

Conquest and
Controversy:
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of Odda of
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Of beasts, it is confess'd, the ape
Comes nearest us in human shape;
Like man he imitates each fashion,
And malice is his ruling passion;
But both in malice and grimaces
A courtier any ape surpasses.

These verses are from Oliver Goldsmith's rewriting of a lengthy poem by Jonathan Swift, and seem to be a fitting place to start an enquiry into the early career of a politician such as Odda of Deerhurst (one filled, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, with more than the occasional touch of political intrigue and court-skullduggery).¹

The later part of Odda's career is well known.² He was a successful and influential nobleman, who rose up through the ranks of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy to the level of earl, building up his estates (on one of which we stand now), and constructing the chapel which lies nearby this church in memory of his brother. However, there is much still to be said about the early stages of his career.

Odda's career most probably began in the first decades of the eleventh century. This was a turbulent period, which saw an intensification of Viking activity throughout southern Britain, the expulsion of King Æthelred 'the Unready' by the Danish invader King Sweyn 'Forkbeard' in 1013, and the latter's sudden death and the former's return from exile a few months later. Sweyn's son Cnut re-invaded in 1015, and met resistance from Æthelred's son Edmund Ironside, and the narratives of that period are little more than a list of their battles and attempts to overthrow each other's strongholds. Each had their measure of success, but in October 1016 a decisive stalemate was reached and the two parties met on 'Ola's island' near Deerhurst, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us, and divided the kingdom between them.³ Cnut took the northern area of the country, Edmund the south (as his father King Æthelred had passed away a few months before). However, this was only a temporary settlement: Edmund died in unclear circumstances in November of the same year, and Cnut succeeded to the whole of England, ruling until his own death some nineteen years later in 1035.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Cnut's reign is that the changeover of rulership appears to have been so easily effected. Cnut, a member of the ruling

elite of Denmark, an illiterate and predominantly heathen country still in its infancy as regards its forms of government and social organization, appears to have seamlessly stepped into the shoes of the West Saxon kings of England as the head of a sophisticated bureaucratic regime. The mind boggles at what Cnut and his followers must have made of the heaps of written documents and gaggles of clergy attendant on the court, but the fact remains that there are no signs of any problems of interaction between the complex machinery of English government and the Danish invaders.

One promising explanation for this lies in the possibility that at the height of government there may have been a great deal of administrative continuity — that is, while the king and his immediate circle changed, the machinery of government and its numerous employees did not. As anyone who has watched the 1980s television programme *Yes Minister* is well aware, one can change a prime minister, and for that matter the entire government, but the civil service and its powerful Sir Humphreys remain as a stabilizing and often reactionary element.

By far the best source of evidence for the structure of the royal court and the administrative machinery of late Anglo-Saxon government can be found in the surviving body of royal charters: the formal written documents by which the king granted individuals or institutions particular estates and rights. I should perhaps say a few words about these, and some of the methodologies for using them as evidence, before we go any further. A typical charter consists of a number of parts: it usually begins with a *proem* stating that the charter is in the name of God or that its issuer operates with God's grace, followed by a dispositive section containing a statement by the issuing ruler (often in the first person) of the salient details of grant, and on occasion this is followed by the *anathema*, a condemnation of anyone who may try to tamper with the document. We may then be given some directions of the boundaries of the estate concerned, and all this is supported by a list of witnesses to the grant, divided into a number of social groupings: beginning with the king and the royal family, followed by the archbishops and bishops, the earls or ealdormen, the abbots, and lastly a mass of names usually given the ill-defined title *ministri*. It should also be noted that it is clear that within the *ministri* present in our extant records there are usually two levels of official: those at the top of the lists who appear in a large number of charters and thus were most probably members of the royal court in some form of permanent attendance on the king, and those at the lower end of the list who occur on only one or two documents, and who were probably only local attendees to the specific royal meeting.

It is uncertain if these documents in the form in which they survive were composed by the scribes of the royal court, or by monks from the abbeys which later served as the archive of the documents concerned, and it should be noted that there has been a rather extensive debate about the existence of such a chancery.⁴ Thankfully, much of this debate can be set aside here. Simon Keynes has shown through the comparison of a large number of charters from

widely dispersed archives, that in the tenth and eleventh centuries some form of record must have been carried away from the royal court by the benefactors of the document.⁵ There is such agreement between certain parts of charters, such as the lists of witnesses, from numerous documents from geographically disparate archives, that it seems almost impossible that the extant records do not preserve some form of roll-call of who was actually in the royal court when each grant was made. Moreover, Keynes has also demonstrated that the order of names in the witness-lists is significant, and that the sudden rise and fall of individual names within the sequence can be tied to other records of increasing status or disgrace in our other sources. In addition, Keynes has observed that groups of *ministri* sometimes occur together with an unusually high frequency, and that where other sources are available it can be shown that these individuals were often close associates and political allies. Thus, by comparing the witness-lists and the relative position of the names therein, we can see the waxing and waning of these men's careers, and can perceive the bonds of friendship and allegiance that existed between some of them as they formed factions within the royal court.

Let us return to the question of administrative continuity between Æthelred's and Cnut's governments. It should be noted that in Cnut's charters a few significant Scandinavian names occur at the very top of the lists of *ministri*, perhaps indicating a watchful Scandinavian eye over court proceedings, but what is more interesting is that there are a large number of English names present, and some of these names can also be found in the charters of Æthelred. This detail attracted the attention of Katy Mack, who in an article in 1984 attempted to examine the possibility of continuity.⁶ Her method is quite simple: if we take the names of the men in the witness-lists of Æthelred's charters and compare them to those in Cnut's, then every time we find a Godwine, a Leofwine or an Odda in both, then we have the possibility that these names represent a single individual who worked for both kings (see Table 1).⁷

Table 1.

