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William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History

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It is one of the worst vices of medievalists that we are too reluctant to take the authors of our major sources at their word. We are keen to classify (or dismiss) repeated ideas or phrases as tropes, *topoi* or commonplaces merely because they are frequently repeated. Perhaps we should consider that the very repetition of a concept indicated its importance, rather than consign such features to the realm of literary criticism. Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn?s new monograph, *William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History* takes one of the most familiar of these ?tropes? (a chronicler?s assertion that he wrote for the moral edification of the reader) and convincingly shows that we *must* take it seriously if we are to understand a particularly crucial text, William of Malmesbury?s *Gesta Regum Anglorum*.(1) An extremely detailed investigation of William of Malmesbury?s writing, linking *GR* to his theological output, is used to test William?s assertion that he wrote *ad bonae vitae institutum.* Sønnesyn?s objective is to show that William was not only heavily influenced by, but consciously wrote in the philosophical/ethical tradition of, Cicero and of Augustine of Hippo. The result is an important and occasionally difficult work that makes a very significant contribution to the growing scholarship on the greatest of 12th-century England?s chroniclers and will soon be considered required reading for anyone conducting serious research on the tradition of English chronicle writing in the period.

Summary

The monograph proceeds in seven chapters of widely varying length. The first of these, *The Framework of an Enquiry* (pp. 1?20), makes the case for writing the work. Sønnesyn shows that William of Malmesbury repeatedly commented on the purpose of reading and writing history (and not just in his historical works), suggesting that modern historians (most outstandingly Bishop Stubbs) have valued William because and only insofar as he conformed much more closely to modern ?scientific? history than most of his contemporaries. William?s own comments, however, strongly influenced by his extensive knowledge of classical ethicists as well as by historians ancient and medieval, ought not to be disregarded as mere *topoi* but taken seriously as a manifesto for his work. Sønnesyn develops the point by arguing that ?historical writing? itself cannot be addressed as an atemporal ideal but that we must pay more attention than historians often have to the question of why history is written in the first place. We must view historical writing as a practice, a ?socially embodied activity ... a locus of meaning? (p. 15), that can be fully understood only in the context of its authorship. In consequence, William?s historical writing (and by extension the historical writing of all medieval monks) must be located very firmly in the setting and overarching philosophical objectives of Benedictine monastic life.

Through his extensive knowledge of Roman philosophers (most importantly Cicero and Augustine), William of Malmesbury inherited a complex and highly coherent set of ethical ideas. In the classical scheme, all philosophy aimed at an understanding of the highest attainable human good (*Telos*), though different schools might disagree on what constituted that good. In a Christian context, it could only mean unity with (in the Augustinian formulation, loving contemplation of) God. This meant more than merely the apprehension of correct doctrine, however; it required the purposeful and disciplined development of good character, often focussed around specifically designed spiritual exercises based on the contemplation of edifying examples. These could even be drawn from the (properly excerpted) work of pagan authors. It was also a collective endeavour, arising from the nature of man as a social animal. In the context of monastic or scholastic education (a distinction in Sønnesyn?s view that has been rather overstated) this meant the relationship between student and master. At a greater scale, this meant the Augustinian concept of a Christian *res publica* united around its shared pursuit of *Telos*.

William?s theological work (his comparatively neglected *Commentary on the Lamentations* and his *Miracles of the Virgin*) shows that he had developed an ecclesiology much influenced by Augustine?s concept of the Christian moral community. Just as Christ stood at the head of the church, kings stood at the head of earthly nations. They could exercise that role to lead their people towards *Telos*, or their personal moral failures could bring about spiritual and material decay in their societies.

