

*Forgery as Historiography**Alfred Hiatt*

Forgery has traditionally been considered anything but a legitimate mode of historical writing. Nevertheless, this chapter will argue that, legitimate or not, forgeries constituted an important element of medieval historiography, and that to exclude them from consideration of the writing of history in the Middle Ages inevitably impoverishes an account of medieval textual practices. While many texts forged in the Middle Ages were intended to achieve immediate and thoroughly banal goals (such as financial gain of one kind or another), equally many if not more forgeries were designed to intervene in the historical record: to write, or rewrite, history. Such texts were frequently accepted as genuine, becoming – at least for their medieval audiences – a valid historical source, indistinguishable from actually genuine texts. Modern historians have understandably sought to identify spurious texts and to exclude them from their own historical narratives, but the danger of such practice is that it privileges the status of the text (true or false, genuine or forged) over its *function* as an attempt to write history, and over its medieval position as part of the historical record. To attempt to understand certain categories of medieval forgery as historiography is not to claim that the category of forgery did not exist in the Middle Ages, nor that scholars should cease to distinguish between genuine and false historical sources. It is, however, to insist that binary distinctions between genuine and forged texts are rarely helpful when it comes to assessing the residue of medieval historical writing.

The verb ‘to forge’ has been used in English to refer to the construction of false texts since the later Middle Ages, but it retains some of the connotations of its original meaning, to form or fashion metal.¹ This idea of reshaping existing material is a useful one when considering forged texts in the Middle Ages. The term forgery can cover a very wide range of material, including objects such as relics and coins. Texts forged in the

¹ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘forgeren’, 5.

Middle Ages can – on a broad definition – include works falsely attributed to classical or early Christian authors, hagiographical inventions designed to lend credibility to a saint's Life, as well as various apocrypha, forged chronicles or parts thereof, false travel narratives, prophecies, laws, and decretals.² The category of forged documents includes charters, letters, indulgences, and wills – as well as the means of their authentication, most obviously through the forgery or misuse of seals, but also through the imitation of script.³

Yet such a conspectus of forgery, like the rogues' gallery that previous scholarship on forgery has sometimes produced, can mask the complex connections between forgeries and genuine texts.⁴ Forged texts may sometimes have been entirely invented, but much more often they were based upon genuine records. The forger(s) attempted to produce a credible document by adopting the style, formulae, and format of existing texts, and such activity necessarily involved research into the textual records of earlier periods of history.⁵ In the case of documents in particular, forgeries may have been produced to replace lost originals, or to improve damaged ones. As historians have long acknowledged, forgeries can contain genuine information, just as diplomatically genuine documents can contain false information.⁶ It makes sense then to see forgery not as the opposite or cancellation of the authentic, but as one end of a spectrum of textual practice; as a product of the archive, rather than an intrusion into or subversion of it.⁷

In order to explore further the function of forgery as a form of historical writing, the following pages focus primarily on the forgery of documents, since these texts may be considered fundamental to both medieval and modern historical narrative. However, I will also emphasise the intimate relation that documents have with other genres of historical writing, notably hagiography and the chronicle. A final section considers the nature of medieval criticism of forgery, and argues that medieval responses to the

² For representative examples of these different types of forgery, see Fuhrmann (ed.), *Fälschungen im Mittelalter*.

³ See Guyotjeannin, Pycke, and Tock, *Diplomatique médiévale*, pp. 367–91; on the imitation of script, see Crick, 'Historical Literacy'.

⁴ For surveys of forgeries, see Bagnani, 'On Fakes and Forgeries'; Brooke, 'Approaches to Medieval Forgery'; and Arthur Freeman, *Bibliotheca Fictiva*, pp. 6–9, 114–30.

⁵ A fundamental starting point for consideration of the relationship between forgery and historical research is Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*.

⁶ Mabillon, *De re diplomatica libri VI*, pp. 1–3, 238–42.

⁷ On the archive as a repository of historical literature, see Chapter 20 above.

falsification of the historical record were more sophisticated than has often been presumed.

