



The Division of the Bishopricks of Wessex. ✓

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THE *Proceedings* of the Somerset Archæological Society do not contain any notice of a remarkable letter of St. Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, which was published in 1895 by Messrs. Napier and Stevenson, among the "Early Charters," called the Crawford Collection, in the Bodleian Library. This letter, which they tell us "has hitherto been entirely unknown," throws considerable light on what Bishop Stubbs calls "one of the most vexed questions of Anglo-Saxon history"—the Division of the Bishopricks of Wessex. The MS. is written in characters of the end of the tenth or beginning of the eleventh century. It is probably a copy, for it is among documents relating to Crediton, where it was likely to be preserved after the union of the Sees of Cornwall (St. Germans) and Crediton. I propose to give Professor Napier's translation of the Saxon letter, and then proceed to show its bearing on the bishopricks mentioned. Dunstan's name is not mentioned in it; but it is addressed to King Æthelred II (the Unready), and has to do entirely with the South-West of England, so it could not have been written by Oswald, Archbishop of York. The letter runs thus:—

"This writing the Archbishop sends to his lord, Æthelred the king. It happened that the West Welsh (the inhabitants

of Cornwall) rose against King Egabriht. The king then went thither and subdued them, and gave a tenth part of the land (to God) and disposed of it as it seemed fit to him. He gave to Sherborne three estates, Polltun, Caellwic, Landwithan. And that remained so for many years until heathen hordes overran this country and occupied it. Then there came another time after that, when the teachers fell away, and departed from England on account of the unbelief that had then assailed it; and all the kingdom of the West Saxons stood for seven years without a bishop. Then Formosus the Pope sent from Rome, and admonished King Edward and archbishop Plegmund to amend this. And they did so; with the counsel of the Pope and all the witan of the English nation they appointed five bishops where there were formerly two: one at Winchester, that was Frythestan; a second at Ramsbury, that was Æthelstan; a third at Sherborne, that was Waerstan; a fourth at Wells, that was Æthelm; a fifth at Crediton, that was Eadulf. And to him (Eadulf) were assigned three estates in Wales (*i.e.*, West Wales, or Cornwall), to be under the authority of the people of Devon, because they (the Cornish) had formerly been disobedient, without awe of the West Saxons. And Bishop Eadulf enjoyed those lands during his life, and Bishop Aethelgar in like manner. Then it happened that King Æthelstan gave to Conan the Bishopric as far as the Tamar flowed (*i.e.*, Cornwall). Then it happened that King Eadred commanded Daniel to be consecrated, and gave the estates, as the witan advised him, to the bishop-stool at St. Germans. Afterwards, when King Edgar bade me consecrate Wulfsize, he and all our bishops said that they did not know who could possess the estates with greater right than the bishop of the diocese, seeing that he was loyal, and preached the belief of God aright, and loved his lord (the king). If, then, this bishop does so now, I know not why he should not be worthy of the estates, if God and our lord (the king) grant them to him.

For it does not seem to us that any man can possess them more rightfully than he, and if any (other) man take them to himself, may he have them without God's blessing or ours." (pp. 106-7.)

Before mentioning the great difficulties that this letter by no means settles, it may be well to point out that it proves that the account of the Division of the Wessex Bishopricks, as given by William of Malmesbury, was known in the time of St. Dunstan. Bishop Stubbs, before the discovery of this letter, was of opinion that the statement which is found in the records of the Cathedrals of Exeter, Winchester, and Canterbury "acquired its present form soon after the middle of the eleventh century." (Malmesbury, *Gesta reg.* ii, p. lvi.) St. Dunstan died in 988, and he must have consecrated Wulfsige after 975, in which year his predecessor's signature as bishop appears for the last time. The letter apparently contemplates a successor to Wulfsige. That successor was Ealdred, who must have been consecrated before 988, although his first signature appears in a document of 993. It also proves that Æthelstan bestowed on Conan the bishopric of Cornwall, which had been stated by Leland, although the Charter of Æthelstan, on the authority of which he had rested, is now lost. Another point is proved by it, viz., that Daniel, a monk of Glastonbury, had been appointed by Eadred bishop of Cornwall. He is said by Malmesbury to have died in 956.*

The three manors, to use the Norman term, given to the Bishoprick of Sherborne are called Polltun, Caellwic and Landwithan. Polltun is called Pauntona in the Exeter

* The editors note: "The first four Bishops of the West-Saxon See of Cornwall are therefore: (1) Conan, consecrated under Æthelstan (A.D. 926?); Daniel, consecrated under Eadred, signs 955 to 959; (3) Comoere, who appears in the Bodmin manumissions as 'Comuyre presbyter' under Eadred (946-955), and as bishop under Edgar (959-975); (4) Wulfsige, consecrated under Eadgar; signatures 963 to 980. That Comoere preceded Wulfsige is evident from the fact proved by this letter, that the latter survived King Eadgar, in whose reign he was consecrated; hence Comoere, who is mentioned as bishop in the time of this king, must have been bishop during the earlier years of the reign." (p. 104, n.)

