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Authority over Men and Allocation of Riches

Two Readings of William of Malmesbury

Mathieu Arnoux

Julie Barrau and David Bates (ed.), *Lives, Identities and Histories in the Central Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 42-55.

There is a consensus among medievalists that there was a long period of economic and demographic growth during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, this consensus comes with a seeming reluctance to describe the nature and the workings of that growth from the actual point of view of those who implemented it. This is a recent phenomenon: half a century ago, Michael Postan and Georges Duby put growth at the core of their conceptions of medieval society. More recently Mark Bailey and John Hatcher showed, in an important book, that such malaise among medieval economic historians is partly explained by the fact that historians struggle to use coherently the theoretical tools created by economists.¹ This is not just about medievalists being ill-informed or diffident; the problem runs deeper. Concepts developed by economists may allow historians to sieve and organise data and to describe processes, but they don't give the means to understand what they meant for contemporaries.² Indeed, even

I wish to thank Julie Barrau and David Bates, whose translation from French helped much to improve the original text. Any remaining errors are mine.

¹ J. Hatcher and M. Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages. The History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

² P. Malanima, *Pre-Modern European Economy. One Thousand Years (10th–19th Centuries)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

though sources reveal that medieval men and women were not oblivious to issues of quantification, their observations do not lend themselves easily to be addressed by modern economic tools. The notion of resource especially, which, according to modern economists, cannot be dissociated from any analysis of choices made by economic agents, is totally foreign to medieval culture; that is because it was developed in the early nineteenth century to describe industrial growth. There is therefore a prerequisite for any economic history project that has ambitions to go beyond a mere description of phenomena and to offer explanations: a reconstruction of the medieval toolbox used by medieval thinkers to understand the material conditions of human life. Methods developed by Peter Biller to reassemble scholastic thought about demography and by Giacomo Todeschini to shed light on the consistency of the languages of the medieval economy can be a guide that provides a perspective from which to read Anglo-Norman sources.³ Narrative sources are seldom used by economic historians, who consider them to be weak, as they are often far removed in time from the events they describe and too dependent on the ambitions and intentions of their narrators. They use instead charters and legal records. We know, however, particularly thanks to the work of Elisabeth van Houts, that memory is a dimension of the present, not only of the authors, but also of their readers. It is with this perspective that the following pages propose to reread a central author for knowledge of Anglo-Norman societies.⁴

³ P. Biller, *The Measure of Multitude: Population in Medieval Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2000); G. Todeschini, *I mercanti e il tempo. La società cristiana e il circolo virtuoso della ricchezza fra medioevo ed età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); French translation, *Les marchands et le temple. La société chrétienne et le cercle vertueux de la richesse, du Moyen Âge à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2017).

⁴ E. van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900–1200* (University of Toronto Press, 1999).

Famine as a Revealing Marker

To understand what religious, political and social choices prompted medieval growth and allowed it to last for over two centuries, it is crucial to scrutinise how material wealth was shared in a way that led to the increased standards of living and demographic growth that are attested by numerous sources, written as well as archaeological. This is difficult because contemporaries rarely reflected explicitly on those developments. As a result, it is necessary to approach the subject indirectly, through the study of situations where the phenomenon is clearly identified. There are partial answers in Fritz Curschmann's great book, published in 1900, about medieval famines, particularly the documentary appendix in which he analysed or transcribed most of his sources.⁵ For the eleventh and twelfth centuries a remarkable gathering of hagiographical texts and extracts of *Acta episcoporum* from Flanders and the Rhineland revealed both the workings of crises and the ways rulers, bishops and people invested with comital powers responded to them.⁶

Another striking feature of Curschmann's list is its geographical imbalance, and in particular how few are related to the Anglo-Norman dominions, even though they are so close to Flanders. It can be rapidly established that this is not the result of

⁵ F. Curschmann, *Hungersnöte im Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur Deutschen Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 8 bis 13 Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1900). This field of research has recently been renewed by J.-P. Devroey, *La nature et le roi: Environnement, pouvoir et société à l'âge de Charlemagne* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2019).