Forgery as Historiography

Forgery of documents during the Middle Ages took place in a variety of contexts, but most often in monastic houses, since these institutions were not only centres of literacy but also repositories of documents.⁸ Early medieval history was a field of particular interest for monks and clerics who wished either to support their institutions' assertion of a glorious past, or to provide evidence to back up claims to rights and privileges. As a result, the textual record of Anglo-Saxon England is littered with forged or suspect documents, many of which were produced after the Norman Conquest. Indeed the large number of post-Conquest forgeries encouraged certain twentieth-century historians to dub the late eleventh and twelfth centuries a 'golden age of forgery' in England.⁹ The reasons for this turn to forgery seemed relatively clear. The Conquest resulted in the steady development of an administrative culture in which written evidence assumed heightened importance. Monasteries required documents in order to assert rights to land and privileges (exemption from episcopal interference, for example) which they possessed or thought they should possess. Lacking genuine originals, they very often resorted to forgery. One paradigm for thinking about medieval forgery, particularly in the case of England, is that forgery was a symptom of the transition from 'memory to written record' – the transition, that is, from a society in which authentication resided in oral and physical acts (such as swearing oaths and physically witnessing deeds), to one in which written texts acquired an elevated status as sources of authority and historical memory.¹⁰

In recent years certain challenges have been made to both the 'golden age' and the 'memory to written record' narratives. In the first place, it has been pointed out that, in designating a 'golden age' of forgery in the twelfth century, historians underestimated the scale of forgery in both preceding and succeeding centuries.¹¹ More importantly, recent commentary on Anglo-Saxon documents has revealed a more complex picture of the

⁸ For more on history writing and monasticism, see Chapter 2 above. On the archival practices of one particular house, Bury St Edmunds, see Chapter 11 above.

⁹ Morey and Brooke, *Gilbert Foliot*, p. 128; Brooke, 'Approaches to Medieval Forgery', pp. 115–17.

¹⁰ Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 318–28.

¹¹ See Crick, 'St Albans'; Julia Barrow, 'Why Forge Episcopal Acta', p. 26. On twelfth-century English monastic forgery of papal privileges, see Savill, 'Prelude to Forgery'.

interrelation between forged and genuine documents than hitherto appreciated.¹² It is now clear not only that there were reasonably significant levels of forgery before the Conquest, but also that instances of altering, and creative copying, of genuine early documents were endemic in many scriptoria. Above all, sensitive attention to suspect or evidently forged documents shows that, time after time, forgers engaged carefully with the historical records they sought to imitate: forgeries were often the products of significant levels of historical research.¹³ One consequence of this revaluation of forged and suspect documents is the realisation that forgeries are not simply inept or malicious imitations of historical records, or the by-products of rapid technological change in which the written text displaced oral tradition, but potentially valuable sources of historical information. Finally, as the precocious amount and quality of documentation – genuine or not – that was produced in Anglo-Saxon England testifies, characterisation of a shift from ‘memory to written record’ does not accurately describe a society in which the written text already played vital administrative and memorial roles.¹⁴ While the centralisation of royal administration, and the growth of bureaucracy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are undeniable, it is less clear that the paradigm of oral to written is helpful in understanding forgeries, many of which are the product not of the writing down of orally transmitted information, but of supplementing already existing written records.

This brief overview of the position of forged Anglo-Saxon documents in contemporary historiography can be brought into focus through consideration of a single document, in some ways typical, in others atypical, of twelfth-century forgeries: a charter allegedly granted by Edgar, king of the English, to the abbey of St Mary at Worcester on 28 December in the year 964. I choose this document, known to scholarship as the ‘Altitonantis’ after the first word of its opening phrase (‘Altitonantis Dei largiflua clementia’, ‘by the liberal clemency of high thundering God’), because it

¹² The British Academy’s Anglo-Saxon Charters series has been exemplary in this regard. See particularly Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury*, pp. 51–64; Crick (ed.), *Charters of St Albans*, pp. 47–73; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Glastonbury*, pp. 113–27; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Chertsey*, pp. 39–45; and, on Bury St Edmunds, Chapter 11 above.

¹³ Atsma and Vezin, ‘Les faux’; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Chertsey*, p. 40; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury*, pp. 51–2, 56; Brooks and Kelly (eds.), *Charters of Christ Church Canterbury*, p. 394; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Glastonbury*, p. 126: ‘The main group of privileges display evidence of archival research’; Crick, ‘Historical Literacy’, p. 190: ‘The best forgeries employed historical scholarship.’

¹⁴ See Keynes, *Diplomas of Æthelred*; and Snook, *Anglo-Saxon Chancery*. The third edition of Clanchy’s *From Memory* acknowledges his previous underestimation of the extent of literate practice in Anglo-Saxon England: pp. 23–45.

has enjoyed a nearly continuous history of commentary since the Middle Ages, which makes it an easy target for study: it is in several ways a known text, even if its ultimate origins, its author and date, remain conjectural.¹⁵