Sønnesyn argues that *GR*?s historical content is entirely rational within this philosophical scheme. The first two books show the emergence of the English as a civilized, Christian people, bound together by their status as a moral community advancing towards a Christian *Telos*, and making spiritual, moral and material progress under the leadership of kings supported by nobles and bishops. In Sønnesyn?s view, modern, ?scientific? history separates the empirical from the moral, and regards William of Malmesbury?s value as a scholar as resident in his empirical trustworthiness. Sønnesyn argues, however, that as a product of his philosophical/ethical inheritance, moral progress or retreat was the central object of William?s interest. William?s remarks on earlier English intellectuals (such as Aldhem, Alcuin and Bede) show that he admired their learning not for its own sake, but for its reformative capacity. In his understanding, moral unity and progress (largely inspired by the king) brought with them military and political success, while royal degeneracy brought division, decay and defeat at the hands of foreign invaders (as had happened twice in the 11th century). Nevertheless, despite the disasters provoked by the character defects of Aethelred II and the under-educated leadership of the late Anglo-Saxon church, the English had been established as a national moral community sufficiently securely for the Norman Conquest to mean the divine correction of their recent errors, not the obliteration of their national identity. Kingship is seen less as a juristic office than a perfective moral role.

In Sønnesyn?s view, the later books of *GR* add relatively little to this scheme in conceptual terms. William?s treatment of the Norman kings which (as has long been recognised) is modelled on the Suetonian biographies (with heavy emphasis on their personal characters) may not be to the taste of the modern reader, but does accord very well with William?s broader purposes. It represents the fullest development of the edificatory examples of good and bad kings that William?s view of the purpose of education required.

In short, Sønnesyn has advanced a very convincing case that William ought not to be thought of as a practitioner of an atemporal historical profession, but as a monastic educator working in a self-consciously classical framework first and foremost. His primary interest was in spiritual/moral development and history provided an appropriate mechanism for that. William himself did not separate the empirical from the moral, for he viewed moral education as the primary goal of historical writing, the moral character of leaders as historically causative, and the lessons of history residing in not just in epistemological fact but in divine Truth.

Analysis

William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History is a substantial achievement, a worthy addition to the growing body of scholarship on William himself and on the extraordinary flowering of historical writing that took place in the Anglo-Norman *Regnum* during the 12th century. Sønnesyn?s central case, that William conceived of his work, and the task of historians more generally, as a continuation of the task of classical ethicists in a Christian moral framework, and that this conception was the organising principle behind his work, unifying his history and theology, is admirably well-demonstrated. It also positions elements of major interest in the historical tradition of the period, such as concepts of national identity and kingship, more firmly within the intellectual culture of the day. It ought to have a substantial impact on our reading of *Gesta Regum,* and on our understanding of the chronicle tradition more widely, and surely invites attempts to apply similar analysis to other historians of the period.

Sønnesyn covers a remarkable amount of ground in the 272 pages of his main text. Though clearly writing for postgraduate scholars, the author assumes no knowledge of classical ethics and the monograph fulfils in part the role of an introduction to the form and influence of classical ethics on medieval thought. The relevant elements of the philosophy of Cicero, Augustine, Seneca and other Roman authors are clearly and meticulously explained. The recent scholarship on national identity has been usefully drawn together and its theoretical underpinnings explored. Sønnesyn?s investigation of how the characters of William the Conqueror and Harold II are depicted as having contributed towards the Norman victory at Hastings includes the most theoretically advanced discussion that I have read concerning the place of divine intervention in medieval chronicle writing. He has taken great pains to unfold his argument with precision, to ensure not only that the various elements of William?s thought are established, but that their precise origins are explored and their relative importance assessed. More so than the vast majority of academic monographs, this work is one continuous argument that develops in sequence. It is not, therefore, a work that can be easily summarised, or ?dipped into?, and (though many of its potential readers will doubtless be inspired by the contents page to select individual chapters) this is very much a book that should be read and reflected on *in toto.*

There are aspects of this work that may not please all readers. Though Sønnesyn brings into his discussion a wide range of historiography, there are some places where he seems to exaggerate controversy by stressing obsolete historiography, and others where the theoretical apparatus seems somewhat overdone. It seems unnecessary to dwell on those historians who struggled to accept that the Middle Ages had concepts of ethnicity in the wake of the horrors of twentieth century nationalism (p. 107) when (as he points out) there is now a very considerable weight of scholarship pursued from multiple perspectives on medieval ethnicity and national identity. In a similar vein, his criticisms of Bishop Stubbs (pp. 2?3, 60 (n. 65)), whom Sønnesyn later describes as a ?great Victorian scholar?, seem unnecessary and perhaps a tad ironic given that the focus of this work is squarely on not imposing criteria of analysis on the work of earlier historians. Forays into Wittgenstein?s understanding of ?meaning? (pp. 15?20) and Aristotelean concepts of causation (pp. 145?6)

may strike some readers as excessive.

