

## The Use of Seals in Anglo-Saxon England

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The late tenth-century seal of Edith, bearing the inscription ‘+ Seal of Edith royal sister’, has been known to scholarship since its first publication in 1815. The Edith in question can be identified as the daughter of King Edgar by (St) Wulfthryth, and thus a half-sister of King Edward the Martyr (975–8) and of King Æthelred the Unready (978–1016). Like her mother, Edith was associated with Wilton abbey, in Wiltshire, founded in the late ninth century; she died (age 23) in the early 980s. The matrix used for her seal does not survive. It was made probably in the later 970s, and since it shows her in the dress of one who had entered the religious life, we may assume that it was used by her, at Wilton, for as long as she continued to conduct her worldly affairs. Many years later, probably in the 1060s, St Edith’s namesake Queen Edith, daughter of Earl Godwine, sister of Earl Harold, and wife of King Edward the Confessor, dedicated herself to the further development of Wilton abbey (where she had been brought up). It was presumably out of respect for these associations that the seal-matrix of the earlier Edith came to be used at Wilton, after the Norman Conquest, as a conventual seal. Impressions made from the original matrix are found appended to charters issued in the names of Matilda de la Mare, abbess of Wilton (1252–71), Cecily Willoughby, abbess of Wilton (1485–1528), and Cecily Bodenham, abbess of Wilton (1534–9). The matrix was used finally, and no doubt symbolically, on 25 March 1539, for sealing the abbey’s deed of surrender to the agents of King Henry VIII.

One cannot look at the later medieval charters of successive abbesses of Wilton, sealed ‘open’ using an Anglo-Saxon seal-matrix, without wondering whether this might have implications for our understanding of the use of seal-matrices, and seal-impressions, in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The surviving corpus of seal-matrices has recently increased, from three to four; and this provides a pretext, as if any were needed, for reviewing them in relation to each other, and in relation to other evidence bearing on the use of seals in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>1</sup>

### *The surviving seal-matrices*

The seventh-century gold signet ring in the name of Balthild, now in the Norwich Castle Museum, and the mid-ninth-century bronze seal-matrix in the name of Æthelwald, bishop of Dunwich, in the British Museum, remind us that such objects are attested from the earlier part of the Anglo-Saxon period. Our concern here, however, is with the group of four matrices which date from the same (later Anglo-Saxon) period as Edith’s, and which seem, as a group, to represent practices by then well established in England. The matrix for the seal of Ælfric [I] came to light in 1832, at Weeke, in Hampshire. The matrix for the seal of Godwine *minister* (‘the thegn’) was discovered in 1874 at Wallingford, in Berkshire; the other side of the matrix had been engraved for secondary use, in the name of Godgyth, styled *monacha Deo data* (‘nun given to God’). Both of these matrices (Ælfric [I] and Godwine/Godgyth) are held in the British Museum. The matrix for the seal of Wulfric

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<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank the organisers of the conference at the British Museum in December 2015, and also to acknowledge a long-standing debt to Dr Leslie Webster, formerly of the British Museum, centring on Anglo-Saxon seal-matrices. I am grateful also to Dr Rory Naismith for valuable comments.

came to light in the 1920s, and reappeared, at auction, in 1977; it was acquired by the British Rail Pension Fund, and after appearing again at auction, in 1996, is now in another private collection. The matrix for the seal of Ælfric [II] was discovered by a metal-detectorist in 2010, in Hampshire, and was acquired subsequently for the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.<sup>2</sup> If four such objects have chanced to survive from this distant period, there must once have been many more.

King Æthelred's half-sister Edith has thus been joined, among those who carried out business of a nature which required the use of a personal seal, by four laymen, three of whom (Ælfric I, Godwine, and Wulfric) are depicted brandishing a sword. Godwine is designated *minister* (the standard Latin equivalent of 'thegn'); the others (Ælfric I, Wulfric, and Ælfric II) are not accorded a title or style. Godwine's seal was adapted for use by Godgyth, who like Edith was a woman in the religious life. The matrices are linked in various ways by shared features. Two are in ivory, with figurative decoration on the tab (Godwine and Wulfric); and two are in bronze, with stylised acanthus ornamentation on the back, in one case (Ælfric I), and on the back and the tab in the other (Ælfric II). All four bear inscriptions in essentially the same form: '+ SIGILLVM ÆLFRICI AV [I]'; '+ SIGILLVM ÆLFRICVS [II]'; '+ SIGILLVM WULFRICI'; and '+ SIGILLVM GODWINI MINISTRI' with '+ SIGILLVM GODGYÐE MONACHE DEO DATE'. The (lost) matrix used for the seal of Edith, perhaps in ivory, would have fitted well within this group. The representation of a woman in religious life is comparable with the representation of Godgyth; the acanthus ornamentation on the tab is comparable with the acanthus on the seals of Ælfric I and Ælfric II; and the form of inscription is a variation on the same theme ('+ SIGILL[VM] EADGYÐE REGAL[IS] ADELPHÉ'). Given the close links between the matrices themselves, and in the light of numismatic and iconographic parallels, it is likely that they were made and used across a period which extended from c. 975 onwards. If men and women of standing among the English needed a seal-matrix in the performance of their duties, one might suppose further that the matrices were made by craftsmen who specialized in such business, perhaps on licence from a higher authority.<sup>3</sup>

There is evidence of a different kind for what might have been the personal seal of a readily identifiable layman in the mid-eleventh century. A record drawn up at Waltham abbey, Essex, in the twelfth century, lists relics which were kept there 'under the seal (*sub sigillo*) of Leofwine *ducis minisi*'. The word *minisi* is nonsensical. It is conceivable, however, given the inscription on the seal of Godwine 'the thegn' (and in the absence of any better explanation), that the record was compiled by someone who had seen a contracted or damaged form of the inscription '+ SIGILLVM LEOFWINI MINIS[TR]I', on a seal associated with relics which he knew

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<sup>2</sup> For details of the four matrices, see E. Okasha, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 118–19 (Godwine/Godgytha) and 119–20 (Ælfric I), with 'A Supplement to *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *ASE* 11 (1983), 83–118, at 99, and R. Linenthal and W. Noel, *Medieval Seal Matrices in the Schøyen Collection* (Oslo, 2004), 3–4 (Wulfric); and J. Kershaw and R. Naismith, 'A New Late Anglo-Saxon Seal Matrix', *ASE* 42 (2013), 291–8 (Ælfric II).

