



Commentary on an extract from The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

“1135. In this year, at the Lammas, the king Henry went across the sea, and the next day, while he laid asleep on ship, the day darkened over all lands, and the sun became as if it were a three-night-old-moon – and stars around it at midday. Men became very astonished and terrified, and said that something important would come after this; so it did, because that very year it happened the king died in Normandy the next day after the Feast of Saint Andrew. Then this land immediately grew dark because every man who could immediately robbed another. Then his son and his friends took and brought his body to England, and buried it at Reading. He was a good man and was held in great awe. In his time no man dared do wrong against another; he made peace for man and beast; no man dared say anything but good to whoever carried their load of gold and silver.

In the middle of this his nephew Stephen de Blois had come to England, and came to London, and the London people received him and sent for the archbishop William Corbeil and consecrated him as king on midwinter’s day. In this king’s time it was all strife and evil and robbery because the powerful men who were traitors immediately rose against him [1136]; first of all Baldwin de Redvers, and held Exeter against him; and the king besieged it, and afterwards Baldwin came to terms. Then the others took and held their castles against him; and David, king of Scotland, took to warring upon him; then, notwithstanding, their envoys travelled between them and they came together and were reconciled, though it was to little avail.”¹

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a collection of annals from England which detail English history between the fifth and twelfth centuries. The original document (the “common stock” – now lost) was likely commissioned during the late years of the reign of Alfred the Great (c. 890 AD), with copies sent to monastic houses across England where they were updated independently.² There are seven extant manuscripts, labelled A – G, as well as two fragmentary manuscripts labelled H and I.³ The text is (primarily) written in

¹ Michael Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (Phoenix Press, 2000), pp. 262–63.

² Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*.

³ Technically only manuscripts A – F are considered complete; manuscript G (sometimes called manuscript A²) was burnt in the 18th century and only a few pages remain.

old English and provides a valuable record of post-Roman English history, being the first known continuous history of any European people written in their own language.⁴

The extract chosen for this assignment relates to the death of Henry I in 1135, the subsequent coronation of Stephen, and the tumultuous events of his first year as king. It specifically comes from the Peterborough Manuscript (labelled “E”) which is the only manuscript to continue recording history post-1114.⁵ The years 1132 – 1154 were thought to have been written by an unnamed scribe in a composite account – nineteen years after the events of the extract, the asynchronicity of which should be considered as a factor when reading.⁶ For this assignment, a translation into modern English by Michael Swanton will be used.

The extract begins with the events leading up to, and including, the death of Henry I in 1135. This part of the extract is panegyric towards Henry – emphasising his goodness and the peace that his reign brings, followed by the overall chaos and lawlessness that ensues as a direct result of his death.⁷ The extract starts at Lammas (the first day of August) in 1135 where Henry is travelling across the sea, presumably to Normandy, and experiences a solar eclipse on the journey. The eclipse is heralded as a portent and is linked to Henry’s death that same year. This is inconsistent with several other chroniclers, including Henry of Huntingdon, John of Worcester, and William of Malmesbury who all state the crossing and the eclipse occurred in 1133.⁸ This means he was in Normandy for two years after the eclipse before his death, which is consistent with further chronicle entries.¹⁰ This can be further backed up with data from NASA, who

⁴ Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*.

⁵ What remains of the fragmentary H manuscript does record some history in the 12th century but stops at 1114; the Peterborough manuscript continues from there and up until the death of King Stephen in 1154.

⁶ Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*.

⁷ Earlier entries in the ACS are, however, more critical of Henry due to a nepotistic appointment of an abbot that the monks disagreed with. Once the abbot was removed, by Henry, it seems the monks forgave him because entries after that are positive in tone.

⁸ Thomas Forester, *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon* (Henry G. Bohn, 1853); Thomas Forester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester with the Two Continuations* (Henry G. Bohn, 1854); J.A. Giles, *William of Malmesbury’s Chronicle of the Kings of England* (Henry G. Bohn, 1847).

⁹ Malmesbury actually states 1132 but it is thought from context in the rest of the text that this is an error and he did mean 1133.

¹⁰ Forester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester with the Two Continuations*; Forester, *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon*; Giles, *William of Malmesbury’s Chronicle of the Kings of England*; Thomas Forester, *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy by Ordericus Vitalis* (Henry G. Bohn, 1856), IV.

have modelled all eclipses since antiquity, confirming that the eclipse occurred on August 02nd 1133.¹¹ The portent the chroniclers attribute to the eclipse is different as a result; rather than being an omen for his impending death, it is instead perceived as a sign that the country will fall into metaphorical darkness and lawlessness when the king leaves the country for the last time; a foreshadow for the anarchy.

