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THE MYSTERY OF THE SEVEN ANGLO-SAXON MONASTERIA

by Richard Hoggett

A mistaken reading of a letter written by the eighth-century East Anglian king Ælfwald to the missionary Boniface at some point between 747 and 749 has left many scholars attempting to identify the seven East Anglian monasteria in which the king promised prayers would be said for the missionary. This article considers the contents and context of the original letter and examines what its correct reading can tell us about eighth-century religious practices in East Anglia.

INTRODUCTION

The very first article in the very first volume of the journal *Anglo-Saxon England*, published in 1972, was a seminal paper by Dorothy Whitelock entitled 'The pre-Viking age church in East Anglia' (Whitelock 1972). In the space of just 22 pages, Whitelock used the surviving historical sources to provide what James Campbell later described as 'an admirable and fully referenced account of the early history of the diocese' (Campbell 1996, 4 n.2). Forty years after its publication the contents of the article have yet to be bettered, in itself a testament to the quality of Whitelock's scholarship, and her assessment has underpinned much subsequent study of the early church in East Anglia (e.g. Williamson 1993; Campbell 1996; Pestell 2004; Hoggett 2010). Yet there is one passage in this article which has created confusion and caused difficulties for subsequent generations of scholars.

The passage in question concerns a letter from the eighth-century East Anglian king Ælfwald to the missionary Boniface written at some point between 747 and 749 (Haddan and Stubbs 1871, 387–8; Tangl 1916, 181–2; Emerton 1940, 149–50). Whitelock summarised the contents of that letter thus:

> Boniface had written to ask for their prayers, and the letter says that masses and prayers are said for him in their seven monasteries, and it asks for prayers in return and for the mutual exchange of the names of those who die, that prayers may be offered for them (Whitelock 1972, 16).

Whitelock's reading of 'seven monasteries' has since percolated through a number of other works, resulting in all of the authors who have considered the subject attempting to identify which seven sites Ælfwald may have been referring to and struggling to explain why he singled out seven of what must have been numerous such establishments in eighth-century East Anglia.

THE SEVEN MONASTERIA

From the outset it should be noted that one of the very few ways in which Whitelock's article shows its academic age is in its giving of 'monasteries' as a translation of the Latin *monasteria*. *Monasterium* was the Latin noun most commonly used during the early medieval period to describe a congregation of people living together under religious vows, but modern scholars tend to avoid translating this as 'monastery' because the term carries too many connotations of the cloistered monasticism of the Benedictines and other major orders which typified the later medieval period (Foot 1992, 214–15; 2006, 5–6). Such models of monastic life are anachronistic in an Anglo-Saxon context and the modern convention is to use 'minster', a term derived from the Old English Latin loan-word *mynster*, itself used as a direct equivalent of monasterium in contemporary vernacular texts (Foot 1992, 215; Blair 2005, 2–3). The term 'minster' will be used throughout the rest of this article for the sake of consistency.

An additional layer of complication is introduced to the discussion by the fact that, although linked by the religious devotion of their inmates, both of the terms *monasterium* and *mynster* were used to describe a wide variety of institutions, encompassing everything from 'a small community of a handful of men, living at a distance from secular settlement … to a large, well-endowed congregation of men and women, living in a planned enclosure around one or more stone-built churches' (Foot 2006, 5). In terms of our reading of Ælfwald's letter, it is therefore difficult for us to understanding exactly what kinds of institution he may have been referring to, while at the same time greatly broadening the field of potential candidates for Whitelock's 'seven monasteries'.

Drawing on historical references, and Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* in particular,

Whitelock herself was of the opinion that the epistolary seven minsters may have included the following: the unnamed institution to which Bede records that king Sigeberht retired in the 640s (HE, iii, 18); the double house at Ely, which had been founded in 673 by Æthelthryth, daughter of the East Anglian king Anna (HE, iv, 19); the unnamed house of which Bede's East Anglian informant Abbot Esi had been the head (HE, Preface); Botolph's minster at Iken, the foundation date of which is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 654 (Plummer and Earle 1898, 28–9); and the nunnery or double minster presided over by Ælfwald's sister, Abbess Ecgburg, referred to in the dedication of the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, of which more below (Colgrave 1956). Whitelock did not think that the episcopal sees of Dommoc and Elmham would have been included in Ælfwald's tally, and likewise did not include the site of *Cnobheresburg*, recorded by Bede as a royal gift from Sigeberht to the missionary Fursa (HE, iii, 18), which had apparently already been despoiled by the mid-seventh century (Whitelock 1972, 16).