The total potential administrative continuity as traced by Mack (8 out of 90 witnesses)

	Last attestation for Æthelred (year and charter reference)	First attestation for Cnut (year and charter reference)
Leofwine	1015 (S. 934)	1019 (S. 956)
Æthelweard	1015 (S. 934)	1019 (S. 956)
Ælfwine	1013 (S. 931)	1022 (S. 988)
Æthelmær	1012 (S. 927)	1019 (S. 955)
Ælfmær	1014 (S. 933)	1018 (S. 951)
Godwine	1016 (S. 935)	1022 (S. 958)
Brictric	1016 (S. 935)	1023 (S. 954)
Odda	1015 (S. 934)	1018 (S. 951)

Table 2.
The total potential administrative continuity based on Keynes (as note 8)

Name	Last witness for Æthelred	First witness for Cnut	Comments on the likelihood of being the same individual
Ælfgar	1014 (S. 933)	1018 (S. 951)	Plausible.
Ælfmær	1014 (S. 933)	1018 (S. 953)	Plausible.
Ælfweard	1005 (S. 911)	1022 (S. 958)	Implausible: absence of 17 years.
Ælfwig	‘1008’ (S. 918)	1019 (S. 954)	Implausible: absence of 11 years.
Ælfwine	‘1012’ (S. 927)	1019 (S. 954)	Plausible.
Æthelmær	1013 (S. 931b)	1019 (S. 954)	Plausible.
Æthelric	1013 (S. 931)	1018 (S. 950)	Implausible: only in 2 of Cnut’s grants, and both for Christ Church, Canterbury. Plausibly a local <i>thegn</i> .
Æthelweard	1015 (S. 934)	1019 (S. 956)	Implausible: only in 1 of Cnut’s grants.
Æthelwine	1013 (S. 931)	1019 (S. 954)	Plausible.
Beorhtic	1016 (S. 935)	1018 (S. 953)	Implausible: only in 1 of Æthelred’s grants, and probably a local <i>thegn</i> .
Brihtsige	1013 (S. 931b)	1024 (S. 961)	Implausible: absence of 11 years.
Ceolric	1015 (S. 934)	c.1023 (S. 977)	Implausible: only in 1 each of Æthelred’s and Cnut’s grants.
Eadric	‘1008’ (S. 918)	1026 (S. 962)	Implausible: absence of 18 years.
Eadwig	1005 (S. 911)	1019 (S. 954)	Implausible: absence of 14 years.
Eadwine	1016 (S. 935)	1019 (S. 954)	Implausible: only in 1 of Cnut’s grants.
Godric	1013 (S. 931b)	1022 (S. 958)	Implausible: absence of 9 years.
Godwine	1016 (S. 935)	1018 (S. 950)	Plausible.
Leofnoth	1005 (S. 911)	1018 (S. 953)	Implausible: absence of 13 years.
Leofric	1007 (S. 918)	1019 (S. 954)	Implausible: absence of 12 years.
Leofsige	1013 (S. 931)	1018 (S. 953)	Implausible: only in 1 of Æthelred’s grants.
Leofwine	1015 (S. 934)	1019 (S. 956)	Plausible.
Odda	1015 (S. 934)	1018 (S. 951)	Plausible.
Wulfmær	1005 (S. 911)	1018 (S. 953)	Implausible: only in 1 of Cnut’s grants.
Wulfnoth	1005 (S. 911)	1024 (S. 961)	Implausible: absence of 19 years.
Wulfric	1013 (S. 931b)	1022 (S. 958)	Implausible: only in 1 each of Æthelred’s and Cnut’s grants.
Wulfsige	1009 (S. 922)	1019 (S. 954)	Implausible: only in 1 each of Æthelred’s and Cnut’s grants.

However, this method offers us only possible identifications, not probable or even certain ones, and as a large number of the names present were very common in late Anglo-Saxon England, we cannot tell if the Leofwine in 1015 is the same one as in 1019. As the remainder of her argument focused on the large number of English nobles who died in the wars of 1015–16, she argued that little if any continuity could be seen in the charter witness-lists, and concluded that only 12% of those who appeared as *ministri* for Æthelred could have done so for Cnut. There are some small errors in the data here, but it should be acknowledged that her study was undertaken at a time when no comprehensive corpus of the data existed. Keynes subsequently put together a tabulation of the relevant data, and in 1994 he was in a position to revise her conclusions. He reached very different results. He showed that the greatest possible degree of continuity was 40%. However, the awkward problem of definitive proof remained; like Mack, he could not establish if his 40% were examples of continuity, or if they were namesakes either side of the invasion. Thus, he wound up his argument with a line that summarises the situation precisely, but strikes terror into the heart of every scholar who deals with statistical data: in his opinion there “was more ‘continuity’ than none, and rather less than a lot”.

More can be done with this data. As a maximal figure I count from Keynes’ tables some twenty-seven Englishmen who could conceivably have spanned the gap between the regimes, but on closer inspection most of these identifications do seem too tenuous to be credible (see Table 2).⁸ Out of the twenty-seven possible cases, only eight are even plausible. Furthermore, very few of these names are uncommon. Moreover, even if we give these names the benefit of the doubt, much of this is insufficient to suggest men with places in the royal court. The majority of these Englishmen appear low down in the witness-lists and only in a small number of documents. Thus, they are more likely to be figures of only local importance, not royal servants close to the king.

Another approach to the data reveals a small but politically significant element of administrative continuity. If we ignore Æthelred’s charters for the moment, it should be possible to identify some of the most important Englishmen in Cnut’s following by ranking the English names in his witness-lists according to the frequency of their attestations and their relative prominence. Many of the English names appear only once or twice, and in the interests of brevity I have tabulated here (see Table 3) only those names which appear in the witness-lists of Cnut’s charters four or more times.

Much more can be said about a number of the names which rank highest in this table. Of course, our eyes are drawn to the Odda here, and let us begin with him. An Odda can be found third among the eleven *ministri* of a charter of Æthelred from 1013.⁹ He recurs in a charter of 1014, and another from 1015, in similarly high positions (fifth among nine *ministri* and second among four respectively).¹⁰ As few charters are extant from 1016, and none for 1017, no comment can be made about his position at court in those years. However, an Odda reappears in Cnut’s earliest extant charters for 1018. One of the earliest

Table 3.
English names appearing in the witness-lists of Cnut's charters four or more times.

Name	Frequency	Comments
Ælfgar	11	Note that on 7 of these charters two Ælfgars witness simultaneously.
Ælfwine	9	
Odda	9	Note that on 2 of these grants two Æthelmærs witness simultaneously.
Æthelmær	8	
Byrhtic	7	
Ordgar	6	
Ælfged	5	
Leofsig	5	
Leofric	5	
Eadmær	4	
Leofwine	4	
Wulfnoð	4	

extant witness-lists for Cnut's reign can be found in slightly differing forms attached to two forged charters produced at Exeter in the late eleventh century, and while there is significant doubt about the authenticity of the main documents, it appears likely that the forgers of both charters took their witnesses from an authentic witness-list of 1018.¹¹ The highest *ministri* in the three witness-lists are set out in Table 4 (I have highlighted the names to which I want you to pay particular attention).