⁶ Cf. M. Arnoux, 'Manger ou cultiver: *laboratores, oratores et bellatores* entre production et consommation (xie – xiiie siècle)', in *L'alimentazione nell'alto medioevo: pratiche, simboli, ideologie*, Settimane di studio della fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 63 (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2016), pp. 939–62.

documentary bias.⁷ Even though annals written in Anglo-Norman monasteries (such as those of Saint-Évroult)⁸ mention bad harvests, food shortages and even famines (*fames valida*), local chronicles and hagiographical texts provide little material as precise as that gathered by Curschmann. Indeed, one rare famine narrative that has survived from the duchy of Normandy, which is to be found in the *Inventio et miracula sancti Vulfranni* and is possibly about the great famine of the 1030s famously described by Radulfus Glaber, is strikingly vague and seemingly second-hand, as if, one generation after the event, there was no direct memory of it in the duchy.⁹

Orderic Vitalis' *Historia ecclesiastica* brings further confirmation. The topic, even though it would have allowed him to assess the worth of rulers, does not have a prominent place in the narrative, and is handled from a different viewpoint. Mentions of famines (*fames valida*) in Orderic's work are clearly borrowed from monastic annals; one of them, about the year 1094, includes the common explanation of natural calamities as punishment for human sin:

AD 1094: Sedition and sounds of war resounded almost throughout the universe and the fierce sons of the earth inflicted immense damage on each other by their carnage and plunder. Evil was spreading and providing its customers with disasters. Then an extreme

⁷ On the geographical distribution and diversity of such sources, cf. E. van Houts, *Local and Regional Chronicles*, *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental*, 74 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), pp. 27–49.

⁸ *Annales Uticensis*: famines of 1095, 1109–1111 et 1143 in Orderic Vitalis, *Histoire ecclésiastique*, ed. A. Le Prévost and L. Delisle, Société de l'histoire de France, 5 vols. (Paris: J. Renouard, 1838–55), vol. 5, pp. 159–61.

⁹ *Inventio and Miracula Sancti Vulfranni*, ed. Dom J. Laporte, Mélanges publiés par la Société de l'Histoire de Normandie, 14th series (Rouen and Paris, 1938), pp. 53–5; E. M. C. van Houts, 'Historiography and Hagiography at Saint-Wandrille: The *Inventio and Miracula Sancti Vulfranni*', *ANS*, 12 (1990), 233–51.

drought burned the seeds in the soil, and damaged harvests and fruits.

Their loss caused a terrible famine.¹⁰

However, Orderic does not, as the texts gathered by Curschmann often do, branch out from there with remarks about how well, or badly, rulers faced such arduous circumstances sent by God, a theme usually glossed with a quote from Isaiah: 'Et populus non est reversus ad percutientem se' (9:13). A close reading of Orderic reveals indeed that, if famine is present in his writings, it is not for him a supernatural sign, but a military and political event: strikingly famine comes up most of the time in the context of warfare. That is particularly the case for the Crusade, the topic of book IX; in his narrative of the siege of Antioch, the chronicler deploys the distinctive lexicon of awe and sacrilege about the moral degradation brought about by famine in its victims.¹¹

Famine in Orderic's narrative is therefore neither a divine warning sent to all Christians, nor a challenge sent to rulers and bishops to test their mettle; it is a specific dimension, which can be provoked or suffered, and often results from decisions made by military leaders. Those leaders ought to prevent famine with appropriate measures, such as storing supplies or establishing supply lines; they are morally responsible if a famine occurs. In a passage famous for its unusually personal tone, although consistent in this context, Orderic is scathing about William I's destruction of Yorkshire in 1069, because

¹⁰ OV, vol. 5, pp. 8–9 (ed. Le Prévost and Delisle, vol. 3, p. 460): 'Anno ab incarnatione Domini MXCIV, indictione II^a, seditiones et tumultus bellorum pene per universum orbem perstrepebant, et immites terrigenae ingentia sibi caedibus et rapinis damna mutuo inferebant. Nequitia multiplex nimis abundabat, et innumeras calamitates clientibus suis suppeditabat. Tunc magna siccitas gramina terrae perussit, segetes et legumina laesit; quibus pereuntibus, maxima fames successit'; OV, vol. 1, p. 23 (ed. Le Prévost and Delisle, vol. 1, p. 160); vol. 3, pp. 78–9 (ed. Le Prévost and Delisle, vol. 2, p. 358).