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see W. H. Stevenson, 'Yorkshire Surveys and Other Eleventh-Century Documents in the York Gospels', *EHR* 27 (1912), 1–25, at 3–8; S. Heslop, 'English Seals from the Mid Ninth Century to 1100', *Jnl of the Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.* 133 (1980), 1–16, and 'Twelfth-Century Forgeries as Evidence for Earlier Seals: the Case of St Dunstan', *St Dunstan: His Life, Times and Cult*, ed. N. Ramsay, et al. (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 299–310; S. Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred the Unready 978–1016* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 138–40; B. Bedos Rezak, 'The King Enthroned: a New Theme in Anglo-Saxon Royal Iconography. The Seal of Edward the Confessor and its Political Implications', *Kings and Kingship, Acta* 11 (1985), pp. 53–88; and Kershaw and Naismith, 'Seal Matrix', pp. 294–8.

had come to Waltham from Earl Harold's brother, Earl Leofwine, presumably at a time (in the 1050s) when Leofwine was still a thegn.<sup>4</sup>

*The use of seals in the tenth and early eleventh centuries*

Seal-impressions produced using matrices of the kinds represented by the surviving examples would have had various applications at the higher levels of the secular and ecclesiastical orders. In a glossary of the period, the word *sigillum*, as in *sigillum uel bulla*, was glossed *insegel* 'seal'.<sup>5</sup> Deeper understanding flows from occurrences of the word *insegel* in vernacular texts, and of the word *sigillum* in Latin texts.<sup>6</sup> We learn from the 'Fonthill Letter' that a certain Helmstan, who had been declared an outlaw, had visited the grave of King Alfred (at Winchester), and was given a 'seal' (*insigle*), apparently as evidence of his visit, which he took to the writer at Chippenham, who gave it to the king – who removed Helmstan's outlawry.<sup>7</sup> This was perhaps a loose seal-impression, issued at the New Minster to those who visited Alfred's grave as a form of penance, though it may have been associated with a written document regarded as secondary to the evidence of the seal itself. A more common use for a seal (in association with a lock) would have been to affirm ownership of a box or chest containing precious items belonging to a particular person, or to control access to a building or room. The word *insegel* was used in this sense as a translation for *sigillum* in the Alfredian version of the *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory the Great. In the same vein, the author of a homily composed in the tenth century said of a wealthy man who kept the produce of his land for himself, rather than share it with the needy, that he 'beclosed it with seals (*mid insigelum*)'.<sup>8</sup>

Further usages of *sigillum* and *insegel* are best approached in the wider context of the documentary culture of the day. There can be no doubt that use of the written word for mundane and practical purposes began early and became widespread, in Latin as well as in the vernacular.<sup>9</sup> When he wished to share his concerns with Archbishop Brihtwold, in the opening years of the eighth century, Wealdhere, bishop of London, chose to do so by letter, 'so that it may not be divulged and known to many'.<sup>10</sup> The correspondences maintained by Bede, Boniface and Alcuin in the eighth

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<sup>4</sup> For discussion, with further references, see S. Keynes, 'Earl Harold and the Foundation of Waltham Holy Cross (1062)', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 39 (2017).

<sup>5</sup> *The Antwerp-London Glossaries: the Latin and Latin-Old English Vocabularies from Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus 16.2 - London, British Library Add. 32246, I: Texts and Indexes*, ed. D. W. Porter, Publ. of the DOE 8 (Toronto, 2011), 1–131, at 63.

<sup>6</sup> For further details, see the entries for *insegel* in the dictionary of Old English by Joseph Bosworth (1898), its supplement by T. Northcote Toller (1921), and the University of Toronto's Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus (online), pending the publication of the fascicle for the letter I in the *Toronto Dictionary of Old English*; see also the entries for *sigillum* in the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (online).

<sup>7</sup> For the Fonthill Letter, see further below (n. 13); for the seal given at Alfred's grave, see also N. Marafioti, 'Seeking Alfred's Body: Royal Tomb as Political Object in the Reign of Edward the Elder', *EME* 23 (2015), 202–28.

<sup>8</sup> *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, ed. D. G. Scragg (Oxford, 1992), pp. 205–6, with *The Vercelli Book Homilies*, ed. L. E. Nicholson (Lanham, MD, 1991), p. 77; see also J. Roberts, 'What did Anglo-Saxon Seals Seal When?', *The Power of Words*, ed. G. D. Caie, et al. (Amsterdam, 2006), pp. 131–57, at 137–41 (connecting the seals with the further information that this was bookland).

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990), and M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chichester, 2013), pp. 2, 23, 30–5, 68, 235, 309–18 (seals) and 337.