A more significant problem is the very strong focus that Sønnesyn has placed on *GR* at the expense of *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum.* Sønnesyn gives three reasons for this ? that consideration of the other texts would widen the scope of the study considerably, that the new edition of *GPA* (2) was published only when his work was well advanced and that since William?s work as a ?scientific? historian is largely a product of *Gesta Regum*, treatment of that work is sufficient to establish the ethical nature of William?s work (pp. 3?4). This decision, however, is problematic. The new edition of *GPA*, after all, is five years old, and a good paperback translation (by David Preest) was available as far back as 2002. Sønnesyn acknowledges repeatedly the importance of *GPA*, regarding it as *GR?s* ?monumental twin? (p. 1) and ?companion volume? (p. 96). He does address some differences between how William handled the Battle of Tinchebrai in the two works (p. 245), but there are other points where William?s depiction of events diverges more significantly, particularly concerning the behaviour of bishops.(3) Perhaps the most dramatic of these concerns St Wulfstan?s defence of the city of Worcester against rebels in 1088. In *GR*, some royal knights were ?inspired by the blessing of Bishop Wulfstan, who had been entrusted with the command of the castle?, while in *GPA* (in a story shared with John of Worcester?s account) the story becomes miraculous as Wulfstan excommunicated the besiegers, throwing them into confusion and blinding many of them.

The second problem caused by the minimal discussion of *GPA* is the heavy emphasis on kings and their relationship to national identity as the organisers of moral communities. By emphasising *GR* so heavily, Sønnesyn almost obscures the fact that William himself could organise history very differently if he so chose. Sønnesyn goes so far as to suggest that ?There was no way to describe the development of a *gens* other than through the deeds and characters of its kings and the effects of these on the people? (p. 182; also ?in the Latin West of the Middle Ages, such an executive faculty was always focused on a single, monarchic ruler, the *princeps* or *rex*?, p. 149). *GPA*, however, seems to offer a very different way of organising the history of the English around the development of dioceses. When he approached history in this fashion, William?s concept of the English *gens* appears to have been quite different, including giving regional analyses of English character, emphasising the impatient dignity of the men of Canterbury (4) or the violence and harsh speech of the men of Northumbria (5), for instance. Though Sønnesyn?s final chapter is very helpful on how we should see William?s moral agenda informing his historical writing without violating his concept of truth, it does not help us in cases where the framing of the story or of major concepts is very significantly different. In short, the very intellectual coherence of Sønnesyn?s case makes the lack of discussion of *GPA* problematic. If the scheme of *GR* flows so naturally and seamlessly from William?s understanding of moral education, how do we explain a major piece of his historical writing that does things quite differently?

The relatively minor treatment of *Historia Novella* does not cause the same difficulties. In some senses, this text can be considered an appendix to *GR.* The exemplary and ethical scheme that Sønnesyn develops for *GR* can be applied almost as well to *HN*, the prologue of which asks:

> For what is more to the advantage of virtue, or more conducive to justice than recognizing the divine pleasure in the good and punishment of those who have gone astray? Further, what is more pleasant than consigning to historical record the deeds of brave men, so that following their example the others may cast off cowardice and arm themselves to defend their country? (6)

Though the work was never completed, the extant main text of *HN* can also be largely understood in the context of Sønnesyn?s scheme. The central crisis of *HN* (the arrest of the bishops in 1139) is partly a product of the influence of court faction on King Stephen (7), and his response to their influence brought about further divisions, a degradation that stood in marked contrast to the masterful central direction of Henry I?s reign.(8) The king?s weakness, therefore, had allowed weakness, disunity and ultimately sacrilege (9), a regression notably similar to that described by Sønnesyn in *GR?s* depiction of William Rufus (pp. 213?227). Robert of Gloucester, the dedicatee of the work embodies, the same characteristics as William?s ideal kings

in *GR*, vigorous, just, temperate and valorous.