This part ends with a description of his peaceful reign and serves as a eulogy to the king whom the writer of this text evidently admired. Parallels with bible are drawn with “*he made peace for man and beast*”, perhaps especially with Hosea 2:18, emphasising Henry’s perceived holiness.¹² We also see a parallel with Bede with the following: “*no man dared say anything but good to whoever carried their load of gold and silver*”. Bede wrote of similarly peaceful times during the rule of King Edwin of Northumbria, stating that “*a woman with her newborn babe might walk throughout the island, sea to sea, without receiving any harm*”.¹³ The subtle comparison to Edwin is likely intentional; Edwin is said to have been the first English king to convert to Christianity, later canonised, and he was succeeded by his brothers whose one year reign brought such chaos that Bede states their memory was abolished by having the succeeding king claim their reign as the first year of his own.¹⁴ The inclusion of this is likely an attempt to align Henry with other saintly Christian kings, and to draw parallels with the chaos of the anarchy which was driven by Henry’s death.

The extract continues with the description of Stephen’s coronation on Midwinter’s Day (Old English term for the winter solstice – 22nd December) the same year and subsequent first rebellions which escalated to the anarchy.¹⁵ It presents a juxtaposition with Henry’s reign by saying Stephen’s was filled with “*strife and evil and robbery*”. Further entries in the ASC emphasise this, accusing Stephen of an inability to bring

¹¹ ‘NASA - Total Solar Eclipse of 1133 August 02’, n.d.

<<https://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEsearch/SEsearchmap.php?Ecl=11330802>> [accessed 20 November 2025].

¹² Hosea 2:18: “*And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety.*”

¹³ A.M. Sellar, ‘Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of England: A Revised Translation’, Project Gutenberg, 1907 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38326/38326-h/38326-h.html>> [accessed 23 November 2025].

¹⁴ Sellar, ‘Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of England: A Revised Translation’.

¹⁵ Several other chroniclers also use the same date of 22nd Dec for the coronation, so this appears to be accurate or at least consistent.

order. This is an interesting portrayal by the monks of Peterborough Abbey, as in 1143 Stephen visited them in person, granted them cleared lands from the former royal forest of Rockingham, free-warren rights in Kettering, and remitted a large amount of money that they owed him.^{16 17} It is thought that the composite entry was written in the 1150s after Stephen's death, so the writer would have been aware of this. Rather than the monks displaying an overt dislike for the man himself, it is perhaps that they had a more nuanced disliking of what his perceived inability to rule did specifically to the abbeys of the Fenlands. The Fenland monasteries suffered greatly during Stephen's reign at the hands of rogue earls, barons, and knights who made landgrabs and levied excessive taxes – and may explain the somewhat different image presented elsewhere.¹⁸

Baldwin de Redvers is mentioned as the first person to rise against Stephen in 1136, seizing Exeter Castle and holding it against him, a date and event which other chroniclers agree with.¹⁹ Other risings across the country emulated this first uprising, with King David I of Scotland taking advantage of the chaos in England by invading the north.²⁰ David was also the first person to take the oath to accept Matilda as heir to the throne - remaining a supporter of her throughout his life and likely being one of the reasons for his invasion.^{21 22} The text mentions the truce that was drawn between them which came to nothing, however there were at least three attempted truces, eventually leading to the Battle of the Standard in 1138, whereas the text implies one.²³

When comparing the two paragraphs, there is a distinct difference in tone. The admiration for Henry versus Stephen is obvious, with the first paragraph containing a portent, comparisons to Christian saints, biblical allusions, and a eulogy. The second paragraph is largely reporting on events, with none of the allusions and comparisons of

¹⁶ Edmund King, *King Stephen*, Yale English Monarchs (Yale University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ H. W. Carless (Henry William Carless) Davis, with Internet Archive, *Regesta regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066-1154* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1913) <<http://archive.org/details/regestaregumangl03davi>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

¹⁸ Ethan Birney, 'The Fenland Monasteries during the Reign of King Stephen' (unpublished, University of St. Andrews, 2019) <<https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10023/17856/EthanBirneyPhDThesis.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>>.

¹⁹ Forester, *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon*.

²⁰ King, *King Stephen*.

²¹ Giles, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England*.

²² King, *King Stephen*.

²³ King, *King Stephen*.

the first. No judgement is made on Stephen's character (in this extract), but the implication of being a weak ruler can be read into. The monks of Peterborough evidently held nuanced views of both rulers that are more complex than they first seem, and it serves as a reminder that there is almost always a deep complexity to medieval texts under the surface.

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