The 'Altitonantis' is a very long document. Like many medieval documents, it consists of two main sections: a *narratio*, a kind of preamble in which the author of the deed identifies him or herself and explains the circumstances in which the grant recorded in the document has come to be made; and a *dispositio*, which outlines the substance of the deed, usually followed by an 'anathema' clause promising divinely sanctioned punishment to any who contradict its terms, and finally authentication in the form of a witness list, and/or a seal. In the *narratio* of the 'Altitonantis', Edgar outlines the extent of his realm (in terms that would later attract the interest of proponents of England's imperial sovereignties) and recounts his actions in support of his country's monasteries, forty-seven of which he claims to have founded personally.¹⁶ The *dispositio* is in favour of the church at Worcester, specifically the abbey of St Mary. Edgar grants land (a half hundred called Cuthburgeslawe and other estates, culminating in the creation of the triple hundred of Oswaldslawe, so named in memory of Bishop Oswald of Worcester), continued support for the abbey, remission of certain taxes, as well as the power to raise money through the receipt of fines, and freedom from ecclesiastical and secular interference in its administration.¹⁷ The charter concludes with a series of signatures, starting with Edgar's, and including those of his queen, archbishops, and bishops.

There are a number of reasons for thinking the 'Altitonantis' is a forgery: the handwriting of the 'original' document is twelfth century, and while this might only mean that it is a copy of a tenth-century original, there is no evidence of its possession or use by the monks of St Mary in the eleventh century, when it would certainly have been useful to them.¹⁸ Some details of the grant (the use of the term 'naucupletio', i.e. ship-load, and the creation of hundreds) are anachronistic, and while the phraseology of the document resembles genuine charters, one part of it also seems to derive

¹⁵ John, 'Alleged Worcester Charter' argued that the core of the document was genuine despite later interpolations; see *contra*, Darlington (ed.), *Cartulary of Worcester*, pp. xiii–xix; and Julia Barrow, 'How the Twelfth-Century Monks' pp. 69–71. On the charters of Edgar generally, see Keynes, 'Conspetus'.

¹⁶ Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, S 731; for updated bibliography, see 'Electronic Sawyer', www.esawyer.org.uk (accessed 24 November 2017). The text of the charter is printed in Darlington (ed.), *Cartulary of Worcester*, pp. 4–7. For early modern interest in Edgar's charter, see for example Dee, *General and Rare Memorials*, pp. 58–60; and Selden, *Mare clausum*, pp. 336–339; see further Crick, 'Edgar'.

¹⁷ Darlington (ed.), *Cartulary of Worcester*, p. 4. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xv–xvi.

from a hagiographical text, Byrhtferth of Ramsey's *Life of Oswald*.¹⁹ The opening of the charter contains an unusual devotional formula, though it echoes words in genuine documents of Edgar. Finally, the 'Altitonantis' is confirmed in a charter issued by King Stephen between 1136 and 1139 (MS Harley 7513), which may itself be a forgery (it has a fake seal).²⁰

Although a late eleventh-century date has been suggested for the forgery, most scholars agree in dating it to the mid-twelfth century:²¹ it has been suggested that the "Altitonantis" and Stephen's confirmation would have been written to be produced in royal courts to try to prove Worcester's rights of secular jurisdiction'.²² Two motivating factors for the 'Altitonantis' and other forgeries of the time were the desire to show 'continuity of property and traditions between pre- and post-Conquest traditions' and 'the need to stand up to' the authority of bishops and their agents (including archdeacons and deans), which was growing at the time.²³ Julia Barrow locates it and other forgeries specifically in the context of the tenth-century conversion of Worcester from a congregation of secular clergy to a community of Benedictine monks, and the desire of the monks in the twelfth century to assert this conversion as both a rapid and legitimate process, in order to forestall moves to return the monastery to a secular cathedral community.²⁴ The 'Altitonantis' can, then, be seen as a retelling of actual events in the past that, by the twelfth century, had become of urgent importance to the monks of St Mary's Worcester. The decision to encase this narrative in the potent form of an official document gave rise to a forgery, but this status as a false document should not obscure the function of the forgery as a form of historical writing.

Forgery and Hagiography

One notable aspect of the 'Altitonantis' is its connection with another form of historical writing open to allegations of falsity and manipulation of the past: hagiography.²⁵ The 'Altitonantis' is far from alone among forgeries in possessing an intimate relation with a saint's Life. A comparable case is Malmesbury Abbey, where documents clearly drew on local hagiographic traditions relating to its former abbot, Aldhelm. These documents were in

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii. ²⁰ Julia Barrow, 'How the Twelfth-Century Monks', p. 70.

²¹ John, 'Alleged Worcester Charter', dated the charter to the time of Wulfstan, i.e. before 1095, while Darlington, *Cartulary of Worcester*, and Julia Barrow, 'How the Twelfth-Century Monks', regard the 1140s as the likely time of production.

²² Julia Barrow, 'How the Twelfth-Century Monks', p. 71. ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 73. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 73–4.

