



John Leland and Asser's *Vita Ælfredi regis*: British Library, MS Cotton Otho A. xii Reconsidered in its Tudor Context

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ABSTRACT

Before the sixteenth century the religious houses had been the chief repositories of learning in England. With the Henrician religious revolution, however, their stability became threatened and what survived and what was destroyed has greatly influenced our views of the intellectual culture of the English Middle Ages. It is for this reason that the writings of the royal agent John Leland are so important to our understanding of the crumbling world he was witnessing.

In the years shortly before the suppressions Leland examined the contents of many libraries, listing titles of what he saw where. When in 1535 he began the compilation of his *De uiris illustribus*, he made use of these titles, the notes he had taken, and often the manuscripts themselves. The *De uiris illustribus* was compiled in two stages and the changes he made as he discovered further materials are significant. His evolving thoughts on Asser and his writings thus provide an illuminating case that throws light on his bio-bibliographical enterprise.

BACKGROUND TO LELAND'S MISSION

In early summer of 1533 John Leland (c. 1503–1552) set out on the first of a series of visits to English religious and collegial houses in England. He was greatly aided in this endeavour by having a royal warrant authorizing him to examine the contents of their libraries, no matter how sacrosanct and carefully guarded they might be.¹ Leland made lists of titles of works he saw in these libraries and these survive in the third volume of his four autograph folio notebooks, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Top. gen. c. 3, the so-called *Joannis Lelandi antiquarii De rebus Britannicis collectanea*.² He also appropriated manuscripts for the royal collection and for his own use. His bibliographical journeys

¹ On this topic see J. Leland, *De uiris illustribus: On Famous Men*, ed. and trans. J. P. Carley, with the assistance of C. Brett (Toronto, 2010), pp. li–c.

² J. Leland, *De rebus Britannicis collectanea*, ed. T. Hearne, 6 vols., 2nd ed. (London, 1774) [hereafter *Collectanea*].

continued for approximately three years and then they suddenly ended, just at the point when the task might have seemed most urgent, that is in 1536, the year when the Act was passed for the dissolution of all monasteries with an income of less than £200. This was the beginning of the end for the religious houses and in April 1539 another act was promulgated dissolving the remaining monasteries, their treasures dispersed to the four winds, not to mention Henry VIII's coffers. Leland himself never compiled another monastic booklist as such after 1536 and with rare exceptions seems not to have visited any of the still functioning houses between 1536 and 1540, although he did continue to examine and take notes from collegial libraries. Instead, he devoted the next six years or so to a set of itineraries which chronicle the topographical features of the landscape, its inhabitants and buildings, as well as gathering information, much genealogical in the broadest sense, from his hosts in the grand houses where he often stayed. Most of the notes from these itineraries are in English and they are found in a jumbled state in eight quarto volumes, now Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Top. gen. e. 8–15.³

Apart from his mission for the king, Leland had his own purposes for the manuscripts he unearthed and what they might reveal. He had grandiose publishing plans, but most of these came to nothing and all that survives are his often disjointed notes.⁴ In one case, however, a project did move beyond the planning stage: in 1535 he began compiling entries in a folio notebook, now Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Top. gen. c. 4, for his magnum opus, *De uiris illustribus*, one of whose cornerstones was to be his booklists. He continued with new entries up to late 1536, but then put the project aside and did not return to it until after the vast majority his itineraries were completed, that is, in 1543 or so. Not surprisingly, he did from time to time revise previous entries as he came across new material, or strike out incriminating pieces of text as the political situation changed: after 1538, for example, 'Saint' was judiciously removed before citations of the name of Thomas Becket.⁵ Bodleian, MS Top. gen. c. 4 was first edited by Anthony Hall as *Commentarii de scriptoribus Britannicis* (Oxford, 1709). Taking up preliminary work by Caroline Brett, I produced a

³ See *The Itinerary of John Leland the Antiquary*, ed. T. Hearne, 9 vols., 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1768–9); *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535–1543*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, 5 vols (London, 1906–10). On the state of the remains see O. Harris, "Motheaten, mouldye, and rotten": the Early Custodian History and Dissemination of John Leland's Manuscript Remains', *Bodleian Lib. Record* 18 (2005), 460–501. On the sequence of the itineraries, see most recently the introduction to *John Leland. Itinerary. A Version in Modern English*, ed. J. Chandler (Gloucester, GL, 2022), pp. xliii–xlix.

⁴ On his plans for the notes see *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. xxx–xxxiii.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. lxiv, n. 211. For another example, see *ibid.* p. lviii, n. 176.

new edition with translation in 2010, as *De uiris illustribus*. This new version contains material subsequently deleted by Leland and not found in Hall's somewhat haphazard edition.⁶ It also distinguishes between two distinct phases of production which I have labelled Stage I (1535–6) and Stage II (1543–7).⁷ Given the turmoil of these years, what Leland wrote and when can be highly revealing. Asser's *Vita Ælfredi regis*, which forms the focus of this article, is a case in point.

