

ART. IV.—*Walter the Priest and St Mary's, Carlisle.*  
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RECENT research has shown very clearly that the process of founding and building a monastery in the two centuries which followed the Norman Conquest could be prolonged and complicated.<sup>1</sup> This was certainly true of the priory established at St Mary's, Carlisle, the origins of which are much befogged by the disappearance of almost all the archives of the priory and notably by the absence of any surviving cartulary from it. Our knowledge of that establishment at St Mary's, which quickly grew into the cathedral of Carlisle, is largely dependent on a very small number of early charters, some invaluable references in the *Acts of the Priors of Nostell* and several notices in medieval chronicles, none of which are contemporary and almost all of which exhibit signs of inaccuracy, and, above all, on an invaluable excerpt from the lost register of Bishop Strickland.

On three major points, however, the evidence is so clear as to be undeniable. It cannot be doubted that the first bishop of Carlisle was Athelwold, who was consecrated in 1133<sup>2</sup> and was previously prior of Nostell, a house of Austin canons near Wakefield which had come into existence in the early years of the century.<sup>3</sup> (According to the latish evidence of the

<sup>1</sup> e.g., J. C. Dickinson, "Les constructions des premiers chanoines réguliers en Angleterre", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* (1967), 179-198.

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Prescott, *Register of Wetheral priory* (1897), 478-479; J. C. Dickinson, CW2 134-143.

<sup>3</sup> On the origins of Nostell see J. Burton, *Monasticon Eboracense* (York, 1768), 300-302; A. Hamilton Thompson, *Bolton Priory* (1924), 25-26; and D. Nicoll, *Thurstan, Archbishop of York* (York, 1964), 127-137.

*Lanercost Chronicle*, Athelwold was at the time of his appointment "young in age but mature in behaviour" and was "afterwards inaccurately called Athulf".) Secondly, it is indubitable that a priory of Austin canons was established in the ancient church of St Mary's, Carlisle, by Henry I, probably as a result of his visit to the city in the winter of 1122-3 when he ordered the fortification of the place *castello et turribus*.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, it is clear that almost certainly because of the poverty of the church of St Mary Athelwold was given the very unusual privilege of holding the bishopric in plurality with the priorate of Nostell by a pope, apparently Calixtus II (1119-24).<sup>5</sup> The fact that the date of this privilege roughly coincides with that of the foundation of the priory suggests the possibility that from the first the latter was intended to serve as a cathedral. The delaying of Athelwold's consecration to the see until 1133 may well have been largely due to its lack of revenues adequate to support a bishop's *familia*; for long after his time the poverty of Carlisle was notorious. Yet the Strickland register tends to suggest that episcopal status was an after-thought.<sup>6</sup>

However, the acceptance of these facts does not explain various medieval references to (i) the priory of Carlisle having been founded in 1102; (ii) an important part in the foundation having been played by one Walter the Priest. These facts have by no means escaped notice. The judicious Wilson long ago noted them but wrote that no effective action was taken "till after the political changes of 1120-2",<sup>7</sup> while more recently the present writer has claimed "if the foundation of a monastery was mooted about 1102 . . .

<sup>4</sup> Dickinson, *The origins of the Austin Canons* . . . (1950), 247-250.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 249, n. 4. On the question as to whether Athelwold was ever Prior of Carlisle see Prescott, *op. cit.*, 480-481.

<sup>6</sup> Below, see n. 37.

<sup>7</sup> *V.C.H. Cumberland* ii 131. He regards as probable the grant of a monastic *site* by the king in 1102.

there can be little doubt . . . little was done for another twenty years".<sup>8</sup> Recently, following the discovery of another reference to this matter in a late 12th-century manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris, an article in our *Transactions* claims that consideration be given "for treating seriously the suggestion that before the Austin canons were established at Carlisle there was an earlier foundation, dating back to 1101 or 1102, for a religious community of some unspecified kind".<sup>9</sup>

The present paper aims to consider the evidence on this matter with a fullness not hitherto accorded it, and concludes that the veracity of the 1102 date is very doubtful and that this "unspecified" community did not exist.

