdom...

Stevenson ed 1865, 465: 'A venerable man, endued with wisdom'



5. Late tenth-century letter from St Dunstan (Whitelock ed 1979, no 229)

Then there followed another period after that when teachers fell off and left England because of the unbelief that then assailed it and the whole west saxon kingdom was left without a bishop for 7 years. Then Pope Formosus sent from Rome and admonished King Edward and Archbishop Plegmund to amend this and they did so with the advice of the Pope and of all the councillors of the English nation; they appointed five bishops where there were two before, one, namely Firthestan at Winchester, the second ....

6. Flodoard, 890 onwards

(a) Extract (Whitelock ed 1979, no 225)

*Pleonico archiepiscopo transmarino, congratulans bonis eius studiis, quibus eum laborare compererat pro abscidendis et extirpandis incestuosis luxuriae fomentis, supra in his litteris, quae Albrado regi scripserat, commemoratis, quae in ea gente videbantur inolevisse; sacris eum instruens et armans auctoritatibus censurae canonicae, particeps imirum piis ipsius laboribus cupiens existere.*

(Fulk wrote) to Plegmund, an archbishop across the sea, congratulating him on his good exertions, by which, he had learnt, he was working to cut off and extirpate the incestuous heats of lasciviousness, mentioned above in the letter which he had written to King Alfred, which would seem to have sprung up in that race; instructing him and arming him with the sacred authority of canonical censure, and desiring truly to be sharer in his pious labours.

(b) Report of a letter from Fulk to King Alfred, (Whitelock ed 1979, no 224)

*Albrado regi transmarino amicales litteras mittens, grates refert, quia tam bonum virum et devotum ecclesiasticisque regulis congruentem destinaverit episcopum in civitate Cantabrug nomine. Audierat enim, quod perversissimam sectam, paganis erroribus exortam et in illa gente tunc usque relictam, verbi mucrone satageret amputare. Quae secta suggere videbatur, episcopis et presbiteris subintroducitur habere mulieres, ad propinquas quoque generis sui quisque vellet accedere, insuper et sacratas Deo feminas incestare, uxorem habens concubinam simul habere. Quae omnia quam sanae fidei sint adversa, documentis manifestat evidentissimus, ex sanctorum patrum prolatis auctoritatibus.*

To Alfred, a king across the sea, he sent friendly letters, thanking him that he had appointed a man so good and devout and suitable according to the rules of the church, as bishop in the city called Canterbury. For he had heard that he was concerned to cut down with the sword of the word that most perverse opinion arisen from pagan errors, until then surviving among the people. This opinion seemed to permit bishops and priests to have women living among them, and anyone who wished, to approach kinswomen of his own stock, and moreover, to defile women consecrated to God, and, although married, to have at the same time a concubine. How contrary all these things are to sound faith he shows by most convincing example and cites in support the authority of the holy fathers.

7. Florence of Worcester (Stephenson ed 1853)

(a) s a 889

*Quo etiam anno dux Aethelwoldus et Dorubernensis archiepiscopus Aethelredus in uno mense obierunt, cui in archiepiscopatu successit Pleigmundus, literis nobiliter instructus.*

In this year too, and in the same month, died Aethelwold the ealdorman, and Aethelred, archbishop of Canterbury; the latter was succeeded in the archbishopric by Plegmund, a man of extensive literary acquirements.

(b) s a 914 In text A only

*Athelmo Wyllensi episcopo, in archiepiscopatum Dorobernensem levato, successit Wulfhelmus.*

On the promotion of Athelm, Bishop of Wells, to the archiepiscopal see of Canterbury, Wulfhelm succeeded.