<sup>10</sup> P. Chaplais, 'The Letter from Bishop Wealdhere of London to Archbishop Brihtwold of Canterbury: the Earliest Original "Letter Close" Extant in the West' [1978], reprinted in his *Essays in Medieval Diplomacy and Administration* (London, 1981), XIV 3–24.

century, and by or on behalf of King Æthelwulf, King Alfred and others in the ninth, represent aspects of the forms of communication which continued to develop thereafter, and which proliferated in the tenth century as conditions changed and needs increased.<sup>11</sup> The Alfredian reforms and political developments of the late ninth and early tenth centuries, were far reaching, and soon began to affect further the ways in which business was conducted. The implication of an oft-cited passage in the Old English version of St Augustine's *Soliloquies* is that a man of high standing might have occasion to send a 'message in writing' (*ærendgewrit*) to one of his men, accompanied by an impression of his seal (*and his insegel*), in the expectation that the man would understand in this way that the message came to him from his lord.<sup>12</sup> A letter addressed, in the vernacular, by a prominent layman to King Edward the Elder, concerning the history of an estate at Fonthill, in Wiltshire, survives in what is patently its original form, exemplifying practices which obtained c. 920. It bears no evidence of an address, or indeed of sealing, and one can but ask whether it might have been delivered to the king by its bearer, with an impression of the sender's seal.<sup>13</sup> As a 'unified' kingdom of the English began to emerge, in the later 920s, knowledge of all that took place at royal assemblies had to be disseminated more widely, and those attending the shire courts and other local assemblies needed to be able to communicate back to those at the centre as well as further on down the line. As products of a working legal system, the 'law-codes' generated during the reigns of kings from Edward the Elder to Æthelred the Unready suggest much, in the variety of their form, about the processes involved in their production, multiplication, publication, and preservation.<sup>14</sup> Letters directed by a named author to a named recipient are well attested in the later tenth century. A collection in Latin was put together at Canterbury, probably in the early 990s, and is of primary importance for manifestations of 'connectivity' in high circles, within England and across the channel to the Continent.<sup>15</sup> It is complemented, for the vernacular, by three letters bearing on contentious matters of particular concern: a letter from Archbishop Dunstan to King Æthelred, on the see of Cornwall; a letter from Queen Ælfthryth to Archbishop Ælfric, on the history of an estate at Ruishton, in Somerset; and a letter from Bishop Æthelric to Ealdorman Æthelmær, on the treatment of the see of Sherborne.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For Alcuin's use of seals in his letter writing, see M. Garrison, 'Alcuin's World Through his Letters and Verse', unpublished PhD dissertation, Univ. of Cambridge (1995), pp. 26–33. The leaden *bull* in the name of Coenwulf, king of the Mercians (796–821), found in Italy and now in the British Museum, may or may not have been associated with a written document: see Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, p. 28, and P. Chaplais, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chancery: from the Diploma to the Writ' [1966], reprinted in *Prisca Munimenta*, ed. F. Ranger (London, 1973), 43–62, at 52–3.

<sup>12</sup> F. E. Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs* (Manchester, 1952), p. 10; S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great* (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 141 and 300, with further references.

<sup>13</sup> S. Keynes, 'The Fonthill Letter', *Words, Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. M. Korhammer, *et al.* (Cambridge, 1992), 53–97, with 'Church Councils, Royal Assemblies, and Anglo-Saxon Royal Diplomas', *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. G. Owen-Crocker and B. W. Schneider (Woodbridge, 2013), 17–182, at 73–4.

<sup>14</sup> For Æthelstan's legislation, see D. Pratt, 'Written Law and the Communication of Authority in Tenth-Century England', *England and the Continent in the Tenth Century*, ed. D. Rollason, *et al.* (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 331–50.

<sup>15</sup> The composition and significance of the 'Canterbury Letter Book' (BL Cotton Tiberius A. xv, fols. 144v–173r) are explored further in a study of Archbishop Sigeric (990–4) and Archbishop Ælfric (995–1005), forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> For these three texts, with further references, see Chaplais, 'Anglo-Saxon Chancery', pp. 56–9, and Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, p. 138. Dunstan's letter (S 1296) survives in what is arguably its original single-sheet form; there is no physical indication that it had been sealed. Queen Ælfthryth's letter (S 1242) was seemingly retained by the Old Minster, Winchester, as the interested party; its text

While there is evidence of this kind for various forms of communication in writing, little is known of the ways in which letters were conveyed from writer to recipient, and it remains uncertain, therefore, to what extent practices developed which might be dignified as a working 'system'. One thinks, of course, of Charlemagne's *missi dominici*.<sup>17</sup> The evidence from Anglo-Saxon England falls short of this, yet there is reason to suppose none the less that those at the 'centre' of royal government and those who were responsible for 'local' assemblies communicated with each other through a network of qualified, trusted and perhaps accredited agents. We catch what seems to be an almost miraculous glimpse of such agents in the late 980s, and into the early 990s. Three diplomas issued in 988, preserved in different archives, combine to suggest that King Æthelred made provision in that year for the appointment of special agents with bases in appropriate county towns.<sup>18</sup> One was a grant to a certain Æthelnoth of a property (*curtis*) in Wilton, Wiltshire. The second was a grant to Æthelsige, bishop of Sherborne, and to Æthelmær, king's thegn (*miles*), of a property (*curtis*) in Winchester, Hampshire. The third was a grant to a certain Leofstan of a substantial estate near Chichester, Sussex, with a holding (*haga*) in the town. As it happens, a list of those named as present at a royal assembly at London, c. 989, ends with 'Leofstan of Sussex', quite possibly the man named the year before in connection with Chichester; it also includes the same Æthelmær and one Æthelnoth, son of Wigstan (possibly of Wilton).<sup>19</sup> This evidence can then be set beside the letter in which Pope John XV announced the peace which had been established between King Æthelred and Richard I of Normandy (991).<sup>20</sup> The negotiators for the English are named as Æthelsige, bishop of Sherborne; Leofstan, son of Ælfwold; and Æthelnoth, son of Wigstan. The pope's letter ends with the statement that neither party is to receive a representative of the other party 'without their seal' (*sine sigillo eorum*). Relations between the English and the Normans may have been compromised in the recent past by people passing themselves off as special representatives of the duke or the king; though it is not entirely clear whether each was expected to carry an impression of the king's seal (or the duke's), or whether each had a seal of his own. The fact that beneficiaries of the diplomas issued by King Æthelred in 988 seem to recur among those attending an assembly at London c. 989, and then match so closely those named in the pope's letter of 991, is a remarkable coincidence; in fact so remarkable that one should like to think it meaningful. It is as if we see here the appointment of three men, doubtless among several others, who were assigned places of their own in particular county towns, who are known to have been entrusted with negotiations on behalf of the king at the highest level, and who were among those expected to carry seals when engaged in the king's business.<sup>21</sup>

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was later copied there into a cartulary. Bishop Æthelric's letter (S 1383) survives in what was perhaps a file-copy retained by the sender, as an addition to the 'Sherborne Pontifical'.