## I. Evidence for a monastic foundation at Carlisle in 1102.

Before considering the main individual references to an establishment of a monastery at Carlisle in 1102, four preliminary points may be made:

(i) It would be surprising to find a monastic establishment set up in our area at so early a date. Only in 1092 did the area become part of that English kingdom wherein alone the great monasteries of Britain were now to be found, and for long to come there is no sign of the English government giving the city more than passing attention, Henry's visit in 1122 being almost certainly the first major attempt to consolidate the political work which his brother had begun. In 1102 there was no monastery of any kind in north-western England, and even in Yorkshire, where Norman power was appreciably more effective, there were but three (all houses of Benedictine monks),

<sup>8</sup> Dickinson, *op. cit.*, 246. Cf. J. E. Prescott, "there could not have been a foundation of Regular Canons at Carlisle in 1102", *op. cit.*, 486.

<sup>9</sup> CW2 lxx 178.

Selby abbey founded for very special reasons in 1069, the venerable house of Whitby, re-established on a small scale in 1077, and the abbey of St Mary's, York, established only in 1088.<sup>10</sup>

(ii) There is no clear reference anywhere to any ecclesiastical establishment by 1102 at Carlisle other than a house of regular canons, no mention occurring of either hospital, collegiate church or Benedictine monastery. All the sources which mention the matter in detail assert that the house which was "founded" there in 1102 was a priory of regular canons.

(iii) The Austin canons did not effectively gain a foothold in England before 1104 and only became well known in the decade after the priory of Holy Trinity, Aldgate, had been established by queen Matilda in 1107-8.<sup>11</sup>

(iv) If an effective monastic community had come into existence as early as 1102 one would have expected it to have acquired the endowment intended for it by its alleged founder, Walter the Priest, at an early date, yet the later legal evidence shows that over twenty years later it is Walter who is still mentioned as the legal owner of this. In a charter which probably dates from 1127, Henry I confers on the priory of Austin canons at St Mary's, Carlisle, "all the churches and the whole land which belonged to Walter the Priest".<sup>12</sup>

From these general considerations let us turn to the main individual references to a religious house being set up at Carlisle. (i) The earliest of these is the recently discovered one in the Paris manuscript which may be assigned roughly to the 12th century. The entry reads *Anno M.c.ii fundata est domus Karleoli*,<sup>13</sup> "in

<sup>10</sup> M. D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (1949), *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> J. C. Dickinson, *The Origins of the Austin Canons*, 98-131.

<sup>12</sup> *V.C.H. Cumberland* ii 10 n. = *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, ed. C. Johnson and H. A. Cronne (Oxford, 1964), ii, no. 1491, where the mention of churches in the gift is omitted.

<sup>13</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. n.a. lat. 692, f. 39.

the year 1102 was founded the (*or a*) house at Carlisle''. This is an addition to the original text in a smaller hand, assigned by Dr E. Pellegrin to a similar date.<sup>14</sup> *Domus* is a word which at this time was used in various senses, both ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical, and it is a little curious that a more precise term such as *prioratus* or *monasterium* is not used, which would make it quite certain that an ecclesiastical foundation is in question.

(ii) A list of dates of foundation of Cumberland monasteries is given in a transcript of the now lost cartulary of Lanercost priory, possibly of late 13th-century date. This gives, under 1102, *Fundata est Eccl. Cath. Sce. Marie Carl.* and proceeds to add the following foundations — 1104 Holm Cultram abbey, 1116 Lanercost priory, 1120 Shap abbey, 1140 St Bees' priory, 1130 Wetheral priory, 1233 Franciscan friary of Carlisle.<sup>15</sup> The last date of foundation (which may well have been written not long after the event) is evidently correct but all the others are wrong.<sup>16</sup> It is remarkable that even the foundation of Lanercost itself is given a whole fifty years too early, it being certain that the origins of this house belong to 1165-9.<sup>17</sup> Under such circumstances it is clearly impossible to place any trust in the date which is given for the foundation of Carlisle. (In accounting for this inaccuracy of the list — which is remarkable even by usual medieval standards — we must remember the immensely disturbed condition of Cumbria in the 12th century, with persistent warfare between English and Scots ravaging the area and depriving it of the settled conditions without which monasticism and learning cannot flourish.)