¹¹ OV, vol. 5, pp. 140–1 (ed. Le Prévost and Delisle, vol. 3, p. 581).

for him the motive was the king's *ira*, which Orderic sees as the cause of over 100,000 Christian *inermes*, mostly women and children.¹²

There are of course mentions of extreme weather events noted by Orderic in the terms used by the writers of annals, without giving them a historical, and by consequence political, meaning. Unlike, for instance, Galbert of Bruges in his *De multro, traditione et occisione gloriosi Karoli comitis Flandriarum*, Orderic does not suggest that in such circumstances rulers have a specific duty to manage the wealth of Christians in order to help their subjects and dependants survive. However, the more articulate and precise narratives mentioned earlier can be seen as reflecting a society structured by the three orders, whose scandalous malfunctioning they illustrate. In the case of the Harrying of the North, the words *inermem ac simplicem populum*, used to

¹² OV, vol. 2, pp. 231–4 (ed. Le Prévost and Delisle, vol. 2, p. 195): ‘Nowhere else had William shown such cruelty. Shamefully he succumbed to this vice, for he made no effort to restrain his fury and punished the innocent with the guilty. In his anger he commanded that all crops and herds, chattels and food of every kind should be brought together and burned to ashes with consuming fire so that the whole region north of the Humber might be stripped of all means of sustenance. In consequence so serious a scarcity was felt in England, and so terrible a famine fell upon the humble and defenceless populace, that more than 100,000 Christian folk of both sexes, young and old alike perished of hunger. My narrative has frequently had occasion to praise William, but for this act which condemned the innocent and guilty alike to die by starvation, I cannot commend him. For when I think of helpless children, young men in the prime of life, and hoary greybeards perishing alike of hunger I am so moved to pity that I would rather lament the griefs and sufferings of the wretched people than make a vain attempt to flatter the perpetrator of such infamy. Moreover, I declare that assuredly such brutal slaughter cannot remain unpunished. For the almighty Judge watches over high and low alike; he will weigh the deeds of all men in a fair balance, and as a just avenger, will punish wrongdoing, as the eternal law makes clear to all men.’ For Orderic’s and William of Malmesbury’s narratives of the Harrying of the North, see D. Bates, *William the Conqueror* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 313–21.

describe the victims of the sacking, were also commonly used about *laboratores*. In that context, as during the Crusade, famine is first of all a war tactic used by the *bellatores*, who bear the moral and social responsibility for its tragic consequences in Europe as in the Holy Land.

William of Malmesbury and the Management of the Kingdom's Resources (1): The Reign of William Rufus

William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* reveal authorial choices about these themes that are in line with Orderic's. Here too one finds mentions of famines in annalistic, if not necessarily borrowed from annals, passages, such as this about 1086–7:

Besides this, in the year before the king's death there was a great mortality both of men and beasts, severe storms and constant lightning of violence no man had ever seen or heard of. And in the year in which he died an epidemic fever preyed on more than half the ordinary population, so severely that many succumbed to the ill effects of the disease; and then, as a result of the corrupted air, a widespread famine followed, so that the survivors of the fevers fell victim to hunger.¹³

William's account of the destruction of Yorkshire mentions *ira* as an explanation of the king's actions, as does Orderic's narrative. Even though William proposes a plausible

¹³ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 500–1: 'Praeterea, anno antequam moriretur proximo, mortalitas hominum et jumentorum, vis tempestatum frequens, violentia fulgurum, quantam nemo viderat, nemo audierat. Illo quoque anno quo obiit, promiscua febris plusquam dimidiam partem plebis depasta, adeo ut plures incommoditas morbi extingueret; deinde pro intemperie aeris, fames subsecuta vulgo irrepsit, ut quod febribus erat reliquum ipsa corripere.'

