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FACT AND FICTION IN THE LEGEND OF ST. EDMUND

by DOROTHY WHITELOCK, C.B.E., F.B.A.

Although most of the materials relating to the story of St. Edmund have been collected and discussed,¹ not all the conclusions reached on their reliability as historical evidence are equally valid, and it may be worth while to re-examine them, in this year of commemoration of the saint.

The oldest source is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, compiled a little before 890.² This enters the arrival of the great Danish army in its annal 866, though it probably came in the autumn of 865; during all this section the chronicler is beginning his year on 24 September.³ He says: 'a great heathen army came to England and took up winter-quarters in East Anglia; and there they were supplied with horses, and the East Angles made peace with them.' It was as a mounted land-force that the Danish army moved for the next few years. Leaving East Anglia for Northumbria, it captured York, had an indecisive campaign in Mercia, and returned to York. Then, in what the chronicler calls 870 (the autumn of 869) it came back to East Anglia. The annal reads:

In this year the raiding army rode across Mercia into East Anglia, and took up winter-quarters at Thetford. And that winter King Edmund fought against them; and the Danes had the victory and killed the king, and conquered all the land.

If this were our only account of Edmund's death, we should have assumed that Edmund was killed in battle, as, in fact, Asser, who was writing his *Life of King Alfred* in 893 and rendering this annal of the Chronicle, did.⁴ To die fighting the heathen was an

¹ An almost exhaustive collection was made by Lord Francis Hervey, *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi. The Garland of Saint Edmund King and Martyr*, London, 1907 (henceforward cited as *Corolla*). Most of the material was discussed by Grant Loomis, in 'The Growth of the Saint Edmund Legend', *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, xiv, 1932, pp. 83-113, and 'St. Edmund and the Lodbrok (Lothbroc) Legend', *ibid.*, xv, 1933, pp. 1-23.

² J. Earle and C. Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 1, pp. 68f. Translation in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Revised Translation*, by D. Whitelock, with D. C. Douglas and S. I. Tucker, or G. N. Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

³ See M. L. R. Beaven, 'The Beginning of the Year in the Alfredian Chronicle', *English Historical Review*, xxxiii, 1918, pp. 328-42.

⁴ Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, p. 26: *ipso cum magna suorum parte ibidem occiso, inimici loco funeris dominati sunt*, which allows the victory to the Danes only after the fall of the king. The mention of heavy English losses is probably Asser's surmise.

adequate claim to sanctity.⁵ Yet the wording 'had the victory and killed the king' does not outrule a killing after the battle was over. Neither the chronicler nor Asser were interested in or well-informed about East Anglia, and may not have known any details.

Nothing else is known of Edmund from contemporary writings, but he issued coins in enough number to suggest that he had had a reign of several years. Coin evidence shows also that two otherwise unknown kings, Æthelstan and Æthelweard, preceded him, and that several of the moneyers who struck for Æthelweard struck also for Edmund.⁶ It seems likely that Edmund succeeded Æthelweard; if there was a ruler between them, he cannot have reigned long.

Besides coins issued by Edmund, there survives a coinage issued in his honour, the St. Edmund pennies, which begin in the last decade of the ninth century.⁷ This shows that he was honoured as a saint already in the lifetime of some of the men who could have witnessed his martyrdom, and while Danish kings were reigning in East Anglia.

The next account of Edmund's death is that of Abbo of Fleury, a continental scholar who spent some time at Ramsey Abbey and wrote his *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* at the request of the monks there between 985 and 987,⁸ thus 116 years, at least, after Edmund's death. Normally an account of so much later date would be viewed with suspicion, particularly if it is at variance with earlier sources. But the authority Abbo claims is unusually detailed: in a prefatory letter addressed to Archbishop Dunstan he says that he heard Dunstan tell the story in the presence of the Bishop of Rochester and the Abbot of Malmesbury and other brothers, and that Dunstan had said that he had heard it as a young man from a very old man (*sene decrepito*), who had recounted it simply and in full faith to King Æthelstan, asserting on oath that he was armour-bearer to King Edmund on the day on which he fell as a martyr for Christ. Abbo says that Dunstan stored up the words to relate them afterwards 'in honeyed accents' to younger people. Sending his own version to Dunstan, Abbo claims that all except the last miracle is told as he heard it from Dunstan. Æthelstan came to the throne in 924, and was crowned on 4 September 925; Dunstan was born

⁵ Ordericus Vitalis, who speaks of two other kings besides Edmund who received martyrdom at the hands of the pagans at this time can only have been thinking of Osbert and Ælla of Northumbria. See *The Ecclesiastical History of Ordericus Vitalis*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, II, 1969, p. 240.

⁶ See C. E. Blunt, 'Anglo-Saxon Coinage and the Historian', *Medieval Archaeology*, IV, 1960, p. 4.

⁷ Idem, 'The St. Edmund Memorial Coinage', below p. 253.

⁸ *Abbonis Floriacensis Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, ed. T. Arnold in *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, I, 1800, pp. 1-25 (henceforward cited as *Memorials*).

about 909,⁹ and was commended to Æthelstan soon after his coronation. This was some 55 years after Edmund's death, but, if the armour-bearer were young at that time (and men took up arms early), he need not have been more than in his seventies. Dunstan would be about 76 when Abbo heard him recount the story. It is possible for two memories to cover some 116 years. Abbo's *Passio* must be treated with respect.

Yet we are a long way from the story told 'simply' by the armour-bearer. It has passed through Dunstan's re-telling, no doubt many times,¹⁰ and has been written up by Abbo in the verbose and rhetorical style which he felt the theme demanded. Both he and Dunstan were familiar with many *Lives* of saints and likely to bring their accounts into line with what was expected of a work in this genre. It is obvious enough that a great deal of what Abbo says is embroidery, but it may always be a matter of opinion just how far he represents the actual facts told by the armour-bearer.