²⁵ See also Chapter 24 below.

several cases incorporated by William of Malmesbury into his influential twelfth-century histories, the *Gesta pontificum Anglorum* and the *Gesta regum Anglorum*, thereby offering an excellent example of the interrelation between (forged or suspect) document and consolidated historical record.²⁶ As S.E. Kelly has pointed out, there are parallels between Malmesbury Abbey's construction of documents out of hagiographical legend and the case of St Mildburg, a Mercian noblewoman of c.700 who was recognised as the patron saint of the minster at Wenlock by the early eighth century.²⁷ Mildburg's 'testament' ('testimonium') provides a lengthy account of the lands granted to her both in writing and orally, including the names of witnesses to the deeds. The testament, apparently still sometimes read aloud at Wenlock in the late eleventh century,²⁸ is on one level an important document, written in the voice of an early medieval female saint, which may well preserve ancient traditions. Yet from another view it is suspect, and likely to have been composed well after her death.²⁹

A far more certain case of hagiographic forgery is a charter of St Patrick that records the saint's visit to, and endowment of, Glastonbury Abbey. This allegedly fifth-century document seems to have been forged in the early thirteenth century, perhaps in order to boost the local pilgrim trade, not long before it was interpolated into William of Malmesbury's *De antiquitate Glastonie ecclesie* (*On the Antiquity of the Church of Glastonbury*);³⁰ it was still in existence as a single-sheet charter in the sixteenth century, when it was cited by the antiquary John Leland.³¹ In the charter, Patrick records that, after his successful mission to Ireland in 430, he journeyed to Britain, where through divine assistance he discovered an ancient and holy place, consecrated in favour of the Virgin Mary.³² He further discovered that a small number of hermits had remained there since the days of the second-century missionary saints Phagan and Deruvian; moreover, documentary relics in the form of writings of the two saints, and a large but mutilated volume containing the Acts of the Apostles alongside the deeds of Phagan and Deruvian, allowed Patrick to perceive the antiquity of the site. Patrick attests that he has produced two copies of his charter: one to be taken back to

²⁶ Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury*, pp. 51–2; for examples, see William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, vol. 1, pp. 592–613 (5.246–57), vol. 11, pp. 298–300; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Mynors et al., vol. 1, pp. 248–51 (2.153).

²⁷ Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury*, pp. 55–6.

²⁸ Finberg (ed.), *Early Charters*, p. 213; but see Hayward, 'Miracula Inventionis'.

²⁹ Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury*, p. 55.

³⁰ Scott (ed.), *Early History of Glastonbury*, pp. 34–6. See also Crick, 'Marshalling of Antiquity'.

³¹ Leland, *Assertio inclytissimi Arturii*, fol. 11^v.

³² Scott (ed.), *Early History of Glastonbury*, pp. 54–8.

Ireland by brothers Arnulf and Ogmar, and the other to be kept in a chest at the church.³³ It is hardly surprising that monastic and ecclesiastical institutions would want to preserve and promote texts relating to their most important patrons and founders, but it is worth noting that the hagiographical text and the forgery can share not only a common purpose, but at times a common language: Patrick's charter includes a vision in which Jesus promises to cause the saint's left arm to wither until he informs the brethren of his discovery of an ancient oratory built by Phagan and Deruvian: 'Et factum est ita' ('and so it came to pass').³⁴

The connection between suspect document and hagiographical text is perhaps best illustrated by the case of the most famous of all medieval 'forgeries', the so-called 'Donation of Constantine'. This text, which is more properly known as the *Constitutum Constantini* (the decree of Constantine), purports to be a grant by the Emperor Constantine (r.306–37) of the Western Roman empire to Pope Sylvester and his successors.³⁵ It is still cited by historians as a prime example of medieval forgery, and its successful denunciation in the fifteenth century (by Nicolas Cusanus, Reginald Pecock, and above all the humanist Lorenzo Valla) is held up as a turning point in the shift to a modern consciousness of documentary fraud and critical method.³⁶ Yet it is sometimes forgotten that the *Constitutum Constantini* was rooted in hagiography: the text was composed in the eighth or ninth centuries for reasons that remain matters of debate,³⁷ but it could not have been conceived without the legend of St Sylvester, and the story of his miraculous healing of Constantine's leprosy. Whatever the political motivations of the forger(s), it was only later in the Middle Ages that the *Constitutum* acquired status as evidence of the Church's temporal holdings and jurisdiction.³⁸ Even then, the 'donation' continued to be celebrated as part of the *vita* of Sylvester; the text of the donation itself often appeared alongside hagiographical material, and was on occasion supplemented with excerpts from the *actus Silvestri*.³⁹ Valla,

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58. For an example of forgery concerning a more recently canonised saint, see the 'Magna Carta Beati Thome' (Great Charter of St Thomas Becket), forged at Christ Church, Canterbury, probably in the 1230s, to support the interests of the monks of Christ Church: Cheney, 'Magna Carta Beati Thome'.