military motive for the campaign, and is soberly objective in his choice of words, his conclusion carries just as much implicit moral indictment as Orderic's:

As for the cities once so famous, the towers whose tops threatened the sky, the fields rich in pasture and watered by rivers, if any one sees them now, he sighs if he is a stranger, and if he is a native surviving from the past, he does not recognize them.¹⁴

The breadth and diversity of William of Malmesbury's works enable us to develop the analysis that began with Orderic, both in his historical writings, with the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, and in his hagiographical works, with the *Vita Wulfstani*. Through such a comparison between works of different scope and perspective by the same author, it is possible to sidestep the issues raised when different sources are considered, for instance between local texts, such as *Acta episcoporum*, and national chronicles. According to their genre, these texts showcase quasi-contemporary people and events by underlying their exemplariness or how they reveal God's plans. Both genres make rulers and bishops instrumental in the prosperity or the woes of the kingdom and the faithful. But both also provide insights into the norms of consumption behaviour. Together, they draw up a picture of detestable or exemplary practices concerning the use of the riches of the Creation by Christians. In this limited survey, which is also a work of exploration, William of Malmesbury will be seen in these narratives as the bearer of values shared with his readers and listeners.¹⁵

¹⁴ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 464–5: 'Urbes olim praeclaras, turres proceritate sua in coelum minantes, agros laetos pascuis, irriguos fluviis, si quis modo videt peregrinus, ingemit; si quis superest vetus incola, non agnoscit.'

¹⁵ E. van Houts, 'Historical Writing', in C. Harper-Bill and E. van Houts (eds.), *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003) pp. 103–21, especially at pp. 109–14.

A good starting point is the mention in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* of famine that happened around the year 1094. Although it is brief, it stands out from all other mentions because it gives the crisis an explicitly political cause:

In the seventh year, the imposts decreed by the king when he was in Normandy caused a breakdown in the farms, and when farming collapsed, famine rapidly followed. As the famine grew more severe, plague came in its train, so universal that it was impossible to care for the dying or bury the dead.¹⁶

This paragraph (c.327), is part of the annalistic sequence (c.322–c.331) in which a chronological presentation of the thirteen years of William Rufus's reign reveals the tragic consequences for the kingdom of the king's shortcomings: 'Many sudden and tragic events befell in his time, which I will arrange one by one under their regnal years, with an eye to the truth and following the Chronicle as my chief authority.'¹⁷ This list of signs and catastrophes is at the core of the first half of book IV of the *Gesta Regum* (c.305–c.333), whose sole topic is the reign of William Rufus.¹⁸

The editors of the text, who are struck, like all readers, by the complex and to an extent contradictory nature of the choices made by William of Malmesbury, comment: 'What should have been the book's central topic, the reign of William Rufus, William found obviously nearly as distasteful and as difficult to deal with as that of Æthelred

¹⁶ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 570–1: 'Septimo anno, propter tributa quae rex in Normannia positus edixerat, agricultura defecit; qua fatiscente fames e vestigio; ea quoque inualescente mortalitas hominum subsecuta, adeo crebra ut deesset morituris cura, mortuis sepultura.'

¹⁷ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 566–7: 'Plura sub eo subita et tristia accederunt, quae singulatim per annos eius digereamus, veritati maxime secundum cronicorum fidem inseruientes.'

¹⁸ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 542–77.

II.¹⁹ That would explain why only a third of book IV is actually focused on the king, the remainder being concerned with the growth of the Cistercian order under the impetus given by Stephen Harding (c.332–c.343) and with the First Crusade (c.332–c.343). Following a classical tradition when it comes to a ruler that is consecrated but tyrannical, William draws a portrait in which are weighed, on the one hand, qualities rooted in a prestigious lineage and the remarkably refined education imparted by Lanfranc and, on the other, the psychological, moral, political and natural circumstances that drew to a reign made of a series of disasters that was too short to remedy them.