Table 4.
The highest-ranking *ministri* in three charters of the reigns of Æthelred and Cnut.

S 931b (Barking) 1013	S 951 (Exeter) 1018(?)	S 953 (Exeter) 1018(?)
Ethelmer	Ðored	Poryd
Elfgar	Aslac	Aslac
Odda	Tobi	Tobi
Ethelric	Ælfgar	Ælfgar
Elfgar	Odda	Odda
	Ælfgar	Ordgar
		Ælfgar

There is a distinctive pattern here of an Ælfgar witnessing immediately before an Odda, and another Ælfgar closely following them after an intermediate figure (either Ethelric or Ordgar). Yet the geographical distance between Barking and Exeter makes it exceedingly unlikely that any cross-contamination of the documents could have occurred. It appears that we are observing a clique or faction appearing together at court on two separate occasions, and this strongly suggests that the Odda here is the same official before and after the conquest of 1016.

This impression is supported by the endurance of the association between Odda and the senior Ælfgar in other charters. A charter of 1019 also from Exeter's archive, but clearly not descendent from the 1018 witness-list, contains an Ælfgar and an Odda together, high up in the lists (fifth and sixth among twenty-six *ministri*).¹² In a charter from 1026 Odda is accompanied by an Ælfgar, fourth and sixth among fifteen *ministri*.¹³ Furthermore, the figure between Odda and Ælfgar in this charter, Ælfwine, also appears to have had links to this faction. The trio reappears at the head of the *ministri* in a grant from 1033, taking precedence there above even the Scandinavian court-officials.¹⁴

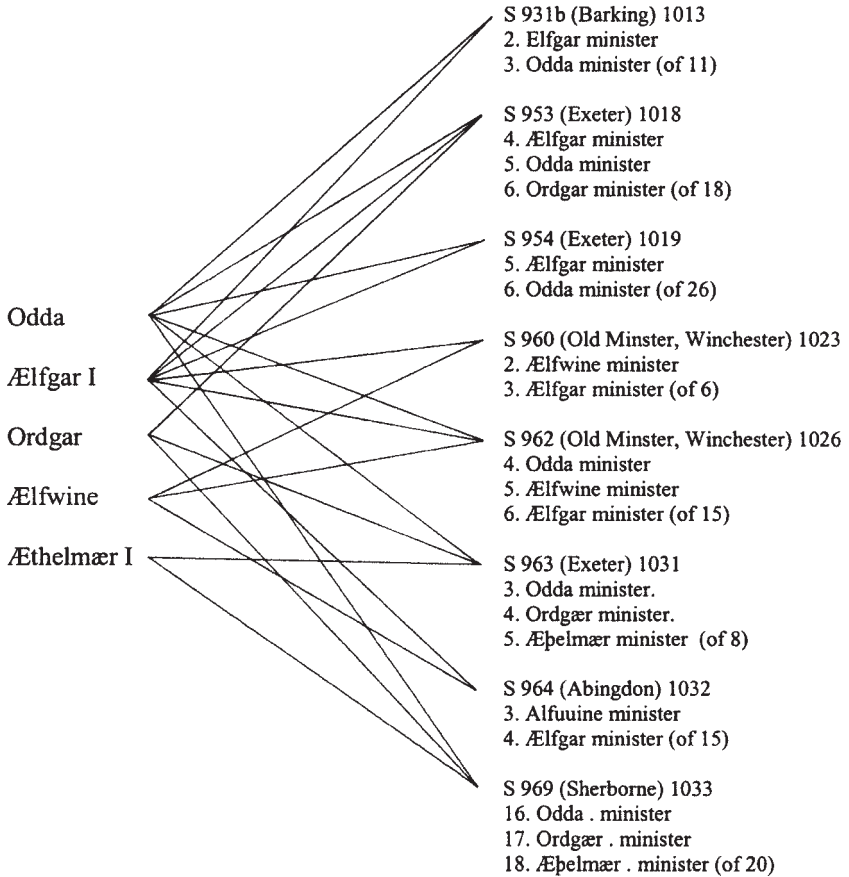
As the number of extant charters increases in the 1030s we can begin to link more names from our table of prominent Englishmen to Odda and his associate Ælfgar. In an authentic grant bearing the date 1031, whose witness-list has been re-dated to between 1026 and 1030, he appears immediately before an Ordgar and an Æthelmær, third, fourth, and fifth among eight *ministri*.¹⁵ Again these are names from our table of prominent *ministri* with English names who witness Cnut's charters. Finally, Odda's association with this Ordgar and this Æthelmær continues in a charter of 1033.¹⁶ The above can be set out in the manner shown in Table 5.

What then can be discerned of the careers of these apparent associates outside the witness-lists of Cnut's charters? The attestations of Odda stretch seamlessly from Æthelred's charters, through Cnut's and Harthacnut's, and into Edward the Confessor's reign, in a position of consistent prominence, often alongside Ælfgar and Ordgar. He disappears in 1050 from the witness-lists of royal documents, re-appearing only in a Worcestershire lease of 1051×1053 as *Odda eorl . ond Ælfric his broðor*.¹⁷ The rise in office to an earldom in 1051 as well as the record of Odda's brother Ælfric (who is also named in the dedicatory inscription of the chapel adjacent to this church; now in the Ashmolean Museum), conclusively identifies him with Earl Odda who died 950 years ago on 31 August 1056 here at Deerhurst.¹⁸

It is also possible to identify Ordgar. Like Odda, he witnessed charters in the 1030s and 1040s in positions indicating a man of importance in the royal court. His prominence, as well as the rarity of his name, allows us to identify him with some certainty with the royal *minister* Ordgar, to whom Edward the Confessor granted an estate at Littleham in 1042.¹⁹ Through this grant it is possible to deduce that he was the head of an influential aristocratic family based on the Devonshire-Cornwall border.²⁰ At the time of the Domesday inquest the same

Table 5.

