

Anglo-Saxon Charters

A joint committee of the British Academy and Royal Historical Society was set up in 1966 to plan the production of what is intended to be the definitive edition of the entire corpus of Anglo-Saxon charters. Six volumes have been published so far, and several more are in an advanced state of preparation. When complete, the series will comprise approximately 30 volumes, providing a secure basis for our knowledge and understanding of English history, society, religion and culture from c. 670 to 1066, or for a period of roughly 400 years. Professor Simon Keynes, Secretary to the Anglo-Saxon Charters Committee, presents an overview of the project.

An Anglo-Saxon charter is typically a formal document, in Latin, recording a king's grant of land or privileges to a religious house, or to a layman. The earliest surviving charters were drawn up in the 670s, and the corpus extends in unbroken sequence thenceforth to the Norman Conquest. Their form, and the circumstances of their production, varied from one context to another, and changed with the passage of time. For example, from the mid-ninth century onwards charters often incorporate a detailed clause, in Old English, describing the boundaries of the estate concerned; and particular draftsmen in the tenth century found cause to supply unusually precise information on the date and place of issue. The term 'charter' is also applied, more loosely, to a variety of documents in Old English, ranging from records of lawsuits, wills (among them, for example, the will of King Alfred the Great), and letters, to royal writs of the kind which underlie the Latin writ-charters and writ-mandates of the Anglo-Norman kings. The corpus of charters comprises approximately 1,600 texts, and traces survive of a further 250 charters, categorised as lost or incomplete; but of course these numbers represent only a small proportion (perhaps as little as a tenth) of the total number of charters produced in the Anglo-Saxon period as a whole. Of the surviving corpus, nearly 300 charters are preserved in their original form (written on single sheets of parchment, in contemporary handwriting). The remainder are preserved as copies of originals now lost, made by the compilers of cartularies (collections of title-deeds) at any time from the eleventh century to the sixteenth, or by early modern antiquaries.

Charters as source material

Charters constitute one of the principal categories of source material for our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon England. Above all, they serve as a continuous frame of reference from c. 670 to 1066, complementing the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and other 'literary' sources, and bearing on many aspects of the history, society and language of the English peoples throughout the Anglo-Saxon

period. They provide the basis on which it is possible, in conjunction with other sources, to reconstruct the individual careers of kings, queens, athelings, archbishops, bishops, abbots, royal priests, ealdormen, and thegns. They constitute evidence of the landed interests of particular laymen, or of more extended families; and their witness-lists afford an insight into the changing composition of the king's council. They cast light on matters ranging from the condition of the peasantry, on a particular estate, to the policies and even the aspirations of kings, whether leaders of peoples long-settled in the land, or rulers of newly-constituted kingdoms. They bear in one way or another upon various aspects of ecclesiastical, social, and cultural history, ranging from the circumstances of the foundation and endowment of a particular religious house (in relation to other houses, and to lay society), to the learning of priests in the royal household. If preserved in their original form, they provide evidence of the competence (or otherwise) of draftsmen and scribes in the composition and writing of both Latin and vernacular prose; and they can be used, furthermore, to advance understanding of the date, and place of origin, of surviving manuscripts of the period. They can be used (with all due caution) for dating sound-changes in the English language, for establishing diagnostic features of regional dialects, and for assessing the role of the written word in secular society. They can also be used for reconstructing ancient estate-boundaries, and for examining other aspects of land-use in the distant past; and in many cases they represent estates which prove to correspond closely with the boundaries of a modern parish.

