

THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a historical record in English, which takes the form of annals—that is, an annual summary of important events. Entries begin with variations of the formula “Ðis gear” (This year) and may be brief or, occasionally, extended narratives. Copies of the original *Chronicle*, which was started in 891, were distributed to centers of learning where they were carried on independently. Seven manuscripts survive. The following selections are from the *Peterborough Chronicle* (named for the monastery where it was kept), which was continued until 1154.

The *Peterborough Chronicle* provides an English perspective on the rule of the Normans after the conquest. In recording the death of William the Conqueror, the chronicler begins with conventional pious observations about the transitory nature of fortune in this world and the expected eulogy of the late king. But the rhetorical praise of the great man shifts into criticism and finally into doggerel rhyme satirizing William’s greed and arbitrary exercise of power—especially his cruel game laws.

Since the *Chronicle* was written by monks, much space is devoted to church politics. The resentment of English monks at French exploitation clearly shows in the chronicler’s barbed account of Henry of Poitou, an enterprising French churchman who pulled strings to get himself appointed abbot of Peterborough even though he was already abbot of a monastery in Normandy.

The Conqueror’s iron rule, which, according to the *Chronicle*, provided a measure of peace and security, did not last. After the death of Henry I in 1135, Henry’s nephew, Stephen of Blois, crossed the English Channel and succeeded in having himself crowned. He thus displaced his cousin Matilda, Henry’s daughter, who had been the designated heir. Matilda had been married at the age of twelve to the emperor Henry V and, upon the latter’s death, was remarried to Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou, whose raids in Normandy made him extremely unpopular with the Anglo-Norman barons who owned lands in that province. Stephen, however, soon managed to alienate his supporters, and a bitter civil war ensued. The chronicler gives an apocalyptic account of King Stephen’s reign. Although people unquestionably suffered greatly during this period, the chronicler’s descriptions of torture, famine, and robbery perhaps reflect a rhetorical excess considered appropriate to descriptions of evil times, the other side of which may be seen in the idealization of a legendary past in the twelfth-century Arthurian chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Robert Wace, and Layamon.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle¹

[HENRY OF POITOU BECOMES ABBOT OF PETERBOROUGH]

[1127] In the same year [King Henry I] gave the abbacy of Peterborough to an abbot called Henry of Poitou, who held the abbey of St. Jean d’Angely² in his possession. And all the archbishops and bishops said that it was illegal and that he might not hold two abbacies. But this same Henry gave the king to understand that he had given up his abbey because of the great unrest that was in that country, and that he did this on the advice and with the consent of the pope of Rome and the abbot of Cluny, and because he was the papal

1. Translated by Alfred David

2. Monastery in Normandy.

tax collector.³ But it was no more true for all he said, but he wanted to have both monasteries in his possession, and so he had it as long as it was God's will. As a priest, he had been bishop of Soissons; then he became a monk at Cluny and afterwards prior of that same monastery; and then he became prior at Savigny. Thereupon, because he was related to the king of England and to the count of Poitou, the count made him abbot of St. Jean d'Angely. Then, as a result of his elaborate stratagems, he got the archbishopric of Besançon and held it for three days; then he justly lost it because he had obtained it unjustly. Then he got the bishopric of Saintes, which is five miles from the monastery of which he was abbot. He had that for almost a week. The abbot of Cluny got him out of there, as he had previously out of Besançon. Then he considered that if he could put down roots in England, he could have all his will. He sought out the king and told him that he was a broken-down old man, and that he could not put up with great injustices and strife in their land. Then he asked specifically for the abbey of Peterborough on his own behalf and that of all his friends. And the king granted it to him because he was his kinsman and had been the chief cleric to swear an oath and bear witness when the son of the count of Normandy and daughter of the count of Anjou were divorced because of consanguinity.⁴

Thus miserably was the abbacy given away between Christmas and Candlemas at London. And so he traveled with the king to Winchester and then he came to Peterborough. And there he lived like the drones in the hive. All that the bees drag in the drones devour and drag out—so did he. All that he might take, inside and outside, from churchmen or laymen, he sent across the sea. He did no good there and left nothing good there.