Patterns in the order of names of a number of prominent ministri in witness-lists from charters belonging to the period 1013–33.



estate in Littleham was in the possession of the monastery of Horton. Details recorded by the twelfth-century chronicler William of Malmesbury tell us a little of the intervening history of the estate. William noted that two members of this powerful Devonshire family, one Ordgar and his son Ordulf, were buried at Tavistock and that their property passed to that house.²¹ However, this was against Ordulf's wishes, as he had left instructions that he was to be buried at Horton. This detail is supported by the Exeter redaction of the Domesday Book which records litigation following Tavistock Abbey's reception of both Ordulf's corpse and his property.²²

The survival of a fragment of genealogical information in a Devonshire document from the mid-1040s perhaps reveals the identity of Odda's and Ordgar's associate Ælfgar.²³ Odda and Ordgar are cited as witnesses in this local record, alongside an Ælfric who is identified as Odda's brother, and an Ælfgær and an *Eschern* who are identified as Ordgar's brothers. As the name element *gær* is a common variant for *gar*, then this first of Ordgar's brothers is a plausible candidate for this Ælfgar.²⁴

These men were important figures in the West Saxon hierarchy, and were closely related to the West-Saxon royal house. William of Malmesbury notes that Odda was a *cognatus* (relative) of King Edward the Confessor, and this is apparently confirmed by the fact that when Odda died heirless in 1056, Edward the Confessor inherited both Deerhurst and Pershore.²⁵ Ordgar's family also had ties to the royal house. When describing Ordgar's son, Ordwulf, William of Malmesbury states that he and King Edward the Confessor were also *cognati*. We can be more certain of the nature of the link here: Ordgar's father had received high office in the royal court after the marriage of his sister (and Ordgar's aunt) to King Edgar. King Æthelred was the product of this union, and Ordgar was thus his cousin.

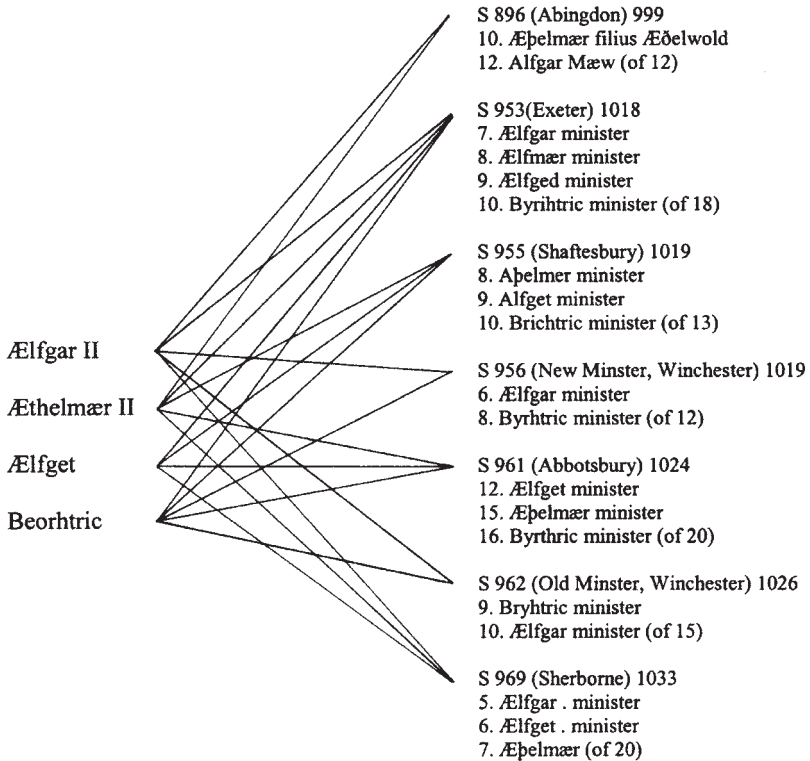
There is evidence for another group of associates among the men with English names in Cnut's charters. I reproduce here the longer version of the 1018 Exeter witness-list (again the emphasis is mine):²⁶

Poryd
Aslac
Tobi
Ælfgar
Odda
Ordgar
Ælfgar
Ælfmær
Ælfged
Byrihtric

The names immediately following the second Ælfgar, those of Ælfmær (corrected to Æthelmær), Ælfged (Ælfget), and *Byrihtric* (Beorhtric) attest together on a large number of documents.²⁷ Æthelmær, Ælfget and Beorhtric witness together immediately after a block of seven Scandinavian names heading the *ministri* in a grant of 1019.²⁸ Additionally, despite the insertion of two Danish names into the sequence between Ælfget and Æthelmær, the same group is recognisable among the *ministri* witnessing a grant from 1024.²⁹ Finally, Ælfgar, Ælfget, and Æthelmær witness together immediately beneath the men with Scandinavian names who head the *ministri* in a grant of 1033.³⁰ Ælfgar and Beorhtric appear, separated by one Thorkell, immediately beneath five Scandinavian names heading the *ministri* of a grant from 1019.³¹ In addition, these two men are found together among the *ministri* of an authentic witness-list appended to a

Table 6.

Patterns in the order of names of a number of prominent *ministri* in witness-lists from charters belonging to the period 999–1033.



suspect charter bearing the date 1026.³² The above can be set out in the manner shown in Table 6.

We can also say something of the identities of these men and their relationship to each other by tracing their attestations further into the eleventh century. Neither Ælfgar nor Æthelmær appears in the charters of Harthacnut or Edward the Confessor, and it seems safe to deduce that they both died at some point in the late 1030s.³³ However, Beorhtric's career was more enduring. In the 1040s and 1050s we can observe Beorhtric still holding a position in the witness-lists which is indicative of great importance in the royal court. In two charters from 1061 he is placed at the head of the *ministri*, and in the one preserved in Bath's archive he is given a title indicating some status at court, *consiliarius* (perhaps to be translated as 'royal adviser').³⁴ As Ann Williams has noted we can take this identification a little further.³⁵ In 1065, the wealthiest *thegn*

below the rank of earl in the records of Domesday Book was a landowner based in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire named Beorhtric son of Ælfgar. The Domesday Book notes that among the properties held in 1065 by this Beorhtric were estates at Cranborne and Dewlish.³⁶ These same estates appear in the medieval chronicle of Tewkesbury Abbey, and there they are listed as the gift of one Ælfgar, who was a member of a noble family who patronised the monastic community.³⁷ Several generations of this family are named in the text, and are given their distinctive family name: *mæw*.³⁸ They are, in genealogical order, one *Haywardus meaw* (more correctly Æthelweard *mæw*), his son *Algar meaw* (Ælfgar *mæw*), and his grandson, *Brictric meaw* (Beorhtric *mæw*).