Abbo provides an introduction, going back to Bede to tell of the arrival in Britain of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, with the strange alteration that he settles East Anglia with Saxons, instead of Angles. After describing the province, he reaches his main theme, and says that Edmund was *ex Antiquorum Saxonum nobili prosapia oriundus*, 'sprung from the noble stock of the ancient Saxons'. This is probably only his verbose way of saying that Edmund was of the ancient nobility of his race, but it was to be the starting point of a tale of Edmund's foreign origin, since the Saxons on the Continent were sometimes called 'Old Saxons' to distinguish them from the Anglo-Saxons.¹¹ If Abbo had meant that Edmund was a foreigner from the Continent, he would hardly have left so extraordinary a fact without explanation, or even comment. Abbo describes Edmund's virtues in true hagiographical tradition. These virtues brought the ancient enemy of the human race to test Edmund's patience, as he had done that of Job, sending to this end one of his limbs, called Hinguar, who, with another man of the same depravity, called Hubba, tried to bring to destruction all the territories of Britain.

Stripped of its learned discussions and verbosity, Abbo's account of the martyrdom is as follows: Hinguar and Hubba first came to Northumbria, which they overran. Leaving Hubba there, Hinguar came from the north to the east with a fleet, came secretly to a city,

⁹ See J. Armitage Robinson, *The Times of St. Dunstan*, Oxford, 1923, pp. 92 f.; Idem, *The Saxon Bishops of Wells*, British Academy Supplemental Papers, iv, pp. 28-40. By proving that the date 925 for Dunstan's birth is wrong, Robinson makes it easier to accept his having listened to the armour-bearer.

¹⁰ Abbo says that all but one miracle were told by Dunstan, and this implies that the latter had been collecting information on the saint after he heard the armour-bearer.

¹¹ See p. 225 below. Arnold, Hervey and Grant Loomis all agree that the tale arose from this misunderstanding.

which they took by surprise and burnt, slaughtering the inhabitants. He enquired about Edmund's whereabouts, and killed all those round about so that Edmund, whom he had heard to be strenuous in war, should not be able to resist. Edmund was in the vill of *Hægelsdun*, which is the correct form for Hellesdon, Norfolk, and for no other surviving name,¹² from which a neighbouring wood was called by the same name. He left a force to guard his fleet, and sent a messenger to Edmund, to demand that Edmund should reign under him, and divide with him his treasures. Edmund consulted one of his bishops, and he advised surrender or flight. Edmund declared that he did not wish to survive his slain men, or to bear the lasting reproach of having fled. Nothing would separate him from the love of Christ. He told the messenger that though he deserved death, he would follow Christ's example and refrain from staining his hands with blood; he was ready to die if necessary, and would submit only if Hinguar became a Christian. The messenger returned and Hinguar ordered his men to seize Edmund. He was taken in his hall, having thrown away his weapons, was bound, brought before Hinguar, scourged and tied to a tree. Infuriated by his constantly calling on Christ, his tormentors amused themselves by shooting at him with arrows, until he bristled with them like a hedgehog or a thistle. (Abbo did not fail to comment on the similarity with St. Sebastian). Eventually, Hinguar ordered his head to be cut off. Abbo dates the martyrdom 20 November.¹³ He says that the Danes left the body lying, but took away the head, and hid it in the bramble thickets in Hellesdon wood, so that the survivors might not give decent burial to the body with the head.

It is not my concern to deal with the miracles claimed for Edmund, and at this point, before any miraculous element enters into Abbo's account, we may discuss the considerable discrepancy between his version of the events leading up to Edmund's death, and that given in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Abbo makes no mention of the coming of the Danes to East Anglia in 865 but makes them land first in Northumbria, and hence says nothing about the East Angles supplying them with horses and making peace. When he brings them from Northumbria to East Anglia, he brings them

¹² It is unfortunate that Arnold took this name to be Hoxne, on which see p. 223 below. If it is not Hellesdon, it can only be a lost place. The Domesday Book form for Hellesdon, *Hailesduna*, is a natural development of *Hægelsdun*. The first element is the personal name *Hægel*, and cannot be made to mean 'holy' or 'saint': not only is the vowel wrong, and the order of consonants, but the *s* would be unaccounted for. The genitive of *halga* 'saint' is *halgan*. Abbo may have been mistaken in placing the martyrdom at *Hægelsdun*, but it seems to have been accepted by most later versions, even at Bury.

¹³ This date can reasonably be accepted, for Edmund's cult began early and the day would soon be commemorated. His festival is entered in most calendars from the beginning of the eleventh century.

by sea, whereas the Chronicle brings them riding across Mercia, to Thetford. Then there is the big difference that the Chronicle makes Edmund fight, and lose, a battle, whereas Abbo says he was unable to raise an army.

It is not uncommon for events to be telescoped when handed down by oral tradition, and it is possible that Abbo's version has done so with the two historical attacks on East Anglia, that in the autumn of 865, by sea, and that in the autumn of 869, by land. The destruction of a town and some negotiations with the king could belong to the earlier year, when the East Anglian surrender may have been preceded by ravaging and when negotiations must have taken place before peace was made. The position described by Abbo in which Edmund was unable to assemble an army may have been true of 865.

Some later writers, e.g. Gaimar and Roger of Wendover,¹⁴ having access both to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and to a *Life* based on Abbo, reconciled these conflicting sources by assuming a passage of time between Edmund's defeat in battle and his capture by the Danes, into which interval they put a retreat by Edmund into a fortress. Roger of Wendover, however, put the interview with the messenger before Edmund gave battle.