Let no one think strange the truth that we declare, for it was well-known throughout the entire country that as soon as he arrived there—that is, on the Sunday on which one sings, “Exurge, quare obdormis, Domine?”⁵ immediately thereafter many men saw and heard many huntsmen hunting. These hunters were black and big and ugly, and all their dogs were black and ugly with wide eyes, and they rode on black horses and black goats.⁶ This was seen in the deer park itself in the town of Peterborough and in all the woods between Peterborough and Stamford. And the monks heard the horns blowing, which they blew at night. Reliable witnesses observed them at night. They said it seemed to them there might well have been twenty to thirty blowing horns. This was seen and heard from the time he came here all that Lent up to Easter. This was his arrival. Of his departure we cannot yet speak. May God provide!

[THE REIGN OF KING STEPHEN]

[1135] In [King Stephen's] time all was warfare, wickedness, and robbery, for right away all the powerful men who were traitors rose up against him⁷

3. For the tax popularly known in England as “Peter’s Pence.”

4. The divorce was promoted by Henry I to allow the count’s son (Henry’s nephew) to marry the sister of the king of France, who, in return, made him count of Flanders. Such a divorce or annulment required the endorsement of the church, usually on grounds that the marriage had violated the permissible degree of kinship between the partners.

5. Awake, why sleepest thou, Oh Lord? (Latin); Psalm 43 [44].23, sung at the beginning of the mass on the second Sunday before Lent, February

6 in 1127.

6. The Wild Hunt, a motif in Germanic mythology, is here given a diabolical twist.

7. Though dated the year of Stephen’s accession, these entries, which later refer to the entire reign of nineteen years, were written after 1154. In fact, Stephen at first had considerable support from the city of London and among the baronage. Many of the barons—traitors according to this chronicler, who regards Stephen as an ineffectual but legitimate monarch—soon switched to Matilda’s cause.

* * * [1137] When the traitors discovered that he was a mild man, and gentle and good, and did not enforce justice they committed every sort of atrocity. They had done homage to him and sworn oaths, but they kept no faith. They were all forsworn and broke their oaths, for every powerful man built castles and held them against him. And they filled the land full of castles.

They oppressed the wretched people greatly with forced labor on castle works. When the castles were built, they filled them with devils and evil men. Night and day they seized anyone who they thought possessed any wealth (both men and women), and put them in prison, and tortured them with unspeakable tortures to get their gold and silver. For never were any martyrs so tortured as these were. They were hung up by the feet and smoked with foul smoke. They were hung up by the thumbs or by the head with armor attached to the feet. Knotted cords were tied around their heads and twisted till they cut into the brain. They were incarcerated with adders, snakes, and toads and killed in that way. Some were put into a torture box—that is, in a chest that was short, narrow, and shallow—into which they put sharp stones, and pressed the man in it so that all his limbs were broken. Many of the castles had a “strangle-trap”: that was a device made up of chains so heavy that it was all two or three men could do to carry one of them. It worked like this—they fitted a sharp iron, which was fastened to a beam, around a man’s throat and neck so that he could not move in any direction, nor sit, nor lie down, nor sleep but had to bear up all that iron. Many thousands they starved to death.

I do not know how nor would it be possible to tell all the atrocities and tortures they inflicted upon the wretched people of this land. And that lasted nineteen winters for as long as Stephen was king. And the whole time it went from bad to worse. They were constantly making the villages pay taxes, which they called “protection money.” When the wretched people had nothing more to give, they pillaged and burned all the villages so that you could easily do a day’s journey without ever seeing an inhabitant in a village or land under cultivation. Then grain was expensive, and meat and cheese and butter, for there was none in the land. Wretched people starved to death. Some, who had once been wealthy, went begging. Some fled the country. Never before in the land had there been more misery, nor did ever heathens do worse things than they did.

Contrary to civilized behavior, they spared neither church nor churchyard but took all the valuables therein and then burned church and all together. They did not spare bishop’s land, nor abbot’s nor priest’s, but robbed monks and clerics, and every man robbed the other if he was the stronger. If two or three men rode into a village, the entire village would flee them because they thought they were robbers. The bishops and clergy kept excommunicating them, but they did not care about that since they were all totally accursed, perjured, and abandoned.

Wherever the ground was tilled, the earth bore no grain, for the land was ruined by such acts. It was openly said that Christ and his saints were asleep. Such things—and more than we can tell—we suffered nineteen winters for our sins.