

Notes and Documents

The Beginning of the Year in the Alfredian Chronicle (866-87)

THE problem of the date of the commencement of the year in the English Chronicle is one which, in view of its importance to students of Anglo-Saxon chronology, has received less than its fair share of the attention of English historians. It is discussed in a short appendix to the Introduction to vol. ii of Mr. Plummer's *Two Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, published in 1899, as well as by Mr. W. H. Stevenson¹ and Mr. Alfred Anscombe.² But the whole literature of the subject is slight in volume and limited in range. My object in this paper being to attempt to determine from what day the year was reckoned by annalists in the south of England at the time of the composition of the Chronicle in the reign of Alfred, I will begin with a brief summary of the conclusions or conjectures of the writers whose names I have mentioned.

The opinion of the editor of the English Chronicle must be first considered. In Mr. Plummer's judgement 'the only two commencements (of the year) which we have to consider seriously in relation to the Chronicle are Easter and Christmas'.³ In support of the Easter beginning Mr. Plummer quotes a number of examples drawn from the years 1009-86. It has already been pointed out by Mr. Poole that, with two exceptions, which can be otherwise explained, these entries accord with the supposition that the chronicler was reckoning by the *Stylus Florentinus*, which began the year with the Annunciation (25 March) succeeding the 1 January of the Julian year.⁴ Since the practice of dating the year from Easter appears to have originated in the chancery of the kings of France at a period somewhat later than that

¹ *Ante*, xiii. 71-7 (January 1898), and *Asser's Life of Alfred* (1904), p. 282, n.

² *Athenaeum*, 22 September and 10 November 1900; *British Numismatic Journal*, series 1, vols. iv, v (1907-8).

³ Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (1892, 1899), II. cxxxix.

⁴ *Ante*, xvi. (1901) 719-21. The *Stylus Florentinus*, represented in England by the *Old Style*, differed by twelve months from the *Stylus Pisanus*, which began the year with the Annunciation preceding 1 January.

indicated, and since there is no evidence to show that it was ever adopted in this country, it is reasonable to assume that the instances collected by Mr. Plummer are merely early examples of the employment of the Florentine reckoning, which became general in England from the reign of Henry II. As regards the system in use in Alfred's day Mr. Plummer holds that 'the reckoning from Christmas prevails throughout the Alfredian Chronicle, i. e. up to about 892'.⁵ Unluckily this view, which denies that any chronological difficulty exists, takes no account of a circumstance upon which Mr. Stevenson had commented in this Review before the appearance of Mr. Plummer's volume, namely, that 'in the Chronicle of Alfred's time we come across several instances where the first events recorded in a given year happened late in the autumn or in October or November', whilst the foreign events from 878 onwards are frequently recorded a year too late.

Mr. Stevenson's own interpretation of these phenomena is a merely tentative one. After remarking that in the case of events on the Continent the news might sometimes not reach England until after Christmas, thus causing the events themselves to be entered in the Chronicle under the year subsequent to that in which they actually occurred,⁶ he cites certain instances, to be noted below, which are not susceptible of so simple an explanation.

'These instances', he says, 'would follow in the order given in the Chronicle in a year beginning 25 March, which would have been the proper commencement in the era of the Incarnation. If the year commenced on 25 March preceding 25 December, and not on 25 March following that date, we should have an easy explanation of the annals being in so many cases a year in advance of the real date, since 9 months of the year would, according to our system, be pre-dated one year.'⁷

Mr. Stevenson did not commit himself definitely to the opinion that English chroniclers of the ninth century employed the *Stylus Pisanus* in reckoning their year-dates;⁸ but the fact that a writer of his authority should have been prepared to reject the Christmas commencement was in itself no small contribution to the study of a problem the existence of which was not suspected before

⁵ *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii, p. cxl.

⁶ But this would seem to postulate the assumption that the annals were entered up year by year, which for this section of the Chronicle, at least, is certainly erroneous.

⁷ *Ante*, xiii. 75, 76 (1898).

⁸ Mr. Stevenson's conjecture has found a supporter in Professor Stenton, who, writing of Æthelwold's 'probable dependence upon a chronicle which began the year with the Annunciation preceding Christmas', observes that 'an original writer towards the close of the tenth century would naturally adopt the *Stylus Pisanus* in making his chronological indications, and there is some evidence to suggest that even the Alfredian sections of the Chronicle are based upon a year beginning with 25 March' (*ante*, xxiv. 79)..

Mr. Stevenson called attention to it and can scarcely be said to be recognized even to-day.