One cannot set aside the clear statement of the Chronicle that Edmund fought a battle. To explain its absence from Abbo, one could surmise that the armour-bearer was asked only for his account of the actual martyrdom, or that this was what impressed Dunstan. In any case, hagiographical writers would not be averse to depicting Edmund as all along an unresisting victim. Abbo does not contradict the Chronicle in placing Edmund's death at Hellesdon, for the annal does not say that the battle was fought at or near Thetford, but merely that the Danes took up winter-quarters there. They may have been out on a raid a long way from their base when Edmund opposed them.¹⁵

The main facts of the martyrdom are likely to be true. On this central theme, Abbo could not drastically have altered what he claimed to have heard from Dunstan, to whom he sent this work. He could not have invented the armour-bearer. Nor is it likely that Dunstan should indulge in motiveless and flamboyant lying.¹⁶ It is one thing to add to one's narrative speeches and moral statements; it is a different matter to turn a death in battle into a cruel execution after the battle. Nor is the account of the martyrdom incredible. The slaying of a prisoner by the Danes, using him as a

¹⁴ See pp. 224 f, 229 below.

¹⁵ In 871 the Danish army based at Reading fought battles at Ashdown, Berks., Basing, Hants., and Wilton, Wilts.

¹⁶ Nor need we adopt the suggestion in *Corolla*, p. xxxv, that Dunstan had been taken in by a hoax intended to fasten ridicule on him.

target, can be paralleled by the martyrdom of St. Ælfheah in 1012.¹⁷ The removal of the head is a well-evidenced practice among primitive peoples.¹⁸ There is good support for making Hinguar the Danish leader at this time.¹⁹

Abbo is unhelpful about the date of the burial and of the translation of Edmund's body to Bedricesworth (Bury). The first burial is when a little peace had been restored, and it was near where the body fell. A church of poor work was built, and the body rested there many years, until it was translated to a royal vill, Bedricesworth, where a very large church was built by the people of the whole province. This was some time in or before the episcopate of Bishop Theodred, who signs charters from 926-951. Abbo is supported here by the wills of this bishop and of Ealdorman Ælfgar, both of whom make bequests to this church c. 942-51.²⁰ It is not until we reach Hermann, a Bury writer, who wrote his *Liber de Miraculis Sancti Eadmundi* after, perhaps soon after, 1095, that a closer date is given to the translation. Hermann located the first burial at Sutton,²¹ close to the place of his martyrdom, and appears to assign the translation to Bedricesworth to the reign of Æthelstan. One wonders if it was not in connection with this event that the armour-bearer spoke in the king's presence; but it is possible that Hermann took the name Æthelstan from Abbo's preface. The late fourteenth-century source, Bodley MS. 240,²² assigns the translation either to c. 900 in the reign of Alfred, or 906, and the Curteys Register to 903; but we do not know on what authority.

Within a few years, Abbo's work was translated by the homilist Ælfric.²³ He added nothing except that the martyrdom occurred when King Alfred was twenty-one; but he omitted Abbo's rhetoric, greatly shortened the speeches, and wrote in his own lucid prose. He produced something much closer to what one can imagine the armour-bearer having said. This is his own good taste, and we need not, with Hervey, assume he had help from some other of Dunstan's auditors.²⁴

Ælfric's patron, Ealdorman Æthelweard, a contemporary of Abbo, wrote between 965 and 988 (probably late in that period) a Latin chronicle based on a lost version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It may be from this that he got the name of the Danish leader in

¹⁷ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, *s.a.*

¹⁸ Compare the removal of the head of Edwin, in Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II, 20, and of Oswald, *ibid.*, III, 12. In 1063 the Welsh brought to Earl Harold the head of King Griffith (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle).

¹⁹ See p. 223 below.

²⁰ D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, pp. 2-7.

²¹ *Memorials*, I, p. 27. Hermann does not say which Sutton.

²² See p. 231 below.

²³ W. W. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, E.E.T.S., II, pp. 314-35.

²⁴ *Corolla*, p. xxxiv.

annal 866, Iguuar, i.e. Hinguar in a form close to Old Norse Ivar. He seems to imply that he was still leader in the following years, and says he died in the same year as Edmund. To his annal 870 he adds that Edmund fought 'for a little time', and he knows that he was buried at Bedricesworth.²⁵ The difference of form shows that he did not get the name I(g)uuar from Abbo, and he was unlikely to have known this work. He is doubtless right about Ivar's leadership, for the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions him along with his brother Healfdene in 878 as if they were in association, and about 1030 the Icelandic skald, Sighvat, names him as leader when King Ælla was killed at York in 867.²⁶ About 1100, the Canterbury scribe of version F of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle attributed the attack on East Anglia to both Ingware and Ubba, though Abbo had left Hubba in Northumbria. This could be carelessness, but a version with both as leaders, as we find in later writers, may have been current already.

If we can trust the foundation charter for Norwich Priory of Bishop Herbert, dated 1101, there was already at this time a claim that Hoxne, Suffolk, was the place of Edmund's martyrdom, for it grants to the Priory the church at Hoxne, with the chapel of St. Edmund of the same vill 'where the same martyr was killed'. But this phrase is not in the confirmation charter of Henry II.²⁷ Later, in the time of Bishop de Blundeville (consecrated 1226) the cell was moved from the bishop's palace to the immediate vicinity of St. Edmund's chapel.²⁸ There is no early evidence to connect Hoxne with the martyrdom; about 950 Bishop Theodred refers to a church of St. Ethelbert there, and shows that this place was then considered the see for Suffolk, as it was in Domesday Book, and about 1040 Bishop Ælfric speaks of a body of priests there.²⁹ It is natural that a chapel should be dedicated to St. Edmund at this episcopal centre, and it may be that the bishops of the diocese were ready to increase the prestige of the place by identifying it with the place of martyrdom.