³⁵ For a modern edition of the text of the *Constitutum Constantini*, see Fuhrmann (ed.), *Constitutum Constantini*.

³⁶ Greenblatt, *Swerve*, pp. 149–50.

³⁷ Fried, *Donation of Constantine*; Goodson and Nelson, 'Roman Contexts'.

³⁸ An expanded version of these remarks can be found in Hiatt, *Medieval Forgeries*, pp. 137–43.

³⁹ See Fuhrmann's discussion of the versions of the text and its manuscripts: *Constitutum Constantini*, pp. 8–41, esp. pp. 18–19.

the most vociferous of the text's critics, and the only one to deem it a forgery (Cusanus and Pecock preferred to classify it as apocrypha), was undoubtedly aware of the intimate connections of the donation with hagiography, and it is this awareness that gave his denunciation its explosive nature: for if the *vita* of Sylvester was false, where did that leave the plethora of saints' Lives with equally – and often more – extraordinary and historically questionable events?⁴⁰ The shared fabric of certain forged documents and saints' Lives suggests one reason why such forgeries escaped detection and why, when detected and rejected, they very often continued to be cited and copied by the institutions whose interests they served.

Forgeries and Chronicles

As the example of William of Malmesbury indicates, forged documents were not simply texts confined to archives, to be produced from time to time during legal proceedings: they frequently informed, and were reproduced in, other genres of historical writing. Most large monasteries compiled cartularies – manuscripts that contained copies of significant documents, usually extending from the institution's foundation onwards – and these cartularies in turn served the authors of chronicles by providing them with apparently authentic source material. Later medieval chroniclers often showcased their houses' earliest documents as a means of asserting antiquity and a legal basis for their institutions' rights and privileges. A spectacular example is the history of St Augustine's, Canterbury, compiled by 1413 by one of its monks, Thomas Elmham. Elmham went so far as to include facsimile copies of what he believed to be St Augustine's earliest documents – three royal charters and a papal bull – to preserve for future generations the physical form of these texts.⁴¹ The documents were all forgeries, and in at least two cases had been rejected in late twelfth-century legal proceedings. They had nevertheless remained in the abbey's archives, and became for Elmham important icons of its historical status. Elmham's act of imitating antique script and reproducing the dimensions of the single-sheet documents he found at St Augustine's was unique, but at the same time it was consistent with other chroniclers' memorialisation of old documents.⁴²

⁴⁰ Valla, *De falso credita*. For comparison between the approaches taken by Valla, Cusanus, and Pecock, see Hiatt, *Medieval Forgeries*, pp. 146–67; and Fubini, 'Contestazioni quattrocentesche'; on the impact of Valla, see Hiatt, *Medieval Forgeries*, pp. 167–73.

⁴¹ Hiatt, *Medieval Forgeries*, pp. 52–7; Hunter, 'Facsimiles'.

⁴² Hiatt, *Medieval Forgeries*, pp. 57–62.

At times not only documents but entire histories were forged. The abbey of Crowland in Lincolnshire maintained that it was founded in 716 by King Æthelbald of Mercia. At some point in the later Middle Ages – in the fourteenth, or perhaps more likely the first half of the fifteenth century – a lengthy chronicle of Crowland Abbey was compiled, and attributed to one Ingulf, a late eleventh-century Crowland abbot.⁴³ Pseudo-Ingulf included in his chronicle a series of nine Anglo-Saxon charters, ranging from King Æthelbald's foundation charter of 716 to a charter of Edward the Confessor. These charters may well have been in existence before pseudo-Ingulf's chronicle was constructed, but as presented in the chronicle they are full of anachronisms, do not accord with known features of Anglo-Saxon diplomatic practice, and conflict with other (more reliable) historical sources.⁴⁴ As a result they have been regarded, since the seventeenth century, as forgeries.⁴⁵ The forgeries seem to have existed both in single-sheet form, as pseudo-authentic originals, at least one and probably more of which boasted golden crosses at the top and bottom of the document; the first record we have of one of these golden charters is a document recording its confirmation by Richard II in 1393.⁴⁶ At the same time their incorporation within pseudo-Ingulf's chronicle meant that the texts of the documents could be publicised more easily beyond the walls of the abbey.