Domesday, where it is held by the Bishop of Exeter. Mr. Warren identifies it with the manor of Pawton, in the parish of St. Breock, a few miles from Padstow. Caelling is called Caelling in the statement above referred to, Caluuitona in the Exeter Domesday, and is identified by Mr. Warren as Callington, a small town between Launceston and St. Ives. Landwithan is spelt Languitona in the Exeter Domesday, and was held by the Bishop of Exeter. Mr. Warren says it is the present parish of Lawhitton in the borough of Launceston, which is now the property of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, having remained connected with the Bishoprick of Exeter. The three estates seem, after the Danish invasion, to have been transferred from the Bishoprick of Sherborne to that of St. Germans, or Cornwall; then to have been merged in that of Crediton; and finally to have formed part of the property of the See of Exeter at the time when St. Edward the Confessor obtained from the Pope permission to remove the See from Crediton to Exeter. The editors note that this letter "enables us to add another name to the Bishops of Cornwall, namely that of Daniel, who, we learn, was consecrated at the command of King Eadred (946-955). This is no doubt the Bishop Daniel who signs from 955 to 959, who, Bishop Stubbs suggested, was Bishop of Rochester or Selsey. Daniel, Bishop of Cornwall, is probably the Bishop Daniel who is named in an Exeter manumission of King Eadwig's. As he was appointed under Eadred, and signs through Eadwig's reign, he must have preceded Comoere, who subscribes in the time of King Edgar" (p. 104).

The principal value of the letter, however, consists in its authentication, in the time of St. Dunstan, of the record given by William of Malmesbury. That record is as follows:—

"In the 904th year from the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, Formosus, the apostolic Pontiff of the Roman Church, sent to King Edward in the land of the English, moved with great anger and devotion, and called down upon him and all his

(counsellors) a malediction in place of the benediction which blessed Gregory had formerly sent to the nation of the English by the holy man Augustine—unless he and his bishops instituted (pastors for) the dioceses destitute of bishops, according to the tradition which had been delivered to the nation of the English by the See of St. Peter. For the country of the Gewissi had for seven years been entirely without any bishop.

Upon this, King Edward assembled a Synod of the senators of the nation of the English, over which Archbishop Plegmund presided, and recited to the King, and discussed the severe words of the apostolic message which blessed Pope Formosus sent. Then the King, with his (counsellors) and Plegmund the Archbishop took salutary counsel, applying to themselves the sentence of our Lord, “the harvest indeed is great, but the labourers are few.” They appointed separate bishops to each of the tribes of the Gewissi, and assigned an episcopal residence (*episcopia*) to each; and what before had two, they divided into five.

“This resolution having been passed, Archbishop Plegmund returned to Rome with honourable gifts, and with great humility appeased the apostolic (Lord) Formosus, announced the decrees of the King, and the senate of the country, which greatly pleased his apostolic (lordship).

“Returning home, in the city of Canterbury he ordained seven bishops to seven churches in one day. Frithestan to the Church of Winchester; Æthelstan to the Church of Corvinsis (really Ramsbury); Waerstan to the Church of Sherborne; Æthelm to the Church of Wells; Eadulf to the Church of Crediton. Moreover, they gave him in addition three villas in Cornwall, named Polltun, Caelling, and Landwithan, in order that every year from thence he should visit the people of Cornwall to repress their errors. For of old they used to resist the truth as much as they could, and did not obey the apostolic decrees. Moreover (Archbishop Plegmund) ordained two bishops for the South Saxons, Beornch,

a fitting man, and for the Mercians Coenulf for the city which is called Dorchester.

"All this the apostolic Pope confirmed in Synods at St. Peter's Church, and condemned for ever anyone who should change this salutary resolution."

William of Malmesbury, not knowing the origin of the name "*Corvinensis*," supposed it to be meant for "*Cornubiensis*," and so made Æthelstan Bishop of Cornwall. The late Canon Jones, of Bradford-on-Avon, gives the following explanation of how it came to mean Ramsbury:—

"The Bishops of Ramsbury are usually styled '*Episcopi Corvinensis Ecclesiæ*.' The town chosen as their See is in the north-east of Wilts, and was originally called 'Hraefenes byrig,' that is Ravensbury: an estate close by being still called 'Crow-wood.' The Latin name is a simple translation of the Anglo-Saxon." (*Fasti Sarisb.*, i, 34).