Fairly early in the eleventh century, almost certainly at Bury,

²⁵ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. A. Campbell (Nelson's Medieval Texts), 1962, pp. 35 f.

²⁶ D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042*, p. 310. It used to be claimed that Inguar, Halfdene and Ubba were in Sheppey in 855, on the authority of the *Annals of Lindisfarne*, but this has been shown to be a twelfth-century Durham compilation; see W. Levison, 'Die "Annales Lindisfarnenses et Dunelmenses"', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, xvii, 1961, pp. 447-506.

²⁷ Both charters are given in Dugdale, *Monasticon*, iv, pp. 15-7.

²⁸ Francis Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, London, 1806, iii, p. 607. I wish to thank Mr. M. E. Last for calling my attention to the concern of the bishops of Norwich with St. Edmund's chapel at Hoxne.

²⁹ D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, pp. 2-5, 72 f., 102.

the compilation known as the *Annals of St. Neots* was made.³⁰ This is the earliest source to date Edmund's accession, 855, which occurs also in Florence of Worcester. It is hard to see what type of source the author used for this date, for if he had had a regnal list, his failure to mention Edmund's predecessors is remarkable. He has information more likely to come from a narrative source, i.e. that Edmund succeeded on Christmas Day, and was not crowned until the next Christmas Day, when he was anointed by Hunbert, bishop of the East Angles, with much joy and great honour at Bures, a royal vill.³¹ A year's delay before coronation is so unusual that one wonders whether there was already current some tale like that told by Geoffrey of Wells³² about Edmund's foreign origin. The location at Bures could be a tradition, or invented. Hunbert could have crowned Edmund, for his last signature is in 845 and he may still have been bishop eleven years later. But as his name is the last on the lists of bishops of Elmham before the viking invasion, his name would have been chosen in any case. Symeon of Durham, 1104-8, identifies him with the unnamed bishop present at Edmund's martyrdom, and makes him share it.³³ But as he was bishop by 824, at the latest, this makes him hold the see for 45 years or more and it is hard to believe that Abbo would have been silent about the martyrdom of the aged bishop if he had heard of it. The *Annals of St. Neots* took their account of Edmund's martyrdom from Abbo, including the localisation at Hellesdon; but, in an annal not connected with East Anglia, the author speaks of Hinguar and Hubba as brothers, sons of Lodebroch.³⁴

Not much later, between 1135 and 1140,³⁵ Geoffrey Gaimar wrote his Norman-French *L'Estoire des Engleis*. He had a good version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, to which he makes many additions. He names Ywar and Ube as leaders when the Danes left York for Nottingham, in the autumn of 867,³⁶ and hence implies that they were in the army which came from East Anglia and attacked York in 866. He describes a battle lost by Edmund after which he was driven to a castle. He came out and was accosted

³⁰ To the evidence for a Bury origin brought forward by W. H. Stevenson, on pp. 100-2 of his *Asser's Life of King Alfred* in which he edited excerpts from the *Annals of St. Neots*, one can add the palaeographical evidence on p. cxli, n. 3 of the 1959 reprint of the work.

³¹ W. H. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 131 f.

³² See p. 225 below.

³³ This is in Symeon's *Historia Ecclesie Dunhelmensis* and in the *Historia Regum* which goes under his name; see *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, I, p. 55, II, p. 107.

³⁴ See p. 228 below.

³⁵ See *L'Estoire des Engleis* by Geffrei Gaimar, ed. A. Bell, Anglo-Norman Text Society, xiv-xvi, pp. li-liiii.

³⁶ Lines 2836-9.

by a heathen who asked him where Edmund was, and he replied: 'When I was in flight, Edmund was there and I with him; when I turned to flee, he turned'. He was recognised and kept prisoner until Ywar and Ube came. The martyrdom is taken from Abbo, except that Gaimar adds the name of the man who cut off Edmund's head, Coran Colbe.³⁷ Obviously his source is not simply Abbo, but a version that has acquired extra features.

Geoffrey of Wells (*de Fontibus*) dedicated his *De Infantia Sancti Eadmundi* to Abbot Ordning of Bury (1148-56). He says he has often heard the monks of the abbey tell the parentage and early life of Edmund, each contributing what he knew, and that he also contributed things which he had heard from others or from reading. He took the words 'sprung from the noble stock of the ancient Saxons' to mean that Edmund was a continental Saxon, and he tells a long romantic story to account for this.³⁸ In outline, this is that King Offa of East Anglia, being without an heir, resolved to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He went by way of his kinsman, king of the Saxons, and was received with honour, especially by the younger of the king's sons, called Edmund. He gave Edmund a gold ring, and showed him another which was to serve as a token if sent to him. He fell ill on his return journey, and when dying charged his companions to elect Edmund, giving them the ring to take to him. The reluctance of the king of the Saxons was overcome by his remembering that when he had been in Rome, a matron had seen a vision and interpreted it as a sign of future greatness for him or one of his sons. They brought Edmund and landed at *Maydenebure*, where twelve springs miraculously burst forth. Edmund founded a royal dwelling on a neighbouring eminence called Hunstanton. He then stayed a year at an ancient town called Attleborough, learning the psalter by heart. The East Angles, moved by fear of the pirates who were often ravaging, and of neighbouring kings, now that Offa was dead, consented to elect Edmund. He was anointed by Hunbert at Bures on Christmas Day, as in the *Annals of St. Neots*. We may note that no King Offa of East Anglia is known at any date, and the coins suggest that Edmund immediately followed a king called Æthelweard;³⁹ that pilgrimage to Jerusalem is most unlikely in the ninth century; and there is no record of frequent viking raids on East Anglia about 855. Geoffrey's work reads like fiction.