<sup>17</sup> R. McKitterick, *Charlemagne: the Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge, 2008), esp. pp. 256–63, with further references.

<sup>18</sup> Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 91–2, citing S 870 (Wilton), S 871 (Glastonbury), and S 872 (Selsey). For S 871, see also A. R. Rumble, *Property and Piety in Early Medieval Winchester* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 91–5, with *Charters of Glastonbury Abbey*, ed. S. E. Kelly (Oxford, 2012), pp. 526–8. For S 872, see also *Charters of Selsey*, ed. S. E. Kelly (Oxford, 1998), pp. 91–5.

<sup>19</sup> S 877 (Robertson, *Charters*, no. 63; *WinchNM* 31).

<sup>20</sup> The pope's letter is preserved, significantly, as the final item in the 'Canterbury Letter Book' (BL Cotton Tiberius A. xv, fols. 172v–173r), printed in *Councils & Synods*, ed. Whitelock, pp. 177–9 (no. 38), with translation in *EHD*, no. 230.

<sup>21</sup> Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 139–40. For the wider context, see James Campbell, 'Some Agents and Agencies of the Late Anglo-Saxon State' [1987], reprinted in his *The Anglo-Saxon State*

It is against this background (albeit blurred) that we may now approach the two explicit references to the seal of King Æthelred himself, which in combination with a passage from one of the homilies of Ælfric (formerly of Cerne abbey in Dorset, but from 1005 of Eynsham abbey in Oxfordshire) provide compelling evidence of the ways in which the king at the centre was able to communicate with the officials of the shire-courts or with any of the widespread body of his thegns. In the early 990s the king had occasion to send his seal (*his insegel*), by Abbot Ælfhere (of Bath), to a shire-meeting at Cuckhamsley, Berkshire, in order to instruct the assembled company to settle a particular dispute. The seal-impression was evidently that of the king, but it is not clear whether the message was delivered orally by the abbot himself, or whether it would have been read out from a written document.<sup>22</sup> Some years later, on the occasion of a shire-meeting in Kent, the king sent a writ and his seal (*gewrit and his insegel*) to Archbishop Ælfric (995–1005), again to order that a dispute be settled. In this instance the bearer is not named; but one imagines that the text of the writ, guaranteed by its association with an impression of the king's seal, was formally read out at the start of proceedings.<sup>23</sup> Both records report what was essentially the same procedure, in slightly different ways; and they are complemented by a third text, which illustrates the principle at stake. In a homily *De populo Israhel*, written c. 1000, Ælfric writes of those who refuse to listen to God's instruction, so that they might plead ignorance and hope to evade punishment for their wrongdoing. He counters them with what was evidently intended to be an irresistible analogy drawn from the secular world.<sup>24</sup> If the king sends his writ to any one of his thegns, and the thegn despises it so greatly that he will not hear it, nor look at [any] of it, then the king will not be very gracious to him on learning how he has been scorned. In effect, Ælfric was describing the same procedure in another way, making a point of his own about the absent authority. The king's mandate had been brought to its intended recipient by the king's agent, and read out or shown to him; so woe betide anyone who dared to scorn what he had been instructed to do by the king himself. There is no explicit reference here to an associated seal-impression, though it is hard to believe that the imagined situation was any different from the particular cases. One can only guess what King Æthelred's seal might have looked like. It may be that it lies behind the design of one of the king's earliest coin-types; or that it depicted the king crowned, with sceptre and sword; or that it was modelled on a recent or contemporary seal from imperial Germany.<sup>25</sup> It is likely to have been single-sided; but quite possibly it produced seal-impressions slightly larger than those produced with one or other of the group of seal-matrices discussed above. It might have been modified from time to time, as the matrices wore out.

Moving onward into the first half of the eleventh century, knowledge of the documentary culture acquires additional dimensions. In a Latin school text which originated probably at Winchester, we read of a pilgrim who asked his lord to provide

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(London, 2000), pp. 201–25, at 214–23; and S. Keynes, 'Royal Government and the Written Word in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *Uses of Literacy*, ed. McKitterick, pp. 226–57.

<sup>22</sup> S 1454 (Robertson, *Charters*, no. 66; *CantCC* 133), with Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> S 1456 (Robertson, *Charters*, no. 69; *Roch* 37), with Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> For the passage in question, see Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 136–7, with further references. The interest of the passage in this context was first noted by Dorothy Whitelock.

<sup>25</sup> The connections between Anglo-Saxon England and Ottonian Germany are symbolised by the fine gold filigree, cloisonné and enamel disc brooch, with the forward-facing bust of a crowned king, found c. 1840 at Dowgate Hill in the heart of the city of London, now on display in the British Museum (1856,0701.1461).