In the catalogue given by Florence of Worcester, they are called "Epi Sunningenses." In our MS. it is called "Hramnes byrig." Canon Jones endorses the contemptuous remark of the editor of the "*Monumenta Historica Britannica*": "that the tale of seven bishops consecrated in one day by Archbishop Plegmund, which had given so much trouble to many learned men, was not yet concocted in the tenth century." Dr. Giles makes a similar remark in a note to Bohn's translation of William of Malmesbury, and says: "though it may not be easy to assign a rational motive for the invention of such an instrument, it is a decided forgery." Dr. Oliver also says: "Of course we reject the letter of Pope Formosus." If the judgment of the editors of the Crawford MS. be accepted, this rough and ready treatment cannot be sustained. The date may easily have got miscopied; but so remarkable an event as seven bishops being consecrated in one day can hardly have been invented, and certainly was well known in the tenth century. The Cornish more than once took part with the Danes against the Saxons; and a report of this might well

have led the Pope to suppose that they were lapsing into paganism, and the Bishop of Sherborne probably found no opportunity of visiting Devon and Cornwall during the Danish incursions on the coasts of Devon. It is true that Asser, whom Canon Jones considers Bishop of Sherborne, did not die until 910; but it might well have happened that no Bishop had been in Somerset, Devon, or Cornwall for seven years before 894. And Asser was really domestic prelate to King Alfred, and might rather be called Bishop of Cornwall than of Sherborne.

Mansi (*Sacr. Council. Tom. xviii*, pp. 111-120) discusses at considerable length the difficulties of this remarkable record, with the corrections suggested by Baronius, Pagi, Wharton, Wilkins, and Cossart. The pontificate of Formosus lasted from 891 to 895; and during that time Alfred the Great was King of Wessex, and Edward did not succeed him until 901. Plegmund went to Rome for his consecration in 890, or 891, and died in 914.

Jaffé, in his "*Regesta Pontificum Romanorum*," gives among the *Gesta* of Pope Formosus, as occurring A.D. 892-896:

"He writes to the Bishops of England that it was in his mind to excommunicate them, because they had ceased to root out the abominable pagan customs which were sprouting out afresh in England. But great joy had been brought to him by Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had brought word that they had returned into the right way. He exhorts them that they should neither violate Christian faith, or allow the flock of God to go astray, be dispersed, or be destroyed through lack of pastors, nor permit the churches to stand vacant on the death of bishops. He confirms the Primacy of the Church of Canterbury." (p. 301.)

The letter of Formosus, "*Audito nefandos*," is given by Mansi with Wilkins' dissertation upon it. Birch follows Jaffé, *Cartul. Sax.* ii, p. 214. Cossart considers that the best way out of the difficulty is to suppose that the real date of the

English Synod was about 894; and that Alfred should be substituted for Edward as the name of the King. This is precisely what we find in Higden, who says in his *Polychronicon*, Lib. VI, of the year 894:

“Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, nobly learned in letters, having lately received the pallium from Pope Formosus, in one day ordained seven Bishops for seven Churches of the English. This year King Alfred drove out the Danes, first from Kent, then from Oxford, and then from Chichester.”

This, however, lands us in another difficulty, that it is stated that there were no bishops in Wessex for seven years, whereas we find Denwulf, Bishop of Winchester, signing a charter of King Alfred in 889 as Bishop, and in 895 he signs at full length: “Ego Denewulfus Wentanae urbis episcopus assencio aet conscribo.” In a charter of the year 900 for 901, “in which year also King Alfred died,” Denewulf is styled “that venerable Bishop of the city of Winchester.” In 902 he gives a grant of land to Beornulf; in 903 he witnesses the Golden Charter to the Abbey of Newminster; in 904 a grant of King Edward to St. Peter’s, Winchester, and other charters. The first grant by Edward to Frithestan, Bishop of Winchester, is of A.D. 909; and in the same year a grant is made to Denewulf, Bishop of Winchester, which fixes Denewulf’s death as in that year. It is true this grant is signed, not by Denewulf, but by Frithestan. Unless Frithestan was consecrated as coadjutor to Denewulf, it is difficult to see how he could have been consecrated by Plegmund in 905, still less in 894. (See Birch, *Cartul. Sax.* Vol. ii, pp. 169-289.)