<sup>14</sup> I am much indebted to her for this information.

<sup>15</sup> Carlisle, Dean and Chapter Library: I am indebted to Mr B. C. Jones for confirming my notes on this.

<sup>16</sup> The correct dates are Holm Cultram 1150, Lanercost 1165-9, Shap 1190-1200, St Bees c. 1120, Wetheral 1106-12.

<sup>17</sup> CW2 xlii.

(iii) A passage in the *Lanercost Chronicle* of late 13th- or early 14th-century date, *Eodem anno, videlicet anno domini mciij, Henricus primus, ut dicitur per consilium et industriam Matildis regine, constitutuit canonicos regulares in ecclesia Karleolensi*.<sup>18</sup>

As we have seen, this reference to regular canons is almost certainly untrue as is the statement which occurs a little later in this chronicle that Walter the Priest was connected with Conquerer and was given by him lands in the Carlisle area, a region which was as yet no part of the English kingdom, as Domesday Book irrefutably shows. The reference here to 1102 may well come from the next source, which is certainly far from reliable. That queen Matilda knew anything about regular canons as early as 1102 is unlikely.

(iv) A further reference is to be found in the *Scotichronicon* of John Fordun,<sup>19</sup> claiming that in 1102 Henry I at the instigation of queen Matilda established regular canons in Carlisle. But this is known to have been an insertion by a 15th-century continuator, so that its authority cannot rank high; it would not be surprising if it had been borrowed from the *Lanercost Chronicle* or some allied work.

(iv) What is almost certainly a reference to the foundation of the priory of Carlisle in 1102 is to be found in the verdict of a Carlisle jury,<sup>20</sup> given in 1278 which avers that a monastery had been established at Carlisle about 180 years ago.<sup>20</sup> However, no one with any familiarity of such verdicts in these centuries would be inclined to trust them very far on matters of detail when these occurred nearly two centuries before, though they may reproduce exactly the tradition of

<sup>18</sup> *The Chronicle of Lanercost*, trans. H. Maxwell (Glasgow, 1913), p. xiv. This may have been the source of one or two other later references [CW2 177].

<sup>19</sup> rex Henricus persuasione et consilio ipsius regine (Matildis) anno MCII constituit canonicos regulares in Kaerleil (ed. Edinburgh, 1759, p. 289).

<sup>20</sup> Cumb. Assize Roll 132 m. 32, quoted in *V.C.H. Cumberland* ii 9.

the day. (Thus of the priory of Taunton where regular canons were instituted about 1120, a jury reported in the early 14th century that it was founded by bishop William Giffard who died in 1129 "before the time of King Edmund Ironside", who died in 1016.)<sup>21</sup>

At this juncture it is worth noting that if the traditional date of the foundation of Carlisle was 1102 were inaccurate it would be by no means unique, for such an error can be paralleled in the case of several contemporary houses of regular canons in England, which, for uncertain reasons, overestimated their antiquity. Thus the priory of Worksop, said to have been founded in 1103 came into existence twenty years later, Southwark's date of 1106 is also almost certainly too early, as is the 1108 of Lantony and the 1110 of Haughmond.<sup>22</sup> In view of this and the doubtful value of the annals ascribing the date of foundation of Carlisle to 1102, this latter cannot be taken very seriously unless it is borne out by other evidence of early date, notably that of charters which are normally much more likely to be correct than that of medievalist annalists whose work has all the erratic quality of modern journalism.