Sam Newton's discussions of Ælfwald and his letter also follow Whitelock's reading (Newton 1993, 134–5; 2003, 44). In his enumeration of the likely candidate sites, in common with Whitelock, he considers Botolph's minster at Iken, Sigeberht's retirement minster and the double house at Ely to be likely candidates, along with a possible minster at Blythburgh, where according to the *Liber Eliensis* Anna was buried in 654 (Blake 1962, 18) and the nunnery at East Dereham founded by Wihtburh, who some sources purport to be Anna's youngest daughter (Yorke 1990, 70). Contra Whitelock, Newton considers that the two episcopal sees of Dommoc and Elmham were likely to be included in the count, and taking a more archaeological approach to the problem also mentions the then-recently-excavated Middle Saxon settlement and cemetery sites at Burrow Hill, Butley (Fenwick 1984) and Staunch Meadow, Brandon (Carr et al. 1988) as other likely contenders.

Tom Williamson's (1993, 143–9) attempt to identify seven likely sites is much more archaeological in its approach. His tally includes the episcopal see of North Elmham, Botolph's Iken, Wihtburh's Dereham and Burgh Castle, a site often (perhaps spuriously) identified as Bede's *Cnobheresburg* (see Hoggett 2010, 44–6). In addition, he suggests Babingley in west Norfolk, which Camden's *Britannia* (again perhaps spuriously) records as the landfall of Felix, the founding bishop of Dommoc (Moralee 1982). Other sites suggested by Williamson are Seham – a site most often identified as Soham, Cambs, but perhaps Norfolk's Saham Toney – where according to William of Malmesbury's *De Gestis Pontificum Anglorum* Felix's body was taken after his death, and Reedham, where later traditions recorded in the *Liber Eliensis* and the *Liber Albus* of Bury St Edmunds indicate that Felix founded a church (Williamson 1993, 144–5).

Tim Pestell (2004, 21), too, follows Whitelock's reading of the letter. However, rather than focussing on seven sites, he cites the letter as proof of the shortcomings of the period's historical sources when viewed against the region's rich archaeological record, which contains evidence for far more than seven eighth-century minsters (see Wade 1999; Rogerson 2005). In the interests of fairness, it should be stressed again that none of the authors whose work is cited here has claimed that there were only seven minsters in eighth-century East Anglia, all of them acknowledging that there must have been more and offering their interpretations of which seven sites were being singled out.

As can be seen from the differing shortlists given above, various hypotheses about the rationale behind Ælfwald's possible selection criteria have been developed. Perhaps some short-lived early foundations may have disappeared by the time of Ælfwald's writing, as may be the case with *Cnobheresburg*? Perhaps other well-known sites from the period, such as *Beodericsworth* (later Bury St Edmunds), may not yet have been sufficiently well established by the 740s? Or perhaps Ælfwald was specifically only referring to foundations with connections to his own royal family? All of these are valid hypotheses, but such intellectual efforts are actually unnecessary, since the various pieces of this puzzle have been in print for a long time, although they have largely gone unrecognized. As is often the case in instances such as this, in order to get to the heart of this mystery we need to return to the original sources.

ÆLFWALD'S LETTER IN CONTEXT

The author of the letter in question, Ælfwald, ruled the East Anglian kingdom between c.713 and 749, and his pedigree is recorded in a ninth-century Anglian collection of royal genealogies (Dumville 1976, 31). He is particularly remembered for commissioning the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, one of the earliest English saints' lives which is thought to have been written in East Anglia by the monk Felix at some point between 730 and 740 (Colgrave 1956, 15–9). As well as indicating the king's keenness to promote literary endeavours, the breadth of the texts drawn upon by Felix and the style of his prose indicate that, far from being a backwater, eighth-century East Anglia was rich in manuscript sources

and was capable of producing scholars and scribes of renown. Indeed, Sam Newton has argued that the epic poem Beowulf may also have been composed in East Anglia during Ælfwald's reign, citing personal names which appear in both the poem and in Ælfwald's own genealogy and stylistic similarities between the poem and the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* among his arguments (Newton 1993, 132–45). Newton's thesis has not met with universal acceptance, but the fact that the case can be argued so cogently is a testament to the cultural prowess of the East Anglian kingdom during this period.

The recipient of the letter, Boniface, was an Anglo-Saxon missionary who was very active on the Continent during the first half of the eighth century and who has come to be widely known as the 'Apostle to the Germans'. During the course of his lifetime Boniface was heavily involved with reform of the Frankish Church and ultimately became the archbishop of Mainz, before being martyred in 754 (Wood 2004). Boniface's wide-reaching correspondence, comprising some 150 letters written by, to and about him, was collected shortly after his death by Lullus, his successor as archbishop. This collection survives in several eighth-, ninth- and eleventh-century copies, and printed editions of the Latin text have been produced since the seventeenth century. What is seen as the most accurate transcription of the letters was published by Michael Tangl (1916), and his text formed the basis of the standard translations produced by Ephraim Emerton (1940).