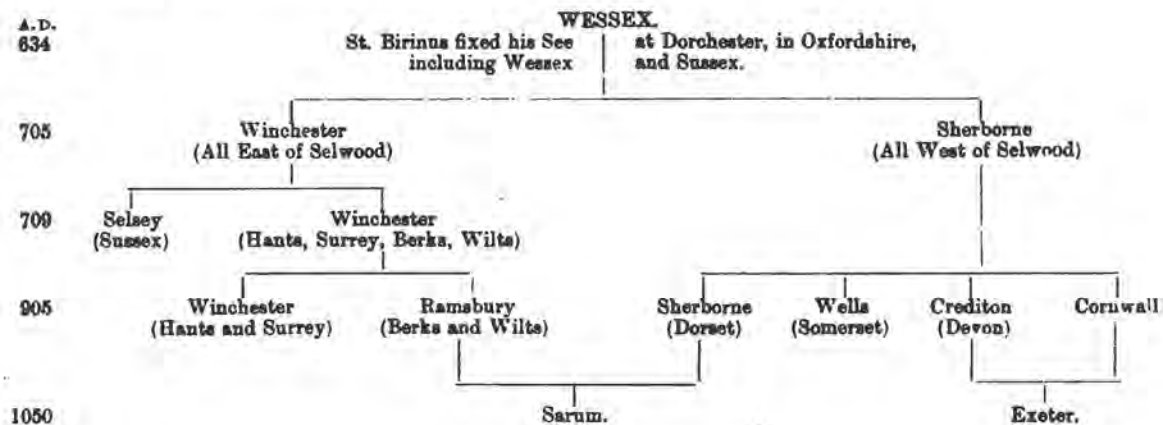
There are no signatures in the Charters published by Birch, of either Æthelstan, Bishop of Ramsbury, unless as “Mass priest” in 903, Waerstan, Bishop of Sherborne, or Æthelm, Bishop of Wells. Waerstan is named in the list of Bishops of Sherborne in the Hyde, *Liber Vitæ*, and Mr. Clark, in 1873, at Sherborne, stated that “Werstan, the fourteenth bishop, fell in battle” against the Danes. This was stated probably on the

authority of William of Malmesbury, who says that he fell in the night attack that Anlaf made on the camp of Æthelstan. Bishop Stubbs, however, has proved that it could not have been Werstan, as Alfred was the Bishop of Sherborne when that battle was fought; and Alfred's signature is found both before and after that date, so that it could not have been a Bishop of Sherborne that was killed.

According to the record as preserved in the Abingdon Register, and quoted by Wharton, Æthelm was the first Bishop of Wells. An old fragment of a history of Wells, published by the Camden Society, gives Daniel as its first Bishop, in consequence of his having blessed the marriage of King Ine with the Queen Ethelburga of Mercia. But the account of that marriage is so improbable as to make Daniel's episcopate very doubtful, and it was not until 200 years afterwards that Wells became an episcopal See.

For other points of interest in this document, we must refer to the Notes of the learned editors of this Crawford Collection of Early Charters.

TABLE SHOWING THE DIVISIONS OF THE DIOCESES OF WESSEX.



THE SUCCESSION OF BISHOPS IN WESSEX AFTER 905.

KING.	A.D.	WINCHESTER.	RAMSBURY.	SHERBORNE.	WELLS.	CREDITON.	CORNWALL.
Edward the Elder	905	(Denewulf) Frithestan	Æthelstan	(Asser) Woorstan	Athelm	Eadulf	(Athelstan)
	915				Wulfhelm		
	918			Ethelbald		Ethelgar (931)	Conan Ruidoc Aldred
Athelstan	920		Odo (Abp. Cant.)		Elfega		
	924			Alfred			
	931	Brinstan	Oswulf				* Brihtwin
	934	Elfega					* Athelstan II
Edmund	942			Wulfins	Wulfhelm	(Algar)	* Daniel
Edred	951	Elfrin				Alfwald	
Edwy	958	Brihtelm		Alfwald	Brihtelm		* Comoere
Edgar	963	Ethelwald				(Alfwulf)	* Wulfsgie
Edward the M.	971		Ælfetan		Kinewald		* Woron
	978			Æthelgaige		Sideman (972)	
Ethelred	981		Wulfgar			Alfred	
	985	Elfega, M.	Siric (Abp.)		Sigar		Woloo Stidio
	988					Alfwald	
	994		Aelfric (Abp.)	Wulfsgie			
Edmund	1005	Kenulf	Brihtwald	Brihtwin	Burwald		Burwald
	1008	Brihtwald	(Living)		Living	Ednod (1022)	
Canute	1015	Elain		Ælmar	Ethelwin		
	1025		(Ethelwin)	Brihtwin	Merewith	Living	Living
Edward the Conf.	1045	Alwain	Herman	Ælfwald	Dudnoo		
	1050	Stigand	Herman united the Sees Ramsbury and Sherborne, transferred to Sarum.			Leofric transf. Sees of Crediton and St. Germans to Exeter	

(Adapted from the late Canon Jones' "Fasti Sarisberienses.")

* Dates uncertain.