

Priston's charter of A.D. 931

Priston's charter of A.D. 931 gifting 10 hides of land to the Minster in Bath has long been regarded by historians as a forgery. One of the factors pointing to its forgery is that in the Priston document some of the clerics listed in the witness list did not hold those particular posts in 931 and indeed the list appears to have been copied from a charter of A.D. 941 (drawn up by Aethelstan's successor Eadmund).

However the latest scholar to examine all the charters [S.E. Kelly (ed), *Anglo-Saxon Charters 13: Charters of Bath and Wells*, Oxford, 2007] feels there maybe some contemporary truth enmeshed within the extraordinary narrative. The story behind the charter itself is unique in its recording of sensational personal detail. It states that King Aethelstan granted the estates in both Priston and Cold Ashton to the Minster because they belonged to a discredited Anglo-Saxon thegn, Alfred, who was involved in an attempt to blind Aethelstan in Winchester early in his reign. The plot was foiled and possibly Alfred fled to Rome or possibly he was sent, as the text says, to clear himself by undertaking an oath to the Pope stating his innocence. He apparently died in Rome and was therefore judged to have perjured himself, so proving his guilt.

There is no information as to who Alfred actually was, although there are four 'Alfreds' who witness the charters of Aethelstan's father, King Edward the Elder, of whom only two are also recorded under Aethelstan. Clearly, however, Alfred owned quite a lot of land and might possibly have been a royal official, because more of his estates, this time 5 hides in each of Norton (now in Wiltshire), and Somerford and Ewen in Gloucestershire, were alienated in the same year by Aethelstan, but this time to Malmesbury Abbey, not Bath.

Dr Kelly believes that both the Bath and Malmesbury charters could represent a somewhat sensationally embroidered account of a genuine historical incident. Aethelstan, the oldest of Edward the Elder's numerous offspring, was proclaimed King by the Mercians [amongst whom, it is thought, he was brought up] at Edward's death in A.D. 924. But his coronation did not take place till the autumn of A.D. 925, which might suggest some difficulty in establishing himself in the West Saxon part of the kingdom. This fact would mesh with the story of a Winchester plot against him, particularly if there had been some resistance, as obviously a blind king would not be able to rule a society in which campaigning was a normal requirement. As to Alfred's reported dramatic collapse in front of the Altar of St Peter's then death three days later, the journey itself was a most hazardous one and Rome was surrounded by malarial marshes, so illness rather than divine retribution might be a possible explanation.

But why might the incident have been embroidered in a charter? Possibly both Bath and Malmesbury were facing a legal challenge from the disposed heirs and if this was the case, it would imply that they got together to protect their holdings— we will never know. Interestingly, Aethelstan himself did not choose to be buried in Winchester's New Minster with his forebears but lies in Malmesbury on the border between Wessex and Mercia

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