It appears that the Beorhtric, son of Ælfgar, who can be found in the Domesday Book is the same Beorhtric *mæw*, son of Ælfgar *mæw*, who appears in the Tewkesbury Chronicle, and that he retained some form of ownership of the estates his father bequeathed to Tewkesbury Abbey until 1065 at least. The identification of the Ælfgar in Cnut's charters, who appears in conjunction with a Beorhtric, with this Ælfgar *mæw* can be confirmed by an examination of his appearances in the charters. As shown above, this Ælfgar witnessed charters from the very last years of the reign of King Æthelred in a position beneath Odda. In the other charters from these years there was only one prominent *minister* by this name in the last years of Æthelred's reign, and he is named in a grant dated 999 as Ælfgar *mæw*.³⁹ Furthermore, in the charters from the last years of Æthelred's reign this Ælfgar *mæw* nearly always attests with an associate Æthelmær and his father Æthelwold.⁴⁰ Æthelwold's name does not appear after 1007, but Æthelmær can be found in conjunction with Ælfgar *mæw* and one *Brihtric minister* (who is probably Beorhtric *mæw*) in a charter of 1009.⁴¹ Thus, the Æthelmær who is found commonly alongside Ælfgar *mæw* and Beorhtric *mæw* in Cnut's charters, was most probably their associate from before the conquest of 1016.

Again these men were prominent West Saxon noblemen who were closely related to the royal house. The Tewkesbury Chronicle notes that Æthelweard *mæw* (Ælfgar *mæw*'s father) was "descended from the illustrious line of King Edward the Elder".⁴²

Where then does this leave us? The supposed continuity in the Anglo-Saxon administration was numerically small, but in terms of importance in the royal court, quite significant. We can perceive in the witness-lists two groups of Englishmen; one composed of Odda and Ordgar, their brothers and associates, and the other Ælfgar *mæw*, his son and a number of their associates. Interestingly, the heads of these factions appear to have been neighbours: Odda's landholdings, at least late in his life, were concentrated on this estate at Deerhurst, and Ælfgar *mæw* held the vast adjacent estate of Tewkesbury. They may have been associates themselves, or their families may even have been intermarried, but no evidence of this survives.

Unlike the majority of their peers, these men worked for both King Æthelred's administration and for Cnut's, and somewhat disturbingly, they did not just

survive the conquest of 1016, but thrived under it — transforming themselves from prominent but middle ranking court figures into the most influential and wealthy men of the realm.

The crucial years here are 1015–1018, the point when Cnut invaded and seized control, and sadly the paucity of records ensures this is one of the darkest periods of the eleventh century. However, of the few that do survive, one in particular sticks out in this context. When an early twelfth-century chronicler, John of Worcester, copied out the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's list of the Englishmen who changed sides in 1016 and joined the Danes at the battle of Sherston, he added the name of one *Algarus filius Meauues* to the list of traitors.⁴³ *Algarus* is a Latinised form of Ælfgar, and the fact that he is named as the son of someone with the obviously erroneous name *Meauues*, alerts us to the fact that this is a Latinised (and slightly garbled) form of his father's nickname *mæw*. This must be Ælfgar son of Æthelweard *mæw*, and crucially, here he is named as a prominent turncoat in the war with the Danish invaders. It becomes difficult to avoid the impression that these Englishmen were collaborators with Cnut's regime, who withdrew their support from Æthelred and offered it to Cnut.

Let us briefly consider their motives. It is perhaps somewhat anachronistic to think of this in modern terms of betrayal, but the concept of one's right lord and king was known in late Anglo-Saxon England; indeed, Wulfstan had railed passionately against such a betrayal of King Æthelred in his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*.⁴⁴ Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this is that these men were closely related to the West Saxon royal line and were from the traditional heartlands of support for that dynasty, Wessex and southern Mercia. On a national and a personal level these men seem to have committed grave acts of betrayal.

A number of possibilities for their motives present themselves. Æthelred's last years in government were turbulent and difficult ones, and as Keynes has shown, were marked by a sudden ousting of the principal faction of royal advisors in 1005–6, either through disgrace and banishment or through the individuals withdrawing from court and entering self-imposed retirement. It seems likely that this wave of expulsions and retirements was orchestrated by an over-ambitious court figure named Eadric streona, who was (along with his numerous brothers) the principal benefactor of the political vacuum left around the king.⁴⁵ Members of both Ordgar's and Odda's families were among those banished from court at this time. Ordgar's father Ordulf either retired or was ousted from Æthelred's government in 1005. Ealdorman Æthelmær, Æthelweard's son and thus Odda's close relative, also disappeared from public office in the wake of this political crisis. Thus, it is possible that our Odda and the rest of the collaborators were minor members of this expelled court faction, and that disgruntlement with King Æthelred led them to consider revolt.

This theory is attractive, but does not fit with all of the evidence. Firstly, as Æthelred seems to have attempted to bring Odda's family back into his court in the years between 1013 and 1016 they cannot be made to comfortably fit into the role of disgruntled exiles from royal favour. Ealdorman Æthelmær

was recalled from retirement and re-entered politics in the strained years immediately before 1016, and Odda found prominence at court from 1013 onwards, perhaps even as the result of his close relative's return.⁴⁶ Additionally, some of these men actually profited from the political vacuum left by this series of expulsions and retirements. Ælfgar mæw and his associate Æthelmær attest only sporadically and very far down the witness-lists before 1006, and leap to positions of prominence immediately after this date.⁴⁷ Thus, the events of 1006 would appear to have been responsible for their success at court.