Beyond the problems of the actual sources of the narrative, which was mostly composed from information provided by John of Worcester's chronicle, what is of interest here is the interpretation offered by William of Malmesbury of William Rufus's biographical trajectory. William's narrative can be read as a meditation on a double theme: the looting by powerful men of human wealth and the destruction of that wealth by natural disasters. There is present here a philosophy of values that is the opposite of what William has described, namely that of the people's prosperity and the model for a ruler's behaviour towards natural and human resources. Every episode in the narrative outlines the same series of causes: the king, because of his inconsistent and indecisive character, reveals himself unable to put an end to the discord raging in his obviously dysfunctional family, fostered by his uncle Odo of Bayeux or by his brother, the duke of Normandy Robert Curthose. It is made clear that what is at stake in that discord is the appropriation by each of the protagonists, princes, ruthless courtiers and greedy bishops, of some of all of the kingdom's wealth. But William also stresses the solidarity

¹⁹ *GR*, vol. 2, p. 268.

of the dominant, for better or for worse. An example is the king's dialogue with Roger of Montgomery:

I cannot understand, said the king, why you are all so ungovernable. If you want money, take as much as you like, and the same with land, you are welcome. Only, mind you do not have my father's wisdom called in question; if you think he was wrong about me, take care that this does not reflect on yourselves. The same man who made me king chose you as magnates.²⁰

In a particularly carefully crafted part of his text, in which the vocabulary alone would deserve a wider-scale study encompassing all of his works, William establishes a link, first positive then negative, between the king's personality, the institutional workings of the kingdom and of its ecclesiastical institutions, and the prosperity of its people. Since the king has been trained by his father and his teacher with the prospect of monarchical power, his character presents, as would be expected, the greatness (*magnanimitas*) inherent in the office. But passing time and circumstances make that greatness first a blessing, then a curse:

At the beginning of his reign, while Archbishop Lanfranc was still living, he refrained from all wrongdoing, and it was hoped that he would turn out a paragon among princes. On Lanfranc's death, for some time he showed himself changeable, virtue and vice equally balanced; but now in his later years, his love of good grew cold, and the undesirable features warmed into life within him like springing corn. His open-handedness became prodigality, his high mindedness pride, his strictness cruelty.²¹

²⁰ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 546–7.

²¹ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 554–5.

In this downward process, a key element is the gradual transformation of his largesse (*largitas*) decaying from generosity (*liberalitas*) into prodigality (*prodigalitas*). It refers both to the degradation of his moral character, the decay of his political power and the social collapse of his kingdom. In William's narrative successive anecdotes illustrate the king's inability to assess appropriately the value of things, when he insults his chamberlain who was guilty of dressing the king in hose worth three shillings and therefore unworthy of the king, but then approving of the same man when he lies about the value of his clothes; or to measure the corruption of the administration, greedy in particular for the resources the Church should use to relieve the poor:

In his father's time, when a bishop or abbot died, all the revenues were preserved intact to be handed over to his successor, and persons praiseworthy for their religious life were chosen as shepherds of the church. Now, after the passage of a very few years, all was changed. None became rich unless he was a moneychanger [*nummularius*], none a clerk, unless he was a lawyer [*causidicus*], none a priest unless he was, to use a word foreign to Latin, a rentier [*firmarius*]. No wretch however low in his station, no culprit however great his offense, but was sure of an audience the moment he made an appeal that could bring profit to the crown. The noose itself was slackened from the bandit's neck if he had promised something to the king's advantage. The knightly code of honour disappeared; courtiers devoured the substance of the country people and engulfed their livelihood, taking the very food of their mouths [*soluta*

militari disciplina curiales rusticorum substantias depascebantur, insumebant fortunas, a buccis miserorum cibos abstrahentes].²²