him with ‘a seal (*sigillum*) engraved with his [the lord’s] name, and a document (*scriptum*)’, to help ensure safe passage on his way to Rome.<sup>26</sup> Following the death of King Swein, in 1014, King Æthelred (then in exile in Normandy) sent over his son Edward to England, with his messengers (*mid his ærendracum*), as if Edward himself was the most powerful guarantee imaginable of his father’s good word and intentions – in effect, a human seal. Again, surviving texts illustrate different aspects of publication and preservation. We learn from the will of Æthelstan (Edward’s older half-brother) that the atheling had received permission to make his will (communicated by a certain Ælfgar), on the day of his death (25 June 1014). The ‘originals’ were the two or three parts of a chirograph, of which the top part survives, with another part in a different archive; further copies would have been needed for wider circulation, of which one survives (with a step from a wrapping-tie).<sup>27</sup> A letter from Archbishop Wulfstan informing the king and queen (Cnut and Ælfgifu) that he had consecrated Æthelnoth as archbishop of Canterbury (in 1020), and urging that he be entitled to his rights, was apparently passed to and retained by the new archbishop, who had the text copied into a gospel-book.<sup>28</sup> King Cnut’s letter to the English people (which originated in the winter of 1019–20), and his ‘letter’ (*epistola*) of 1027, are themselves most likely to have been brought to England, and then circulated more widely, in written form. The procedure did not, however, prevent Archbishop Wulfstan from ‘improving’ the text of the earlier letter when he caused a copy of it to be entered for safe keeping in his gospel-book; and it was perhaps from an associated seal-impression that a copy of the letter of 1027 was known later to have been delivered by Lyfing, abbot of Tavistock.<sup>29</sup> Also in Cnut’s reign, a shire-meeting for Herefordshire was convened at Aylton (12 miles east of Hereford), attended by the thegn Tovi the Proud, who had come there ‘on the king’s business’. A man of the shire made a claim against his own mother; whereupon three thegns were chosen from those at the meeting to get evidence of the woman’s intentions. They rode about 10 miles south-west from Aylton to see her, and were charged by her to act properly, ‘like thegns’ (*thegnlice*), in reporting back to the meeting. Once the matter was settled, one of those present returned from Aylton to Hereford in order to place a record of the proceedings in a gospel-book.<sup>30</sup> Clearly thegns were expected to discharge their responsibilities in the manner appropriate to their station; and one should like to think that each one of them might have been the bearer of some token of their own status, or some evidence indicating on whose authority they had come.

We emerge with the cumulative impression of a documentary culture which may have owed much at the outset to the Alfredian reforms of the 880s and 890s, but which owed no less thereafter to the ways in which unfolding circumstances continued to drive the internal arrangements and requirements of a fast developing kingdom. Documentation was generated in a variety of different contexts, ranging from the writing and delivery of a king’s mandate ordering that a dispute be settled, via the preparation of statements prepared by contending parties, for use as evidence, to the ‘official’ records of the outcome, perhaps with associated memoranda by an

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<sup>26</sup> *De raris fabulis retractata*, ch. 26, in *Latin Colloquies from Pre-Conquest Britain*, ed. S. Gwara (Toronto, 1996), pp. 37–8.

<sup>27</sup> S 1503: *Charters of Canterbury*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, pp. 1037–50, at 1043 (no. 142).

<sup>28</sup> S 1386, entered in the ‘MacDurnan Gospels’: *ibid.*, pp. 1074–6 (no. 150).

<sup>29</sup> For the two letters, see S. Keynes, ‘The Additions in Old English’, *The York Gospels*, ed. N. Barker (London, 1986), 81–99, at 95–6, and *Councils & Synods*, ed. Whitelock, pp. 506–13 (no. 65); with E. Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: the Politics of Early English* (Oxford, 2012), 17–43.

<sup>30</sup> S 1462 (Robertson, *Charters*, no. 78).

interested party. No example of a *gewrit* initiating action has chanced to survive; so we can only guess what one might have looked like, and how it might have compared (for example) with a *gewrit* making an announcement of some other kind, such as an appointment to high office, an instruction to the king's reeves, a grant of bookland, or the arrangements for the next assembly. None the less, a sufficient quantity and variety of 'law-codes', diplomas and vernacular charters, produced in connection with the routine operation of this documentary culture in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, survive to suggest how they developed in form, and how they worked in relation to each other. The royal diploma, and the bi- or tripartite chirograph, were very different products of this culture; another was the Anglo-Saxon writ.

*The development of the sealed writ*

While certain kinds of message were doubtless transmitted orally, the evidence reviewed above suggests that messages were also conveyed from the king to a local assembly, or to a particular recipient, in written form, by trusted agents of the king. Much has to be left to the power of imagination, and then reduced to a working hypothesis.<sup>31</sup> A message would have been composed in the formulaic terms appropriate to its purpose. Once written, it would have been folded into a small package, and fastened with a wrapping-tie (whether cut from the lower edge of the parchment, or made from a separate strip). It seems unlikely that such writs were themselves sealed, whether 'open' (with a pendent seal affixed to a seal-tag) or 'close' (for example with a seal applied over a wrapping-tie placed around the folded package, broken in the act of opening). The bearers of the king's messages ranged in status from higher ecclesiastics, when circumstances allowed or required, to thegns going about the king's business, extended perhaps to the sons of the nobility, at the outset of their own careers in the king's service. We may suppose that they had been chosen for the task not only because they could ride, but because they were able to read the messages they carried. We may imagine, furthermore, that on first arrival at an assembly, an agent would have been required to show his credentials to the officers of the local assembly, perhaps in the form of a well produced seal-impression in wax (more imposing than a thin disk), made for him by those in charge of the king's seal-matrix; after which he might have put it back (for example) in an embroidered bag. When the time came, at an assembly, the 'performance' might have begun with a formal announcement of the agent's status as a representative of the king. The crucial element would have been his oral statement of the king's word, or reading aloud of a written text. In most cases, perhaps, a document was retained by the agent, if not by the officers of the local assembly; but in particular circumstances, the interested party,