There is very little contemporary evidence concerning Asser (d. 909). The only things that can be established with any real certainty are based on King Alfred's statement that Asser aided him in his translation of Pope Gregory's *Book of Pastoral Care* and the fact that his name is found in charters issued by King Edward the Elder. Later he is mentioned by post-Conquest writers, but it was only Leland's discovery in the late 1530s of the unique surviving copy of the *Vita Ælfredi regis* (the first text of thirteen in a composite volume put together by Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), now B.L. MS Cotton Otho A. xii), that established him as a figure of major importance for the Anglo-Saxon period.⁸ Modern scholars have, nevertheless, raised questions about the accuracy of the *editio princeps* of 1574 by Matthew Parker, its relationship to Otho A. xii, destroyed in the fire of the Cotton Library at Ashburnham House in 1731, and indeed Asser's very authorship.⁹ Most notably, Alfred P. Smyth in his *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995) claims that the author was Byrhtferth of Ramsey (c. 970–c. 1020). After Simon Keynes's spirited rebuttal few would accept Smyth's hypothesis,¹⁰ but there continue to be discussions concerning the relationship of the text presented in Otho A. xii and the putative original. If not providing a solution to these speculative questions, the evolution of Leland's thinking as he came across crucial manuscripts nevertheless shows the process by which sixteenth-century scholars came to their understanding of Asser and his writings.

⁶ I am now working on a commentary volume to the text.

⁷ On pp. c–ciii and clvii–clviii of my introduction to *De uiris illustribus*, I outline the ways in which I am able to distinguish between the two stages; see also Appendix 2.

⁸ For the remainder of this paper Otho A. xii refers only to the *Vita Ælfredi regis* rather than the whole manuscript.

⁹ From the perspective of Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504–1575) what was particularly significant as he set about consolidating church and state in his Elizabethan Settlement was the fact that the opening salutation contained in Otho A. xii described Alfred as *rector* of all Christians in the island of Britain, but *rex* only of the Anglo-Saxons (*Domino meo venterabili piismoque omnium Britannie insulae christianorum rectori Ælfred Anglorum Saxonum regi*). This ties in with the position that Henry VIII maintained after the break with Rome in 1534 and his re-interpretation of the title *Fidei Defensor* bestowed on him in 1521 by Pope Leo X. In this context it remains an unresolved mystery why Leland never quotes the salutation.

¹⁰ S. Keynes, 'On the Authenticity of Asser's Life of King Alfred', *JEH* 47 (1996), 529–551.

LELAND'S EARLY EXAMINATIONS OF MONASTIC LIBRARIES AND HIS
DEVELOPING THEORIES ABOUT THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE *ANNALS OF ST*
NEOTS AND THE WRITINGS OF ASSER

In the summer of 1534 Leland visited the Benedictine priory at St Neots where, unusually, he did not list any titles, although he did take short extracts from a now lost copy of the 'Bec' Life of St Neot.¹¹ Elsewhere in the *Collectanea*, moreover, are found his longer extracts from another text he discovered at this time, that is the unique surviving copy written in late Caroline script of the so-called *Annals of St Neots*, now Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R. 7. 28 (770), 1–74.¹² The heading he gave to these extracts was: 'Ex libro annalium autoris incerti nominis, sed quem constat familiarem fuisse Alfredo, sive Aluredo, regi, literatorum omnium Mecae-nati'.¹³ There are also a number of marginal notes in Leland's hand in the manuscript itself, of which he had no doubt taken possession. Eventually it passed to Archbishop Matthew Parker and from Parker went to Trinity College, Cambridge.

Leland made use of the *Annals of St Neots* twice in the earliest stages of the compilation of *De uiris illustribus*.¹⁴ The first consists of a quotation in the entry for King Alfred (§ 115) concerning the king's death, in which he describes the *Annals* as 'cuiusdam scribae historia, qui Alfredo familiarissimus fuit, et eius acta scripsit'.¹⁵ He went on to explain that he had come across this ancient manuscript at the monastery of St Neots in Huntingdon.¹⁶ Secondly, in his entry for Æthelweard, second son of Alfred (§ 117), he registered his surprise that '[scribam illum: later deleted] qui Alfridi historiam quam diligentissime perscripsit, nullam Etheluardi mentionem, ne per umbram quidem, fecisse'.¹⁷

¹¹ *Collectanea* IV, 13. This is the *Vita secunda Sancti Neoti* (BHL 6052), pr. in *Acta sanctorum ordinis Sancti Benedicti*, ed. L. d'Achery and J. Mabillon, 9 vols, (Paris, 1733–38), IV.2 337–49. Leland probably also saw London, British Library, MS Add. 38130, which contains a copy of the *Vita prima Sancti Neoti* (ed. Lapidge in *The Annals of St Neots with Vita prima Sancti Neoti*, ed. D. Dumville and M. Lapidge, AS Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition 17 (Cambridge, 1985), 111–142).

¹² His extracts are found in *Collectanea* III, 214–19. The text was edited by Dumville in *Annals of St Neots*, ed. Dumville and Lapidge, pp. 1–107. In the words of Dumville, the skill of the Compiler of the *Annals*, which covered the period from 60 BC to AD 914, 'lay in the selection and blending of items from different texts to produce an Anglo-Norman protohistory with a slant towards the visionary and the East Anglian', (p. lxiv).

¹³ 'From a book of annals by an unknown author, who was nevertheless a member of the household of King Alfred, patron of all writers' (*Collectanea* III, 214).

¹⁴ The Life of St Neot itself (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, §113) was a later addition.

¹⁵ 'The history by a certain scribe who was very intimate with Alfred and wrote his deeds' (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, p. 248; later deleted).

¹⁶ 'Nos igitur, quoniam apud Fanum Neoti [coenobium Isodunensis prouinciae in ripa Iscae fluminis situm] in uetus exemplar nuper incidimus' (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 248–48).

