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William of Malmesbury

*Chronicle of the Kings of England*



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*Chronicle of the Kings of England by*

**WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY**

(c. 1095-c. 1143)



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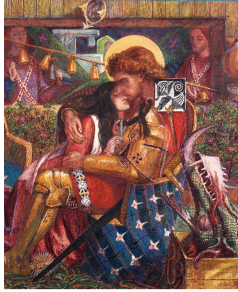
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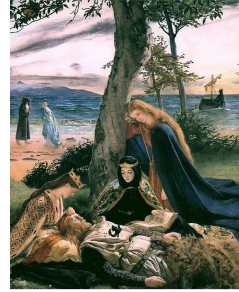
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## The Translations



*Malmesbury, a town in north Wiltshire — William's birthplace*

## Chronicle of the Kings of England (1125)



*Translated by John Sharpe and Edited by J. A. Giles, 1847*

The foremost English historian of the twelfth century, William of Malmesbury was born in c. 1095 in Wiltshire to a Norman father and a Saxon mother. He spent his adult life serving as a monk at Malmesbury Abbey and he would never venture out of England. Though his education at the Abbey included logic and physics, the subjects to which he devoted most attention were moral philosophy and history. The earliest detail of his career that he records is that he assisted Abbot Godfrey (1081-1105) in collecting a library for the use of the community, revealing his first-hand knowledge of at least four hundred works by two hundred or so authors. During the course of his studies, he amassed a collection of medieval histories, inspiring him to write his own popular account of English history, modelled on the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* by Bede, written about four centuries before. William's debt to Bede is apparent even within the preface of his work, where he professes his admiration for the eighth century author.

In 1125 William completed his great history of the "Deeds of the English Kings", with events spanning from 449 to 1120. He later edited and expanded the text up to the year 1127, releasing a revision dedicated to Robert, Earl of Gloucester. This "second edition" is now considered one of the great histories of English literature.

William had travelled widely in England, which enhanced his vivid descriptions of abbeys and bishoprics, while he gathered details of the lives of the English prelates and saints, notably the learned wonder-working Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury. He stayed at Glastonbury Abbey for a time, composing *On the Antiquity of the Glastonbury Church* for his friend, the abbot Henry of Blois, who was also the Bishop of Winchester. At some point before the onset of the Anarchy in 1139, William made the beneficial acquaintance of Roger, Bishop of Salisbury, who also owned Malmesbury Castle. This local connection, as well as the positive reception of the *Gesta Regum*, resulted in an offer of the position of abbot of Malmesbury in 1140, which William declined, preferring his duties as a librarian and scholar. His one public appearance was made at the council of Winchester in 1141, in which the clergy declared for the Empress Matilda.

In c. 1140, William began work on a continuation of his chronicles under the title *Historia Novella*, or "modern history", a three-book chronicle that ran from 1128 to 1142, including important accounts of the Anarchy of King Stephen's reign. This work breaks off with an unfulfilled promise that it would be continued. Presumably, William died before he could redeem his pledge. The three books of this continuation appear in the following translation by John Sharpe.

William was considered by many, including John Milton, to be one of the greatest English historians, who was especially noted for his use of documentation and his clear, engaging writing style. A strong Latin stylist, this work reveals literary and historiographical instincts that are remarkably sound. He is widely regarded as an authority of considerable value from 1066 onwards, as his *Chronicles* feature anecdotes and shrewd judgments on persons and events that can only be found in his work. Some scholars criticise William for his atypical annalistic form, calling his chronology less than satisfactory and his arrangement of material careless. Much of his work on Wulfstan, Bishop of Worcester, is thought to derive from a first-hand

account from Coleman, a contemporary of Wulfstan. William merely translated the document from Old English into Latin. In spite of these criticisms, William's *Chronicles* are without doubt invaluable texts, offering a rare window into the life and thoughts of twelfth century Norman Britain. His descriptions of religious communities provide rare insights into the lives of nuns in England during that period. He closely observed their practices, describing their obedience to directives, their care for and veneration of relics, their organisation and participation in their practices of prayer and intercessions on the behalf of those in and out of their communities, and their reputations among the laity and their peers in other religious communities. William's extensive travels throughout England also enabled him to compare the communities he studied, accurately assessing their size, wealth and religious practices.





*Stained-glass window portraying William, installed in Malmesbury Abbey in 1928*



*William's great model, the Venerable Bede, as depicted on a twelfth century codex*



Robert, Earl of Gloucester and his wife, as depicted in the 'Tewkesbury Abbey Founders Book', Bodleian Library, Oxford c. 1500. The dedicatee of the celebrated second edition of William's chronicle, Robert FitzRoy (c. 1090-1147) was an illegitimate son of King Henry I. He was the half-brother of the Empress Matilda and her chief military supporter during the civil war known as the Anarchy, in which she vied with Stephen of Blois for the throne of England.

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*Harold Rex Interfectus Est: "King Harold is killed", as depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry, illustrating the Battle of Hastings in 1066 — a key event of William's 'Chronicles'.*



*The principal subject of the 'Historia Novella', King Stephen, as depicted in Matthew Paris' 'Historia Anglorum', c. 1250. Stephen (c. 1092-1154) was King of England from 1135 to his death in 1154. His reign was marked by the Anarchy, a civil war with his cousin and rival, the Empress Matilda, whose son, Henry II, succeeded Stephen as the first of the Angevin kings of England.*

## EDITOR'S PREFACE.



“WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY,” according to archbishop Usher, “is the chief of our historians;” Leland records him “as an elegant, learned, and faithful historian;” and Sir Henry Saville is of opinion, that he is the only man of his time who has discharged his trust as an historian. His History of the Kings of England was translated into English by the Rev. John Sharpe, and published in quarto, in 1815.

Though the language of Mr. Sharpe’s work is by no means so smooth as the dialect of the present day would require, yet the care with which he examined MSS., and endeavoured to give the exact sense of his author, seemed so important a recommendation, that the editor of the present volume has gladly availed himself of it as a ground-work for his own labours. The result of this plan is, that the public are enabled to purchase without delay and at an insignificant expense, the valuable contemporary historian, who has hitherto been like a sealed book to the public, or only accessible through a bulky volume, the scarcity of which served to exclude it from all but public libraries or the studies of the wealthy.

But the translation of Mr. Sharpe has by no means been reprinted verbatim. Within the last ten years a valuable edition of the original text, with copious collations of MSS., has been published by the English Historical Society. This edition has been compared with the translation, and numerous passages retouched and improved. Some charters, also, have been added, and a large number of additional notes appended at the foot of the pages, together with a few other improvements and additions calculated to render this interesting history more acceptable to the reading public.

J. A. G.

*Bampton, June, 1847.*

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