8. Letter of Pope Formosus to the bishops of England (Whitelock ed 1979, no 227)

*Audito nefandos, ritus paganorum partibus in vestris repullasse, et vos tenuisse silentium, ut canes non valentes latrare, gladio separationis a corpore Dei ecclesiae vos ferire deliberavimus. Sed quia, ut nobis dilectus frater noster Pleimundus intimavit, tandem evigilastis, et semina verbi Dei olim venerabiliiter jacta in terra Anglorum, cepistis renovare, mucronem devotionis retrahentes, Dei Omnipotentis et beati Petri apostolorum principis benedictionem vobis mittimus, orantes, ut in bene ceptis perseverantium habeatis.....Nunc ergo accingimini et vigilate contra leonem, qui circuit "quaerens quem devoret" et non patiamini ulterius in regione vestra penuria pastorum Christianam fidem violare, gregem Dei vagari, dispergi, dissipari, sed cum unus obierit, alter qui idonus fuerit canonice protinus subrogetur..... nulla itaque mora sit subrogandi alium cum quilibet sacerdotum ex hac vita migraverit, sed mox ut illi qui primae sedis principatum querens inter vos ceteris episcopis praeesse dinoscitur, fratris obitus fuerit denuntiatus, facta electione canonice alter consecratus succedat. Quis autem inter vos principatum tenere debeat, quaeve sedes episcopalis ceteris praepolleat, habeatque primatum, abolitanis temporibus notissimum est. Nam ut ex scriptis beati Gregorii ejusque successorum tenemus, in Dorobernia civitate metropolim sedemque primam episcopalem constat essi regni Anglorum, cui venerabilis frater noster Pleimundus nunc praeesse dinoscitur, cuius honorem dignitatis nos nullo pacto imminui permittibus, sed ei vices apostolicas per omnia gerere mandamus. Et sicut beatus pater Gregorius primo vestrae gentes episcopo Augustino omnes Anglorum episcopos esse subjectos constituit, sic nos prenominato fratri Doroberniae sive Cantorberiae archiepiscopo, ejusque successoribus legitimis, eandem dignitatem confirmamus; mandantes et auctoritate Dei et beati Petri apostolorum principis praecipientes, ut ejus canonicis dispositionibus omnes obediant, et nullus eorum quae ei suisque successoribus apostolica auctoritate concessa sunt violator existat.*

Having heard that the abominable rites of the pagans have sprouted again in your parts, and that you kept silent "like dogs unable to bark," we have considered thrusting you from the body of the Church of God with the sword of separation. But since, as our beloved brother Plegmund has informed us, you have at length awakened, and have begun to renew the seed of the word of God once admirably sown in the land of the English, we withdraw the sword of anathema, and send to you the blessing of Almighty God and of the blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, praying that you may persevere in what has been well begun. .... Now, therefore, gird yourselves and watch against the lion who "goeth about seeking whom he may devour," and do not any longer in your country to suffer the Christian Faith to be violated, the flock of God to wander and be scattered and dispersed, for the lack of pastors; but when one dies, another who is suitable to be canonically substituted forthwith. .... And thus when any of the priests departs from this life, another ought to be substituted without delay. As soon as the death of the brother is announced to him who, bearing the rule of the chief see, is set over the rest of the bishops among you a canonical election is to be made and another to be consecrated and to succeed. And it is well known from ancient times who among you ought to hold the authority, and which episcopal see is superior to the others and holds first rank. For, as we understand from the writings of the blessed Gregory and his successors, it is agreed that the metropolis and first episcopal see of the English is in the city of Dorobernia, over which now our venerable brother Plegmund is set, the

honour of whose dignity we do not permit to be diminished on any consideration, but we order him to have charge of the apostolic duties in all things. And just as the blessed Father Gregory appointed all the bishops of the English to be subject to the first bishop to your people, Augustine, we confirm the same dignity to the aforementioned brother, Archbishop of Dorobernia or Canterbury, and to his legitimate successors; enjoining and commanding with the authority of God and of the blessed Peter, Prince of all the Apostles, that all are to obey his canonical directions, and no one is to violate those things which have been granted to him and his successors by apostolic authority....