Shortly after the publication of Mr. Stevenson's article and Mr. Plummer's book a letter from Mr. Anscombe to the *Athenaeum* introduced a new complication into the inquiry. In this communication, in which he was primarily concerned to justify the accuracy of the date (673) assigned by Bede to the Council of Hertford, Mr. Anscombe advanced the theory that 'the Old English annalistic year of Our Lord is an indiction year, the annuary numbers of which were changed on 1 September by those chroniclers who used the Greek indiction, and on 24 September by those who used the Caesarian one'.⁹ According to this method of computation an event which occurred between 1 (or 24) September and 31 December of the Julian year would be dated with the numeral of the year which succeeded it. Hence Mr. Anscombe suggested not only that one year must be subtracted from Bede's date for any event which is known to have taken place later than 24 September in a given year—Bede, it is certain, used the Caesarian not the Constantinopolitan (or Greek) indiction—but that the same principle should be applied to all similar dates supplied by the English Chronicle down to as late as the middle of the tenth century. A more elaborate treatise upon 'The Anglo-Saxon Computation of Historic Time in the Ninth Century' was afterwards contributed by Mr. Anscombe to the pages of the *British Numismatic Journal*.¹⁰ The obscurity of the writer's subject-matter and the nature of his treatment of it, which is technical rather than historical, have prevented Mr. Anscombe's views from receiving that amount of consideration at the hands of historians which they undoubtedly deserve. His original letter to the *Athenaeum* secured him an important convert in Sir James Ramsay;¹¹ but with this exception his opinions have been overlooked, or rejected, by subsequent writers upon the history of England before 1066.¹²

Four methods of beginning the year have thus to be considered: at the Annunciation (*Stylus Pisanus*), at the September indiction, at Christmas, and at the following Annunciation (*Stylus Florentinus*). Of another mode of reckoning, from 1 January, which was already in use amongst Irish annalists, Mr. Plummer is

* *Athenaeum*, 22 September 1900.

¹⁰ *British Numismatic Journal*, series 1, vol. iv (pp. 241 ff.); vol. v (pp. 381 ff.).

¹¹ See his letters to the *Athenaeum*, 3 November and 1 December 1900. Sir James Ramsay's *Foundations of England* was published in 1898.

¹² The dates in Miss Lees, *Alfred the Great* (1915), like those in Hodgkin (*Political History of England*, vol. i, 1906) and Oman (*England before the Norman Conquest*, 1910), appear to be based upon the assumption that the year began at Christmas. No hint of the possibility that the year may have begun in September is to be found either in Mr. Plummer's *Life and Times of Alfred* (1902), or in Mr. Stevenson's *Asser* (1904), both published since the appearance of Mr. Anscombe's letter in the *Athenaeum*.

justified in observing that he has 'found no trace in the Saxon Chronicles'. The possibility that English chroniclers may have employed a different *caput anni* from any of those noted above must also not be excluded from consideration. In the following pages an attempt will be made to arrive at a solution of the problem, by a study of the internal evidence supplied by the Chronicle itself, so far as concerns that section of it to which the designation 'Alfredian' is specially appropriate, namely the period covered by the annals 866-87. I have chosen 887 rather than the more usual date 892 as a halting-place, because I believe that the original compilation of the Chronicle must be assigned to a period somewhat earlier than is generally supposed, and that the archetype of our extant manuscripts did not at first extend beyond the former of these two dates.¹³

One feature of the annals 866-87 cannot fail to arouse attention. The entries are almost exclusively military: they relate in much detail the annual movements of the Danish 'host' from the date of its arrival in England to the conclusion of the Treaty of Wedmore, and, more summarily, the subsequent wanderings of that section of Guthrum's following which declined to avail itself of the permission to settle in the Danelaw, preferring to continue a career of piracy at the expense of England's neighbours beyond the Channel. Thus from 866 to 878 the annals are concerned solely with England: from 879 to 887 the interest is mainly continental. It has not escaped notice that the ravages of the Danes in 'Frankland' (i. e. Germany, France, and Lotharingia) are generally recorded in the Chronicle one year later than that to which they properly belong. This led Earle, who, like all his contemporaries, assumed that the year began at Christmas, to formulate the theory since adopted by Mr. Plummer, that the annals 879-87 are consistently one year in advance of the correct dating.¹⁴ Now the peculiarity of these continental entries lies in the circumstance that, with few exceptions, they refer to events which took place about October or November, i. e. to the annual autumn migration of the Danes from one locality which they had 'eaten up' in the preceding summer to another which they destined for their head-quarters during the following twelve-month. Thus their coming to Ghent, recorded in the Chronicle under 880, should rightly be referred to the November of 879; ¹⁵ their ascent of the Meuse 'far into France', given under 882,

¹³ This was the view of the German critic Grubitz and of the late Professor Earle (*Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, p. xv). It rests chiefly, though not wholly, upon the fact that Asser, although he was writing some years later, makes no use of the Chronicle after 887. Mr. Plummer thinks the inference 'uncertain' (ii, p. cxliii).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* ii. 95.