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<sup>31</sup> For different views on the evolution of the sealed writ, see Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, pp. 10–24 (origins), 34–8 (writ and diploma), 41–7 (writ and seal), 57–61 (royal secretariat) and 92–105 (seals); *Facsimiles of English Royal Writs to A.D. 1100*, ed. T. A. M. Bishop and P. Chaplais (Oxford, 1957), pp. ix–xiii; Chaplais, 'Anglo-Saxon Chancery', pp. 50–61, with *English Royal Documents: King John–Henry VI 1199–1461* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 2–7, and *English Diplomatic Practice in the Middle Ages* (London, 2003), pp. 1–45 (messages transmitted orally, recorded by the beneficiary; sealed open from the 1040s); Heslop, 'English Seals', pp. 14–15, and 'Twelfth-Century Forgeries', p. 303 (sealed close in the tenth century); Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 144–5; and N. P. Brooks, 'The Archbishop of Canterbury and the So-Called Introduction of Knight Service into England', *ANS* 34 (2012), pp. 41–62, at 51–2, with *Charters of Canterbury*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, pp. 144–7 and 991–2 (sealed close in the tenth century).



or ‘beneficiary’, might have asked to retain it, in order to preserve it for the record, for example by copying its text into a gospel-book.<sup>32</sup>

Although its origins lay deep in the past, it is not until we reach the reign of King Edward the Confessor (1042–66) that we first encounter tangible evidence of the king’s writ and seal. As conditions unfolded in the 1040s and 1050s (before and after the political crisis of 1051–2), the operation of royal government was affected in ways which are not yet fully understood. Contacts across the continent had increased during the reigns of Cnut and his sons, raising awareness in high places of ‘continental’ practices, in various respects. This was taken further in the 1040s, following Edward’s return from Normandy; and although all of the ‘Frenchmen’ said to have given ‘bad counsel’ were outlawed on Earl Godwine’s restoration, in 1052, the king was able to keep with him those who were loyal. In the 1040s, the production of the king’s diplomas continued much as before; in the same decade, writs begin to survive in some numbers, as if circumstances were now more favourable to their preservation. For whatever reason, there seems to have been a noticeable decline, in the 1050s, in the production of royal diplomas, though production of writs continued; when production of diplomas picked up again, *c.* 1060, they display a new variety of form. The dynamics of the documentary culture require further investigation, in the light also of analogies provided by the evidence of the coinage; for there could be little doubt that these were changing times for those at court and for those in the shires.

It was perhaps in the 1040s that the king’s writs began to be sealed ‘open’, with a pendent single-sided seal, using a matrix of much the same kind as those mentioned above, bearing a symbolic portrait of the king. A writ which has some claim to be regarded as the earliest to survive in its original form cannot be dated with certainty, though is most likely to have been issued in or soon after 1044.<sup>33</sup> It might well have been sealed; but the seal itself is missing. A story told in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* shows, most interestingly, how a ‘writ and seal’ might be deployed by its ‘beneficiary’. At a royal assembly (*witenagemot*) held at London over mid-Lent [10 March] in 1051, the king had appointed Robert, abbot of Jumièges, as archbishop of Canterbury, and Sparrowhawk (*Sparhafoc*), abbot of Abingdon, as bishop of London in Robert’s place. A week or two later Robert went to Rome for his pallium, returning at the end of June, going first to Canterbury and then to the king. ‘Then Abbot Sparrowhawk met him on his way with the king’s writ and seal (*mid þæs cynges gewrite and insegle*) to the effect that he was to be consecrated bishop of London by the archbishop; but the archbishop refused and said the pope had forbidden it him.’<sup>34</sup> The writ was presumably addressed either to Sparrowhawk himself or generally to the officials in those shires where the bishop of London held land. Sparrowhawk was evidently in possession of the original, with a seal attached, and felt empowered by it when he confronted Archbishop Robert, albeit (in these highly charged circumstances) to no avail. The key development, however, probably in the early 1050s, is likely to have been the introduction of an improved royal seal, which was more distinctively royal, and more clearly set apart from other seals in common use at

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<sup>32</sup> Had writs been sealed open or close in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, as a matter of course, one might expect more to have been retained by the interested parties, preserved into the late eleventh century, and mentioned incidentally or copied into cartularies thereafter. It seems easier to understand their loss if writ and seal were separate entities; but any new evidence might change the picture.

<sup>33</sup> S 1071, with Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, p. 156 (no. 11), and *Facsimiles*, ed. Bishop and Chaplais, no. 1, issued probably on the appointment of Leofstan as abbot of Bury St Edmunds.

<sup>34</sup> ASC, MS E ‘1048’ for 1051, in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 7: *MS. E*, ed. S. Irvine (Cambridge, 2004), p. 80, with *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Revised Translation*, ed. D. Whitelock, *et al.* (London, 1961), p. 117.

the time.<sup>35</sup> The new seal was large (diameter 7.5 cm), and double-sided. Each side showed an image of the crowned king on his throne, holding sceptre and orb (on the obverse) and staff and sword (on the reverse, or counterseal); within the outer circle, on both sides, there was room enough for the legend '+ SIGILLVM EADVARDI ANGLORUM BASILEI'. Perhaps as before, the seal was attached to a tongue cut from the lower part of the parchment, presumably as soon as the text itself had been written; the writ with its pendent seal was then fastened with a wrapping-tie, cut from the bottom edge; whereupon the 'writ and seal' was despatched on its way. The earliest surviving original bearing an impression of the new seal was issued probably in 1052, though could be later;<sup>36</sup> another surviving original bearing an impression of the new seal was issued between 1053 and 1057, probably nearer the later date.<sup>37</sup> The grandeur of the seal, suffused with the symbolism of the king's regalia (harking back to the coronation *ordo*, but also evoking the regular occasions on which the king was seen in all his splendour), is powerful, and compelling – and the seal itself so much more, therefore, than a device for guaranteeing the authenticity of the writ. The natural assumption is that writs were written and sealed by one and the same agency, in the king's household, and then delivered by an accredited royal agent to the shire court;<sup>38</sup> and it is easy to understand why those whose interests were affected would have been eager to secure the original, and take it home.