When he reaches the great Danish invasion, he tells a tale of the type that tends to grow up to explain political events by personal motives. He brings the invasion of East Anglia into connection with a viking leader known to legend as Ragnar Lothbrok. The

³⁷ Lines 2861-2928.

³⁸ *Memorials*, I, pp. 93-103.

³⁹ See p. 218 above.

stories about him can be divided into two main types, one bringing him to Northumbria, the other to East Anglia. The former comes in Scandinavian sources, i.e. in Danish writers of the late twelfth century, fullest in Saxo Grammaticus, and in Icelandic sources, especially the fourteenth-century *Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*.⁴⁰ These tell how Ragnar was killed by King Ælla of Northumbria by being cast into a snake-pit (a motif borrowed from Old Norse heroic poetry), and how his sons Ivar, Sigurth, Björn and (in the saga only) Hvitserk, brought an army to Northumbria and killed Ælla. This tale was known already by the Icelandic skald Sighvat, about 1030. He says that 'Ivar, who dwelt at York, carved the eagle on Ælla's back',⁴¹ and in another poem he describes the English at Ringmere, in 1010, as 'the race of Ella'.⁴² The historical Ælla had only just come to the throne when the Danes arrived, and could not have killed Ragnar some time before the invasion of England was planned. A nation would not be referred to by the name of a provincial king who reigned less than a year if he had not become very prominent in legend by Sighvat's time.⁴³

Frankish annals record a Regineri or Ragneri with the vikings on the Seine in 845, and he appears in later accounts of the miracles of saints, such as the *Miracles of St. Germain*.⁴⁴ The *Annales Xantenses* say that he was killed in battle in 845,⁴⁵ which is at variance with the Scandinavian accounts of his death in England, if he is the same as Ragnar Lothbrok. No other source supports his death in this year. Another viking leader in the Frankish annals, Bernus, who appears on the Seine in 855, and builds a fort on an island there in 858 or 859, is identified already by William of Jumièges by 1070 with Ragnar Lothbrok's son Björn.⁴⁶ For he calls him *Bier Costae*

⁴⁰ On the Scandinavian authorities see A. Mawer, 'Ragnar Lothbrók and his Sons', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, vi, 1908-9, pp. 68-89; A. H. Smith, 'The Sons of Ragnar Lothbrok', *ibid.*, xi, 1928-36, pp. 173-91; Grant Loomis, *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, xv, pp. 1-23.

⁴¹ D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, c. 500-1042, p. 310.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴³ The alleged death of Ragnar in England has sometimes been held to be corroborated by an Irish source, but this very late record, printed in J. O'Donovan, *Annals of Ireland. Three Fragments*, seems to be only a garbled and disjointed version of the Scandinavian tale. After recording a destruction of York, it tells of the driving out from Lochlann (Norway) of Ragnall, son of King Albden, and of his coming to Orkney; of the arrival of his elder sons in Britain with a fleet, and their exploits in Spain and North Africa, where one of them has a dream that his brother has been killed, and surmises that his father will not have survived (pp. 158-63). At p. 173, the death of Ælla in York is described, without connecting this with the Ragnall reference. There seems here some reminiscence of the feats of Ragnar's son Björn in Spain, etc. and Ragnall could be a corruption of Ragnar.

⁴⁴ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores*, xv, 1., pp. 14 f.

⁴⁵ *Annales Xantenses*, ed. B. de Simson (*Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*), pp. 14 f.

⁴⁶ *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, ed. J. Marx, p. 5. This account shares features with the Scandinavian sources, and may derive from a common source.

Ferreae (—'Ironsides', his nickname in the legends) and makes him son of Lothrocus. The Frankish annals state that the Danish forces sailed round Spain to the mouth of the Rhone, and in 860 went to Italy and captured Pisa and other places. Jumièges ascribes to Bier ravages all over France, and the sack of Luna in mistake for Rome. He says he was wrecked on the English coast, and died in Frisia. He does not mention the attack on Northumbria in which Scandinavian sources make Björn participate. One English tradition has him killed in Kent.⁴⁷

The principal figure in the vengeance taken on Ælla is Ivar, just as Hinguar is the leader against Edmund. He does not appear in Frankish annals, but is proved historical by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.⁴⁸ He is sometimes categorically identified with an outstanding viking in Ireland, Im(h)ar, who was in Munster in 857, in Meath in 859 and 863, captured Dunbarton in 870, and returned there, and eventually to Ireland, in 871, bringing a multitude of English, British and Pictish captives. He died in 873.⁴⁹ But it is by no means certain that he should be identified with the son of Ragnar, for the name is not uncommon.

Ubba (Hubba) does not appear in Frankish sources, and only Saxo among Scandinavian sources gives Ragnar a son of this name. He does not connect him with England. But Hubba is one of the leaders in the attack on Northumbria in Abbo and later sources, including the early-eleventh-century *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, which calls him *dux Fresonum*.⁵⁰ The early-twelfth-century *Annals of Lindisfarne* make him lead along with Inguar and Halfdene an army of Danes and Frisians in Sheppey in 855.⁵¹ Abbo does not make him a brother of Hinguar, but the *Annals of St. Neots* do, and Gaimar took him to be the brother of Inwær and Healfdene, unnamed in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, killed in Devon in 878.⁵² The other sons whom Scandinavian sources bring to England to avenge Ragnar, Sigurð and Hvitserk, have no connection with the St. Edmund story, to which we may now return.

Ari the Wise, an Icelandic historian writing about 1133, is the

⁴⁷ See p. 228 below.

⁴⁸ See p. 223 above.