¹⁵ 'Nortmanni . . . mense Novembrio in Gandao Monasterio sedem sibi ad hismandum statuunt': *Annales Vedastini*, a. 879, pp. 45 f., ed. B. Simson, 1909.

when, as Æthelwerd tells us, they 'measured out their camp' at Elsloo, belongs to the autumn of 881;¹⁶ their advance, noticed under 883, up the Scheldt to Condé, where they 'settled one year', took place in the autumn of 882;¹⁷ whilst the winter mentioned as *a.* 884, which they spent on the Somme at Amiens, was the winter of 883-4.¹⁸ Similarly, their taking up 'winter quarters at the city of Paris', noted by the Chronicle under 886, refers to the celebrated siege which began in November 885¹⁹ and was prolonged till the November of the following year. The latter, again, is the true date of their 'departure over the bridge at Paris' recorded in the annal for 887. All these instances, therefore, are consistent either with the view that the year began at Christmas and that the annals are all one year post-dated, or with the alternative theories that the English chronicler began the year either from the Annunciation preceding Christmas or from the September indiction.

This perplexing ambiguity is happily absent when we turn to those rare instances in which the Chronicle records Frankish occurrences which took place earlier in the year than September. Two such instances must be noticed. Under 881 the Chronicle relates that 'the host fared further inland into France, and the Franks fought against them'; Æthelwerd adds that the Franks got the victory and that the 'barbarians' were put to flight. The first half of the entry is too indefinite to allow any conclusion to be drawn from it; but the engagement in which the Danes were routed can safely be identified with the battle of Saucourt, which raised hopes, destined to be disappointed, that Louis III would deliver his country from the Scandinavian peril.²⁰ The battle of Saucourt was fought in August 881, i. e. in the same year as that in which it is recorded in the Chronicle, a circumstance which is consistent with the view that English annalists began the year in September or later, but is not consistent with the Pisan commencement, or with the supposition that *all* the annals 879-87 are one year in advance of the true chronology. Again, under 885 the Chronicle states that King Louis the Stammerer, the father of Louis III, died 'in the year when the sun was eclipsed', an event which it records under 879.

¹⁶ 'Mense Novembrio', Regino, *Chronicon*, *a.* 881, p. 118; ed. F. Kurze, 1890.

¹⁷ 'Nortmanni vero mense Octobrio in Condato sibi sedem firmant': *Ann. Vedast.*, *a.* 882, p. 52.

¹⁸ The Danes took up their winter-quarters at Amiens 'Octobrio mense finiente': *ibid.*, *a.* 883, p. 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *a.* 885, p. 58.

²⁰ *Annales Fuldenses*, *a.* 881. The writer adds that the Danes, after the battle of Saucourt, 'instaurato exercitu, et amplificato numero equitum,' proceeded to ravage the dominions of King Louis the Saxon: this accords with the statement in the Chronicle 'then was the host mounted there after the battle'.

Louis II died on 10 April 879,²¹ but the eclipse was on 29 October 878.²² Hence, if Louis died in the same calendar-year as the eclipse, it is obvious that the English year 879 must have begun before 29 October 878 and ended some time between April 879 and the following October. In any case, as Mr. Stevenson points out,²³ it is clear from these instances that we cannot correct all the dates by simply throwing them one year back.

Again, the annal for the year 885 is as long as its six predecessors put together. It records the siege of Rochester by a band of Danes who 'in the same summer departed over sea'; the two sea-fights at the mouth of the Stour; the death in 'that same year before mid-winter' of 'Charles, king of the Franks' (i. e. Carloman, king of France, whose death took place on 12 December 884²⁴); an attack by the Danes upon 'Old Saxony', with 'great fighting twice in the year' in which 'the Saxons had the victory, and the Frisians were there with them'; the recognition of the Emperor Charles the Fat as king of France; and the death of 'the good Pope Marinus'. The date of the last-mentioned event is uncertain, but it is generally assigned to 15 May 884, which would seem to support the view that the annals are one year post-dated. On the other hand, the death of King Carloman 'before mid-winter' is distinctly stated to have taken place in the same year which witnessed the siege of Rochester and the departure of the Danes 'in the summer', and it is certain that these events are correctly dated 885.²⁵ Since the Emperor Charles the Fat can scarcely be said to have 'succeeded to the western kingdom' before June 885,²⁶ we are left with the impression that the compiler of the annal regarded 12 December 884 and the following summer as falling within the same annalistic year 885, as indeed would be the case if the year had begun in September. The reference to 'great fighting' having taken place 'twice in the year' between the

²¹ Louis died on Good Friday: *Ann. Vedast.*, a. 879, p. 44.

²² For this eclipse, which is correctly dated in the *Annals of Ulster*, i. e. s. a. 877 (= 878), and in most of the continental chronicles, see Stevenson, *Asser*, pp. 281-6.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 282. n.