We should perhaps also consider that the sources of this betrayal may have come from a section of the aristocracy wider than just one expelled court faction. A few fragments of evidence are suggestive that King Æthelred's regime (as well as that of his son Edmund Ironside) faced general opposition from widespread elements of the West Saxon and Mercian nobility during the invasion. Let us retrace in detail some of the events of the very last years of that campaign, 1015–16. Our sources indicate that support for Æthelred and Edmund Ironside was waning in some regions of England throughout that year. Æthelred appears to have been infirm at this date, and command of the forces fell to his son Edmund Ironside. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that in 1015 Æthelred lay ill in Cosham (Hampshire) while Cnut ravaged Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset.⁴⁸ Edmund appears to have had some difficulty in commanding the allegiances owed to his father. Early in 1016 Edmund met opposition while trying to counteract Cnut's ravaging of Warwickshire. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that Edmund began to collect the *fyrð* (or local militia) in the area, but they refused to follow him unless he had the support of his father and the London garrison. Edmund raced away, and by 6 January had secured these, but still the full penalty and force of the law had to be threatened to mobilise an army.⁴⁹ This reluctance appears to have been taken by Æthelred as an indication that elements in these areas were ready to revolt; he travelled to Mercia to support his son's attempts to levy forces, but was warned that he would be betrayed (by, in varying accounts of the event, either an unnamed follower of his or some of his auxiliary troops) and he fled back to the safety of London.⁵⁰

The Mercians' conditional support of Edmund early in 1016 seems to prefigure what happened after Æthelred's death. Support for Edmund in Wessex seems to have begun to collapse on the death of his father on 23 April 1016. Following this, Edmund was elected king by "those of the nobles who were at that time at London".⁵¹ However, Cnut was simultaneously elected at a more comprehensive meeting in Southampton, which publicly repudiated Æthelred and his descendants.⁵² Only a few months later, "after midsummer", Cnut and Edmund's forces met at Sherston on the Gloucestershire/Wiltshire border. It is in connection with this crucial battle that the sources begin to report defections by members of the English nobility to the Danish side.⁵³ Given the sources' identification of Eadric streona as a serial traitor, we are not surprised when the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle names him as a defector at Sherston. Perhaps we can

even conclude that the mysterious Ælfmær deorling was a follower of his in this betrayal. John of Worcester, as I said before, adds Ælfgar mæw to this list of villainy. Moreover, there are hints in John of Worcester's account that these defections may have involved wider sections of the English forces than a few renegade nobles. John records that forces from Hampshire and Wiltshire were with the Danes at Sherston. Of course, these could be the followers of one of the three named turncoats, but this seems unlikely. In particular, it is unlikely that forces from these areas would have followed Eadric streona into battle; he had influence in the Mercian shires that border Wales, and the nearest we can place his influence to these shires is across the Mercian border in Gloucestershire.⁵⁴ It does not seem any more probable that such a substantial force would be the following of an otherwise unknown figure such as Ælfmær deorling. Furthermore, to judge by what we can perceive of Ælfgar mæw's estates from those of his son, Beorhtric as recorded in the Domesday Book, it does not seem likely that he held any jurisdiction in Wiltshire and Hampshire either.⁵⁵ Thus, John of Worcester's naming of these areas as in revolt against Edmund would appear to also identify them as turncoats at Sherston. Sherston appears to have been the crucial tipping-point in the conflict, where a number of noblemen and the forces from entire regions turned away from Edmund Ironside and offered their allegiance to Cnut.

We might question why large sections of the nobility of Mercia and Wessex held common concerns about Edmund Ironside as a ruler in 1016. It seems unlikely that it was his inability to present serious resistance to the invader which motivated these concerns. The accounts of 1016 do not describe an unstoppable invasion in the face of which resistance would have been futile. Edmund had his measure of success at Penselwood in Dorset, Otley in Kent, and in the defence of London.⁵⁶ Doubts appear to have existed before his father's death, but it is this event which seems to have formed a crucial turning point in his ability to command the support of the West-Saxon and Mercian aristocracies. It may be significant in this context that Edmund appears to have formed a lasting social bond not with the nobility of Wessex or Mercia, but with that of the eastern Danelaw.⁵⁷ Most of the extant records connected with him derive from this region. Only two charters in his name survive, one of which is a grant to Thorney Abbey from 1015×1016, the other a grant of land to Peterborough Abbey, made for the souls of Edmund, his wife, and an East-Anglian *thegn* Sigferth.⁵⁸ While his elder brother, the *ætheling* Æthelstan (d. 1014), left decorated weaponry and valuable horses to both of his living brothers in his will, only Edmund received land, in particular estates in East Anglia and further north in the Danelaw.⁵⁹ A presumed connection of Edmund (and of his elder brother Athelstan) to the Danelaw explains much about Edmund's actions early in 1015. In this year he revolted against his father's execution of two prominent Danelaw *thegns*, Sigferth and Morcar, and the seizure of their property.⁶⁰ Edmund released Sigferth's widow from her imprisonment in Malmesbury Abbey and married her, moving northwards to accept the formal submission of the dependants of

the executed *thegns*. If he had not formally represented this Danelaw faction at court before, his marriage ensured that he would do so from this point onwards. This was a scandalous affair, and probably Edmund only escaped punishment as Cnut chose this opportune moment to launch his invasion, and in the face of that attack differences between Edmund and his father were quickly brushed aside. However, it seems significant that Edmund may have been seen as more closely allied to the eastern Danelaw and the north of England before 1015, and had shown his willingness to defend the interests of his allies there, even when that led to direct defiance of the king. His actions may have inadvertently alienated the nobility of Wessex and Mercia, who began to look for another potential royal candidate.

However, to suggest that these collaborators should be seen as the tip of an iceberg of open revolt against Edmund Ironside's rule goes further than the evidence will allow. Less than whole-hearted support, and perhaps even the hedging of diplomatic bets, is quite a different thing than open revolt against a royal candidate. The majority of West Saxon and Mercian forces appear to have held to their allegiance to him, albeit reservedly, and there are no signs that the most significant sources of local authority: the ealdormen of the region, withdrew their support from Edmund. It is more likely that our turncoats were a small and integrated clique, apparently geographically focused on estates around Deerhurst, who shared general concerns about the rule of Edmund Ironside in 1016, but took these concerns to a level individual to them among the West Saxon and Mercian elites — and used them to justify revolt against Edmund.

It is perhaps worth noting here that, partly through Odda and his actions, Deerhurst and Tewkesbury were catapulted into the very centre of the political life of the late Anglo-Saxon state in the early eleventh century, as the site of the peace summit between Cnut and Edmund Ironside and as the most likely place that the powerful statesmen Odda and Ælfgar mæw met outside the court to discuss matters of state.

So to conclude, what then can we say about Odda's early career? Certainly, it seems to have involved both conquest and controversy. He appears to have held a prominent position in one of two related factions of Englishmen, who at a crucial moment during Cnut's invasion, withdrew their support from the English candidate for the throne (for whatever reason) and transferred it to the invader. We may judge them harshly for this, but the fact of the matter is that it brought them wealth, influence and security in their positions which they could not have expected otherwise.