It is tempting to connect the developments in the 1050s with one or other of the group of king's priests who had appeared as witnesses to Edward's diplomas in 1050, and who are visible again in the early 1060s.<sup>39</sup> Among them, the most likely candidate is Regenbald, who headed the priests in 1050, is styled *regis sigillarius* in 1060, and *regis cancellarius*, with a *notarius*, in 1062.<sup>40</sup> Through Regenbald the trail leads back to the contacts which flourished in Cnut's reign with the secular clergy of Lotharingia, sideways to others whom he would have encountered at Edward's court, including Theodoric the goldsmith (perhaps responsible for making a new seal-matrix), and onward to Ingelric, who like Regenbald is also found in the service of William the

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<sup>35</sup> W. de G. Birch, 'On the Three Great Seals of King Edward the Confessor', *Trans. of the Royal Society of Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 10 (1874), pp. 136–48, and *Facsimiles*, ed. Bishop and Chaplais, pp. xix–xxiv. For discussion, see Heslop, 'English Seals', pp. 9–10, and 'Twelfth-Century Forgeries', p. 302; Bedos Rezak, 'King Enthroned', pp. 61–6; and L. Jones, 'From Anglorum Basileus to Norman Saint: the Transformation of Edward the Confessor', *HSJ* 12 (2002), 99–120, and 'The *Enkolpion* of Edward the Confessor: Byzantium and Anglo-Saxon Concepts of Rulership', *Cross and Crucifixion in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. S. Larratt Keefer, et al. (Morgantown, WV, 2010), pp. 369–86, at 373–4.

<sup>36</sup> S 1088, with Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, pp. 186–7 (no. 33), and *Facsimiles*, ed. Bishop and Chaplais, no. 3. It is likely that the writ was issued at the *beginning* of the archiepiscopate of Stigand. If so, its introduction would pre-date the death of Earl Godwine in 1053.

<sup>37</sup> S 1105, with Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, pp. 243–5 (no. 55); *Facsimiles*, ed. Bishop and Chaplais, no. 20; and S. Keynes, *Facsimiles of Anglo-Saxon Charters* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 7–8 (nos. 20–1). The seal associated with this writ is now missing, but is known from casts and photographs. King Edward's 'Sovereign/Eagles' coin-type (introduced in the late 1050s) is likely to have been inspired by the new seal, though its designer shows awareness at the same time of Byzantine coins; see further R. Naismith, *Medieval European Coinage, with a Catalogue of the Coins in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge*, 8: *Britain and Ireland c. 400–1066* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 274–5.

<sup>38</sup> For the suggestion that writs were written by the beneficiary, taken to the king for sealing, and then delivered by the beneficiary to the shire-court, see Chaplais (above, n. 31).

<sup>39</sup> S. Keynes, *An Atlas of Attestations in Anglo-Saxon Charters, c. 670–1066* (Cambridge, 2002), available on the 'Kemble' website [www.kemble.asnc.cam.ac.uk], Table LXVIII.

<sup>40</sup> S 1021, for Leofric, bishop of Exeter (1050), in which Regenbald *presbyter* is followed by Godwine, Godman and Peter; S 1033, for St Mary's, Rouen (1061), in which Regenbald, styled *sigillarius regis* is on his own; and S 1036, for Waltham Holy Cross (1062), in which Regenbald is styled *cancellarius*, among others accorded distinctive 'court' titles.

Conqueror.<sup>41</sup> It may be that the introduction of the ‘new’ royal writs, sealed open with Edward’s large, double-sided seal, is reflected in the greater dignity accorded to Regenbald, as ‘chancellor’, in the king’s diplomas.<sup>42</sup>

It is only a matter of time before another Anglo-Saxon seal-matrix comes to light, and then another. There is an analogy here with the Alfred Jewel and the Minster Lovell Jewel, which for so many years seemed to be such special items (as indeed they still are), but which in recent years have been joined by several other ‘unidentified socketed objects’, re-opening discussion of the purpose or purposes for which they were intended. Whether the appearance of a fifth seal-matrix is owed to archaeologists, detectorists, or to circumstances of any other kind, one can but hope that it will be in a context which throws more light on their making and use.

#### *The legacy of the Anglo-Saxon sealed writ*

The Anglo-Saxon sealed writ was hailed by Sir Frank Stenton as ‘the most efficient means of publishing the ruler’s will which western Europe had so far known’.<sup>43</sup> The surviving originals, which in three out of six cases have lost their seals, are symbols of a documentary culture, in Latin and the vernacular, which had originated in the ninth century and which formed part of the Anglo-Saxon legacy to Anglo-Norman England. Diplomas, as well as writs, were integral to this legacy; but the diplomas, and all they represented, were not well suited to the purposes of the conquering regime. One learns from Domesday Book, on the other hand, how in several cases a ‘(writ and) seal’ of Edward had played a part in establishing rights over land, whether in ecclesiastical or lay hands;<sup>44</sup> and it was the writs, once adapted, which gave rise to the ‘writ-charters’ of the later eleventh century.<sup>45</sup>

Many of those in Anglo-Norman England who served in religious houses founded before 1066 would have been familiar, from examination of their own muniments, with the (unsealed) royal diplomas of that period and with various forms of vernacular documentation (also unsealed); and it was presumably the *absence* of sealed documents which gave rise to the widespread notion that seals were not used in England before the Norman Conquest.<sup>46</sup> Of course we know the deduction to be mistaken. It was only at a few places (notably Westminster, Bury St Edmunds, and Wells) that special efforts had been made, before the Conquest, to retain the writs of Edward the Confessor; the sole surviving writ of Harold was preserved at Wells. At all three of these places, care was also taken to copy them into their cartularies. Survival of writs from other places is more haphazard; though perhaps a greater use in the 1040s of the practice of sealing writs had ensured that more came to be retained

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<sup>41</sup> For the Lotharingians, see S. Keynes, ‘Giso, Bishop of Wells (1061–88)’, *ANS* 19 (1997), 203–71, at 205–13. For Theodoric, see S. Baxter and J. Blair, ‘Land Tenure and Royal Patronage in the Early English Kingdom: a Model and a Case Study’, *ANS* 28 (2006), 19–46, at 41–2. For Ingelric, see P. Taylor, ‘Ingelric, Count Eustace and the Foundation of St Martin-Le-Grand’, *ANS* 24 (2002), 215–37.