¹⁷ 'The scribe who wrote the Alfred's history in a most diligent fashion made not even the slightest mention of Æthelweard' (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 250–51).

These two entries completed, Leland compiled a separate entry – which he would later delete – on the history written by the ‘Scribe of Alfred’, ‘de quo superius semel atque iterum mentionem feci’.¹⁸ After describing the contents of the *Annals* as a whole, beginning with Julius Caesar, he concluded with a quotation proving to his satisfaction that the ‘Scribe of Alfred’ must have been a member of Alfred’s household, since: ‘quod [the fact that the West Saxons did not allow a queen to sit beside her husband on the throne nor to be called queen, but rather wife of the king] a domino meo Alfrido, Anglosaxonum rege ueridico, etiam saepe mihi referente audiui’.¹⁹ From his reading of the *Annals of St Neots*, then, Leland, who had not yet seen Asser’s *Vita Ælfredi regis*, concluded that, ‘Scribae uero nomen auctori placuit non inepte imponere, quia proprium in exemplari quem unicum habui nusquam comparui’.²⁰

Not long after he examined the library at St Neots priory Leland visited the Cistercian abbey at Jervaulx (Yorks., NR) where he recorded two titles.²¹ He also took brief notes, primarily concerning place names: ‘Ex Chronico Jorevallensi, autore incerto. Perduxit autem opus usque ad tempora Richardi primi’.²² This text can be identified as the fifteenth-century *Fitzburgh Chronicle*, surviving as Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 96.²³ He then took possession of the manuscript and once back in London made extensive notes: ‘Ex Chronico Urivallensis monasterii, cujus exordium est ab ipso Augustini, Anglorum apostoli, aduentu in Britanniam’.²⁴ It is important to emphasize that the shorter set of extracts was no

¹⁸ ‘whom I have mentioned twice in the above’ (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 252–53). He referred to the scribe elsewhere. In 1533, for example, he had seen and taken possession of a copy of Henry of Huntingdon’s *Historia Anglorum*, now London, British Library, MS Arundel 48, which he annotated as well as taking extracts: see *Collectanea* III, 289–306. In the extracts he observed that in book five there were materials ‘ex histor[i]a Scribae Alfridi desumpta’ (*Collectanea* III, 297). Specifically he would point out that ‘Awdre castrum, alias Apuldran, in historia, a quodam Alfridi regis familiari scripta’ (*Collectanea* III, 298). This is taken from the *Annals of St Neots*, under 892 (ed. Dumville, p. 95).

¹⁹ ‘which I have also heard from my Lord Alfred, the truthful king of the Anglo-Saxons, who has often said it to me’ (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 252–53). For Leland’s extract from the *Annals* including this statement see *Collectanea* III, 214. His source was *Annals of St Neots*, ed. Dumville, pp. 47–8.

²⁰ ‘It seemed best to give the author the not unsuitable name of “scribe”, since his own name appears nowhere in the single manuscript which I had’ (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 252–53).

²¹ *The Libraries of the Cistercians, Gilbertines and Premonstratensians*, ed. D. N. Bell (London, 1992), Z10. 1–2.

²² ‘From the chronicle of Jervaulx, by an unknown author. He brought the work up to the time of Richard I’ (*Collectanea* IV, 44).

²³ *Historiae Anglicanae scriptores X*, ed. R. Twysden (London, 1652), cols. 721–1284.

²⁴ ‘From the chronicle of Jervaulx, which begins with the arrival in Britain of Augustine, apostle to the English’ (*Collectanea* I, 209–20). In ‘Two Lives of St. Ethelbert, king and martyr’, *EHR* 32 (1917), 214–44, M. R. James mistakenly stated that the manuscript derived from Rievaulx Abbey (p. 216, n. 7). John Bale would attribute the text to John Brompton when he saw it in the

doubt undertaken in the field, and that the much longer one took place in his own study. In one of these latter extracts Asser is cited as the source for an account drawn from the Life of St Æthelberht: ‘Asser historicus veraxque relator gestorum regis Alfredi’.²⁵ Although Leland had no way of knowing it, this passage derives, including the attribution to Asser, from Gerald of Wales’s *Vita S. Æthelberti* (c. 1195).²⁶ From his reading of the *Fitzburgh Chronicle*, then, Leland concluded that Asser was a truthful historian who had written an account of the deeds of King Alfred which included episodes from the Life of St Æthelberht.²⁷

Leland had already come across Asser’s name in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, where he read that Alfred had called to his court from St Davids one Asser, a man of great learning, so he might simplify the language of Boethius’s *Consolatio philosophiae*.²⁸ Leland therefore made the logical deduction

library of Peter Osborne (d. 1592) (*Index Britanniae scriptorum. John Bale’s Index of British and Other Writers*, ed. R. L. Poole and M. Bateson, repr. with introduction by C. Brett and J. P. Carley (Cambridge 1990), p. 185). Osborne acquired a number of Leland’s manuscripts after the latter’s death, and from Osborne it went to Parker: see J. P. Carley, ‘“Many Good Autors”: Two of John Leland’s Manuscripts and the Cambridge Connexion’, *Trans. of the Cambridge Bibliographical Soc.* 15.3 (2014), 27–56, at 34, n. 28.

²⁵ *Collectanea* I, 210.