⁴⁹ The dates in the *Annals of Ulster* are one year behind, and have been corrected. Æthelweard dated Ivar's death 870 (see p. 223 above). A very late authority says he was drowned at Hungerford, but this is merely a false linking of Hungerwith Hyngvar. See *Liber Monasterii de Hyda*, ed. E. Edwards, p. 10. Icelandic sources say he was buried in England. In one place the *Hemningsbattr* says that when Harald Hardrada came in 1066, he saw his mound in Cleveland, and took it as an ill-omen (ed. Gillian Fellows Jensen, p. 46); yet in another place it says that William the Bastard had the body burnt soon after landing in the south in 1066 (p. 55).

⁵⁰ *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, I, pp. 202-4.

⁵¹ See p. 223 n. 26 above.

⁵² Lines 3141-52.

first to mention Ragnar Lothbrok in connection with St. Edmund's legend, when he says: 'Ivar, son of Ragnar Lothbrok, caused St. Edmund, king of the East Angles, to be slain.'⁵³ The compiler of the *Annals of St. Neots* knew some legend about Lothbrok's sons, but not necessarily connected with East Anglia. To the account of the death of a brother of Inwær and Healfdene in 878 and the capture of the raven banner, he adds that this was said to have been woven by the three sisters of Hinguar and Hubba, the daughters of Lodebroch; and that before victory there appeared in the middle of it as it were a raven living and fluttering, but before defeat it hung motionless.⁵⁴ This replacement of the name Ragnar by the nickname had taken place in William of Jumièges by 1070,⁵⁵ and a few years later in Adam of Bremen, who mentions Inguar, son of Lodparch, as the cruellest of viking leaders, who killed Christians everywhere by torture.⁵⁶

The first author to bring Lothbrok into East Anglia is Geoffrey of Wells. He says that a very powerful man, Lodebrok, deceitful and infamous, was filled with envy of Edmund's qualities and fame. Hearing his sons Hinguar, Ubba and Wern (an error for Bern), who were pirates in Denmark, boasting of their exploits, he taunted them with not having achieved as much as Edmund.⁵⁷ In their anger they came and destroyed the East Angles and their king. Geoffrey then refers his readers to Abbo for the account of the martyrdom.

Geoffrey of Wells is not the only English authority to agree with the Scandinavian sources in bringing Björn to England. In Pembroke College MS. 82 there is an entry on the first folio in a twelfth-century hand: *Ynguar and Vbbe. Beorn was þe þridde loþeþrókes sunes. Loþe weren criste* ('Inguar and Ubba—the third was Beorn—Lothbrok's sons, were hateful to Christ'). This is followed by a Latin paragraph stating that Ubba was killed at *Ubbelawe* in Yorkshire, and that Beorn destroyed the church of Sheppey and outraged the nuns, but by divine vengeance was swallowed up alive by the ground, at Frindsbury near Rochester.⁵⁸ M. R. James first assigned

⁵³ *Íslendingabók*, c. 1; translated by H. Hermannsson, *The Book of the Icelanders*, Islandica 20.

⁵⁴ W. H. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 138. ⁵⁵ See p/p. 226 f. above.

⁵⁶ *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, Bk. I, c. 37.

⁵⁷ The story of the taunting has no parallel in other forms of the Lothbrok legend, but in the *Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* Ragnar's motive for raiding Northumbria was to acquire as much fame as was being accorded to his sons. See Magnus Olsen, *Völsunga Saga ok Ragnars Saga Lodbrókar*, p. 154.

⁵⁸ The whole passage is quoted in M. R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in Pembroke College*, where he withdraws his suggestion in *On the Abbey of St. Edmund at Bury*, p. 54, of a Bury origin. The version in Arundel MS. 69 is in *Corolla*, pp. 164 f. Gaimar mentions *Ubbelawe* (lines 3144-7), but places it in Devon, an unlikely location of a name ending in *-hlaw*. The *Liber Monasterii de Hyda* (p. 10) tells a story of the swallowing up of Ubba, not Beorn.

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this manuscript to Bury, but later decided it was a Tynemouth production. Yet the fact that this entry was copied into the Arundel MS. 69 of Roger of Hoveden, which has entries made at Bury, suggests that the Pembroke manuscript may have reached Bury.

At St. Albans, a different story became current. Roger of Wendover⁵⁹ in the early thirteenth century tells how a man of royal stock in Denmark, Lothbrocus, who had two sons, Hinguar and Hubba, went hawking in a small boat and was driven to sea. He landed at Reedham in Norfolk, and was received with honour by Edmund. One of the king's huntsmen, called Bern, became envious of his skill in hunting and fowling and of the favour he was in with the king. He killed him and hid the body in a wood,⁶⁰ but eventually Lothbroc's greyhound led to its discovery. Bern was sent out to sea in Lothbroc's boat, without equipment, and was cast ashore in Denmark, where he told Hinguar and Hubba that Edmund had killed their father. He then led them to England. They were driven to Berwick-on-Tweed, but Hinguar eventually came to East Anglia, camping at Redford (an error for Thetford). Wendover takes from Abbo the account of the messenger and parley, adding only the name of the bishop, Humbert; but after the messenger returns, Roger makes Edmund summon an army, for he was also using the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, with its mention of a battle. They fought from morning until evening not far from Thetford, with heavy losses on both sides. Edmund mourned for the pagan dead who would go to hell, and retired determined never to fight the heathen again. Hinguar was now joined by Hubba with 10,000 men, and they moved towards Hellesdon. At the bishop's advice, Edmund fled to the church, throwing away his weapons. A resumé of Abbo's account of his death follows, but Wendover adds that it was Bern's suggestion that Edmund's head should be thrown away in the wood, the same wood in which he had hidden Lothbroc's body. Edmund is here said to have been first buried at Hoxne.⁶¹

This version, in having Edmund killed in vengeance for Lothbroc's death, seems to have borrowed from the tale of the vengeance taken on Ælla of Northumbria. It seems possible that the part played by Bern may come from some northern source. For, whereas some sources, Scandinavian, continental and English, regard Bern (Björn, Beorn) as a son of Ragnar Lothbrok, Gaimar, who knows nothing of the story of Ragnar's death in Northumbria, tells of a Northumbrian Buern (=Bern) who, like Bern in Wendover's

⁵⁹ *Rogeri de Wendover Chronica*, ed. H. O. Coxe, I, pp. 303-15.