By the fifteenth century, secular as well as monastic chronicles were making use of, and at times promoting, forged documents. The former soldier John Hardyng spent the last years of his long life writing and rewriting a verse chronicle of Britain from its foundation by Brutus to his own day. He presented the first version of his *Chronicle* to Henry VI of England in 1457; a second version was revised in the early 1460s to suit the interests of the Yorkist dynasty. A consistent theme of Hardyng's *Chronicle* was that the king of England was the rightful ruler of all Britain, including Scotland and Wales.⁴⁷ He maintained that the kings of Scotland, although at times wilfully asserting independence, had been forced to acknowledge England's overlordship of Scotland. To support this claim Hardyng cited charters of Scottish kings that he had himself forged, and which he had sold

⁴³ The entire *Historia Croylandensis*, including the additions to 'Ingulf's' narrative by 'Peter of Blois' and anonymous fifteenth-century continuators, was printed in Fulman, *Rerum Anglicarum scriptorum veterum*, vol. 1, pp. 1–132, 449–593.

⁴⁴ See Hiatt, *Medieval Forgeries*, pp. 36–50; and more recently, Berenbeim, *Art of Documentation*.

⁴⁵ See particularly George Hickes, 'Dissertatio Epistolaris', in his *Linguarum*.

⁴⁶ Now Oxford, Bodl., MS Ashmole 1831.

⁴⁷ For the *Chronicle* see the edition of the first version: Hardyng, *Chronicle: MS Lansdowne*, ed. Simpson and Peverley, vol. 1. On Hardyng, see also Chapters 6, 21, and 27 in this volume.

to the English royal government over the course of forty years (the earliest apparently presented to Henry V in 1422, another in 1440 to Henry VI, and the latest to Edward IV in 1463; an official Treasury record of 1457 records Hardyng's presentation of a further six documents relating to the king's superiority over Scotland). The documents purport to date from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, and they show Scottish kings from Malcolm Canmore to David II and Robert II submitting to the king of England and recognising his right to the overlordship of Scotland.⁴⁸ Several take the form of single-sheet documents, with seals (themselves forged) attached, which suggests that they were intended to be presented as evidence in legal settings. Hardyng's energetic and successful career offers an example of secular, political forgery operating in conjunction with the writing of history.

The examples of Elmham, the Crowland chronicle, and Hardyng show the extent to which textual records – forged, interpolated, and genuine – informed a range of historical writing, including secular, monastic, and ecclesiastical chronicles. Forged material supported the narratives recorded and endorsed by chroniclers, but this was only because the forgeries themselves gave tangible textual form to historical narrative, whether the narrative of a monastery's foundation, or of one kingdom's subjection to another. It would be easy to dismiss all such historical writing as tendentious and propagandistic; yet such tendentious and propagandistic material was part of the material from which medieval and modern historiography, and historical consciousness, were woven.

Criticism of Forgery

Forgeries undoubtedly circulated widely within medieval societies and underpinned a number of important historical narratives, at local, national, and transnational levels. It would be wrong to imply, however, that forgeries were not subject to criticism and censure during the Middle Ages, or to conclude from the number of medieval forgeries that no concept of forgery existed. On the contrary, there is a record of consistent attempts by medieval secular and ecclesiastical authorities to restrict and punish forgery.⁴⁹ Roman and canon law prohibited forgery, and in England statutory provision, particularly against forgery of the king's

⁴⁸ Hiatt, *Medieval Forgeries*, pp. 102–21. See also Chapter 13 above.

⁴⁹ Herde, 'Bestrafung von Fälschern'.

seal – but eventually private documents too – developed over the course of the Middle Ages.⁵⁰ Ecclesiastical censure of forgers was long-standing,⁵¹ and alarms about rogue individuals or groups of forgers seem to have been fairly common, particularly in later medieval administrative circles, with local officials empowered to root out culprits.⁵²

Forgeries were on occasion denounced as part of legal processes, particularly for suspicious physical features, including erasures, lack of plausible antiquity, and of course false authenticating devices, such as seals.⁵³ Such denunciations sometimes reveal a degree of sensitivity to the history of documentary writing and a keen sense of anachronism. The rejection of two of the documents of St Augustine's, Canterbury, which were later incorporated into Thomas Elmham's chronicle, was recorded in the following terms by the twelfth-century chronicler Gervase of Canterbury (a partisan of St Augustine's great rivals, Christ Church, Canterbury). Gervase states that the abbot of St Augustine's presented a charter of King Æthelberht and a privilege of St Augustine (both therefore allegedly early seventh-century documents) before a tribunal comprising the archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of Durham, and the abbot of St Albans:

The antiquity of the first document was indeed praiseworthy, but it had been erased and reinscribed, and it was not supported by any kind of seal. The second document was worthy of real rebuke, for its script and bull were modern [*nova*], when it was supposed to be 580 years old, dating from the time of St Augustine! It was noted, not to say notorious, that the bull of this document was lead, when cisalpine bishops and archbishops were not accustomed to append lead bulls to their authentic writings. Further, the type of Latin [*modus Latini*] and the formulae seemed different from Roman style [*a Romano stilo dissona*].⁵⁴

⁵⁰ For example, Statutes of Salisbury II, c. 40 (1238x1244), Statutes of Wells c. 67 (c.1258), Statutes of Winchester III, c. 77: Powicke and Cheney (eds.), *Councils and Synods*, pp. 382, 619–20, 717–18.