9. Letter of Fulk of Rheims to King Alfred (883–6) (Whitelock ed 1979, no 223)

*Nostrum igitur est vobis illum canonice concedere, vestrum autem honorifice suscipere. Ea scilicet ratione atque tenore, tam ad gloriam regni vestri, quam ad honorem ecclesiae et praesulatus nostri; eum ad vos mittendum cum suis electoribus, et cum nonnullis regni vestri proceribus vel optimatibus, tam episcopis scilicet, presbyteris, diaconis, quam etiam religiosis laicis, qui nobis viva voce, in praesentia totus ecclesiae nostrae, profiteantur atque promittant eum cum digno honore se habituros, omni tempore vitae suae; necnon decreta canonica, et sanctiones ecclesiasticas, ab apostolis et apostolicis viris ecclesiae traditas, quae tunc a nobis audire et videre, et postea ab eodem suo pastore et doctore, secundum formam a nobis sibi traditam....*

Therefore it is for us to concede [Grimbald] to you canonically, but for you to receive him honourably; he is to be sent to you on conditions and terms which are both for the glory of your kingdom and for the honour of our church and episcopate, with his electors, and with some of the magnates and chief men of your kingdom, that is, both bishops, priests and deacons, and also religious laymen. They shall by word of mouth avow and promise in the presence of all our church that they will hold him in due honour all the time of his life; and also that they will observe inviolably all their days the canonical decrees and the ecclesiastical injunctions handed down by the Apostles and the Apostolic men of the church, which they can then hear and see from us, and afterwards learn from this their pastor and teacher according to the form handed on to them by us.

10. Gervase of Canterbury (Stubbs ed 1880)

(a) *Actus Pontificum* 2

*Plegmundus, vir admodum religiosus et sacris literis nobiliter instructus, qui in Cestria insula, quae dicitur ab incolis Plegemundesham, per annos plures heremiticam duxerat vitam. Hic Romam profectus a Formoso papa sacratus est, palliumque suscepit et metropolitani plenitudinem potestatis. Reversusque in Angliam, ex mandato Formosi papae et assensu regis Edwardi, destitutas vii episcoporum ecclesias per Angliam instituit, et in ecclesia Cantuariensi vii episcopos una in die consecravit. His sanctus Plegmundus pro loco et tempore concilia celebravit, sacravit episcopos, et regem Edwardum apud Kingeston, ut fertur, coronavit. Plegmundus archiepiscopus Roman profectus est, et beatum martyrem Blasium cum multa pecunia auri et argenti emit, et secum rediens Cantuariam detulit, et in ecclesia Christi collocavit. Qui cum in ecclesia Cantuariensi sedisset annis xxxiv obiit in senectute bona, et in ecclesia Christi sepultus est.*

Plegmund, a man most certainly religious and learned in sacred writings, who for many years had lived an eremitical life on an island in Chester, which the locals call Plegemundesham,. He travelled to Rome, was consecrated by Pope Formosus and received the pallium with the fullness of metropolitan authority. Having returned to England, following the orders of Pope Formosus and with the agreement of King Edward, he revived seven abandoned episcopal churches in England and on the same day consecrated seven bishops in Canterbury. This holy Plegmund summoned councils

at the proper place and time, consecrated bishops, and, so it is said, crowned King Edward at Kingston. Archbishop Plegmund went to Rome and bought the relics of St Blaise with a great deal of gold and silver money, and bringing them back with him, took them away to Canterbury, and deposited them in the church called Christ Church. When he had held sway in the church of Canterbury for 34 years, he died at a ripe old age and is buried in the Church of Christ.

(b) *Gesta Regum 2*

Ch 123

*Habebat autem in hujusmodi adjutores Plegmundum Cantuariensem archiepiscoporum et Serionem Scireburnensem episcopum et Wenefridum episcopum Wicciorum et Johannem Scottum, qui hierarchiam Dionisii de Graeco transtulit in Latinum.*

He had, however, at the same time as assistants, Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, Asser, Bishop of Sherbourne, Werferth, Bishop of Worcester, and John the Scot, who translated the Offices of Dionysius from Greek into Latin.