Transmission of texts

Charters were highly regarded in the Anglo-Saxon period as evidence of whatever they contain, and they retained their value throughout the middle ages (albeit more so at some places than at others), whether as proof of title to property or privileges, or as an integral part of the historical identity of the religious house in which they had come to be

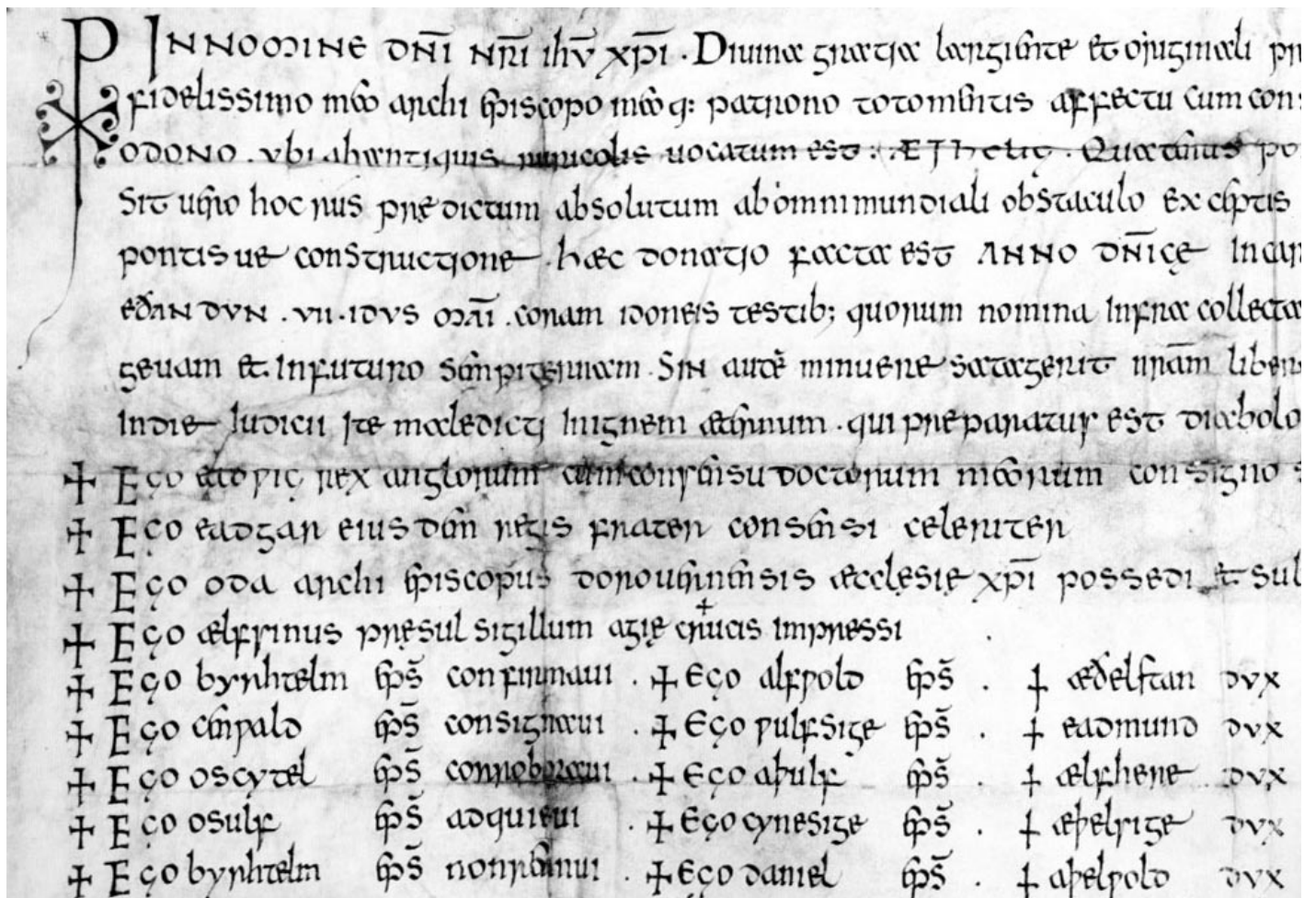
preserved. Of course, charters were also forged, before and after the Norman Conquest, for exactly the same reasons; and much depends, therefore, on the development of principles for testing or establishing the authenticity of the transmitted texts. The archives of religious houses were dispersed following the Dissolution of Monasteries in the mid-sixteenth century, and many charters passed at this time into the hands of those who acquired their buildings and estates; while in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more charters were released or raided from the archives of the cathedrals which might have been expected to look after them more carefully. Charters were, however, collected quite eagerly by those who appreciated their rarity and intrinsic importance, and at the same time they began to be studied by those who understood what they could reveal about the origins of some of the most hallowed institutions of the realm. The example was set by members of the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries, in the late sixteenth and early

seventeenth centuries; and ever since then historians of Anglo-Saxon England have neglected the evidence of charters at their peril.