²⁴ So Lavissee (*Hist. de France*, ii. 1, 392). But most of the Frankish Chronicles give 6 December.

²⁵ The *Annales Vedastini* are decisive as to the date. They state that at the end of October 884 the Danes burned their camp at Amiens and came to Boulogne, where 'pars illorum mare transiit, atque pars Luvanium in regno quondam Hlotharii, ibique sibi castra statuunt ad hiemandum'. This move of a part of the host to Louvain is also mentioned by Æthelwerd: the Chronicle merely states that 'one part went eastwards'. It is clear that the detachment which 'crossed the sea' must have come to Kent about November 884, and that the relief of Rochester and the subsequent departure of the Danes 'in the summer' must be placed in 885.

²⁶ It is doubtful whether the formal recognition of Charles the Fat as king of France can be placed earlier than June 885, the date when he came to Ponthion: *Ann. Vedast.*, a. 885. See also Bouquet, *Recueil des Historiens*, viii. 215 n.

Danes and the Old Saxons supports this view. The *Annales Fuldenses*, a. 885, record a battle in Old Saxony in which the Saxons owed their victory to the timely intervention of a Frisian force which attacked the invaders in the rear.²⁷ Since the Chronicle expressly states that 'the Frisians were there with' the Saxons it is plain that this must be one of the two battles to which the annalist refers.²⁸ In the face of this further testimony to the accuracy of the Chronicle's dating, it is clearly not permissible to relegate the whole of the annal for 885 to the preceding year. On the contrary, from our scrutiny of the annals 879-87 one fact emerges. With a single exception (the obit of Pope Marinus) continental events which occur earlier in the season than September are correctly dated in the Chronicle, whilst those which happen in the autumn are invariably entered one year too late.

When we turn from these continental entries to those annals which are concerned with events in England we note in particular that for 871, Alfred's 'year of battles', and that for 878, the year of Ethandune and the Treaty of Wedmore. The annal for 871 is rich in chronological indications which enable us to fix with something approaching precision the exact date of each of the actions fought in the course of this campaign. Five battles, viz. Englefield, Reading ('after 4 nights'), Ashdown ('4 nights after'), Basing ('after 14 nights'), and Marton ('about 2 months afterwards'), fill up the interval between the beginning of the year and Easter, which in 871 fell on 15 April. The date of one of these engagements can be determined; the battle of Marton, it would seem, was fought on 22 March, that being the day assigned in the English calendar to the obit of Heahmund, bishop of Sherborne, who fell in this action.²⁹ This, in turn, fixes Basing to *about* 22 January, Ashdown to 8 January, Reading to 4 January, Englefield to 31 December, and the coming of the Danes to Reading, the first event recorded in the annal, to 28 December 870.³⁰ Since we are told that 'after Easter' (i. e. the second half of April) King Ethelred died, and that 'about one month afterwards' King Alfred 'fought against the whole host at Wilton', it is apparent that the chronicler regarded the

²⁷ The battle seems to have taken place about May.

²⁸ The other was doubtless the engagement fought at Narden in Friesland late in 884—Mr. Stevenson (*Asser*, 292) places it 'about December'—in which the Danes were defeated by Rimbart, archbishop of Bremen.

²⁹ Ramsay, *Foundations of England*, i. 244. As Mr. Plummer points out (*Life and Times of Alfred*, 92), the date 23 March fits in well with the fact that the battle of Marton is the last event recorded in the Chronicle before Easter.

³⁰ The dates, which are those given by Mr. Plummer (*ibid.* p. 93) and by Miss Lees (*Alfred the Great*, pp. 117-27), must not, of course, be regarded as more than approximately accurate.

whole period from 28 December 870 to the close of May 871 as falling within one annalistic year. In 878 the first event recorded is the move of the Danes to Chippenham 'after twelfth night', i. e. about 7 January. 'At Easter' (23 March) King Alfred builds his fort at Athelney, and 'in the seventh week after Easter' (c. 11 May) he rides out of his encampment to open his campaign for the expulsion of the Danes from Wessex. The battle of Ethandune appears to have been fought in the neighbourhood of 14 May. The siege of Chippenham lasts '14 nights' (c. 14-28 May); the baptism of Guthrum takes place 'three weeks afterwards' (c. 18 June); after which the Danish chief stays 'twelve nights' with the king at Wedmore, thus bringing us approximately to 1 July 878. The date may be later, they can scarcely be earlier, than those indicated. Here, then, we have conclusive proof that the Old English year did not commence at any period between 1 January and 1 July. The evidence of these two annals, 871 and 878, disposes finally of the conjecture that the chronicler reckoned either by the Pisan or by the Florentine calculus, beginning his year on 25 March.