NOTES

- ¹ Oliver Goldsmith, 'The Logicians Refuted, in imitation of Dean Swift', in *Essays and Poems by Oliver Goldsmith* (Edinburgh, 1807), pp. 286–8.
- ² The best single work on Odda's later career is that of Ann Williams' own Deerhurst Lecture, given in 1996, entitled *Land, Power and Politics: The Family and Career of Odda of Deerhurst* (Deerhurst, 1997).
- ³ In this context perhaps the most useful reference here is Michael Swanton's recent translation of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1996), where the relevant entry for 1016 is on pp. 152–3. For the identification of the site of 'Ola's Island' as The Naight, near Deerhurst, see J. D. Harris, 'The Site of Alney – AD 1016', *Glevensis: The Gloucester and District Archaeological Research Group Review* 26 (1992), pp. 11–12. Readers interested in the original Old English and Latin text of the Chronicle at this stage should consult the relevant section of G. P. Cubbin, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Vol. 6, MS. D: A Semi-Diplomatic Edition with Introduction and Indices* (Cambridge, 1996) and P. S. Baker, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Vol. 8, MS. F: A Semi-Diplomatic Edition with Introduction and Indices* (Cambridge, 2000).
- ⁴ The two principal sides in this debate are given by P. Chaplais, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chancery: from the Diploma to the Writ', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3 (1966), 160–79 and S. Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred the Unready, 978–1016: A Study in Their Use As Historical Evidence*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 3rd series, 13 (Cambridge, 1980).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 84–231.
- ⁶ K. Mack, 'Changing Thegns: Cnut's Conquest and the English Aristocracy', *Albion* 16 (1984), 375–87.
- ⁷ References to Anglo-Saxon charters will be made here through Peter Sawyer's catalogue of them: *Anglo Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 8 (London, 1968), by means of an 'S.' followed by the number under which the relevant document appears in his publication. Where space permits this will be followed, in brackets, by an indication of the document's archive. A revised version of Sawyer's catalogue is accessible on the Kemble website <www.trin.cam.ac.uk/kemble>.
- ⁸ S. Keynes, 'Cnut's Earls', *The Reign of Cnut, King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. A. R. Rumble, Studies in the Early History of Britain (London, 1994), pp. 43–88 (at 79, n. 206), counted "about 32". The extra five are the result of his allowing for the greatest margin of duplication of royal *thegns* with the same name. For my purposes here this approach is not necessary. See also S. Keynes, *An atlas of attestations in Anglo-Saxon charters, c. 670-1066* (Cambridge, 2002), table LXIV.
- ⁹ S. 931b (Barking).
- ¹⁰ S. 933 (Sherborne) and S. 934 (Abingdon).
- ¹¹ S. 951 and S. 953 (both Exeter). Both witness-lists appended to these forgeries are remarkably similar. However the list attached to S. 953 is 12 names longer, inserting the name Ordgar into the existing block of names, and adding some eleven names after the point at which S. 951 stops. Additionally, a few of the names in S. 953 are interlined, although the additions are in the hand of the main scribe, and appear to be corrections made by him. The presence of three Scandinavian names at the head of the two witness-lists strongly suggests that the exemplar for these lists was a post-1016 one, and the inclusion of one of these men, Aslac, is loosely consistent

with a date before *c.* 1022, after which date his sporadic attestation disappears from the witness-lists of Cnut's other charters. It would appear that the forgers of both charters had access to an authentic witness-list, and that they lifted the date of 1018 from that document.

- 12 S. 954 (Exeter).
- 13 S. 962 (Old Minster, Winchester).
- 14 S. 970 (Old Minster, Winchester).
- 15 S. 963 (Exeter), see Keynes, 'Cnut's Earls' p. 50, especially n. 43, for the re-dating of the witness-list.
- 16 S. 969 (Sherborne).
- 17 S. 1409 (Worcester).
- 18 See Williams, *Land*, for details of Odda's later career and family connections.
- 19 S. 998 (Horton).
- 20 See H. P. R. Finberg, 'The House of Ordgar and the Foundation of Tavistock Abbey', *English Historical Review* 58 (1943), 190–201, and his *Lucerna. Studies of Some Problems in the Early History of England* (London, 1964), pp. 186–202, for discussion of his family and landholdings on the Cornish border.
- 21 William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, ii, 95 (edited in *William of Malmesbury. Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom & R. M. Thomson, Oxford Medieval Texts, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2007), I, pp. 316–18). I owe the connection to Finberg, *Lucerna*, p. 198.
- 22 For references to this see Finberg, *Lucerna*, p. 200.
- 23 S. 1474 (Sherborne).
- 24 The common use of *gær* in the place of *gar* can be seen in the attestations for Ælfgar, Odda's associate, in S. 969 (Sherborne) and S. 963 (Exeter). In these documents context reveals that this is the Ælfgar identified above, yet on both occasions the written text has *Ælfgær*. Furthermore, it should be noted that his grandfather, Ealdorman Ordgar, attests S. 770 (Exeter) in the form *Ordgær dux*.
- 25 William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ii, 199 (edited in *William of Malmesbury. Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson & M. Winterbottom, Oxford Medieval Texts, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1987–99), I, p. 360); F. E. Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs* (Manchester, 1952), nos. 99–102, pp. 363–7 and 519–21.
- 26 That attached to S. 953 (Exeter).
- 27 While it is evident that the names Ælfmær and Æthelmær are distinct from each other, they are often confused in the sources. See Keynes, *Diplomas*, p. 235, n. 15, for discussion of the phenomenon. It should be noted that this witness-list appears to incorrectly record this name. This is the sole witness to a *minister* with the name Ælfmær during the reigns of Cnut and Harthacnut, and all other attestations of the group discussed here have an Æthelmær in this context. Compare for example the trio in the authentic S. 955 (Shaftesbury).
- 28 S. 955 (Shaftesbury).
- 29 S. 961 (Abbotsbury).
- 30 S. 969 (Sherborne).
- 31 S. 956 (New Minster, Winchester).
- 32 S. 962 (Old Minster, Winchester).
- 33 Although an Ælfgar does witness charters in the 1040s, and very sporadically alongside Beorhtric, it is clear from the association of this Ælfgar with Odda and Ordgar that this is more probably Ordgar's brother.