Ch 124

*Rex Adulfus pater Aluredi dedit ecclesiae Christi Cantuariæ, Ebbene, Deiferteseie, Mistenham, Blakeburneham, Ofneham, Plegmundham, Langeburne, Berthune, Delham, et silva de Ostrindenne, et duo prata, unum apud Scetynge et aliud juxta Tanintune.*

King Aethelwulf, father of Alfred, gave to Christ Church, Canterbury, Ebbene, Deiferteseie, Mistenham, Blakeburneham, Ofneham, Plegmundham, Langeburne, Berthune, Delham and a wood at Ostrindenne and two meadows, one at Scetynge and the other at Tanintune.\*

\* Sawyer 1968, no 323

Ch 125

*Edwardus filius Aluredi optinuit regnum et coronatus est a Plegmundo Cantuariensi archiepiscopo apud Kingestune et regnavit annis xxiii, in litterarum scientia patre inferior, sed regni potestate gloriosior, omnia regna insulae deduxerit in unum Scottos etiam et Walensis suegit.*

Edward, son of Alfred, took possession of the kingdom and was crowned by Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, at Kingston and reigned 23 years; he was less skilled in the literary arts than his father, but greater in regal power. He reduced all the kingdoms of the island to one, even bringing the Scots and Welsh under his rule.

*.... Nam in locis suspectis circa litus maris oppida erexit in quibus milites ad arcendos Danorum excursus. Urbes et oppida demolita reparavit. Idem ex mandato Formosi Papae, qui in eum sententiam dederat, eo quod in Anglia plures episcoporum sedes per annos vii vacarent, convocato concilio cui praefuit, una cum rege, Plegmundus Cantuariensis archiepiscopus instituit singulos episcopos singulis provinciis Gewissorum, id est West Saxonum, et quod olim duo haberunt in quinque divisum est. Deinde Plegmundus, Romam a rege missus, cum Cantuariam rediret, sacravit in ecclesia Christi episcopos vii. Edwardus autem obiit et in novo monasterium sepultus est.*

Thus, in critical places around the sea coast, he built strongpoints in which he based soldiers to repel Danish invasions. He repaired damaged towns and strongpoints. Then by order of Pope Formosus, who placed great trust in him, and because many episcopal seats in England had been vacant for seven years, Archbishop Plegmund presided over a council called by him jointly with the king and created one see for each province of the Gewissae, that is the West Saxons, (so that) where there had once been two, a five-fold division was made. Afterwards, Plegmund, having been sent to Rome

by the king and as soon as he returned to Canterbury, consecrated seven bishops in the church of Christ. Edward, however, died and was buried in the New Minster.

11. Stubbs' Preface to Gervase's *Actus Pontificum*

A very short notice will suffice for the *Actus Pontificum*. Gervase has the credit of being the very first person who attempted to reduce to form, and codify in order, the materials for the history of the Archiepiscopate. He had before him lists of Archbishops, carefully calculated and synchronised with the lives of Popes: he had Bede and the Chronicles, and the lives of the saints, and he had in the *Gesta Pontificum* of William of Malmesbury a sketch of what he was to undertake. With the Kentish hagiographies of Goscelin, the laborious works of Osbern and Eadmer and the records of his own time; with the numerous charters and cartularies of Christ Church, and the roll of episcopal professions of obedience, he had very satisfactory materials. And he used them fairly well, so well that his book, in spite of a few faults, has been and remains a standard authority. The results of the analysis, to which the *Actus Pontificum* has been subjected during the course of this edition, will be found noted in the margin of the volume. They show two things: how very little Gervase ventured to add to the material which he had inherited, and how very little that was valuable in this department has perished since his time.

12. From the introduction to the translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* (transl Keynes & Lapidge 1983, 126)

(a) From the prose preface:

When I recalled how knowledge of Latin had previously decayed throughout England I then began, amidst the various and multifarious afflictions of this Kingdom to translate into English the book which in Latin is called *Pastoralis*, in English, Shepherd-Book, sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense, as I learnt it from Plegmund my archbishop, and from Asser my bishop and from Grimbald my mass-priest and from John my mass-priest..... And in God's name I command that no one shall take that aestel from the book, nor the book from the church. It is not known how long there shall be such learned bishops as, thanks be to God, there are now nearly everywhere.

