

## 8. William of Malmesbury: "The Deeds of the Kings of the English" and "The Modern History"

The passages which follow are taken from two works by this very voluminous writer: the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and the *Historia Novella*. Some notice of this author has been given above (pp. 98, 99), and further information concerning him will be found in Stubbs's edition of these two works, and also in R. R. Darlington, *Anglo-Norman Historians* (London, 1947). The *Gesta Regum Anglorum* was finished in 1125 but two new recensions appeared between 1135 and 1140. The *Historia Novella* was written in 1140-1142. For the reign of Henry I and subsequently, William of Malmesbury may be considered therefore as a contemporary source. In the passages here printed will be found his opinion of the Norman Conquest, his estimate of Henry I, his account of the wreck of the White Ship and his description of two important councils held during the reign of Stephen. He was personally present at one, at least, of these councils. The text is printed in *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis—Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series, 2 vols., 1887-1889), and the section references here supplied are to that edition. Translations of these works are to be found in J. A. Giles, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle* (1847) and in J. Stevenson, *Church Historians of England*, vol. III, pt. I (1854). These have been used in preparing the version which follows.

### (a) *On the English and the Normans*<sup>1</sup>

This<sup>2</sup> was a fatal day for England, a melancholy havoc of our dear country brought about by its passing under the domination of new lords. For England had long ago adopted the manners of the 'Angles' which had been very various at different times. In the first years after their arrival they were barbarians in their look and manners, warlike in their usages, heathens in their rites; but after embracing the faith of Christ, in process of time and by degrees, owing to the peace which they enjoyed, they came to regard arms as only of secondary importance, and gave their whole attention to religion. I say nothing of the poor, whom meanness of fortune often restrains from overstepping the bounds of justice; I omit men of ecclesiastical rank whom respect for their sacred profession, or fear of shame, sometimes restrains from straying from the true path; I speak of princes who from the greatness of their power might have full liberty to indulge in pleasure. Some of these in their own country, and some at Rome, changing their habit, obtained a heavenly kingdom and a saintly communion; and many during their whole lives, to outward seeming so managed their wordly affairs that they might disperse their treasures on the poor, or divide them among monasteries. What shall I say of the multitudes of bishops, hermits, and abbots? Does not the whole island blaze with so many relics that you can scarcely pass a village of any consequence but what you hear the name of some new saint? And of how many have all records perished? Nevertheless, with the lapse of time, the love of learning and of religion decayed, and some years before the coming of the Normans it had declined. The clergy, contented with a very slight measure of learning, could scarcely stammer out the words of the sacraments, and a person who understood grammar was an object of wonder and astonishment. The monks mocked the rule of their order with fine vestments and with the use of every kind of food. The nobility, given up to luxury and wantonness, did not go to church in the early morning after the manner of Christians, but merely in a casual manner heard matins and Mass

from a hurrying priest in their chambers amid the blandishments of their wives. The common people, left unprotected, became a prey to the more powerful who amassed riches either by seizing the property of the poor or by selling their persons to foreigners. Nevertheless it is the manner of this people to be more inclined to dissipation than to the accumulation of wealth. There was one custom repugnant to nature which they adopted: namely to sell their female servants when pregnant by them, after they had satisfied their lust, either to public prostitution or to foreign slavery. Drinking in parties was a universal custom, in which occupation they passed entire days and nights. They consumed their whole fortune in mean and despicable houses, unlike the Normans and the French who in noble and splendid mansions live with frugality. The vices attendant upon drunkenness followed in due course and these, as is well known, enervate the human mind. Hence it came about that they engaged William more with rashness and fury than with military skill, and so they doomed themselves and their country to slavery by giving him an easy victory in a single battle. For nothing is less effective than rashness; and what begins with violence is quickly checked. The English at that time wore short garments, reaching to the mid-knee; they had their hair cropped, their beards shaven, their arms laden with gold bracelets, their skin adorned with punctured designs<sup>1</sup>; they were wont to eat until they became surfeited and to drink until they were sick. These latter qualities they imparted to their conquerors; as to the rest they adopted their manners. I would not, however, have these bad propensities ascribed to the English universally. I know that many of the clergy at that time trod the path of sanctity, and I know that many of the laity of all ranks and conditions were well-pleasing to God. Far be it from me to be unjust: my accusation is not indiscriminate. But as in peace the mercy of God often cherishes both the bad and the good together, so also does his severity sometimes include them both in tribulation.

The Normans—that I may speak of them also—were at that time, as they are now, exceedingly particular in their dress, and delicate in their food, but not to excess. They are a race inured to war, and can hardly live without it, fierce in attacking their enemies, and when force fails, ready to use guile or to corrupt by bribery. As I have said, they live with economy in large houses; they envy their equals; they wish to vie with their superiors; and they plunder their subjects though they protect them from others. They are faithful to their lords though slight offence gives them an excuse for treachery. They weigh treason by its chance of success, and change their opinions for money. They are the most polite of peoples; they consider strangers to merit the courtesy they extend to each other; and they intermarry with their subjects. After their coming to England they revived the rule of religion which had there grown lifeless. You might see churches rise in every village, and, in the towns and cities, monasteries built after a style unknown before; you could watch the country flourishing with renewed religious observance; each wealthy man counted the day lost in which he had neglected to perform some outstanding benefaction.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This should be compared with the pictorial evidence of the Bayeux-Tapestry (see above, p. 235).

<sup>2</sup> This should be compared with the description of the Normans given by Ordericus Vitalis (above, No. 7, p. 282).

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, SS. 245, 246.

<sup>2</sup> The day of the battle of Hastings.