²⁶ The copy of Gerald’s Life contained in London, BL, MS Cotton Vitellius E. vii (which would be subsequently badly damaged in the Cotton fire of 1731) was transcribed by William Dugdale and sent to the Bollandists, who published it within the body of the *Fitzburgh Chronicle* without any attribution to Gerald. The text was subsequently edited by J. S. Brewer in *Giraldi Cambrensis opera*, RS 21, 8 vols. (London, 1863), III, 407–30, and then by James in ‘Two Lives of St. Ethelbert’, pp. 222–36. Leland saw a copy of the Life at Hereford and took excerpts from it, including the citation of Asser: ‘Unde et huic nostrae paginae quod Asser historicus, verax relator gestorum regis Alfredi, de hac generatione perversa conscripsit eisdem interserere verbis non indignum reputavi’ (*Leland’s Itinerary*, ed. Toulmin Smith, V, 185–7 at 187; James, ‘Two Lives’, p. 231). In ‘Two Lives’ James points out that Gerald’s source, apart from the citation from Asser, is the Life by Osbert of Clare (p. 218). Leland later saw a copy of Osbert’s Life at Hereford, from which he took brief notes (*Leland’s Itinerary*, ed. Toulmin Smith, V, 187–8).

²⁷ In *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge come to the tentative conclusion that Asser never wrote such a passage as the one found in Gerald’s *Vita* (pp. 57–8). More recently, however, in ‘Un-Editing Alfred: Rethinking Modern Editions of Pre-modern Texts from a Post-modern Sensibility’ (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Univ. Washington, 2016), Christopher J. Martin argues that ‘the allusion in the *Vita* ultimately must be seen to attest to a lost tradition for the historical writings linked to Asser. The fact that this allusion arises out of Asser’s homeland in Wales is also suggestive’ (pp. 129–30). That Gerald cites Asser may, according to Rebecca Thomas, provide evidence that his writings were known in Wales in the twelfth century: see her ‘The *Vita Alcuini*, Asser and Scholarly Service at the Court of Alfred the Great’, *EHR* 134 (2019), 1–24, at 2 and n. 7). From our perspective the most significant point is that even after he obtained Otho A. xii, Leland did not try to explain why these episodes from the Life of Æthelberht do not appear in Asser’s *Vita Alfredi regis*.

²⁸ *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Pontificum Anglorum / ‘The History of the English Bishops’*, I: *Text and Translation*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom with R. M. Thomson (Oxford, 2007), ii, 80–1 (p. 278);

that the learned Asser summoned by Alfred must have been the one and the same as the *Asser historicus* who was the true reporter of the deeds of Alfred according to the *Fitzburgh Chronicle*. This in turn convinced Leland that he was the anonymous member of Alfred's household who was the author of the *Annals of St Neots*. Leland therefore returned to the heading for his extracts from the *Annals* and replaced 'autoris incertis nominis' with 'Asserionis'.²⁹

Following this, Leland deleted the chapter for the 'Scribe of Alfred' in *De uiris illustribus* and compiled a separate entry for Asser (§ 119) taken for the most part from the *Annals of St Neots* in the context of his new hypothesis that Asser was its author. He also added details such as Asser's translation to the bishopric of Sherborne in succession to Ælfsige based on William of Malmesbury, whose *Gesta pontificum Anglorum* he would cite as an authority in the entry. He concluded, 'Haec ego pauca de Asserione e crassissimis antiquitatis tenebris in lucem erui, quibus percipio illum, annuente genio, uel immortalem facere'.³⁰ This entry, composed c. 1536, was one that he would subsequently emend and supplement as he came across and assimilated new information. For example, after having completed the entry on Asser, Leland came across the now lost Life of St Grimbald from which he took extracts, now found in *Collectanea* I, 18–19, and which he appropriated to his own library, where it was later seen by Bale.³¹ According to this Life, as he would note in one of his additions to the chapter on Asser,³² Asser was one of those sent to bring Grimbald back to England from the monastery at Saint-Bertin.³³

quoted in *Collectanea* III, 250: 'Assero ex S. Dewi evocatus non usquequaque contemnendae scientiae fuit, qui librum Boetii de consolatione philosophiae planioribus verbis elucidavit, illis diebus labore necessario, nostris ridiculo'. See also William's *Gesta regum Anglorum*, which made the same statement (*William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum / 'The history of the English Kings'* I, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors with R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998), II, 122–4 (p. 190).

²⁹ *Collectanea* II, 214.

³⁰ 'By these few facts on Asser which I have brought out of the dense shadows of antiquity into the light, I greatly desire (if my talent permits) to make him immortal' (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 256–57).

³¹ *Index Britanniae scriptorum*, p. 482: 'Vita Grimbaldi, li. "Vrbs Morinorum quondam ampla"'. See also *Index Britanniae scriptorum*, p. 98, where Bale attributes it to Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (i.e. Goscelin of Canterbury). Leland, on the other hand, stated he did not know the name of the author.

³² *De uiris illustribus*, § 119, lines 20–25.

³³ See also the relevant passage in his excerpts from the Life: 'Alfredus rex consilio Eldredi archiepiscopi Cant. oratores ad monaster: S. Bertini de accersendo Grimbaldio misit, inter quos & Joannes presbyter & Asserus, viri eruditissimi & vivacissimi ingenii, praecelebant. Venit Grimbaldus in Angliam anno D. 885' (In consultation with Æthelred, the archbishop of Canterbury, King Alfred sent envoys, among whom John the priest and Asser, men most learned and vigorous of character excelled, to the monastery of Saint-Bertin to fetch Grimbald. Grimbald came to England in the year of our Lord 885), *Collectanea* I, 18.