<sup>42</sup> Keynes, ‘Foundation of Waltham Holy Cross’.

<sup>43</sup> F. M. Stenton, *The Latin Charters of the Anglo-Saxon Period* (Oxford, 1955), p. 90.

<sup>44</sup> Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, pp. 543–5, with R. Fleming, *Domesday Book and the Law: Society and Legal Custom in Early Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 534 (index, on writs and seals), esp. nos. 109 (*brevem et sigillum*), 122 (*sigillum*), 474 (*brevis cum sigillo*), 662–3 (*sigillum*), 844 (*sigillum*) and 2834 (*brevem et sigillum*) and 2934 (*brevia et sigillum*).

<sup>45</sup> For ‘writ-charters’ see Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, p. 43; *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum: the Acta of William I (1066–1087)*, ed. D. Bates (Oxford, 1998), pp. 43–75 and 96–109; and R. Sharpe, ‘The Use of Writs in the Eleventh Century’, *ASE* 32 (2003), 247–91.

<sup>46</sup> Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, p. 144 n. 215; N. Vincent, ‘The Use and Abuse of Anglo-Saxon Charters by the Kings of England’, *The Long Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past*, ed. M. Brett and D. A. Woodman (Farnham, 2015), pp. 191–227, at 212–14.

by the beneficiaries for the record. The notion that the English made no use of seals before the Conquest is also contradicted by the likelihood that some of the matrices known to have been used in the twelfth century for making conventional seals may have originated in the eleventh.<sup>47</sup> No less interesting, as evidence perhaps of the endurance of practices originating before the Conquest, are two ivory seal-matrices bearing inscriptions of a rather different kind,<sup>48</sup> and the famous charter, with seal attached, by which Thor Longus asked Earl David to confirm his grant of Ednam in the Scottish borders to the monks of St Cuthbert at Durham, early in the twelfth century.<sup>49</sup>

The legacy of Anglo-Saxon seals is represented otherwise by the activities of those who wished to add a semblance of authenticity to a forged document. The practice began before 1086, for one learns from Domesday Book how land was adjudged to the king because it had come to Westminster abbey 'by a false writ' (*per falsem brevem*). The Anglo-Norman community had every reason to respect their association with King Edward; but his death on 5 January 1066 had denied them a diploma marking its foundation and endowment, and confirming its privileges. The monks soon felt the need to produce a seal-matrix which would enable them to fabricate their own writs of King Edward, each bearing an impression of his double-sided seal, based closely on one or other of the several seal-impressions which would have been available to them.<sup>50</sup> The same matrix proved useful some years later, when the need arose to provide sealed diplomas as evidence for the pope. The monks of Westminster also forged seals of Archbishop Dunstan and of King Edgar.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, at Worcester, in the early twelfth century, seals of King Edgar, Archbishop Dunstan and Ealdorman Ælfhere were attached to a copy of a charter of King Edgar for Pershore abbey, in the hope that they might help to guarantee its authenticity when sent to Rome for the pope's inspection.<sup>52</sup> Prompted perhaps by their awareness of Edward's seal, the monks of the abbey of Saint-Denis, in Paris, sealed *en placard* documents which they produced in the names of King Offa, Ealdorman Berhtwald, King Æthelwulf and King Edgar.<sup>53</sup> Such forgeries are fascinating in themselves, and are but a natural if imaginary extension of practices which obtained in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

<5910 + 2532 = 8442>

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<sup>47</sup> For further details, see Heslop, 'English Seals', pp. 7–9, citing examples from Durham, Exeter, Sherborne, Athelney, Glastonbury, and Christ Church, Canterbury.

<sup>48</sup> For a matrix inscribed '... SIGNO SIGILLATUR LEGATIO ...', with two or three words deliberately removed, see T. A. Heslop, 'A Walrus Ivory Seal Matrix from Lincoln', *Antiquaries Journal* 66 (1986), 371–2. A matrix in the British Museum (BM 1962 12-2), inscribed '+ SIGNUM PACIS ET ICONIA PAVONIS' ('Sign of peace and image of the peacock'), was brought to the attention of those attending the conference, in December 2015, by Lloyd de Beer.

<sup>49</sup> A. C. Lawrie, *Early Scottish Charters Prior to A.D. 1153* (Glasgow, 1905), pp. 25–6 and 274–5. The legend on the seal reads 'THOR ME MITTIT AMICO' ('Thor sends me to a friend'), illustrated in Heslop, 'English Seals', p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> The question arises whether a matrix made for use at Westminster was already in use there in the late eleventh century, before it or another matrix was used for diplomas and writs forged in the twelfth century. The answer depends on further examination of the writs and seals themselves.

<sup>51</sup> Heslop, 'Twelfth-Century Forgeries'.

<sup>52</sup> P. Stokes, 'The Charter of King Edgar for Pershore', *ASE* 37 (2008), 31–78, at 67–72.

<sup>53</sup> H. Atsma and J. Vezin, 'Le dossier suspect des possessions de Saint-Denis en Angleterre revisitée (VIIIe-IXe siècles)', *Fälschungen im Mittelalter, IV: Diplomatische Fälschungen (II)*, MGH Schriften 33.4 (Hanover, 1988), pp. 211–36. The charters in question are S 133 (King Offa), S 1186 (Ealdorman Berhtwald), S 318 (King Æthelwulf), and S 686 (King Edgar), of which the first and the fourth survive in their 'original' single-sheet forms, with seals.