We are left to choose between a Christmas commencement, which, as we have seen, offers no explanation of the difficulty with regard to the continental entries, and an autumn beginning which would bring them all into agreement. If we examine the annals 866-78 more minutely we shall find that the evidence against the Christmas commencement gathers strength. One annal after another opens with a reference to the annual migration of the Danes to fresh winter-quarters, an event which seems generally to have taken place about November.³¹ In some cases these entries are succeeded by others which clearly relate to what we should regard as an earlier season of the year. Thus in 870 the Danish invasion of East Anglia is placed before the death of Archbishop Ceolnoth, assigned by Stubbs to 4 February 870; whilst in 875 the wintering of the 'host' on the Tyne and its ravages amongst the Picts and the Strathclyde Welsh are made to precede the king's putting to sea with his fleet, which the Chronicle places in 'that summer'. Indeed, it is curious how regularly Alfred's naval cruises, which we should naturally associate with summer weather, are the last occurrences recorded in the annals to which they belong.³² These instances might perhaps, if they stood alone, be accounted for on the supposition that the chronicler made a point of relating the yearly movements of

³¹ This was certainly the case in France (*supra*, nn. 17-21). In England the slight variation of climate may have led the Danes to move somewhat earlier.

³² The annal for 885 is no exception, although the defeat of the English fleet is recorded in the middle of the annal. The succeeding entries relate to continental events, e. g. the death of King Carloman, &c.

the 'host' before recording incidents which he regarded as of secondary interest. But there are other apparent inconsistencies about these annals which cannot be explained away so easily. Thus, in 868, we are told that 'the host fared into Mercia to Nottingham and there took up their winter-quarters'; but the events which followed—the application for aid by King Burhred 'and his witan' to the king of Wessex, the expedition of Ethelred and Alfred with the fyrd to Mercia, the siege of Nottingham, the West Saxon withdrawal, and the subsequent conclusion of peace between the king of Mercia and the Danes—cannot all have taken place in the brief interval between October or November and Christmas. If the West Saxon expedition and the siege of Nottingham are rightly placed in 868 we are almost obliged to conclude that the Old English year began before Christmas, and to throw back the irruption of the Danes into Mercia and their settlement at Nottingham into the autumn of our year 867. Again, under 874 we read that 'the host fared from Lindsey to Repton and there took winter-quarters', presumably not earlier than October; yet before the close of the year, apparently, they had driven King Burhred oversea, 'subdued the whole land', and given the kingdom 'into the keeping of Ceolwulf'. The resistance of King Burhred was doubtless feeble, but it is hard to believe that the collapse of Mercia can have been quite so rapid as it would appear to have been if the chronicler's year began at Christmas. It seems more reasonable to refer the coming of the Danes to Repton to the autumn of 873 and the fall of Mercia to the following year. That this is, indeed, the true solution is rendered morally certain by the fact,²³ that the movement of the Danes to London, recorded by the Chronicle under 872, was made in the autumn of 871. If the move to Repton took place in the autumn of 874, we should have to believe that the chronicler has somehow contrived to omit all record of one of the annual migrations of the 'host' between 871 and 874, which is unlikely.

The objections to the view that the year began at Christmas become still greater when we examine the annal for 870. In that year, we are told, 'the host rode (from York) across Mercia into East Anglia and took up their winter-quarters at Thetford; and that winter King Edmund fought against them and the Danishmen got the victory and slew the king and subdued all the land'. Manuscript E (Peterborough) adds the further detail that 'they destroyed all the monasteries to which they came', including that of Medeshamstead (Peterborough). We have no reason to distrust the very early tradition which assigns the martyrdom

²³ See below, p. 339.

of St. Edmund to 20 November ;³⁴ the date cannot, in any case, be far out, for the Chronicle tells us that the battle took place in the winter. On the other hand, we have seen that the Danes were at Reading and had begun their invasion of Wessex before the close of December 870. Now the chronicler would hardly state that the Danes 'took up winter-quarters at Thetford' if they moved on to the south of England before Christmas ; it is not less improbable that the Danes would make *two* such migrations, one from Northumbria into East Anglia and another from East Anglia into Wessex, in the course of a single winter ;³⁵ and in any case it is impossible that they can have 'subdued all the land' of the East Angles, committed the depredations lamented by the Peterborough chronicler, and ridden across the centre of England from Thetford to Reading all in the five weeks between 20 November and 28 December 870. The narrative of the Chronicle will only regain the credibility to which it is entitled if we assume that the Old English year began at some period in the autumn, put back the coming of the Danes to Thetford and the martyrdom of St. Edmund to November 869,³⁶ and suppose that East Anglia lay at the feet of the marauders throughout the whole of the twelve months between that date and the invasion of Wessex.³⁷

³⁴ The date 20 November is given by Abbo of Fleury (*Passio Sancti Edmundi*), who wrote little more than a century after Edmund's death (c. 985). It is also the day assigned to St. Edmund in Aelfric's *Lives of the Saints*.