In his slightly earlier extracts ‘ex veteri sed fabuloso libro incerti authoris de antiquitate Cantabrigiensi’ Leland had recorded that ‘Joannes Menevensis de monasterio S. David in Cambria, vir eruditissimus, ab Alfredo rege Oxoniam ad profitendas bonas literas vocatus’.³⁴ In the margin Leland has inserted ‘Asserius’. He did not pursue this point (and in fact the passage, drawn from the *Book of Hyde Abbey*, includes both Asser and John of St Davids from the monastery of St Davids as separate individuals),³⁵ but others, basing themselves on Leland, did so, including Archbishop Parker.³⁶

³⁴ ‘From an old but dubious book by an uncertain author on Cambridge’s past’ ... ‘John of St Davids, a most learned man, was called by King Alfred from the monastery of St Davids in Wales to Oxford to profess good letters’ (*Leland’s Itinerary*, ed. Toulmin Smith, II, 166–7). On the *Historiola de antiquitate et origine almae et immacolatae Universitatis Cantebrigiae* ascribed to Nicholas Cantilupe by Bale, see Carley, ‘Two of John Leland’s Manuscripts’, p. 33. A copy survives as Cambridge University Library, University Archives, Collect. Admin. 9. In the commentary to his *Cyanea cantio* (ed. Hearne, p. 68) Leland is especially damning about the *Historiola*: ‘centum sunt ibi praeterea ejusdem farinae fabulae. Profecto nihil legi unquam vanius, sed neque stultius, aut stupidius’ (in it there are as well a hundred fables of the same sort. Truly I have never read anything more empty, more foolish or more stupid). Among Leland’s unfinished projects was a book on the history of the universities. For Oxford at least one of his principal sources was to be the now lost *De antiquitate academiarum Britannicarum* by John Rous (c. 1420–1492), which he had seen probably in 1533 and from which he had taken extracts, on which see Leland’s *Itinerary*, ed. Toulmin Smith, II, 151–54 and 167–8. For Leland’s entry on Rous see *De viris illustribus*, § 585. In the end he did not entirely accept Rous’s testimony either, as he makes clear in his commentary on the *Cyanea cantio* (ed. Hearne, p. 80): ‘Rossus Verovicanus, vir majoris longe diligentiae quam iudicii’.

³⁵ See *Liber monasterii de Hyda* (c. 1380), ed. E. Edwards, RS 45 (London, 1866), 1.41. In his ‘King Arthur at Oxbridge: Nicholas Cantelupe, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Cambridge’s Arthurian Foundation Myth’, *MÆ* 72.1 (2003), 63–81, at 66–67, Ad Putter provides text and translation: ‘In the year of our Lord’s incarnation 886, in the second year of St Grimbald’s coming to England, the University of Oxford was begun, the first among the regent masters and those reading in theology being St Neot, who excelled both as abbot and as doctor of theology; and St Grimbald, the most eminent professor of the sweetest beauty of sacred Scripture. In grammar and in rhetoric Asser was regent master, a priest and monk and a most erudite man in the literary art; and John, a monk of the church of St Davids, read in dialectic, music, and arithmetic; in geometry and astronomy the teacher was John, a monk and colleague of St Grimbald, a man of most astute intelligence and amongst the most learned; and the most glorious and invincible King Alfred presided, the memory of whom will be relished, like honey, by both clerics and ordinary people, as will the memory of his entire reign’.

³⁶ In the contemporary transcript used by Parker for his 1574 edition of Asser, now Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 100/1, the title is given as *Ælfredi res gestae auctore Asser*. In the printed text the title appears as *Ælfredi regis res gestae*, Asser’s name having been dropped. In the preface to the print, however, Parker observes: ‘Ælfredi regis amplissimi (qui olim toti fere Britanniae praefuit) historiam, tibi (humanissime lector) exhibemus, a Iohanne Assero [italics mine] Antistite Shyreburnensi (qui illi quondam a sacris fuit) Latinis literis luculenter expressam’ (sig. Aii’).

LELAND'S DISCOVERY OF OTHO A. XII AT BURY ST EDMUNDS IN 1539 AND
HIS RESULTING RECONSIDERATIONS OF HIS EARLIER HYPOTHESES
CONCERNING ASSER'S WRITINGS

Leland's discovery of the *Vita Ælfredi regis* was, like so many of his other findings, an important one. Although the manuscript itself was one of the casualties of the fire at Ashburnham House in 1731, a facsimile of the first page had been made nine years earlier. This makes clear that Otho A. XII must have been written *c.* 1000 in an Anglo-Caroline script and thus postdates the original composition of the *Vita* by more than a century.³⁷ That it was owned by Leland can be established by John Bale's *Index Britanniae scriptorum*, in which it is described as 'ex bibliotheca Ioannis Lelandi'.³⁸

Three main possibilities have been put forward by modern scholars for the pre-Dissolution provenance of Otho A. XII: Bury St Edmunds Abbey, Ramsey Abbey and Worcester Cathedral Priory. The arguments are based on the fact that copies of the *Vita* were known to have been at each of the monasteries in the years after 1000. It was used at Bury St Edmunds Abbey by the compiler of the *Annals of St Neots*; Ramsey Abbey by Byrhtferth of Ramsey; and Worcester Cathedral Priory by the individual who can probably be identified as John of Worcester.³⁹ In the end, however, Keynes and Lapidge prudently conclude that all we can say with any certainty is that Leland found it in an unknown religious house during his examinations of their libraries.⁴⁰

³⁷ The facsimile was made by James Hill (1697–1727), the antiquary employed by Francis Wise (1695–1767) for his 1722 edition which was based for the most part on Hill's collations. According to Humfrey Wanley (1672–1726), whom Wise consulted, Otho A. XII was written in several hands, the oldest of which resembled that of a charter of Æthelred the Unready dated to 1001. In *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, pp. 223–5, Keynes and Lapidge point out that the hierarchy of texts suggested by the facsimile is perfect for early eleventh century.