(b) From the verse preface:

King Alfred translated every word of me into English and sent me south and north to his scribes; he commanded them to produce more such copies from the exemplar, so that he could send them to his bishops, because some of them who at least knew Latin had need thereof.

13. John VIII to Ethelred, Archbishop of Canterbury 877–8 (Whitelock ed 1979, no 222)

*Nos namque sedis tue privilegium, quam vice beati Augustini a sancto Gregorio pro multorum salute et omnibus ordinibus tam ecclesiasticis quam secularibus custodiatur in perpetuum secundum ipsius sancti precessoris nostri Gregorii [statutum] cuius sapientie radius ecclesiam Christi per orbem diffusam irradiat, sancimus atque precimus.....Quin potius etiam regem vestrum ammonuimus, ut dignum honorem tibi pro amore Iesu Christi domini nostri impendat et omnia privilegii tui iura perpetua stabilitate et conservare ac indiminuta custodire .....*

We indeed wish to preserve for you unimpaired and beyond doubt the privilege of your see, in the manner of the blessed Augustine, sent there by St Gregory for the salvation of many and the conversion of the king, and we enact and command that it is to be observed for ever by all orders, whether ecclesiastical or lay, according to the [statute] of the same St Gregory, our predecessor, the ray of whose wisdom illuminates the Church of Christ dispersed throughout the globe ..... we have admonished your king to show due honour to you for the love of Jesus Christ the Lord, and be anxious to

preserve all the rights of your privilege in everlasting security and to keep them undiminished.

14. Simeon of Durham *History of the kings of England* (Stevenson ed 1987, 65 and 85)

(a) AD 884

*Hic temporibus fidelitur glorioseque regimine rexit ecclesiam Christi Plegmundus Archiepiscopus, qui venerandus vir sapientiae fructibus renidebat, praeditus bis binis columnis, iustitiae videlicet, prudentiae, temporantiae, fortitudinis.*

At this period Archbishop Plegmund faithfully and gloriously ruled the church of Christ; this revered man shone with the fruits of wisdom, being exulted on the four pillars, to wit, justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude.

(b) AD 889

*Anno DCCCLXXXIX ..... Etheredus Dorobernensis archiepiscopus .... obiit, cui ..... Pleigmundus successit.*

‘Ethered, Archbishop of Canterbury died, and Plegmund succeeded him’.

(c) AD 1107

Ch 187

*Nullus fuit certe tunc temporis qui meminisset retroactis temporibus tot simul electos et ordinatos in Anglia, nisi regis Eadwardi senioris tempore, quando Plegmundus archiepiscopus vii episcopos vii ecclesiis in una die ordinavit.*

There was certainly no one at that time who remembered so many pastors having been elected and ordained together in England in former days, except in the time of Edward the Elder, when Archbishop Plegmund ordained in one day seven bishops to seven churches.

15. William of Malmesbury

(a) *Gesta Pontificum* (Hamilton ed 1870)

Bk I, ch 13 (Marginal note ‘A succession of mediocre archbishops’)

*Post eum Wlfredus annis xxvii, Fegeldus mensibus tribus, Celnothus annis xl uno, Etheredus annis xviii, continuatis successionibus archiepiscopi, multa Deo et saeculo digna, ut credimus, exercuere; sed omnia vetustas obsorbuit et delevit, nichilque illorum inter nos nisi tenuis fama manet. Post Etheredum Pleimundus xxxiiii annis fuit, magister Elfredi regis, qui, ut in secundo libro Regalium Gestorum dixi vii episcopos uno die Cantuariæ ordinavit, quorum nomina et locos ibi qui volet leget. Habuitque successorem Athelmum xii annis, unum ex illis quem ecclesiæ Ellensi ordinaverat. Athelmo successit Wlfelmus xiii annis in Wellis, eidemque defuncto in Cantuaria.*

After him came Wulfred for 27 years, Feologild for three months, Ceolnoth 41 years, Ethelred 18 years, continuing the archiepiscopal succession, as we believe, they performed many things worthy of God and the world, but old age wore them down and destroyed them and they are not now held in any regard. After Ethelred, Plegmund was archbishop for 33 years; he was a teacher of King Alfred, who as I have said in the second book of the *History of the Kings*, ordained seven bishops in one day at Canterbury; anyone who wants to can read there their names and Sees. He had as successor Athelm for 12 years, one of those whom he had ordained at the church of Wells. Wulfhelm succeeded Athelm for 13 years in Wells, the latter having died in Canterbury.