This text deserves an in-depth analysis: the moneychanger, the lawyer and the *firmarius*, as king's tax collector, were the actors of the then-nascent centralised fiscal system that had the Exchequer at its core, a system largely established by Bishop Roger of Salisbury and that Richard FitzNigel would describe a generation later.²³ Local officers were expected to account for the *firmae* that were granted to them, the goldsmith-moneychanger assessed the value of the sums paid in and the royal justices decided on the payments to be made.²⁴ In that light, one could see in our passage, written during the reign of Henry I, an implicit criticism by the author of the ongoing structuring of the institutions of monarchical power. However, following Giacomo Todeschini, it is important to note also that the figures outlined by William of Malmesbury belong first and foremost to the tropes of anti-usury literature that was circulated across twelfth-century Europe by canon lawyers.²⁵ This hypothesis is confirmed when we find, a few lines further in the text, a story about the insufferable arrogance of a group of Jews from Rouen, followed by the infamous mortgaging, for 10,000 silver marks, of the duchy of Normandy by Robert Curthose to finance his crusade and the looting of the riches of the English churches by William Rufus to finance his brother's mortgage. At that point the loop that links the resources of the crown to the labour of peasants is explicitly presented:

²² *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 558–9.

²³ J. A. Green, *The Government of England under Henry I* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 38–50

²⁴ Richard FitzNigel, *Dialogus de Scaccario: The Dialogue of the Exchequer, and Constitutio Domus Regis: The Disposition of the King's Household*, ed. and trans. E. Amt and S. D. Church, OMT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

²⁵ Todeschini, *Les marchands et le temple* (see above, n. 3).

An edict ran throughout all England, levying an intolerable tax. Bishops and abbots flocked to the court, complaining of his brutality. They could not possibly meet such an impost, except by driving the wretched husbandmen [*miseros agricolas*] from the land altogether. To this, the courtiers retorted, with their usual scowls: 'have no shrines adorned with gold and silver and filled with dead men's bones?' And that was all they vouchsafed the petitioners by way of answer. The churchmen therefore, discerning the purport of this reply, stripped their saint's reliquaries, despoiled their crucifixes and melted down their chalices, not to help the poor [*not in usum pauperum*] but to fill the king's coffers; almost all that the holy parsimony [*sancta parcitas*] of their ancestors had saved was consumed by the depredations of those robbers [*illorum grassatorum auiditas*].²⁶

This narrative of an unstoppable political, moral and spiritual decay is framed by the idea that the king is in charge of a fair distribution between his people of the riches of Creation, and therefore responsible for the calamities that came out of his moral impotence: there follows a series of natural catastrophes, earthquakes, thunderstorms, tornadoes and floods, warnings that are ignored by the king. The famine of 1094, mentioned earlier and also noted by John of Worcester, is presented by William as one of those episodes when the king's misbehaviour causes misery for his whole people:

In the seventh year, the imposts decreed by the king when he was in Normandy caused a breakdown in the farms, and when farming collapsed, famine rapidly followed. As the famine grew more severe,

²⁶ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 562–3.

plague came in its train, so universal that it was impossible to care for the dying or bury the dead.²⁷

Although William took some liberties with facts and chronology, the meaning of his narrative comes across clearly: on the king's behaviour and his ability to exert his authority in the respect of Christian principles depends the survival of his people. In the case of William Rufus, his incompetence when it came to assessing the value of material as well as moral matters, his inability to surround himself with loyal and worthy men and his refusal to grant to his subjects the rights and the duties attached to their status could only lead to a total disturbance and collapse of the kingdom's prosperity.

William of Malmesbury and the Management of the Kingdom's Resources (2): Bishop Wulfstan

The narrative of the exemplary life of Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester, alongside Lanfranc a rare figure of moral and political righteousness in that chaotic period, tells the same story – positively this time. Like other hagiographical texts written by William of Malmesbury, this *Life*, written at the request of the monks of Worcester, results from a translation of an Old English text, in this case the *vita* written by Coleman, Wulfstan's chaplain. Since Coleman's *vita* has not survived, it is difficult to assess the extent to which William's Latin text diverged from it. In its language and the choice of its themes, William's *vita* is nonetheless a medium for his vision; William lingers at length on Wulfstan in his *Gesta Pontificum* as well.

²⁷ *GR*, vol. 1, pp. 570–1.