³⁸ *Index Britanniae scriptorum*, pp. 34–5.

³⁹ See R. Gallagher, 'Asser and the Writing of West Saxon Charters', *EHR* 136 (2021), 773–808, for more details and other medieval writers possibly familiar with the *Vita*. 'The only attested medieval copy of the *Life*, entirely destroyed by fire in 1731, appears from an early eighteenth-century facsimile to have been produced in England around the year 1000. At about the same time, Byrhtferth, a monk at Ramsey Abbey in the east of England, quoted extensively from the text, while the anonymous author of the mid-eleventh-century *Encomium Emmae reginae*, who was originally from St-Bertin, also seems to have been familiar with it. In the twelfth century, both John of Worcester and an anonymous author at Bury St Edmunds quoted the *Life*, and Gerald of Wales, while probably based at Hereford, at least knew of the reputation of Asser as the biographer of Alfred. In addition, recent evidence for knowledge of the *Life* by the author of the Welsh poem *Armes Prydein Vawr* is the strongest hint yet that some form of the biography was known in Wales in the tenth century' (pp. 774–5).

⁴⁰ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, p. 223.

Significantly, Asser's name does not appear in any of Leland's library lists compiled in the first half-decade of the 1530s. In 1533 Leland examined the library of the Benedictine cathedral priory at Worcester where he listed eleven titles;⁴¹ in 1533–4 the Benedictine abbey at Bury St Edmunds where he listed twenty-two titles;⁴² and in 1534 the Benedictine abbey of Ramsey listing ten titles.⁴³ There is no evidence that Leland returned to the libraries at Worcester (dissolved in 1540) or Ramsey (dissolved in 1539) after this: on the contrary it seems highly unlikely. The case at Bury St Edmunds, however, is different. Leland's research on the king's behalf for ancient documents validating England's break with Rome intensified after the publication at Cologne in 1538 of the defence of the papacy, the *Hierarchiae ecclesiasticae assertio*, written by Albert Pighius (c. 1490–1542).⁴⁴ Soon after this he set out to write a refutation which would culminate in his *Antiphilarchia* completed in 1541/2.⁴⁵ This provides the context for a copy in Leland's hand of a letter written by an unnamed individual on 9 November, year unspecified, to yet another unnamed individual:

where as Master Leylande at this praesente tyme cummith to Byri to see what bookes be lefte yn the library there, or translaid thens ynto any other corner of the late monastery, I shaul desier yow apon juste consideration right redily to forder his cause, and to permitte hym to have the use of such as may forder hym yn setting forth such matiers as he writith for the kinges majeste. In so doying ye shaul bynde me to show on to yow at al tymes like gratitude: for if I were present at this tyme with yow I wold gladly my self fulfil his honeste requeste. Thus fare ye wel this ix of Novembre at Barnewelle.⁴⁶

The Benedictine monastery at Bury St Edmunds was suppressed on 4 November 1539 and one of the commissioners for the dissolution was Leland's friend and fellow antiquary Sir John Prise (1501/2–1555). The author of this letter was almost certainly Prise and the date must have been 9 November 1539, five days after the suppression the monastery.⁴⁷ The phrase 'have the use of' can be interpreted broadly and Leland was no doubt authorized to take possession of manuscripts that were of interest to him. Following in the footsteps of W. H. Stevenson and T. A. M. Bishop, David Dumville has established that the *Annals of*

⁴¹ *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, p. lxxi.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. lxxiii.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. lxxxviii.

⁴⁴ Leland's annotated copy survives as Worcester Cathedral Library G. E. 1. On the title page he has written: 'Hunc librum non alio nomine comparavi mihi quam ut, iubente principe meo longe illustrissime, responderem Pighio' (I purchased this book in order to respond to Pighius at the command of my most illustrious prince). On this copy see Mark Rankin, 'John Leland, Henry VIII, and Albert Pighius's *Hierarchiae Ecclesiasticae Assertio*', *The Library*, forthcoming.

⁴⁵ On the *Antiphilarchia* see *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

⁴⁶ Quoted in *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, p. xcix.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*

St Neots, with its extensive borrowings and quotations from Asser, was written at Bury St Edmunds.⁴⁸ In this case there must have been a copy of Asser's *Vita Ælfredi regis* at Bury by the 1120s or 1130s, where presumably it stayed.

As the early version of *De uiris illustribus* (i.e. Stage I) establishes, Leland had not seen Otho A. XII before 1536, when he had undertaken the last of his monastic visitations. On the other hand, he was making use of it by around 1540 to emend earlier entries. By my reckoning, then, Leland discovered and took possession of Otho A. XII at Bury St Edmunds Abbey a matter of days after the suppression of the monastery. Once he had read this copy of Asser's *Vita Ælfredi regis*, Leland recognized that it was the source for the Alfredian component of the *Annals of St Neots*. This necessitated a rejection of his earlier assertion that Asser was the author of the *Annals* as a whole, and he now concluded that what it contained in its latter section was an epitome (*paralipomena*) of Asser's work. He therefore returned to his extracts and deleted 'Asser' as author and provided a new title: 'Chronicon Fani Neoti incerto autore'.⁴⁹ Modern, if not sixteenth-century, scholarship supports his conclusion.