Bk II ch 80 (Marginal note *s a* 909)

*Quo mortuo cessavit episcopatus Westsaxonum annis septem vi scilicet hostilitatis cogente. Postmodum vero Pleimundus archiepiscopus et rex Edwardus filius Elfredi, minis et deictis Formosi papae coacti, quinque episcopos pro duobus fecere ut sepius diximus et nunc non importune pro contexendra rerum serie repetimus (list of names)*

He being dead, the episcopacy of the West Saxons ceased for seven years through warfare. Afterwards, certainly, Archbishop Plegmund and King Edward, forced by threats and pressure from Pope Formosus, made five Bishopricks out of two as we have said, and it is not inappropriate to give their names to complete the sequence of events.

(b) *Gesta Regum* (Stephenson ed 1989)

Ch 123

*...nihil in ista vel aliis interpretationibus ex suo dicere, sed omnia a spectabilibus viris Pleimundo archiepiscopo, Asserione episcopo, Grimbaldo et Johanne presbyteris, hausisse.*

... that there was nothing of his own opinions inserted in this or his other translations; but that everything was derived from those celebrated men Pleimund Archbishop of Canterbury, Asser the bishop Grimbald and John the priests’.

Ch 129

*Anno quo a nativitate Domini transacti sunt anni nongenti quatuor, misit Papa Formosus in Angliam epistolas, quibus dabat excommunicationem et maledictionem regi Edwardo, et omnibus subjectis ejus, pro benedictione quam dederat beatus Gregorius genti Anglorum a sede sancti Petri; nam per septem annos plenos destituta fuerat episcopis omnis regio Gewisorum, id est West-Saxonum. Quo audito, congregavit rex Edwardus synodum senatorum gentis Anglorum, cui praesidebat Pleimundus archiepiscopus interpretans districta verba apostolicae legationis. Tunc rex et episcopi elegere sibi suisque salubre consilium, et, juxta vocem dominicam, “messis quidem multa, operarii autem pauci” elegerunt et constituerunt singulos episcopos provinciis Gewisorum, et quod olim duo habuerunt in quinque dividerunt. Acto concilio, archiepiscopus Romam cum honorificiis muneribus adiit, papam magna humilitate placavit, decreta regis recitavit, quod apostolico maxime placuit. Rediens ad patriam, in urbe Cantuariæ uno die septem episcopos septem ecclesiis ordinavit...*

In the year of our Lord’s nativity nine hundred and four, Pope Formosus sent letters into England, by which he denounced excommunication and malediction upon King Edward and all his subjects, instead of the benediction which St Gregory had given to the English nation from the seat of St Peter; because for seven whole years the entire district of the Gewisi, that is, of the West Saxons, had been destitute of bishops. On hearing this King Edward assembled a council of the senators of the English, over which presided Archbishop Pleimund, interpreting carefully the words of the apostolic legation. The king and the bishops chose for themselves and their followers a salutary counsel and according to our Saviour’s words “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few” [Matt ix 37] they elected and appointed one bishop to every province of the Gewisi; and that district which two had formerly possessed, they now divided into five. The council being dissolved, the Archbishop went to Rome with splendid presents, appeased the Pope with much humility and related the king’s ordinance, which gave the pontiff great satisfaction. Returning home, in one day he ordained in the city of Canterbury seven bishops to seven churches.....

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There is some confusion between the various J Steph/vensons. His translations originally appeared under J Stevenson in the Church Historians of England series but the Llanerch reprints have adopted Stephenson. I have retained the 'v' for his translations of Asser and the reprint of Simeon but followed 'ph' in references from the Llanerch reprints which are still available.

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