Appointed to the see of Worcester in 1062 and, by the time he died in 1095, the only English-born bishop in office, Wulfstan cuts an unusual figure in various ways when compared to his fellow Anglo-Norman bishops. His biographer emphasises his constant loyalty to all English kings, whoever they might be, and his concern with upholding the traditions of the English Church. He is made exemplary by his sobriety and his resolute efforts to preserve the resources that the Church and the faithful were entitled to because they needed them. William tells of a strange miracle that happened during the dedication of the church at Longney (Gloucestershire), about a tree whose excessive size hindered the size of the church and how much light it received, and which was protected by the local lord because he liked play and feast in the tree's shade in the summer. The moral given for the miracle is unusual, since it states the value of natural resources as they function in relation to the necessities of human life:

The bishop summoned his host and gave orders for the felling of the tree: it was only proper that, if nature had not provided, he should supplement it by his own efforts [*Congrueret enim ut si spacium negasset natura, ipse suppleret industria*], and certainly not take over for his own low pursuits space that nature had given.²⁸

Angered by his host's obstinacy, the bishop 'hurled the spear of his curse at the tree. From the wound, it gradually grew barren, failed in its fruits and shrivelled up from the root.'²⁹

²⁸ *Vita Wulfstani*, in *William of Malmesbury: Saints' Lives*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson, OMT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 94–7.

²⁹ See Stephen Baxter's comment on this text in his 'Lordship and Labour', in J. Cricks and E. van Houts (eds.), *A Social History of England, 900–1200*, pp. 98–114 at p. 103.

The *vita's* third book describes the bishop's everyday life and routine. His meticulous austerity, conceived as the precise measure of everybody's (including the bishop's) needs depending on their status, displays a hostility to all forms of ostentatious consumption. As a tactful host, he dissimulates his abstinence from alcoholic drinks by secretly drinking water when beer and mead is served to his guests. Mead was a costly, high-status drink; a small jar becomes miraculously bottomless and allows for all present to be served.³⁰ In the same vein his abstinence from all meat is explained as expiation from one incident when he had been reluctant to go on a religious mission because he had to leave just as a mouth-watering goose was spit-roasting.³¹ What is presented as praiseworthy here is not that the prelate ate humble fare, but that he abstained from food that would have been appropriate to his rank. Similarly, when Geoffrey, bishop of Coutances, makes a comment about Wulfstan's choice to dress in lambskins rather than marten, beaver or fox, Wulfstan reminded him humorously of the spiritual hierarchy among animals: 'Crede mihi, respondit Wulstanus, sepius cantatur agnus Dei quam cattus dei.'³² He also had no qualms about risking the wrath of powerful people by sharing his last Easter meal with the poor:

He had warned his staff in advance that he wanted that Easter to dine formally with good men. They had taken that the wrong way and invited a large number of rich personages. Easter day dawned and Wulfstan brought as many paupers into the hall as it could hold, and requested to be served with a meal at a chair placed among them. The steward was furious, and grinding his teeth grumbled aloud at the man's

³⁰ *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 106–7

³¹ *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 108–9.

³² *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 106–7.

softheartedness, saying it was more appropriate for a bishop to dine with a few rich men than with many poor. He replied that those men were rich who knew how to do God's will and were capable of doing it; those needed serving who had nothing from which to repay the service. God would, by way of compensation, return on behalf of the poor what they could not afford to give themselves. He was happier to look on this company than if (as often happened) he had sat down with the king of the English.³³

Such extreme attention to the fair sharing of resources to people in need resulted in a miracle of sorts, in effect a demonstration of virtuous economics:

A year before his death, he went so far in carrying out these duties on Maundy Thursday that the care taken in earlier years was reckoned to have been quite eclipsed. He must have had a premonition that he would be doing it for the last time and he struck all his staff with amazement at this solicitude. He has instructed each of the reeves to provide from every vill a complete suit of clothes for one man, shoes for ten and provisions for a hundred. He had ordered his chamberlains to buy up these same things, so that his 'court' would supply any deficiencies left by the estates. Thrice that day, the hall was fill with the needy [*egeni*], so close packed that one could move through them only with difficulty, the throng having so blocked all the entrances, huddled together in a long and disorderly queue.

³³ *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 138–9.