⁵¹ E.g. Cheney and Jones (eds.), *English Episcopal Acta*, p. 54 (no. 74). Several cases of forgery by priests are found in the records of the papal penitentiary: see Clarke and Zutshi (eds.), *Supplications from England and Wales*, nos. 485, 596, 1370, 1374, 2412.

⁵² See Hingeston-Randolph (ed.), *The Register of Thomas de Brantyngham*, p. 315, which records the case of certain 'sons of iniquity' in the diocese of Exeter forging letters of the pope, the king of England, and English prelates and noblemen in the early 1370s. The London Letter Books provide several examples of forgery in secular contexts, usually for financial gain. See particularly the case of the notary public Simon Flegge: Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Letter Book*, p. 105; Riley (ed. and trans.), *Memorials of London*, pp. 583–4.

⁵³ Cheney, *Pope Innocent III*, pp. 110–12. See the comments of Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego was Imago*, esp. p. 203.

⁵⁴ Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, vol. 1, pp. 296–7: 'In prima laudabilis quidem fuit vetustas, sed rasa fuit et inscripta, nec ullius sigilli munimine roborata. In alia vero reprehensione dignum

This account, admittedly delivered by a hostile witness, reveals a careful examination of the physical form of documents, with a clear sense of authenticity and what constituted genuine rather than feigned antiquity. It also demonstrates a willingness to go beyond the material appearance of the document to consider its internal textual features, such as style, formulation, and perhaps, too, the historical form of the language in which it was written. Far from dissuading fraud, however, there is evidence to suggest that such criticism prompted the monks of St Augustine's not only to preserve the 'notorious' documents but also to add more – and better – forgeries to their collection.⁵⁵ This pattern of the preservation – even embellishment and promotion – of documents after criticism seems to have been widespread.⁵⁶

In short, rather than assuming a lack of historical awareness on the part of medieval rulers and administrators, or an age of credulity, it is more accurate to see historical awareness as something that was shaped, contingent, usually partisan, and rarely if ever neutral. As a consequence, a forged document submitted to a hostile, or indifferent audience might well attract censure; a forger on the wrong side of the law might well end up punished, perhaps harshly so. Equally, it was not uncommon for forgeries to be assessed by friendly audiences, or by judges willing to turn blind eyes and not rigorously test the internal and external features of the documents.

The contingent nature of criticism, and the often adversarial nature of historical debate during the Middle Ages, explains not only the survival of 'known' forgeries, but also the tenacity of mythological history more generally. In the 1130s Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* established a potent origin myth of British kingship, aided immeasurably by its promotion of the legend of King Arthur and the prophecies of Merlin. At the end of the twelfth century, the chronicler William of Newburgh accused Geoffrey of fabricating history, succinctly pointing out a number of historical impossibilities, particularly with regard to the European conquests attributed to Arthur.⁵⁷ The rebuke

fuit, quod nova extitit ejus littera et bulla, cum vetustatis esse deberet annorum quingentorum octoginta, id est, a tempore beati Augustini cujus esse dicebatur. Fuit etiam notatum, immo notorium et notabile, quod bulla ipsius plumbea fuit, cum non soleant cisalpini praesules vel primates scriptis suis autenticis bullas plumbeas apponere. Modus etiam Latini et forma loquendi a Romano stilo dissona videbantur.'

⁵⁵ Kelly (ed.), *Charters of St Augustine's*, p. 18.

⁵⁶ The 'Donation of Constantine' itself, still defended as genuine into the seventeenth century, provides a notable example.