## II. Walter the Priest.

The first point to be noticed before undertaking any pursuit of that "Walter the Priest", who was concerned in the establishment of the priory of Carlisle, is that priests were very common in Norman England and so were those called Walter, which was one of the very limited repertoire of Christian names in use at this time. Several instances of the name can easily be found. The earliness of the reference to "Walter the chaplain" in royal deed of 1068<sup>23</sup> makes it almost cer-

<sup>21</sup> Dickinson, *The Origins of the Austin Canons*, 131, n. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Dickinson, *The Origins . . . passim*; W. Dugdale, *Monasticum Anglicanum*, vi (i) 107.

<sup>23</sup> *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, ed. H. W. C. Davis, i (1913), no. 22.

tain that this is not the man we seek, and the intriguing mention of a later Cumbrian "Walter the priest" who probably became prior of Carlisle, must almost certainly be dismissed as being too late for our purpose. The references to him, contained in the cartulary of St Bees,<sup>24</sup> cannot be exactly dated but seem to belong to late in the reign of Stephen or early in that of Henry II — a fellow witness of one charter occurs elsewhere in 1158, whilst Alan fitz Waltheof, who was possibly Walter's first cousin, was much concerned in the foundation of Holm Cultram about 1150.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most valuable references for our purpose is that contained in an *Inquest* of 1212, copied in the *Book of Fees*. This records that King Henry I "gave to Walter, formerly his chaplain Linstock and Carleton . . . The aforesaid Walter by the desire and permission of the aforesaid king took the religious habit in the priory of St Mary of Carlisle, and, by the desire and assent of the aforesaid king, he gave all the aforesaid land to the aforesaid religious house".<sup>26</sup> This inquest of 1212 was one of the major ones of its kind, and its information (produced less than a century after the event) has a convincing ring. Significantly it includes no date of the transactions which it records, but we have a few invaluable references elsewhere which clarify this matter. A deed of King Henry I, dated to 1101, has amongst its witnesses one "Walter the chaplain",<sup>27</sup> who may possibly be the one with whom we are concerned, but does not indicate that he had as yet any connection with Carlisle. It is perhaps worth noting that a fellow witness here was Richard D'Orbal to whom, in 1102, Henry granted the churches of Warkworth, Corbridge, Whittingham and Rothbury,

<sup>24</sup> *The Register of St Bees*, ed. J. Wilson (Kendal, 1915), 50, 317 n., 529-530.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 531; *V.C.H. Cumberland* ii gives c. 1150 as the first reference to prior Walter.

<sup>26</sup> *Book of Fees* i 199 = *V.C.H. Cumberland* i 422.

<sup>27</sup> *Regesta Regum* . . . ii, no. 544.

in Northumberland, the reversion of which churches the king granted to St Mary of Carlisle and its canons in 1125.<sup>29</sup> This gift was made "at the first foundation of the church of Carlisle" asserts a royal letter of 1219,<sup>30</sup> in a phrase which incidentally is difficult to square the priory with any monastic origins in 1102.

Probably in 1127 another charter of Henry I gave to canons of St Mary's, Carlisle, "all the churches and the whole land which belonged (*fuit*) to Walter the Priest".<sup>31</sup> This invaluable reference shows clearly that Walter had not hitherto conveyed these possessions to any previous religious establishment as, if he had done this, the latter would already be the legal possessors. The date of this deed fits perfectly with the foundation of a priory of Carlisle about 1124, the more so since such royal confirmations normally followed soon after the gift in question had been made, and this almost certainly belongs to the original endowment of St Mary's. It is in the highest degree unlikely that the king would have waited a quarter of a century before confirming a gift made to a religious body by one of his chaplains in or about 1102, which, in any case, cannot be proved to have existed.