Sønnesyn has done an excellent job of integrating William of Malmesbury?s thought into the inheritance of classical learning and the intellectual currents of his day. He could, however, have done more to place him into the context of historical writing in the British Isles. He points out that William had a view of kingship somewhat comparable to Gildas (p. 125) whom William admired and that the two worked from a common core of canonical texts. He might, however, have gone further than this. Even though Gildas shows no evidence of the direct influence of either Cicero or Augustine (10), and the details of his education are opaque, the exhortative, edificatory objective of Gildas? work dominates *De Excidio*, far more so than any of William?s historical writings. In a similar vein, rather more could be done with the connections between *GR* and Bede. Though Sønnesyn does repeatedly acknowledge Bede?s role as model for William, more emphasis might be placed on the similarities in the portrayal of important figures in the two texts (Bede?s view of Edwin?s conversion (11) is dominated by the king?s *reasonableness*, just as William?s view of the end of the investiture controversy in England is shaped by Henry?s *reason* (p. 242)). Bede?s view of the role of kings as *rectores animarum* is if anything more strongly expressed than that of William.(12) Most significant for Sønnesyn?s argument is George Molyneux?s recent work on the Old English Bede (13), which he shows was translated with a heavy emphasis on the exemplary material that could be gained from Bede?s Latin text. Indeed, the nature of *HN* as a bank of edifying examples is *more heavily* emphasised in the Old English translation that in the original.(14) Molyneux points out that annotations probably in the hand of Coleman (the Worcester monk who laid down the foundations of William?s own *Vita Wulfstani*) emphasize the didactic value of the *OEB*.(15) Indeed, Molyneux feels driven to defend the translator from criticism for excising important historical material (particularly primary documents) just as Sønnesyn must protect William of Malmesbury from the opposite charge, of being a historian out of his time.

One might wish for an extension of Sønnesyn?s argument that deals more fully with *GPA* and makes more links with the wider tradition of historical writing, or disagree with some aspects of the theoretical or historiographical discussion, but *William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History* succeeds in its primary aim of placing one of the great minds of the 12th century into the context of his intellectual heritage and his intellectual/moral life as a Benedictine monk. It is a stimulating, challenging and significant contribution.

Notes

1. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. Mynors, M. Winterbottom and R. Thomson (2 vols., Oxford 1998?9).Back to (1)
2. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom, R.M. Thomson, (2 vols., Oxford 2007).Back to (2)
3. D. Gerrard, *The Military Activities of Bishops, Abbots and Other Clergy in England c. 900?1200* (unpublished University of Glasgow PhD thesis, 2010), pp. 213?17,Back to (3)
4. *GPA*, prologue.Back to (4)
5. *GPA*, Ch. 99.Back to (5)
6. 6 William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella: The Comtemporary History*, ed. and trans. by Edmund King and K. R. Potter (2nd ed., Oxford, 1998), I, 1.Back to (6)
7. *HN*, II, 22.Back to (7)
8. *HN*, II, 23; III, 47.Back to (8)
9. *HN*, II, 25.Back to (9)
10. On Gildas? knowledge of the Classics and Patristics, see N. Wright, ?Gildas?s reading: a summary?, *Sacris Erudirii*, XXXII, 2 (1991). Though there are substantial overlaps (particularly Orosius and John Cassian, the most important authors for Sønnesyn?s conception are Cicero and Augustine, both notably absent from Wright?s compendium. My thanks to Alex Woolf for this reference.Back to (10)
11. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Rev. ed., London, 1990), II, 13.Back to (11)
12. See for instance Cenred of Mercia?s attempts to correct one of his wayward subjects (*EH*, V, 13).Back to (12)

13. G. Molyneux, ?The Old English Bede: English ideology or Christian instruction??, *English Historical Review*, 124, 511 (2009).Back to (13)
14. Molyneux, esp. 1310.Back to (14)
15. 15 Ibid, 1315.Back to (15)

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