³⁵ The events of the winter of 877-8 when 'the host fared into the land of the Mercians' in the autumn, and afterwards in January 'stole away to Chippenham', furnish no analogy. Æthelwerd tells us, what the Chronicle omits, that the invaders of Mercia had established themselves at Gloucester, i. e. within easy striking distance of Wessex. The distance between Gloucester and Chippenham cannot be compared with that between Thetford and Reading. It is even possible that the move to Gloucester (from Exeter) may have been a deliberate feint, designed to mislead Alfred into disbanding his fyrd on the supposition that the Danes had settled in their winter-quarters and that military operations were over for the season. The complete collapse of Wessex in the early weeks of 878 can only be explained upon the hypothesis that Alfred was taken unawares by the invasion. See Plummer, *Life and Times of Alfred*, p. 59.

³⁶ Florence of Worcester, who records the martyrdom of Edmund under 870, states that it took place 'Indictiones ii, duodecimo Cal. Decembria, die Dominico'. Both the Indiction and the day of the week are those of the year 869. Mr. Stevenson called attention to this discrepancy in his edition of Asser, p. 232, but did not appreciate its significance. Again, Abbo of Fleury tells us that the leader of the Danes in this invasion of East Anglia, by whose command Edmund was slain, was the famous Ingvar (or Ivar), progenitor of the long line of Scandinavian kings of York and Dublin in the next century. But the Irish annals show that Ivar cannot have been in East Anglia in November 870, though he may have been in November 869. He passed the winter of 870 in 'Alba', where he besieged and captured the fortress of Dumbarton, afterwards returning to Dublin, apparently direct from Alba, in 871 (*Annals of Ulster*, c. 869, 870 ; these annals being consistently one year behindhand in their chronology throughout the ninth and tenth centuries).

³⁷ We may infer that the chronicler has slightly understated the interval between the coming of the Danes to Reading (c. 28 December, above, p. 334) and the battle of Marton (22 March). The end of December would be very late for the Danes to shift

There are other entries which point towards the same conclusion. The annal for 866 records the first coming of the 'great host', adding that they 'took up their winter-quarters in East Anglia . . . and the East Angles made peace with them'. Then in 867 'the host fared from East Anglia over the mouth of the Humber to York . . . and *late in the year* they [the two kings Osbryht and Ælle] resolved to continue the war against the host; and to that purpose they gathered a large fyrd and sought the host at York . . . and there was an excessive slaughter made and both the kings were slain'.³⁸ If the year began at Christmas it would be natural to assume, from what the Chronicle tells us, that the Danes spent the winter of 866-7 in East Anglia, that they moved on to York in the autumn of 867, and that the battle of York, which was 'late in the year', took place about the middle of December. But the date of the battle can be fixed: Symeon of Durham,³⁹ with northern authority to guide him, tells us that it was fought upon the Friday before Palm Sunday (i. e. 21 March) 867. Now, were it not for the fact that the annals for 871 and 878 decisively disprove this hypothesis, this passage might be regarded as supporting the view that the year began at the Annunciation. On the other hand, it is possible to reconcile the adjective 'late' with the view that the year began in September, for when once the Danes had settled in their winter-quarters they would probably regard the campaigning season as closed until they chose to reopen it. Again, it is clear from the wording of the Chronicle that some considerable interval must have elapsed between the arrival of the Danes at York and the battle which followed. We cannot, then, place the invasion of Northumbria later than January 867; and this, again, cannot be harmonized with the assumption that the Danes spent the winter of 866-7 in East Anglia. The only way of reconciling the annal for 867 with that for 866 is to suppose that the chronicler's year began at some period not later than about September, and that he intended to signify that the great host came to England in the autumn of our year 865, spent the winter of 865-6 in East Anglia, passed on to Northumbria about the autumn of 866, and had settled at York some months prior to the repulse of the English attack on 21 March 867.⁴⁰

their winter-quarters. It is more probable that they moved from East Anglia in November 870, coming to Reading perhaps the same month, or earlier in December.

³⁸ This translation, like others in this paper, is taken from Gomme's *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1909).

³⁹ *Historia Regum*, i. 106. The Danish victory at York is recorded by the *Annals of Ulster*, a. 866 (= 867).

⁴⁰ This conclusion bears out the view expressed above (p. 336) that the first Danish invasion of Mercia took place in the autumn of 867, not that of 868. If 868 were the true date we should have to conclude that the chronicler has omitted to record where the Danes spent the winter of 867-8.