Ælfwald's letter to Boniface seems to have been composed at some point between 747 and 749, its dates being constrained by its tangential references to the outcomes of the Council of Clovesho of 747 (see below) and the end of Ælfwald's reign. The text of the letter only survives as a part of Boniface's correspondence, and no trace of it (or indeed any other royal correspondence) survives in the East Anglian archives, the letter being just one of many documents which have been lost to us, perhaps as a result of Viking predations, the numerous relocations of the episcopal sees or any number of other factors. Good Latin transcriptions of the letter have been published by Haddan and Stubbs (1871, 387–8) and by Tangl (1916, 181–2: Letter 81), with translations provided by Kylie (1911, 152–3: Letter XXXVII) and by Emerton (1940, 149–50: Letter LXV). Translations of the letter can also readily be found online (e.g. http://elfinspell.com/MedievalMatter/BonifaceLetters/Letters30-38.html).

THE KEY TO THE MYSTERY

With the exception of the 'seven monasteries' reference, Whitelock's summary of the contents of Ælfwald's letter is very thorough: the king is responding to a request for prayers from Boniface, which he assures him will be forthcoming, and he suggests that they exchange the names of their dead so that mutual prayers can be said for them too. The letter ends with a short postscript vouching for the messenger who carried the letter. In the sentence which is the focus of this discussion, Ælfwald assured Boniface that his name was being remembered '*in septenis monasteriorum nostrorum sinaxis*' (Tangl 1916, 181), which Kylie translated as 'in the seven offices of our monasteries' (Kylie 1911, 152) and Emerton gave as 'in the seven-fold recitation of the office of our monasteries' (Emerton 1940, 149). A footnote to the Latin transcription published by Haddan and Stubbs in 1871 also indicates that Ælfwald is referring to the seven canonical hours at this point (Haddan and Stubbs 1871, 388).

Here, then, is the key to the mystery of East Anglia's seven Anglo-Saxon minsters: in a rare mistake on her part, Whitelock read this phrase to mean 'in our seven monasteries' and this reading underpinned her subsequent analysis of the contents of the letter. Such is Whitelock's authority and so widely cited is her article that this slip has effectively entered the canon of accepted facts about the early East Anglian church, an area so devoid of contemporary sources that every tantalising glimpse is readily seized upon. As we have seen, although many commentators have acknowledged that the notion of seven minsters is problematic, even nonsensical, few have openly questioned this reading, the exception being those who have returned to the original sources for themselves (e.g. Foot 1990, 52; 2006, 197; Plunkett 2005, 153).

It would be disingenuous to claim that Whitelock's misreading has gone wholly unnoticed or that every scholar who has used Ælfwald's letter has been mistaken about its contents, but few of the instances where it has been read and used properly are particularly widely known or accessible to a general audience, unlike some of the works which have cited the 'seven monasteries' of Whitelock's article. Clearly the contents of Ælfwald's letter itself have never been seen to be problematic, with transcriptions and translations from the nineteenth century onwards consistently rendering the 'seven offices' phrase correctly. Sarah Foot has been citing the letter in its correct translation for a number of years to illustrate the workings of the Anglo-Saxon monastic day (Foot 1990, 52; 2005, 197), but is clearly unaware of the confused translation which has slipped

into the discussion of the East Anglian church. Steven Plunkett, on the other hand, is aware of the circulating mistranslation and refers to it and the correct translation in his *Suffolk in Anglo-Saxon Times* (2005, 153), although he does not mention any of the texts which follow the erroneous translation by name and the significance of his corrective statement is somewhat undermined by the fact that book's house style does not allow for references. It is hoped that presenting the full argument surrounding the contents of the letter and the misunderstanding regarding the 'seven monasteries' in a journal such as this will do something to redress this imbalance.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Of course, Whitelock's misreading does not render the document useless, and Ælfwald's letter still has the potential to shed light on the workings of the East Anglian church – indeed, it is arguably our only contemporary reference to originate within East Anglia, the accounts in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* having largely (if not wholly) been compiled from external sources (Kirby 1966, 361–3; Hoggett 2010, 24–7, 34–5). That the king should be corresponding with missionaries in this fashion is a strong indication of the role which Christian kings such as Ælfwald played on the international stage, and as Plunkett observes, the letter 'reveals a scholarly, fluent command of Latin, a subtle understanding of theological debate and the perfect manners of a King' (Plunkett 2005, 153). Of course, a degree of caution needs to be exercised here and we need to remember that although the letter is written in the king's name, the letter is not necessarily the work of the king himself, perhaps being the work of a secretary or translator, whose own literary skills may have been brought to bear on the task and the subject matter. Nevertheless, the very fact of the composition of this letter, coupled with Ælfwald's patronage of the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* and the potential links to the Beowulf poem alluded to above, are indicative of the rich tradition of literacy and religiosity in existence in East Anglia by the mid-eighth century.

