



Chronicle of the Kings of England: From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen

William of Malmesbury

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The history of the English, from their arrival in Britain to his own times, has been written by Bede, a man of singular learning and modesty, in a clear and captivating style. After him you will not, in my opinion, easily find any person who has attempted to compose in Latin the history of this people. Let others declare whether their researches in this respect have been, or are likely to be, more fortunate; my own labour, though diligent in the extreme, has, down to this period, been without its reward. There are, indeed, some notices of antiquity, written in the vernacular tongue after the manner of a chronicle, and arranged according to the years of our Lord. By means of these alone, the times succeeding this man have been rescued from oblivion: for of Elward, a noble and illustrious man, who attempted to arrange these chronicles in Latin, and whose intention I could applaud if his language did not disgust me, it is better to be silent. Nor has it escaped my knowledge, that there is also a work of my Lord Eadmer, written with a chastened elegance of style, in which, beginning from King Edgar, he has but hastily glanced at the times down to William the First: and thence, taking a freer range, gives a narrative, copious, and of great utility to the studious, until the death of Archbishop Ralph. Thus from the time of Bede there is a period of two hundred and twenty-three years left unnoticed in his history; so that the regular series of time, unsupported by a connected relation, halts in the middle. This circumstance has induced me, as well out of love to my country, as respect for the authority of those who have enjoined on me the undertaking, to fill up the chasm, and to season the crude materials with Roman art. And that the work may proceed with greater regularity, I shall cull somewhat from Bede, whom I must often quote, glancing at a few facts, but omitting more.

The First Book, therefore, contains a succinct account of the English, from the time of their descent on Britain, till that of King Egbert, who, after the different Princes had fallen by various ways, gained the monarchy of almost the whole island.

But as among the English arose four powerful kingdoms, that is to say, of Kent, of the West Saxons, of the Northumbrians, and of the Mercians, of which I purpose severally to treat if I have leisure; I shall begin with that which attained the earliest to maturity, and was also the first to decay. This I shall do more clearly, if I place the kingdoms of the East Angles, and of the East Saxons, after the others, as little meriting either my labours, or the regard of posterity.

The Second Book will contain the chronological series of the Kings to the coming of the Normans.

The three following Books will be employed upon the history of three successive kings, with the addition of whatever, in their times, happened elsewhere, which, from its celebrity, may demand a more particular notice. This, then, is what I purpose, if the Divine favour shall smile on my undertaking, and carry me safely by those rocks of rugged diction, on which Elward, in his search after sounding and far-fetched phrases, so unhappily suffered shipwreck. "Should any one, however," to use the poet's expression, "peruse this work with sensible delight," I deem it necessary to acquaint him, that I vouch nothing for the truth of long past transactions, but the consonance of the time; the veracity of the relation must rest with its authors. Whatever I have recorded of later times, I have either myself seen, or heard from credible authority. However, in either part, I pay but little respect to the judgment of my contemporaries: trusting that I shall gain with posterity, when love and hatred shall be no more, if not a reputation for eloquence, at least credit for diligence...

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