The argument is clinched by the short entries for the years 872 and 879. The annal for 879 relates that 'the host fared to Cirencester from Chippenham and settled there one year'. The same annal records the eclipse of 29 October 878. The move to Cirencester must also be assigned to the autumn of 878, not to that of 879; for it is out of the question to suppose that the host, which had come to Chippenham in January 878, would have spent two successive winters in the same locality, lingering at Chippenham for fifteen months after the conclusion of the treaty of Wedmore, an essential stipulation of which was that they should depart from King Alfred's dominions. This is recognized by Mr. Plummer, who, however, believes that the date 879 is simply a mistake: 'it is this mistake', he says, 'which throws the chronology of the Chronicle a year wrong from this point up to 897 (896).'⁴¹ We have already seen that the dating of the Chronicle for the years 879-87 is less inaccurate than has been supposed; moreover, it appears to have escaped Mr. Plummer's notice that an exact parallel to what has happened in the annal for 879 is to be found in the annal for 872. In that year, we are told, 'the host fared from Reading to London and there took up their winter-quarters, and the Mercians made peace with the host'. Reading had been the head-quarters of the Danes throughout the campaign of January-May 871, and it is incredible that they should have remained there until nearly the close of 872. The move to London must therefore be assigned, as Mr. Plummer himself assigns it, to the autumn of 871.⁴² It is idle to imagine that this is simply another mistake; the analogy with the annal for 879, which likewise records the events of the preceding autumn, is too remarkable to be lightly set aside. These two annals, indeed, are decisive, since they furnish convincing evidence that the author of this section of the Chronicle changed his year-numbers at some season of the year posterior to that which witnessed the close of the campaigns of 871 and 878, yet anterior to the autumn departure of the Danes into other winter-quarters.

Can we determine the precise date at which he changed them? It has been seen that there is not a single entry in the Chronicle between 866 and 887, if we except that of the death of Pope Marinus, which conflicts with Mr. Anscombe's theory that the year had its beginning in September. On the contrary, the annals 871-2 and 878-9, taken in conjunction, make it perfectly plain that the commencement of the year did not fall between 1 January and 1 July, but that it did fall between 1 July and 29 October. It is possible still further to contract this 'neutral zone' between the old year and the new. The annal for 877

⁴¹ *Life and Times of Alfred*, p. 104, n. 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

concludes with the words 'and afterwards in the autumn the host fared into the land of the Mercians'; the context showing that this must refer to the autumn of 877, not that of 876. The official date of the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon 'haerfest' was 7 August, but it is probable that in common practice it was looked upon as beginning at Lammas (1 August). Hence it follows that the composer of the annal for 877 did not regard the year as closing before 1 August at the earliest. We are left to select some date between 1 August and 29 October; and in the absence of any alternative suggestion which will accord with the evidence we have no choice but to conclude that Mr. Anscombe's supposition is correct, and that, at least throughout the period which is covered by this article, the chronicler dated his years by the indictions, changing their numerals on 24 September.⁴³

How far does our conclusion affect the chronology traditionally associated with the most strenuous phase of Alfred's career? The sacrifice of important dates is less sweeping than might be supposed. The landing of the great host in East Anglia must be put back to the autumn of 865; so, too, apparently, must the death of King Ethelbert, not because the annalist records the accession of Ethelred I before chronicling the arrival of the Danes, but because he assigns to Ethelbert a reign of only five years' duration, although placing his accession in 860 and his death in 866. The first attack upon Northumbria must be relegated to the closing months of 866, the irruption into Mercia to the autumn of 867, and the martyrdom of St. Edmund and the conquest of East Anglia to the winter of 869-70. Similarly, a year should be struck off each of the other dates assigned by the Chronicle to the taking up of winter-quarters by the Danes, whether in England or in France. On the other hand, the dates of Alfred's naval expeditions of 875, 882, and 885 are not affected; neither, happily, are those of his great campaigns of 871 and 878.

A word must be added as to the date of Alfred's recovery of London. The episode is recorded by the Chronicle under 886,

⁴³ There is nothing in the annals 866-87 to show whether 1 or 24 September was the starting-point of the Old English annalistic year. Mr. Anscombe, whilst holding that Bede 'undoubtedly used the Caesarian indiction', assumes that Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury 868-90, used the Greek one, and that in the south of England, in contradistinction to Northumbria, the year began on 1 September. But Mr. Anscombe has, I think, overlooked the circumstance that many of Bede's dates, especially those in which the reckoning from 24 September is most apparent, are derived from a southern source, namely, those Canterbury records which, as he tells us in his preface to the *Ecclesiastical History*, were placed at his disposal by Abbot Albinus. In the absence of any textual evidence that the Constantinopolitan system was ever employed in this country it is safe to conclude that Canterbury chroniclers from the seventh to the tenth century made use of the Caesarian Indiction, beginning their year at the harvest equinox, i. e. 'mid-autumn', just as their successors began it at 'mid-winter'.