⁶⁰ Loomis, in *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, xv, pp. 3-5, compares a tale in the *Völsunga Saga* of the murder of a man out of jealousy for his success in hunting.

⁶¹ See p. 223 above.

version, led in the Danes.⁶² The story is very different, for Buern's grievance was the rape of his wife by King Osbert, but it would be a coincidence if two authors independently chose the same name for a disaffected Englishman who guided the Danes to his country.⁶³

Wendover says nothing about Edmund's origin, but there is a passage in another St. Albans work, a chronicle written in about 1220 and incorporated into the chronicle of John of Wallingford,⁶⁴ which suggests that some people were giving the name Alcmund to Edmund's father, and this is a feature of the foreign origin story in its later forms. The writer of this chronicle has identified a King Ethelmund of South Anglia, whom he has found in the legend of St. Botulf, with Alcmund, father of King Egbert of Wessex, and he refers to some persons who bring Edmund into this context. The name Siwara, which the later versions give to Edmund's mother, is that of King Ethelmund's mother in the legend of St. Botulf.

The name Alcmund for Edmund's father was known at Bury by 1296, if we accept the account in the *Vita Sancti Adalberti Diaconi* of a visit to Bury by Abbot Florentius of St. Adalbert's foundation at Egmond in the Netherlands in that year.⁶⁵ He saw there a *Chronica Regum Angliæ*, in which he read that St. Adalbert, whom he thought to be a brother of St. Edmund, had reigned before him for 37 years and seven months. This extraordinary claim of ninth-century royal origin for a deacon of St. Willibrord is based on several errors: the identification of him with his namesake, the East Anglian king executed by Offa of Mercia in 794; the assumption that, as lists of kings of East Anglia record no name between Ethelbert and Edmund, Edmund succeeded Ethelbert immediately; and the confusion of Ethelbert of East Anglia with Egbert of Wessex, who is given a reign of just 37 years and seven months in the West Saxon regnal list.⁶⁶ The name of Egbert's father was Alcmund, and we are told here that Ethelbert and Edmund were sons of Alcmund. If the legend current at Bury already gave this name to Edmund's father, this would explain why Florentius thought Ethelbert was Edmund's brother; alternatively this belief may have introduced

⁶² Lines 2585-2832. Gaimar's nickname for Buern, *Bucecarle*, is a loanword from Old Norse, recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 1052, 1066 as *butsecarl* 'boatman'. The latest discussion of the versions of this story is by A. Bell in his edition of Gaimar, pp. lviii-lxiv.

⁶³ The mid-thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman poem by Denis Piramus (*Memorials*, II, pp. 137-250) seems unaware of the St. Albans version. It is based on Abbo and Geoffrey of Wells, and its only additions of substance are the name Caistor for the place where the East Angles elected a king, and Orford for the town, unnamed by Abbo, which the Danes destroyed.

⁶⁴ *The Chronicle attributed to John of Wallingford*, ed. R. Vaughan, Camden Miscellany, xxi, 1958, pp. 16 f., 23. See also *Corolla*, pp. 576 f.

⁶⁵ J. Mabillon, *Acta sanctorum ordinis S. Benedicti*, Sæculum III, Pars I, p. 645. This passage was noted in *Memorials*, I, pp. xviii f.

⁶⁶ As noted in *Corolla*, pp. xxix f.

the name Alcmund into the legend. We are told also that the brothers were of the noble stock of the *veteri* Saxons, and that they had a sister, Britiva, buried in Frankfort. But the claim for a long reign of Ethelbert as Edmund's predecessor is irreconcilable with Geoffrey of Wells's account of a childless Offa. If Florentius heard Geoffrey's story, he must have rejected it.

Bodley MS. 240, towards the end of the fourteenth century, includes a collection of material on St. Edmund. To the tale from Geoffrey of Wells it adds the name of Alkmund as Edmund's father and Siwara as his mother, and says he was born in Nuremberg (which is not in Saxony). Geoffrey's Lodebrok story is given and then followed by the St. Albans account of the killing of Lothbroc by Bern.

In speaking of a siege of Edmund by the Danes, it repeats the story given by Gaimar of Edmund's quibbling reply;⁶⁷ this is preceded by two other incidents: in one, Edmund gave orders that corn should be thrown and a well-fed bull driven out, to deceive the besiegers into thinking that he had plenty of provisions; in the other, the Danes entered what seemed an impregnable fortress by bribing a blind old mason, who had helped build it, to betray to them a weak spot. This collection of material seems to have been used by Lydgate in his *Legend of St. Fremund and St. Edmund*.

A few references to Edmund are not connected with the main legend. William of Malmesbury,⁶⁸ an entry in a manuscript of Florence of Worcester once at Bury,⁶⁹ and a version of the *Resting-Places of the English Saints* used by Hugo Candidus,⁷⁰ all give him a brother Edwold, a hermit at Cerne Abbas, Dorset. It seems unlikely that this was a correct identification. A late and worthless text, the *Vita Sancti Fremundi*,⁷¹ makes Fremund the son of a sister of Edmund called Botild. Fremund is supposed to be the son of a pagan king Offa of England, to have converted his parents, reigned for a short while, and then have gone away as a hermit. He was persuaded to return after the Danes had killed Edmund, and defeated 40,000 of them. He was decapitated by an apostate follower of Offa, and was buried at Offchurch. After some translations, the body was found later by Bishop Birinus, who died about 650! In this absurd story, as in Geoffrey of Wells, we get the invention of a fictitious King Offa. There is no need either to place any reliance in the statement of Pierre de Langtoft in the early thirteenth century that Edmund was a cousin of Ethelred I of Wessex and

⁶⁷ See pp. 224 f. above.