Leland also set about revising entries in *De uiris illustribus* based on the information contained in the *Vita Ælfredi regis*. A significant section of the entry on Alfred (§ 115 in Stage I) was devoted to a discussion of the king's putative refounding of Oxford, on which Leland's chief source was John Rous's lost *De antiquitate academiarum Britannicarum*.⁵⁰ He now inserted several new references based on his reading of Otho A. XII. After his earlier observation that Alfred had sought out a number of noble youths in order that they might be educated and later illuminate the whole island with their learning he added, 'id quod ex Asserii Meneuensis historia liquet, qui Alfridi res gestas accurate perscripsit'.⁵¹ Likewise he included the following information: 'Illud certius, quod Asserius his uerbis, ubi de distributione fortunarum Ealfridi agit, refert: "Tertiam partem dedit scholae, quam ex multis propriae suae gentis nobilibus pueris et etiam ignobilibus studiosissime congregauerat"'.⁵² He then observed, 'Haec ille, cuius et Marianus Scottus

⁴⁸ See Dumville, *Annals of St Neots*, pp. lxiv–lxv: 'Palaeographical evidence of varying sorts has confirmed the Bury origin of the manuscript and indicated its quasi-authorial status. Likewise, the evidence for dating the scribes and their other endeavours has enabled the dating of the text to be narrowed to approximately the two decades 1120–40'.

⁴⁹ *Collectanea* III, 214.

⁵⁰ On Rous see above n. 34. On the question of Alfred's putative role in the foundation of Oxford, see more generally S. Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 28 (1999), 225–356, at 325–27.

⁵¹ 'All this is clear from the history by Asser of St Davids, who accurately recorded the deeds of Alfred', *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 242–43.

⁵² 'This is quite certain, since Asser makes the following statement concerning the distribution of Alfred's fortune: "He gave a third to the school which he had worked hard to establish for many noble boys, and even commoners, of his own race"' (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 242–43).

autoritatem secutus (inciderat enim, ut liquido apparet, in librum annalium Asserii) eadem confirmat'.⁵³ The corresponding passage in the *Chronica chronicarum*, probably written by John of Worcester (fl. 1095–1140), reads, 'Tertiam scole quam ex multis gentis sue nobilibus et etiam pueris ignobilibus studiosissime congregauerat'.⁵⁴ Leland attributed the copy of this text which he had seen at Cirencester in 1533 to Marianus Scottus's world history, of which John's chronicle was a reworking and continuation.⁵⁵ 'Marianus's' principal source on Alfred was Asser, as Leland observed, but this passage does not appear in his extracts.

In another addition Leland quotes Asser on Alfred's zeal for learning.⁵⁶ He follows this with Roger of Howden's verdict on the topic: 'Accedit huc et calculus Rogeri Houedeni: "Hic poetarum Saxonorum peritissimus, in Dei seruitio uigilantissimus, et in inquirendis iudiciis disertissimus"'.⁵⁷ Leland would realize that Roger had borrowed heavily from the *Historia regum* attributed to Symeon of Durham. This latter survives only in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 139, which Leland borrowed from his friend Thomas Soulemont in the late 1530s.⁵⁸ In its early sections, attributed by Michael Lapidge to Byrhtferth of Ramsey, are included annals for 849–887 which derive from Asser.⁵⁹ Leland took extracts from these and later noted in the margin, 'Haec ex Asserione *historiogr.* desumpta'.⁶⁰ This connexion was not made again until the nineteenth century. Concerning Alfred's death, he had quoted the *Annals of St Neots* and now substituted 'eo libello, qui Asserii annales in epitomen redegit' for the earlier 'cuiusdam scribae historia, qui Alfredo familiarissimus fuit, et eius acta scripsit'.⁶¹

See *De rebus gestis Aelfredi regis* cii. 17–19, in *Asser's Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1959), pp. 88–9.

⁵³ 'Following his authority Marianus Scottus, who had evidently come across a copy of Asser's *Annals*, asserts the same facts', *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 242–43.

⁵⁴ *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1995–), II, 330–1.

⁵⁵ 'Ex Chronico Mariani Scotti' (*Collectanea* III, 276–89).

⁵⁶ *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 244–45.

⁵⁷ 'To this may be added Roger of Howden's verdict: "He was the most skilful of all Saxon poets, most vigilant in the service of God, and most methodical in searching out the right judgements"', *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 244–45.

⁵⁸ On this manuscript see D. N. Dumville, 'The Sixteenth-Century History of Two Cambridge Books from Sawley', *Trans. of the Cambridge Bibliographical Soc.* 7 (1980), 427–44; also the relevant page of *Medieval Primary Sources: Genre, Rhetoric and Transmission. HIST424*, ed. P. Hayward, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/haywardp/hist424/seminars/Corpus139.htm>.

⁵⁹ See Lapidge, 'Byrhtferth of Ramsey and the Early Sections of the *Historia Regum* Attributed to Symeon of Durham', *ASE* 10 (1982), 97–122, at 98 and 121.

⁶⁰ 'These are taken from the historian Asser', *Collectanea* III, 353.

⁶¹ '[it is described most clearly of all] in the abridgement of Asser's *Annals* ... 'the history of a certain scribe, who was most intimate with Alfred, and wrote his deeds' (*De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 248–49).