⁵⁷ William of Newburgh, *History of English Affairs*, pp. 28–36.

did nothing to impede the success of Geoffrey's history, which in turn inspired counter-histories, such as John Fordun's promotion of a Scottish origin myth that outdid the English.⁵⁸ When Polydore Vergil revived William's criticism in the sixteenth century, and politely suggested the anachronistic nature of Arthur's tomb at Glastonbury,⁵⁹ he received a vigorous response from the antiquary John Leland. Leland's lengthy assertion of the validity of King Arthur and other knights of the round table cited documents that he had found in his exploration of English and Welsh monastic libraries during the course of the dissolution, as well as the seal of Arthur himself.⁶⁰ However, rather than a contest between medieval (Leland) and modern (Polydore) approaches to history, or between tendentious and objective attitudes to the past, the sixteenth-century debate over Arthur seems instead to continue existing modes of historical writing, albeit with the possibility of greater dissemination allowed by the printing press.⁶¹ Polydore's criticism of Arthur was not in fact new, merely a reiteration of long-standing doubts; Leland's defence retold the old story for a new audience. The narrative of Arthur was only removed from accepted history when it ceased to be necessary for dynastic and imperial purposes. The existence of criticism and a critical sense has never been enough to guarantee a history free from false records, and it never will be.

Conclusion

According to a lauded recent discussion of the role of truth and falsehood in historical writing, 'The historian's craft (and, in a different way, the poet's) involves something that is part of everyone's life: untangling the strands of the true, the false, and the fictional which are the substance of our being in the world.'⁶² As the records of medieval Europe suggest, however, it is not always possible to untangle these threads. Even where a text is demonstrably false, a forgery, the possibility frequently remains that it is based on a genuine text – that the strand of the false in fact is spun from the same material as the true thread. Nor is it necessarily desirable to dissociate the threads too rigorously. The forgery that copies elements of

⁵⁸ See Bower, *Scotichronicon*, vol. 1, pp. 1–87. See also Chapter 13 above.

⁵⁹ Vergil, *Anglica historia*, pp. 121–2. ⁶⁰ Leland, *Assertio inclytissimi Arturii*, e.g. fols. 11^v–14^v.

⁶¹ For more on print and history writing, see Chapter 21 above.

⁶² Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces*, p. 6.

a lost genuine text but adds new elements may preserve all that remains of a historical source.⁶³

More importantly, to set aside forgery of historical texts is to set aside one form of historical writing. Not only were historians often forgers; forgers frequently needed to become historians. Their interventions in the historical record may have been tendentious, biased, and in that sense false, serving the interests of the forger or the forger's institution. Yet the same could be said of many a chronicle and many a saint's Life, and indeed many a legally genuine document: there is little surprise that these genres of historical writing inform and support one another. Again, this interconnection between legitimate and illegitimate modes of historical writing does not mean that categories of false and true need be abandoned, still less that they were abandoned in the Middle Ages. It does imply, however, that forgery should not be seen as the binary opposite of the genuine text, but as one extreme on a spectrum of textual practice, which includes many shades of ambiguity, and in which narrative and argument were always shaping forces.

Anachronism was, and continues to be, the mark of a forgery, a sign of historical implausibility that allows an observer to redate a text. The criticism of forgery may then be seen as a kind of chronological policing, in which texts are moved from one period to another, from their pretended time to their real one. Textual cultures such as those of the Middle Ages will provide much material for such criticism, because they are fundamentally accretive: chronicles – but also poems, romance, hagiography, and at times documentary records – invited addition and supplementation, adaptation to the needs of succeeding generations. Living texts of this kind inevitably mixed words from different periods, and therefore left themselves open to charges of anachronism. That a sense of anachronism – a sense of historical period, and of change over time – existed in the Middle Ages is attested by Gervase of Canterbury's raised eyebrows over the lead bull of St Augustine's allegedly antique papal privilege, and its 'new' writing. As Gervase's remarks, and those of other critics, medieval and modern, indicate, in the final analysis forgeries may reveal more about their own time and its expectations of authenticity than about the time they claim to represent. Yet it is worth reflecting that critical standards change:

⁶³ Among many possible examples, see Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Glastonbury*, pp. 113–14; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury*, p. 59; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Chertsey*, pp. 40, 89–114; Atsma and Vezin, 'Les faux'. For the possible interpolation of an original clause into a later copy of a document, see Savill, 'Prelude to Forgery'.

as any examination of the history of criticism of forgeries shows, texts that are considered solidly authentic by one group of historians may be viewed as hopelessly unreliable by later generations; movement in the other direction, from false to genuine, albeit less frequent, is not impossible.⁶⁴ One reason for the possibility of movement between categories is that tests for authenticity are contingent, not absolute: they ultimately depend on arguments about what is valid and plausible, what is not, and what must be regarded as uncertain. One era's anachronism is another's sign of authenticity, which is another reason for understanding forgeries as part of the historical record, rather than its criminal underbelly, or as items in a cabinet of curiosities.

⁶⁴ See the case of Ingulf's *Chronicle*, discussed above; the case for seeing some part of the charters therein as genuine is made by Roffe, 'Historia Croylandensis'. See too Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Chertsey*, p. 118–22, for the resuscitation of a document previously held to be a forgery.