Ælfwald's reference to the manner in which Boniface's name and those of others were to be praised during the seven offices of the monastic day gives us a strong indication of the practices being employed in the East Anglian kingdom. In formulating his rule for monasteries St Benedict of Nursia took inspiration from Psalm 119 – 'Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments' (verse 164) – and stipulated that seven offices should be held throughout each day: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline (Doyle 1948, 36: Chapter 16). The same Psalm contains the line 'At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee because of thy righteous judgments' (verse 62), and so Benedict also required that a night service be held, bringing the total number of offices in the Benedictine day to eight (Foot 2005, 191–205). We cannot be certain that St Benedict's Rule was being followed in East Anglia at this date, but Ælfwald's singling out of seven daily offices for the saying of prayers strongly suggests that a standardised version of Benedict's horarium at least was being practised in the region at this time.

Ælfwald's letter is one of only two surviving Anglo-Saxon documents to refer to the seven-fold recitation of the offices in this fashion, the other being the fifteenth canon of the reforming ecclesiastical Council of *Clovesho* of 747 (Haddan and Stubbs 1871, 367; Foot 2005, 197). This is no coincidence: Boniface himself appears to have played a large part in shaping the canons of the Council, as is suggested by their reflecting criticisms of the English church expressed by him separately in a letter to Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury and the convenor of the Council (Emerton 1940, 136–40; Cubitt 1995, 102–10). We also know from the list of signatories that the East Anglian Bishop of *Dommoc*, Heardwulf, attended the 747 Council and we can assume that through him Ælfwald must have been aware of Boniface's role in the proceedings. Of course, only half of the exchange of the original correspondence survives and there is no record of Boniface's original letter to Ælfwald, in which he may have restated the aims of the Council directly, but given what else we know of Ælfwald's patronage of the Church it should come as no surprise that he was well versed in its continuing development.

It is also interesting to note that the mutual saying of prayers for patrons and benefactors after the daily offices to which Ælfwald alludes is a practice which we later find enshrined in the tenth-century *Regularis Concordia*, under which Late Anglo-Saxon monasticism was reformed (Symans 1953). In this document, which attempted to standardise Benedictine monastic practices in England, we find specific reference to prayers for the king, queen and benefactors being said after seven of the eight offices. The exception is Prime, the second office of the day held at first light, although the text of the Regularis gives no indication as to why this should have been the case (Symans 1953, 14 n.3). We know very little about the shape of the Anglo-Saxon monastic day (see Foot 2005, 191–205), but the compilers of the *Regularis* were clearly building upon on former and existing monastic practices, and Ælfwald's letter again

gives us a rare indication that standardised offices with accompanying prayers were being observed in East Anglian monasteries as early as the eighth century, if not before.

CONCLUSION

Ælfwald's letter to Boniface composed as some point between 747 and 749 is one of the very few contemporary indigenous sources relating to the religious practices of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia, although in a twist of fate it only happens to survives in an external collection of continental correspondence. As we have seen, the letter itself provides several tantalising glimpses of religious practices in eighth-century East Anglia, which are mirrored in other sources, and significantly it does seem to suggest that monastic offices derived from a rule akin to that of St Benedict were being observed in the kingdom at this time.

Unfortunately, to date the importance and usefulness of this source has been somewhat overshadowed by an accident of historiography, whereby a single mistaken reading of 'seven monasteries' on Whitelock's part has inadvertently become an accepted fact, which has in turn caused confusion for subsequent scholars. Much ink has been spilt attempting to identify the seven institutions to which Ælfwald may have been referring, unnecessarily as it transpires, as anyone returning to the original text or the existing translations would have soon discovered. Given how few contemporary sources we have for the study of the early East Anglian church it has felt necessary to bring this mistaken interpretation to the notice of a wider readership, so that the debate might move past this issue and enable us to focus instead on more fundamental and ultimately rewarding avenues of research. Finally, the 'Mystery of the Seven Anglo-Saxon *monasteria*' serves as an object lesson to us all and is a salutary warning to always check one's sources.

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