Collections and editions

The first collected edition of Anglo-Saxon charters was John Mitchell Kemble's *Codex Diplomaticus Ævi Saxonici*, published in six volumes between 1839 and 1848. For the period up to 975, Kemble's edition was superseded by Walter de Gray Birch's *Cartularium Saxonium*, published in three volumes between 1885 and 1893. In addition to these editions of the texts, facsimiles were published of the majority of those charters preserved in their original (or pseudo-original) form. It has long been recognised, however, that the great work of the nineteenth-century editors was not up to the standards required for such a difficult yet important body of material. In 1895 W.H. Stevenson remarked that 'it cannot be said that the O.E. charters have yet been edited'. Two years later, F.W. Maitland expressed his view that the charters

Detail from a charter of King Eadwig granting forty hides at Ely to Oda, archbishop of Canterbury, 957 AD. (Bodleian Library, Oxford)



had to be re-edited 'if the first period of English history is ever to be well understood', and ventured his conviction that a century from his time there would be 'a critical edition of the Anglo-Saxon charters in which the philologist and the palaeographer, the annalist and the formulist will have winnowed the grain of truth from the chaff of imposture'. In the first half of the twentieth century, most of the vernacular charters were re-edited and translated (at the instigation of H.M. Chadwick) by Florence Harmer, A.J. Robertson, and Dorothy Whitelock, followed by Harmer's edition of the vernacular writs in 1952. Scholars continued, however, to feel the need for an edition of the corpus as a whole, which would provide authoritative texts of the royal diplomas, in all their stately glory, and which would set the other records among them. In 1955, Sir Frank Stenton invoked yet again the words of W. H. Stevenson, and cited Stevenson's account of his methods in working on charters 'as a programme commended to the scholars of the future'.

The new edition

The organising principle of the new edition is not chronological (by king's reign), or regional (by county or kingdom), but archival: each constituent fascicule or volume contains the charters preserved in the archives of a particular religious house. The charters are edited according to uniform principles which reflect the standards of modern scholarship, and are accompanied by the level of commentary which is necessary for the informed and effective use of the texts, for historical and, indeed, for all

other purposes. The committee has established guidelines for the new edition, and otherwise exists to co-ordinate the project and to oversee the process of publication. Initially, progress was slow; but with the continued support of the British Academy, and with the aid of generous grants from the Isaac Newton Trust (Trinity College, Cambridge), and from the Leverhulme Trust, it was possible in the 1990s to set the project on a new footing. The volumes published so far have established new standards in the editing and criticism of Anglo-Saxon charters, showing what scope of discussion and depth of analysis the charters both require and will sustain. They have served at the same time to open up the wide field of charter-studies, which may seem arid to the casual observer, but which will strike anyone who ventures within as fertile ground for the identification of new issues and the generation of new ideas. At one level, each text is accompanied by a detailed commentary, discussing matters of authenticity, and exploring its significance in relation to other charters, its bearing on matters of local history and topography, and its wider historical importance. At another level, each volume provides the essential primary material for the further examination of the history of the religious house where the charters were preserved, and for our understanding of the place which the house enjoyed in local society. The whole series, when complete, will represent nothing less than a transformation of our knowledge of a long and formative period of English history.

A web site which describes the project in more detail, and which makes readily accessible some of the work undertaken under the auspices of the Joint Committee on Anglo-Saxon Charters, is located at the following address:
www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwww