

V.—SYMEON'S HISTORY OF THE KINGS.

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Symeon's *History of the Kings* survives in only one manuscript, which is written in various hands and generally assigned to the end of the twelfth century. There is no need to dispute about who wrote this history which a rubric, composed some years after Symeon's death, ascribes to him, because what is called a history is in fact a mass of unedited material, most of it useless, some of it immensely valuable. Symeon was at one stage concerned with the accumulation of this mass, but he was neither the first nor the last to be so concerned, and his own original contribution is very slight. He was content for the most part to copy long passages from Asser, Florence of Worcester and others, but in so doing he did not fail to copy other material which was then available. The high-sounding title which a later scribe prefixed, cannot conceal the fact that the work which follows is in reality a collection of sources designed to form the basis of a history which Symeon, because of old age or some other reason, never wrote. His ability as a historian is revealed in his history of the church of Durham, and it will hardly be denied that if he had completed a political history, it would have held a high place in the list of mediæval histories of England; but we may be grateful for whatever chance it was that has preserved the material which he collected rather than that same material re-arranged, expanded and coloured

with the opinions of his own times. The production of a satisfactory text was never difficult, principally because there is only one manuscript and that written in hands for the most part easily legible. Twysden's edition of 1652 was followed by that in *Monumenta Historica Britannica* in the middle of the nineteenth century. Hodgson Hinde made use of his topographical knowledge in an edition published by the Surtees Society in 1868, and this in turn was followed by Arnold's edition, completed in 1885, in the Rolls Series. Arnold wrote an important introduction embodying the results of work done by Stubbs on Roger of Howden. Scholars of still more recent times have not been blind to the value of Symeon's history, but much work has yet to be done before it can be used to the full.

Few details are known about Symeon's life. He was, of course, a monk at Durham, having come there from Jarrow late in the eleventh century, but it is not known when he was born or when he died, though he cannot have lived much, if at all, after 1130. His work, to which the term "history" has been applied loosely, is in fact written in the form of a chronicle, that is to say events are recorded year by year and not in the narrative form used by Bede, who was more concerned to arrange his material by subjects than years. The earliest of the Northumbrian kings form the natural starting point to a history which was continued with breaks of varying length to 957. The entry for this year was followed by an extract from William of Malmesbury which has no connection with what goes before or with what follows, and thereafter the history carries back to 848, whence it continues to 1129. There are therefore two parallel accounts of events from 848 to 957. After Symeon's death, as one may suppose, the history was continued for a further period to 1153 by John, prior of Hexham. Even if it were not for this Hexham continuation, there is clear evidence that at some period a Hexham hand made considerable additions to the history which we now have. The first stage, therefore, in analysing

Symeon's history must be the removal of the Hexham additions. This having been achieved, there still remains a history in two parts, of which the first extends to 957 and the second from 848 to 1129. Arnold's theory was that the first of these two histories was the work of a monk of St. Cuthbert writing at Chester-le-Street in the tenth century. This writer he styled for convenience, but not altogether euphoniously, "the Cuthbertine." The material available for this writer included, for the earliest period, Bede's history and thereafter a short chronicle reaching from 731, the date at which Bede's history ends, to 802. He could find nothing after the end of this chronicle until the middle of the ninth century, when he could draw upon Asser's life of Alfred, and this he continued to do for as long as possible. At about the year 900 the nature of his work changes abruptly, and from there to 957 extends a series of brief entries mostly concerned with the Scandinavian kingdom of York. They are irregular and in some places obscure, but nevertheless they form the most important single source for English political history in the first half of the tenth century. So much for the first of these two histories. Turning to the second, Arnold explained the repetition by suggesting that Symeon wrote his own account of Alfred, based partly on Asser and partly on Florence of Worcester, intending to substitute it for that of the Cuthbertine. From 900 till 1119 almost the whole of the history is derived from Florence. The survival of the two accounts of Alfred is to be explained by supposing that Symeon left his work in an unfinished state. Obviously in a finished work two such accounts would never have been left side by side in a single work.