The house was uproar. Monks and clerks were washing the feet of those who sat there. Wulfstan was in the midst of them, resting on a bishop's seat (for the enormous labour had drained his strength) so as to be able to sing psalms even if he could not wash feet. His mind, meanwhile, was full of mercy, wanting to satisfy the needs of all, so that no one should go away empty handed. Once and a second time they all went out clothed, happy at receiving coin and shoes, and all with full stomachs. But when the third sitting of paupers was in place, a monk whispered in the bishop's ear that the money and clothes had run out, and that the food stocks were getting low, while the steward and chamberlains had been approached and were refusing money. What was the point of washing feet if there was nothing to give to those who had been washed? 'No' said the bishop, 'let the Lord's commandment be kept. His generosity will not fail, and He will ensure that His servants are fed from somewhere. My staff are refusing to act for me. They will be willing enough when they have me no longer.' The words were scarcely spoken when lo! three messengers came in, almost treading on each other's heels in their haste. The first announced to the bishop that money had been brought, the second that a horse had been led up, the third that oxen had been donated. Wulfstan raised his eyes and hands heavenwards, and rejoiced the miracle, not so much for his own sake as because of the gain to the poor. The monks wept for joy and applauded so remarkable a master. All blessed God for not frustrating the prayers of those who put their hopes in Him, and not allowing Wulfstan to be saddened even for an

hour. So the sale of the horse and the realizing of the value of an oxen, along with the money just brought, san to the needs of the indigents.³⁴

As with many other narratives of hunger, this is grounded both in the Easter cycle and the time of hunger gap between harvests. Although that moment is not explicitly described as a food scarcity or a famine, the encounter between the charitable prelate and the poor takes place nonetheless in a context of shortages. The presence of an unusual large crowd of paupers, which the bishop's stocks are unable to satisfy since only two thirds of the gathered poor can be fed and comforted, and even more tellingly the fact that a miracle is required to enable the elderly bishop to fulfil his charitable duties, all these features indicate a crisis dynamic. However, the animals that are mustered to help Wulfstan out are not eaten on the spot, but sold to provide cash, which shows that the market remains efficient to provide for food needs. It matters a great deal that those animals, whose workforce was a resource for the community, were not sacrificed but exchanged, therefore remaining useful in the future. The answer to the crisis consists therefore in a levy on the diocese's cathedral city to acquire cash that could be used as alms. Nothing is said about the buyers of the animals, but one can guess that they benefited from a very good negotiating position and could buy at a good price, an implicit consequence of Wulfstan's miracle.

The conclusions to be drawn from this rapid foray into William of Malmesbury's works must be tentative. There is a risk of arbitrariness if one gives a general meaning to two short extracts from an author whose works are as numerous as they are varied. It is worth repeating where the inquiry started. Narrative texts from the Anglo-Norman world are devoid of anxious and dramatic stories about livelihoods and the risks of food

³⁴ *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 134–9.

shortages. It is possible that the discrepancy is explained by the early and fast-paced urbanisation of Flanders and the Rhineland, which put a strain on the local capacities of food production. Urbanisation was slower in England and Normandy, which avoided such strain. However, William of Malmesbury's texts shed light to another dimension, which is confirmed by other, documentary, evidence: the crucial role of market institutions and taxation mechanisms in the Anglo-Norman economic system.³⁵ The relative abundance of foodstuffs was an incentive to allow peasants and local communities to organise their crops themselves. It places thus the labourers and the world of production on the margins of written culture, where *oratores* and *bellatores* take centre stage. Yet the necessary coherence between the economic and agrarian system and the political institutions is well understood by people such as William of Malmesbury. This is why they emphasise in their writings the role of rulers, be they kings and their entourage or bishops in their diocese. William Rufus's responsibility for the onset of a famine and the attention paid by Wulfstan to the needs of the *pauperes* are both part of an economy that is not grounded in the exploitation of resources considered as a boundless given but is meant to fulfil the needs of the whole community. Only the texts of contemporary historians can shed light on this coherence.

³⁵ M. Arnoux, 'Ressources et croissance dans le monde anglo-normand: sources et hypothèses', *ANS*, 40 (2018), 53–62.