In his entry for Alfred's son Æthelweard (§ 117; also early Stage I) Leland had registered his surprise, as noted above, that the scribe who had written Alfred's history made no mention of Æthelweard. After he discovered Otho A. XII he deleted 'scribam illum', substituting 'the author of the *Annals of St Neots*' ('autorem chronicorum fani Neoti').

For the entry on Asser he made a number of additions based on his reading of Otho A. XII including the observation that Alfred conferred upon Asser the monasteries of Congresbury, Banwell, and Exeter. At the very end he inserted his own description of the text:

Neque hoc interim omittendum, quod Asserius patroni sui memoriam, famam, gloriam modis omnibus cum longissimam, tum clarissimam efficere studens, eius uitam atque adeo facta illustria omnia libro annalium uicturo eleganter, pro rei maiestate, tanquam rarus Apelles, depinxerit ac demum tabulas uel medio foro spectandas produxerit, quarum et Marianus Scottus uenustate totus captus, flores ex eisdem audius, ueluti stellulas, quibus suam interpolaret historiam selegit.⁶²

This section of Marianus Scottus's world history, like the one above, was derived from Asser.⁶³ Leland's analysis of the beauties of Asser's style is not one with which all modern scholars would concur.⁶⁴

Here, then, is the case Leland had built up concerning Asser's *Vita Ælfredi regis* by the time he became incurably insane in 1547. First, as a result of his reading of the *Annals of St Neots* in 1534, he had assumed that there was an anonymous 'scriba' who had compiled an account of Alfred's life up to c. 894 based on personal interaction with the king. Secondly, when he obtained a copy of the *Fitzburgh Chronicle* soon afterwards he concluded that the scribe of the *Annals of St Neots* must have been the 'Asser historicus verax relator gestorum regis Alfredi' described in this chronicle. He therefore deleted the entry for the 'Scriba Alfredi' and wrote a separate one for Asser, as well as revising his entry for Alfred and tweaking other entries as well. Thirdly, in the late 1530s he discovered Otho A. XII at Bury St Edmunds, as I suspect, and he realized that the *Annals of St Neots* was not written by Asser, but rather that in its latter part it contained an epitome of Asser's history. Based on his earlier hypothesis identifying Asser as the 'verax relator gestorum regis Alfredi' of the *Fitzburgh Chronicle*, moreover, he described Asser's text as

⁶² 'Meanwhile, I must point out that Asser was eager to bring about the enduring and splendid memory, fame, and glory of his patron through every means, and depicted his life and all his illustrious deeds in a book of annals that will endure, written in a style befitting his royal subject. Like a rare Apelles he finally set out his pictures for the general gaze. Marianus Scottus, quite captivated by their beauty, avidly picked flowers like little stars from them to include as highlights in his own history', *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Carley, pp. 256–57.

⁶³ Leland's source is once again John of Worcester's chronicle.

⁶⁴ On this topic see Gallagher, 'Asser and the Writing', pp. 780–1.

‘Alfredi res gestae’ and this became the title used in the printed edition of 1574, *Ælfredi regis res gestae*. Fourthly, although he uses the first person in the *Vita Ælfredi regis* Asser never gives his own name, and it is only in the opening salutation that he identifies himself as Asser. Even without the opening salutation in Otho A. xii, however, Leland would have attributed the text to Asser.⁶⁵ He had already worked out that the ‘T’ quoted in the *Annals of St Neots* was the ‘Asser historicus’ quoted in the *Fitzhugh Chronicle*.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

What this example shows – and there are many more like it – is that Leland’s writings are extraordinarily important resources for recovering the early sixteenth-century travels of medieval English manuscripts and what these tell us about the historical and theological writings of the English Middle Ages. Leland also provides crucial insight into the religious complexities of Henry VIII’s reign as the monarch’s theological position veered radically from one extreme to another. More to the point, however, is the fact that his writings can be very deceptive unless seen in their chronological sequence, and they have led many scholars down the proverbial garden path. It is only by close analysis of what he wrote when, and how he emended his position during the crucial years between 1530 and 1547, that we can fully come to understand what precisely his sources were and what information can be derived from them. It is also important to remember that Leland had an extraordinarily retentive memory concerning the texts he read and noticed (as in the cases of Florence of Worcester and Roger of Howden) when borrowings were made. This kind of virtually total recall is one of the things that makes Leland so important to modern scholars.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Here I disagree with Martin who states in his ‘Un-Editing Alfred: Rethinking Modern Editions of Pre-modern Texts from a Post-modern Sensibility’ that ‘The epistolary salutation addressing Alfred at the very start of the text in Cotton Otho A. xii is evidently the sole source for Leland’s ascription of the *Vita* to Asser’ (p. 145).

⁶⁶ His reasoning may not have been right – it is not certain that the Asser referred to in the *Fitzhugh Chronicle* is the author of Otho A. xii – but his conclusion certainly was.

⁶⁷ A version of this paper was given at the London Manuscripts Seminar on 14 January 2020. Even earlier I discussed Parker’s edition of the *Vita Ælfredi regis* in a keynote address at a conference on ‘Matthew Parker: Archbishop, Scholar, and Collector’ at Cambridge, 19 March 2016. I am indebted to Professor Simon Keynes for his careful reading and advice on a preliminary draft. Dr Robert Gallagher also made helpful suggestions, for which I thank him. The comments of the two anonymous readers were especially pertinent.