This brief survey based on Arnold's work shows clearly that it is only the first part of the history which is important for the Anglo-Saxon period, because the second part where it deals with that period is all derivative and not original work. Turning, therefore, exclusively to the first part, we have seen that even this is not all original work,

but contains, apart from a few unimportant quotations, material derived from three principal sources: Bede's *History*, Asser's *Life of Alfred* and an unknown Hexham hand. How much is derived from the first of these two is easily decided by direct comparison of the texts in question. Exactly how much was inserted by the Hexham hand is less easily determined. The additions by this hand, in Arnold's opinion, consisted of an account of the martyrdom of two Kentish princes put at the very beginning of the history, two passages relating to Acca and Alchmund respectively, both of whom were bishops of Hexham, and the extracts from William of Malmesbury noted above. The passage about Acca includes an account of his translation in about 1040 and a reference to one of the invasions of Malcolm Canmore, possibly that of 1079. A third episode concerns Aldred, the relic snatcher, a brother of the church of Hexham, who made valiant but unsuccessful attempts to steal a bone from one of Acca's little fingers. It is said of Aldred that as a young man he had been brought up in the church of Hexham in the days before that church was given by Thomas II, archbishop of York, to the canons who still served there in the writer's day. Thomas II held the see of York from 1108 to 1114, and in 1112 he handed over the church of Hexham, which had been reduced almost to a state of ruin, to certain canons regular. The date 1112, therefore, is a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the Acca insertion, and as a matter of fact the date can safely be put some years later than this. The writer explains that he was recording the miraculous repulse of Malcolm Canmore's invasion because, though the event was well known by common report, it was well to put it in writing before everyone forgot about it. The latest stage, therefore, in the manipulation of the manuscript is represented by the addition of certain passages betraying a Hexham influence at about the middle of the twelfth century or perhaps a little earlier.

The separation of the Hexham element can be achieved

largely by considerations of style, context and subject, but these are not altogether sure means, and the further solution of the problem suggests a question. If there existed in the second half of the tenth century a more or less consecutive history of Northumbria, is it not likely that traces of it will be found in other post-conquest historians of the north country? Stubbs seems to have been the first to show that such traces do exist. The date of Symeon's death is not known, but it may have been c. 1130. Between twenty and thirty years later a work was compiled under the name of *Historia Saxonum vel Anglorum post obitum Bedae*, and at least two copies of this work, which is more briefly known as the *Historia post Bedam*, still exist in manuscript. This work, in the opinion of Stubbs, formed the basis of the first part of Roger of Howden's history, and its growth is traced by Stubbs in the following stages:

- A. A short chronicle reaching from 731 to 802.
- B. A continuation of this by an unknown person to some date after the middle of the tenth century.
- C. The combination in a single work of "B" together with another history reaching from 848 to 1121 and derived almost entirely from Florence of Worcester.

Symeon's share in the growth of this history is not altogether clear. Arnold believed that he was responsible for combining the two chronicles (i.e. producing stage "c"), but Stubbs wrote on this point, "I dare not decide" (p. xxx RS ed. of Roger of Howden). The addition, however, of the annals from 1120 to 1129 is generally agreed to have been Symeon's work. The important point is that stage "c" was reached before these additional annals 1120-1129 existed, because the *Historia post Bedam* shows acquaintance with the combined chronicles but not with the additional annals. Therefore in this work and its offspring, Roger's history, there survives a version of that chronicle from early times to the middle of the tenth century which we have already traced in Symeon's history. The two

versions are not derived directly one from the other, but are laterally related.

The existence of this other version ought to have some bearing on the problem before us, namely the exclusion of the Hexham additions from the first part of Symeon's history. Arnold was well aware of this, and while he showed comparison of the two versions to be useful, he showed also that the method had limitations because the compiler of the *Historia post Bedam* did not merely copy but tried to reduce the two conjoined chronicles, in the words of Stubbs, "to a reasonable chronological sequence" (*op. cit.* xxxi). He abbreviated everywhere, and for this reason it cannot certainly be said that because a particular statement does not occur in the *Historia post Bedam*, that it did not occur either in the work as it came into Symeon's hands. This other version, therefore, while useful, does not help as much as could be wished. Moreover, the information about Acca in the *Historia post Bedam* s.a. 740 suggests that this work was derived from a manuscript which already had the Hexham additions in it. We must accordingly look elsewhere.