⁶⁸ *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton, p. 185. This was borrowed by Ranulph Higden, *Polychronicon*, ed. J. R. Lumby, vi, p. 344.

⁶⁹ Bodley MS. 279; see *Memorials*, i, p. 344.

⁷⁰ *The Peterborough Chronicle of Hugh Candidus*, ed. W. T. Mellows, p. 61.

⁷¹ It is edited by C. Horstmann, *Nova Legenda*, II, pp. 689-98.

reigned in subservience to him.⁷² Writers at this late date assume far too early a West Saxon control of all England.

A Middle English romance called *Athelston*⁷³ need not have detained us if it had not led Lord Francis Hervey into a number of speculations which in a later work he repeats as if they were historical fact.⁷⁴ The only part of this tale to concern us is when Athelston, king of England, is given a brother-in-law, Egelon(d), married to his sister Edyff, who bore him a son Edmund. Athelston, having killed his own unborn son by kicking his queen, adopted Edmund and promised him the succession to the throne of England. This choice of names need not be connected with Edmund of East Anglia: Æthelstan, king of England, had a sister Edith, and was succeeded by an Edmund, and the romance writer may not have known that Edmund was Æthelstan's much younger brother. But Hervey identified the Athelston of the tale with an earlier bearer of the name, sub-king of Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Essex from 839 to c. 851. He claims that this Æthelstan was brother of King Æthelwulf, though the evidence is stronger that he was his son.⁷⁵ There is no evidence to identify him with the king of East Anglia whose existence is known from coins, except in Gaimar, where East Anglia is likely to be an error.⁷⁶ Hervey thinks that Æthelstan could become the Offa of Geoffrey of Wells by the extremely unlikely development Æthelstan—Ætha—Æffa—Offa. He identified Egelon(d) with a Kentish ealdorman Ealhhere, who fought along with Æthelstan in Kent in 851, though the names have only an initial letter in common; and he suggests that the birthplace first appearing in the late fourteenth century as Nuremberg was Norbury

⁷² *The Chronicle of Pierre de Langtoft*, ed. Thomas Wright, 1, p. 312.

⁷³ *Athelston, a Middle English Romance*, ed. A. M. Trownce, E.E.T.S., 1951.

⁷⁴ *St. Eadmund of East Anglia and his Abbey*, O.U.P., 1929, pp. 11–4. Here Edmund is supplied with various kinsfolk on the assumption that he was son of Ealdorman Ealhhere.

⁷⁵ The natural meaning of the original annal 836 (for 839) in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is that the 'he' in 'and he gave to his son Æthelstan the kingdom of the people of Kent and the kingdom of the East Saxons and the people of Surrey and the South Saxons', is Æthelwulf; and the chronicler Æthelweard states that Æthelstan was Æthelwulf's eldest son (ed. Campbell, p. 39). As Æthelweard was descended from another of Æthelwulf's sons, he probably knew the true relationship. The error of taking 'he' of the annal as Egbert began with the northern recension of the Chronicle in the late tenth or early eleventh century, which altered the wording to 'and he gave to his other son Æthelstan'. As many post-Conquest writers knew only manuscripts of the northern recension of the Chronicle, this error achieved wide currency. It brought others in its wake, such as the giving of a daughter Edith to Egbert by confusion with the sister of Æthelstan, king of England. There is no chronological difficulty in making Æthelstan son (not brother) of Æthelwulf, for the charter with an *Æthelstan dux* in 826 is a fabrication, and the claim that Æthelwulf was unmarried at his accession in 839 is a wild post-Conquest legend.

⁷⁶ Line 2480. In lines 2387 f. his kingdom is described as Kent, Surrey and Sussex.

in Sussex. He assumes that Ealdorman Ealhhere became king of Kent, though this is contrary to historical evidence, and that it was at his court that Æthelstan (Offa) stopped on his way to Jerusalem, and designated Edmund as his heir. This is to pile conjecture on conjecture, and we saw above that between an East Anglian King Æthelstan and Edmund one must place a king called Æthelweard. If this romance has any interest for the Edmund legend, it is in the persistence of a tale that he succeeded after a childless predecessor.

It is clear that a great deal of what appears in our sources after Abbo is invention of the type common in writers of saints' lives, to meet a demand for more precise knowledge of a saint as the cult spreads. Yet it is possible that a few fragments of reliable information were available to later writers. Some tradition presumably would survive at Bury, though a small community of priests is unlikely to have established any archive, and their replacement by monks from Hulme and Ely in 1020 may have caused a breach in tradition. Abbo confined himself to what he had heard from Dunstan, for this was enough to provide an edifying narrative and set his pupils an example of rhetorical Latin style. If he had approached the priests of Bury, perhaps they could have supplied the name of the town Hinguar destroyed or the bishop Edmund consulted, and other details. But this cannot be proved. It can be reasonably established that Edmund succeeded to East Anglia immediately, or very soon, after a king called Æthelweard, and was the king reigning when the Danes arrived in 865; that he fought an unsuccessful battle against the army which was wintering at Thetford, under Hinguar's leadership, in the autumn of 869, and was cruelly killed by them after the battle on 20 November. It is possibly true that Hinguar was a son of a viking Ragnar Lothbrok about whom a great legend grew up. Edmund's cult was well-established before the century closed. His martyrdom attracted the attention of King Æthelstan, and it may have been in his reign that the translation to Bury occurred. If, here and there, the later sources contain an additional grain or two of truth, these can no longer be distinguished from a mass of fiction.