This sort of legal evidence being much earlier and, within its limits more reliable than those of chronicles, must always be preferred to them if their witness does not agree, unless there is some very special reason to the contrary. Bearing this in mind let us look at the literary references to Walter.

The *Lanercost Chronicle* asserts that "a certain priest named Walter who came with the Conqueror to England was given by him this church and various

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 572.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1431. It was provided that after Richard's death "the clerks who serve them (the churches) are to have a maintenance and the canons are to have the rest".

<sup>30</sup> ex concessione bonae memoriae Regis Henrici primi in prima fundatione Ecclesiae, Close Roll, 3 Hen. III m. 11 = Rot. Lit. Claus. i 405.

<sup>31</sup> Above, see n. 12.

others at some adjoining vills . . . whose lands and possessions king Henry (I) gave to the regular canons".<sup>32</sup> As we have seen, it is certain that any linking of Walter with William the Conqueror is quite mythical, since William did not conquer Carlisle so was in no position to give its church to Walter or to anyone else. The vague reference to Henry I agrees fully with that derived from his charters just considered.

The last known reference to Walter in monastic times is that made by the shrewd John Leland,<sup>33</sup> who wrote late in the reign of Henry VIII and who does not repeat the legend that Walter came to England with the Conqueror. He avers that Walter was "a Norman priest" set over the city of Carlisle by William Rufus, which is not impossible but very far from certain, and began to build a monastery in honour of the Virgin, which is very probable. But he died before this was accomplished, his wealth being used by Henry I to finish the structure and install regular canons, which again seems very probable.

Happily there remains an invaluable text which gives an earlier and fuller version of Leland's story, and may very well have been the source of it. This is an extract from the register of William Strickland (who was bishop of Carlisle from 1399 to 1419) which was preserved in a later miscellany<sup>34</sup> and has not hitherto been adequately considered. This tells us that "a certain chaplain called Walter who had come over with William the Conqueror obtained the churches of Carlisle and Stanwix (*Stanwidge*) with

<sup>32</sup> Maxwell, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Walterus Presbyter Normannus, quem rex W. Rufus prefecerat urbi Caerleolensi, coepit inchoare Monasterium in honorem B. Mariae, quo in ipso principio morte sublato, Hen. I rex praedictum monasterium perfecit, Canonicos Regularesque introduxit deditque monasterio 6 Ecclesias viz. Newcastle, Newburne, Warkware, Robern (*sic*), Wichingham & Corbridge, fecitque Adelwaldum confessorem suum primum priorem. J. Leland, *De rebus Britannicis collectanea* (ed. T. Hearne) (Oxford, 1715), 120-121.

their chapels and vills . . . This William abounded in wealth and began to found a most noble church in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary within the walls, but died before it was finished". William Rufus having died there succeeded king Henry "the first of his name, who instituted regular canons in the great church which Walter had founded and gave to them churches and lands which rightly (*iure*) belonged to Walter. And he further gave them, for the good of his soul and those of his ancestors, six churches in Northumberland, viz. Newcastle, Newburn, Warkworth, Rothbury, Whittingham and Corbridge, and made his confessor, Athelwold, their prior and favoured them with many privileges". A small discrepancy between the two sources is that Leland credits Walter with beginning to build "a monastery" where Strickland's register merely mentions "a church", but this is not of any major significance. Otherwise the register contains all the information given by Leland as well as additional details which he may have thought it unnecessary to record. From the fact that it belonged to the archives of the cathedral priory of St Mary, the register has clearly a very high claim to serious consideration, and tells a story of the origin of St Mary's priory which is both convincing and confirmed by the charter evidence.<sup>35</sup>

What it does not do is to make any mention of the date 1102 or to assert that a monastery was actually established at Carlisle before the arrival of Athelwold. It merely states that Walter founded a big church, in