One of the most valuable of post-conquest histories has until very recently been largely unusable for the general student because it survives in only one manuscript, the Cottonian MS., Faustina B IX, and the only available editions of it are full of mistakes. The publication of a facsimile edition of this manuscript in 1936 with a long and careful analytical introduction has overcome the difficulties of access. The manuscript contains what is commonly known as the chronicle of Melrose. The main stages in the growth of this monastic chronicle have been traced by the editors as follows. The first stage was a preliminary compilation of events from other sources, beginning with the end of Bede's history and continuing to 1171. Thereafter the chronicle continues without any break to 1263, and finally there is a brief continuation which closes in 1275. The editors find no certain evidence for the

date when the first part was composed. It may have been between 1173 and 1174, but the better interpretation appears to be that the text was not written earlier than 1185. The principal source of this first part was material from the Northumbrian group represented by Symeon's history and the *Historia post Bedam*. This material includes a third version of that Northumbrian chronicle which originally ended at some date after the middle of the tenth century. The importance of this version is that it appears to lack those Hexham additions which make it so difficult to determine how much of the material in Symeon's history is older than the twelfth century. Expressed in another way the version in the chronicle of Melrose, though preserved in a later manuscript, appears nevertheless to be in an earlier form and it ought therefore to be possible to eliminate the Hexham additions from Symeon by its help with a fair degree of certainty. The achievement of this would carry the problem a stage further. All the derived material could be removed and there would remain two brief chronicles, one from 731 to 802 and the other from *c.* 900 to *c.* 950, each of them represented in at least three laterally related versions.

The next stage is to determine the authenticity of these two chronicles, to show if possible where and when they were compiled, and whether, in spite of surviving only in manuscripts of the twelfth and later centuries, they can be used as contemporary records. Traces of them are not confined to the sources already mentioned because they both appear in more or less similar form in certain texts of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. Plummer pointed out that one of the respects in which text D of this work differs from A, B and C is by the inclusion of a body of annals relating to northern affairs from 733 to 806. There can be no doubt from their contents that they are an English version of the same short chronicle which we have found in Symeon, the *Historia post Bedam* and the chronicle of Melrose. Verbal comparison is, of course, impossible, but

their contents suggest that once again the relation is collateral and not direct. The version in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, for example, mentions some points which Symeon does not and vice versa. The widespread use to which these chronicles were put by later historians serves to emphasize the importance of examining them closely and of establishing a text as free from corruption and late additions as possible. The existence of at least three Latin versions as well as one English version ought to make this latter task not altogether too difficult. Many scholars have emphasized the importance of the chronicles, but none has yet undertaken a critical and comparative examination of all the surviving versions, and until this has been done the fullest use cannot be made of the material which they contain.

Bede's history ended in 731, but he himself did not die till some four years later, and Plummer was of the opinion that the brief annals for the years 731 to 734 which are found in the earliest manuscripts of the history may have been written by Bede himself. The plan which he had adopted, a narrative history arranged in books and chapters according to subjects, was one which later writers did not follow, and indeed it could not have been followed by a scholar of much less ability than Bede. The first of the two short chronicles was beyond doubt designed to begin where Bede finished, and accordingly we find that the annals for 731 to 734 which Plummer ascribes to Bede are included in it. After 735 the chronicle reveals very little connection with that other continuation of Bede which is found in a group of later manuscripts of his history. It follows its own course, recording mainly events of Northumbrian history, at first brief and rather irregular, and gradually becoming fuller through the course of the eighth century. Among its annals are two or three references to eclipses, the actual occurrence of which can be checked by calculation, and to other natural phenomena of a kind which no chronicler would bother to record unless he was