side by side with the entry relating to the siege of Paris ; but there is nothing in the annal to show whether the event occurred before or after 1 January. Certain conclusions may, however, be drawn from a passage which is to be found in manuscripts B, C, D, E (but not in A), *s. a.* 883, to the effect that ' the same year Sighelm and Aethelstan carried to Rome and also to India . . . the alms which the king had vowed thither when they took up their position against the host at London '. This passage has excited much discussion, partly because of the reference to India, with the significance of which we are not concerned, and partly because of the difficulty of identifying the occasion on which Alfred's vow is said to have been made. The latter has been assumed to refer either to the events of ' 872 ' (871) when ' the host fared from Reading to London ',⁴⁴ or to those of ' 879 ' (878) when we are told that ' a band of vikings assembled together and took up a position at Fulham on the Thames '. But on neither of these occasions are we offered the slightest hint that the movements of the Danes were in any way obstructed by the English. In 871, moreover, the fate of London would be a Mercian, not a West Saxon concern ; whilst in 878 Wessex must have been too much exhausted by three years of hard fighting for Alfred to be in any position to pursue the war beyond the boundaries of his own dominions. Again, if the vow was made upon either of the occasions suggested, it is difficult to believe that so pious a king as Alfred would have postponed its fulfilment till 883, especially since the years 878-83 were years of peace. On the other hand, we learn from Asser, who may well have been present, that the recovery of London in ' 886 ' was a considerable military operation involving much slaughter and destruction of property ;⁴⁵ in other words, that it was a crisis of sufficient magnitude to justify the Chronicle's statement that ' they (i. e. King Alfred and the fyrð) took up their position against the host at London '.⁴⁶ If we might assume that the passage in the annal for 883 has become misplaced and that its true date should be 886—an assumption which it is less than usually hazardous to make, since no mistake was more common amongst tenth-century

⁴⁴ This is the view of Mr. Plummer, *Life and Times of Alfred*, p. 99.

⁴⁵ ' Post incendia urbium stragesque populorum ': Asser, p. 69. Asser appears, from his own narrative, to have come to court about April 885, but the chronological indications which he supplies are too indefinite to allow us to fix the date with certainty.

⁴⁶ According to Æthelwerd the occupation of London was preceded by a regular siege (' interea obsidetur a rege Aelfredo urbs Lundonia '): this, however, may be simply Æthelwerd's interpretation of the ' gesette Aelfred cyning Lundenburg ' of the Chronicle. The ambiguity of the phrase ' gesette ' has led some to suppose that Alfred merely restored and garrisoned a town which was already in his possession ; but the testimony of Asser, writing within a few years of the event, seems decisive against this view.

scribes than the confusion of the figures *iii* and *vi*, and since the absence of the passage from the Parker manuscript, from Asser, and from Æthelwerd proves it to be an interpolation inserted, probably by the author of the annals 888-91, at some period later than the transcription of manuscript A—it would then be possible to connect this journey to Rome, the first of which we are cognizant, with the subsequent missions of a similar nature recorded in the annals for 887, 888, and 890. The whole story would thus gain in credibility. In that case we should have to assign the occupation of London to the autumn of 885, so as to allow time for the mission to Rome, which would naturally start in the spring or early summer, to be included in the same annalistic year 886. This interpretation, again, would lend point to the final entry in the long annal for 885, that 'in the same year the host in East Anglia broke peace with King Alfred'. It seems probable, therefore, that the spectacle of the siege of Rochester in the spring of 885 and of the defeat of the English fleet at the mouth of the Stour the same summer encouraged the East Anglian Danes to 'break the peace' about August or September, and that the capture of London in the closing months of 885 represents Alfred's effective reply to an unprovoked aggression. The treaty known as 'Alfred and Guthrum's frith' and the handing over of London 'to the keeping of Aethelred ealdorman' may, with the mission to Rome, be assigned to some period in 886.

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A Charter of Canute for Fécamp

THE English possessions of religious houses abroad form a significant phase of the relations between England and the Continent before the Conquest, and the charters relating thereto still offer problems for the student of diplomatic and of local history.¹ Not the least important of these houses was the Norman abbey of Fécamp, a favoured foundation of the Norman dukes which early enjoyed the liberality of English kings. In Domesday² Fécamp holds of the king three manors, 'Rameslie', Steyning, and Bury, all in Sussex. Of these, Steyning had been granted by

¹ The list of these houses in Ellis, *Introduction to Domesday*, i. 324-6, is by no means complete. See particularly W. H. Stevenson's discussion of the forged Old English charters for Saint-Denis, *ante*, vi. 736-42; and Miss Helen Cam's note on Saint-Riquier, *ante*, xxxi. 443-7. On the supposed grant of the Confessor to Mont-Saint-Michel, see *ante*, xxxi. 265, 267. A study of the early charters for St. Peter's, Ghent, undertaken as part of a history of the early relations between England and Flanders by one of my students, Captain R. H. George, remains for the present in manuscript in the library of Harvard University.

² fo. 17 b.