<sup>35</sup> Hic Walterus in divitiis abundavit, nobilissimam ecclesiam in honorem beate Marie virginis infra muros Carlioli cepit fundare sed dum operi incepto institisset obiit. Dum haec gerantur mortuus est Gulielmus Rufus cui successit Henricus, eius nomine primus, qui canonicos regulares instituit in magna ecclesia quam Walterus fundavit et dedit eis ecclesias et terras quas iure pertinebant ad Waltherum. Et insuper dedit eis pro salute animae suae et antecessorum suorum sex ecclesias in Northumbria cum capellis suis — scilicet de Novo castro de Neuburnia, de Werkwerthia, de Roberia (*sic*), de Whittingham, de Corebrigia — et confessorem suum Athelwaldum priorem eorum constituit et eos multis dignitatibus privilegiavit (British Museum, MS. Lansdowne 721 ff. 54r).

a phrase which indicates that he started to build a place of worship, not that he conveyed endowments to a religious body or procured a convent. This erection of a church was almost certainly envisaged as the first step in the foundation of a monastery, for the endowment of which Walter planned to give churches and lands. However, he was unable to complete this project which was taken over and brought to fulfilment by Henry I who, as we know, installed regular canons under his confessor, Athelwold, and is said to have finished the church, a fact confirmed by the Pipe Roll of Henry I, which shows the king contributing to the building of the church.<sup>36</sup> All the charter evidence confirms this and none gives any reason to believe that a monastery of any kind existed at Carlisle as early as 1102.

It is curious that whereas the *Book of Fees* says that Walter entered the monastery which he had helped to establish, the Strickland register, and indeed all the other known evidence, makes no mention of this. It is not necessarily inconsistent with the statement that Walter died before the church was finished. He may have entered the monastery and died there soon after, having come to an understanding with the king over its establishment. But it is also feasible that he died before the priory was founded, as the Strickland accounts suggests. The story of his having taken the habit there may be due to the original Walter having been confused by the local jury of the 1212 inquest with that Cumbrian Walter mentioned in the St Bees cartulary, who became a canon and later prior of the house.

What significance can be attached to the date of 1102? Almost certainly it does not denote the establishment of any religious community at Carlisle at this date. Whether it was in or about this time that Walter

<sup>36</sup> *V.C.H. Cumberland* i 338.

took initial steps towards establishing the priory of St Mary's, e.g., by buying a site or beginning to erect a church we cannot tell. This is not completely impossible, for the very slight evidence we have of the chronology of Walter's career does not rule it out. On the other hand the unreliability of the sources in which this occurs makes it very far from certain. If it is feasible that the date has some authority behind it, it is at least equally likely that it is merely one of this minor historical howlers which medieval chroniclers perpetrated curiously often, for reasons which are highly obscure.<sup>37</sup>

Only elementary knowledge of English medieval historical writing is needed to appreciate its deep passion for associating with William the Conqueror people of later date. This with evidence cited and the fact that the Carlisle area was not under 1092 make the association of Walter with the Conqueror untenable.

<sup>37</sup> The extract from the Strickland register concludes with an interesting note on the foundation of the archdeaconry of Richmond by Archbishop Thurstan.

Multis annis transactis, venit Thrustannus (*sic*) archiepiscopus Eboracensis visitare partes illas, intelligensque quod Archidiaconus Richemundiae nullum ius haberet in illis partibus cogitabat illam civitatem et illas partes episcopo indigere. Id Henrico primo retulit. Rex statim consensit. Tunc Thrustanus (*sic*) Archidiacono Richmundiae satisfaciens Cumbriam, Westmorelandiam et Allerdaliam ab eius jurisdictione separavit. Deinde ex decreto Innocentii papae et ex consensu Henrici praecepit canonicis Sanctae Mariae Carliol, eligere idoneum episcopum, qui elegerunt priorem suum Athelwaldum qui ad instantiam Henrici a papa Innocentio confirmatus, consecratus est episcopus primus Carliolensis apud Eboracum ab archiepiscopo Thurstino. (B.M. Lansdowne MS. 721 ff. 54r/v).