writing at a date soon after the occurrence of the events themselves. A fact which points in a similar direction is that several events are recorded not only as to the day of the month on which they occurred, but also as to the day of the week. Such entries present an opportunity of checking the chronology, and a high degree of accuracy is apparent in this respect. The chronicle appears to be quite free from that kind of entry which betrays by its contents that it must have been written long after the event which it describes. A good example of this is found in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, text A 787, which records the arrival of viking ships on the south coast and concludes by saying that this was the first time such ships had visited England, thereby showing that the writer was looking back on a series of such visits. Nothing of this kind is to be found in the chronicle at present being discussed. Turning to the kind of material found in the chronicle, the early annals are concerned mainly with the royal and episcopal successions in the various kingdoms and bishoprics throughout England. A study of the information about the episcopal succession reveals the remarkable fact that, excepting one detail about York and the demonstrably accidental omission of Whithorn, the annals from 731 to 745 contain a list of the deaths and consecrations of the bishops in nearly all the English sees during that period. The chronicle contains in addition a list of the first nine archbishops of Canterbury, as well as notices of three English bishops in the Irish see of Mayo. The eighth century was the great period of Northumbrian missionary activity on the continent, but it is little less than remarkable to find a series of English bishops holding an Irish see at this time. This emphasis on the episcopal succession may not be without importance in considering the growth of historical writing in England. Genealogies and lists of kings and other notable people seem to be amongst the earliest recorded history, and such lists continued to be kept at a time when other records were not. The earliest of these lists which

now survives is that contained in the British Museum MS. Vespasian B VI. Internal evidence demonstrates that this list was originally compiled in about 812 and probably at Lichfield. Additions have been made to these lists at various times, but the entries in the original hand suggest that for most of the sees bishops consecrated shortly before or after 805 occupy the last place in the original hand. This may be significant when it is considered that Symeon's version of the chronicle ends in 802 and the Anglo-Saxon chronicle's version in 806. The bulk of the remaining material concerns Northumbrian history. There are a few entries which give important information on the relations between English, Britons, Picts and Scots in the lands south of Forth and Clyde. Entries which show contact with Ireland have already been mentioned. Another topic on which there is evidence is the state of monasticism in Northumbria. No less than eight entries refer to kings, queens and lay officials who gave up their positions and became monks or clerks. The Northumbrian nobility was no fit source of recruitment for the monasteries if the traditions of Bede and his age were to be maintained. These entries form a valuable link between the warnings of Bede about the state of Northumbrian monasticism in his letter to Egbert and the lament of Alfred over the decay of learning throughout England and especially in the north. They show, too, why Northumbria fell such an easy prey to the vikings. The chronicle records in addition to Northumbrian affairs a series of events in Carolingian history between 775 and 802, and in this the hand of Alcuin is perhaps to be detected.

Short though this chronicle is, it is only as one turns to study the last sixty years before the great Danish invasion that one realizes how valuable it is. Its information is not so meagre nor are its entries so brief but that they offer a contrast with the utter dearth of record which follows between *c.* 805 and 866. Neither Symeon nor any other writer of his age could find material to fill the gap. This

is a point which deserves emphasis because failure to appreciate it has resulted in deductions of a historical kind which cannot fairly be made. The see of Whithorn, for example, has frequently been said to have come to an end *c.* 802, whereas the truth is that the list of bishops comes to an end, which is a very different matter. As a matter of fact there is record of a later bishop of Whithorn. The list fails not merely for Whithorn, but also for Canterbury, York, Hexham and Lindisfarne, and logically the argument of extinction would have to be applied to these as well as to Whithorn. What has happened seems to be that after the disturbances caused by the first viking onslaughts had passed, some attempt was made to bring the lists of bishops up to date again. Evidence for Canterbury would not be hard to find, nor would it be hard for a Durham writer to get information about Cuthbert's bishops. At a later period some of the gaps were filled, as marginal entries in Symeon's history show. Whithorn, however, lay in a remote part of Northumbria, and as a see it was chiefly important in the earlier period, so that evidence about it might not be available. There is no evidence to show when the see of Whithorn came to an end, but it was in a better position than any of the other northern sees to survive the invasion of 866.