- ³⁴ S. 1033 (Rouen) and S. 1034 (Bath). See S. Keynes, 'Regenbald the Chancellor (*sic*)', *Anglo-Norman Studies: Proceedings of the Battle Conference* 10 (1987), 185–222, at 200–1, for discussion of the first of these.
- ³⁵ See P. A. Clarke, *The English Nobility under Edward the Confessor*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford, 1994), pp. 260–2, for an assessment of his vast estates, and A. Williams, 'A West-Country Magnate of the Eleventh Century: the Family, Estates and Patronage of Beorhtric, Son of Ælfgar', *Family Trees and the Roots of Politics: the Prosopography of Britain and France from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century*, ed. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 41–68, for an account of his later career.
- ³⁶ *Domesday Book: seu liber censualis Willelmi Primi Regis Angliae* ..., ed. A. Farley, 4 vols. (London, 1783 & 1816), I, folio 75v and 79. See also Williams, 'A West Country Magnate', p. 48.
- ³⁷ The main text of the chronicle was edited by W. Dugdale in *Monasticon Anglicanum: A History of Abbies and other Monasteries, Hospitals, Frieries, and Cathedral and Collegiate Churches* ..., eds. J. Caley, H. Ellis & B. Bandinel, 6 vols. (London, 1817–30), II, 59–65. However, by the time that Dugdale came to consult the original manuscript it was corrupt at the point at which the details of Ælfgar's donations to the community are listed. Fortunately, both London, Brit. Lib., Additional MS. 36,985, and Oxford, Bodleian, MS. Top. Glouc. D. 2, supply accurate Early Modern transcripts of that part of the text. I am indebted to J. Luxford for bringing this record to my attention, and to S. Keynes for allowing me to see his unpublished material on these lost charters.
- ³⁸ *Mæw* is an onomatopoeic Old English word for 'seagull', and is cognate to the Modern English word 'mew'. It may have become attached to Ælfgar mæw's father Æthelweard owing to the medical condition attested in the Tewkesbury Chronicle which appears to have given him large areas of albino skin (although there a garbled Middle English version of the name: *snew*, is given, meaning 'snow').
- ³⁹ S. 896 (Abingdon). Note Keynes, *Diplomas*, p. 209, has traced the attestations of this figure during these years.
- ⁴⁰ All are named together in S. 896 (Abingdon).
- ⁴¹ S. 915 (Abingdon), S. 921 (Athelney).
- ⁴² Tewkesbury Chronicle (ed. Caley, Ellis and Bandinel, *Monasticon*, II, 60); *Haywardus snow...ex illustri prosapia regis Edwardi senioris ortus*. Ann Williams, *Land*, p. 5 and 'A West-Country Magnate', p. 44, has read into this an identification of Æthelweard mæw with Odda's relative Ealdorman Æthelweard, but I am not so sure. Her idea is attractive but not borne out by all of the evidence. The name Æthelweard was common in the period, and it seems likely that the Latin chronicle which claims to be the work of one Ealdorman Æthelweard is the work of this ealdorman. In that chronicle Æthelweard states that he was a descendant of King Alfred's elder brother Æthelred, not Alfred's son Edward the Elder as the Tewkesbury Chronicle claims for Ælfgar mæw: *The Chronicle of Æthelweard (Chronicon Æthelwardi)*, ed. A. Campbell, Nelson's Medieval Texts (London, 1962), p. 2. King Edward the Elder (d. 924) had fourteen recorded children, and Ælfgar mæw and his son Beorhtric may have been descendants of one of these dynastic lines instead.
- ⁴³ John of Worcester, *Chronicon*, s. a. 1016 (edited in *The Chronicle of John of Worcester: Volume II, the Annals from 450 to 1066*, ed. and trans. R. R. Darlington, P. McGurk, & J. Bray, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1995), p. 486).
- ⁴⁴ *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, ed. D. Whitelock (London, 1939).

- ⁴⁵ See Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 209–28.
- ⁴⁶ See S. 933 (Sherborne) from 1014, and Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 209–10, for Æthelmær's return to court.
- ⁴⁷ Compare their positions in S. 896 (Abingdon) from 999 where they are placed tenth and twelfth at the end of the list of twelve *ministri*, and that in S. 931b (Barking) from 1013, where they are the first and second of eleven *ministri*.
- ⁴⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (trans. Swanton, p. 146); for the original text see *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Vol. 5, MS. C: A Semi-Diplomatic Edition with Introduction and Indices*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge, 2001); Cubbin, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle ... MS. D.*; and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Vol. 7, MS. E: A Semi-Diplomatic Edition with Introduction and Indices*, ed. S. Irvine (Cambridge, 2004).
- ⁴⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (trans. Swanton, p. 147); for the original text see references in the previous footnote.
- ⁵⁰ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (trans. Swanton, p. 147) states that the threat came from the unnamed follower, and John of Worcester (*Chronicon*, s. a. 1016 (ed. Darlington et al., p. 482)) claims that the threat came from the auxiliaries.
- ⁵¹ John of Worcester, *Chronicon*, s. a. 1016 (ed. Darlington et al., p. 484).
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, s. a. 1016 (p. 484).
- ⁵³ See *ibid.*, s. a. 1016 (p. 486) for the fullest account.
- ⁵⁴ His authority in this area is attested by Hemming. See *Hemingi Chartularium Ecclesiæ Wigorniensis*, ed. T. Hearne, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1723), I, 280.
- ⁵⁵ In fact, Beorhtric can only be shown to have held a single estate in Wiltshire, and none in Hampshire.
- ⁵⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (trans. Swanton, pp. 147–52); for the original text see the references in n. 48 above.
- ⁵⁷ This may have been due to his mother's origins in the eastern Danelaw. See D. Whitelock, 'The Dealings of the Kings of England with Northumbria in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', *The Anglo-Saxons. Studies in Some Aspects of their History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickins*, ed. P. Clemoes (London, 1959), pp. 70–88, at 80, for details.
- ⁵⁸ S. 947 (Peterborough) and S. 48 (Thorney).
- ⁵⁹ S. 1503. See *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. D. Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), no. 20, pp. 56–63, and 167–74.
- ⁶⁰ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ed. Swanton, pp. 145–6); for the original text see n. 48 above.

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by
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