The second of the two short chronicles offers fewer difficulties than the first because it appears to be in a less corrupt form. The entries are even briefer and individually they are not unlike the type of annal which contemporary Irish historians were composing. There is good evidence of close contact between Ireland and Northumbria in the first half of the tenth century so that the resemblance may not be altogether the result of chance. No more is attempted than the recording of events. The task of stringing these events into a connected narrative is left to the reader. The wildness of the times is fully reflected in this chronicle which records little else but the progress of the viking campaigns and the deaths of leaders on either side. Within

these limits, however, it provides an account of the wars between the vikings and the English which is altogether more trustworthy and more accurate chronologically than the hopelessly confused version preserved in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. Eric Bloodaxe was the last of the Scandinavian kings of Northumbria and thereafter the kingdom was governed by earls. Symeon's version of the short chronicle places this change in 952, and the version in the chronicle of Melrose two years earlier. Whichever of these two dates is right, the chronicle seems originally to have come to an end with the last of the Northumbrian kings, though in its various versions it was continued for a greater or lesser time, and the succession of the Northumbrian earls was kept up to date for as long as two hundred years in the form of an appendix to the original chronicle. The list of earls in Symeon's version, interpolated with one or two items of Northumbrian history, extends from Eric Bloodaxe to Henry I, but the list no longer occupies the place which we may be sure that it originally held, namely at the end of the short chronicle. Arnold found good reasons for believing that the section on the Northumbrian earls which in the now existing text of Symeon's history appears under 1072, ought properly to be placed under 952, in connection with the expulsion of Eric Bloodaxe. This is in fact the place which it occupies in Roger of Howden's work, and in the chronicle of Melrose it is found under 950 in immediate connection with Eric Bloodaxe. This latter version of the list of earls, though much briefer than Symeon's, nevertheless comes down to a later date, namely to Henry II. The extension of the list to the middle of the twelfth century does not in any way detract from the value of the short chronicle itself, nor is it any evidence that this chronicle was not constructed till the twelfth century. Every detail in it suggests that, as it now survives, it is a genuine record of the tenth century, untouched except for minor slips on the part of copyists.

The sources at present available for the study of Anglo-

Saxon history, though they are steadily increasing, are still far from plentiful. The destruction of documents and libraries in past times has made it impossible that they will ever be as plentiful as could be wished. Admirable editions of the major works of the period exist, such as Bede's history, the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, together with the laws and several lesser works besides, but there remains a field of evidence which as yet seems to be largely untouched. I mean the work of the historians who wrote in Latin after the Norman conquest. Each of these historians has his reputation, from Symeon at one end to, perhaps, Geoffrey of Monmouth at the other, but each in a greater or lesser degree has preserved material which could be put to use. In some the material may consist of old traditions told in the form of saga, in others it may consist of annals or chronicles copied from older sources. The two chronicles whose existence is revealed by analysis of Symeon's *History of the Kings* have long been known and recognized as valuable, but it is only when every entry, almost every word, in each of these two chronicles has been subjected to the closest scrutiny, and all the versions closely compared, that their historical information can be used without hesitation. There are several other problems in connection with these two chronicles which invite discussion. To Bede, one may suspect, much of the credit for the first of the two may be due. Presumably as he wrote his history some kind of machinery for collecting information automatically developed. One would hesitate to describe Jarrow as a news agency, but we know that Bede himself seldom left his monastery and he must have had messengers to keep him in touch with the outer world. The completeness of the information about the episcopal succession in the ten years following his death suggests that Jarrow may for a time have maintained the contacts which he had established. One would like to consider further the relation between this first chronicle and the ninth century lists of bishops. Is there any connection between these lists and the collection

of material for what we now know as the Anglo-Saxon chronicle? The continuity of this great work over five hundred years and more is perhaps its most remarkable feature, and it tends to make one forget that in several monasteries up and down the country chronicles were kept which might in favourable circumstances have developed into works of similar importance. The chronicles preserved in the Northumbrian group may be compared with the West Saxon annals, the Mercian register, the additions to Nennius, the annals of St. Neot and other similar short, historical chronicles, most of which eventually found their way into the national chronicle.