

# The beginning of the year in England,

c. 500–900

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Writing a little before the year 1000, Ælfric in a homily on the Feast of the Circumcision (1 January) had this to say about the beginning of the year:

We have often heard that men call this day ‘the day of the year’, as if this day were foremost in the year’s circuit; but we find no explanation in Christian books, why this day is accounted the beginning of the year. The old Romans, in heathen days, began the year’s circuit on this day; and the Hebrew people at the vernal equinox; the Greeks on the summer solstice; and the Egyptian nations began the reckoning of their year at harvest. Now our reckoning begins, according to the Roman institution, on this day, for no religious reason, but for the old custom. Some of our service books begin on the Lord’s Advent; yet it is not on that account the beginning of the year.<sup>1</sup>

*Byrhtferth’s Manual*, written not long afterwards, is a rather diffuse work, relying heavily on Bede; in discussing the month of January, Byrhtferth remarks that ‘the first day, and the whole month, is hallowed by Christ’s nativity’,<sup>2</sup> and, while placing January at the forefront of the year, cannot be said to have untangled Ælfric’s problem, which the historical resources of the time did not allow him to do. If we are better placed today, we must nevertheless find our way through four or five centuries during which the calendar was unsettled, when primitive reckonings by the moon and the arbitrary system of indictions were slowly absorbed into the Christian era. Without attempting to cover all the ground that an answer to Ælfric would require, a few points can be isolated and a few positions made clear, as far as the sources would seem to allow.

## THE DIONYSIAC TABLES

Although the Easter tables of Dionysius are familiar to the medieval historian,

<sup>1</sup> *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: the First Part containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1844–6) 1, 99. I am grateful to Professor Dorothy Whitelock for this reference and for much else, as will appear.

<sup>2</sup> *Byrhtferth’s Manual*, ed. S. J. Crawford, Early English Text Society 177 (London, 1929), 63. *The Menologium*, of about the same date, after mentioning the Nativity goes on to say that January is the start of the year: *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. E. van K. Dobbie (New York, 1942), p. 49.

they are seldom mentioned in any context but that of annalistic writing or as the source of the Years of Grace in Bede's chronology. They were calculated in the first instance for the ninety-five-year term stretching from 532 to 626, divided into five cycles of nineteen years each; a second series from 627 to 721 was calculated by one Felix, called Gillitanus;<sup>1</sup> and they became authoritative in the west partly through the influence of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.<sup>2</sup> And, it is fair to add, on other merits: an earlier computation by Victorius of Aquitaine, besides being less accurate, did not include several features, such as indictions and the lunar cycle, by which Dionysius, or rather, his predecessor Cyril, created a 'ready reckoner' or conversion table, that went far beyond the needs of anyone seeking only the date of Easter. The nature of this ready reckoner will be clear from the extract from the first nineteen-year cycle, from 532 to 550 inclusive, shown in table 1.<sup>3</sup> Certain particulars are left out, since

TABLE I

Anni domini	Indictiones	Epactae	Lunae circulus	Dies dominicae festivitatis
DXXXII	X	NUL.	XVII	III id. Apr.
DXXXIII	XI	XI	XVIII	VI kal. Apr.
DXXXIII	XII	XXII	XVIII	XVI kal. Mai.
DXXXV	XIII	III	I	VI id. Apr.
DXXXVI	XIII	XIII	II	X kal. Apr.
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
DL	XIII	XVIII	XVI	VIII kal. Mai.

they are of no concern here; only the early years of the cycle, and the last year, are quoted for illustration. The four remaining decennovenal cycles, each drawn up separately, carried the information down to 626.

The column for epacts is of some importance, since the number of the epact denotes the age of the new moon, diminished by one day, on the first day of that year. Like many others, the nineteen-year cycle of Dionysius starts with *epacta nulla* on 1 January, and calculations of the date of Easter are based on the Julian calendar.<sup>4</sup> Ælfric would not have included Easter tables among his

<sup>1</sup> *Beda Opera de Temporibus*, ed. C. W. Jones (Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge, Mass., 1943), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> *Venerabilis Bedae Opera Historica*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford 1896). Cited henceforth as *HE*, and notes as Plummer, *Opera Historica* II.

<sup>3</sup> B. Krusch, 'Studien zur christlich mittelalterlichen Chronologie', *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse* 7, no. 8 (Berlin, 1938), 70; Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 67, cols. 493-8.

<sup>4</sup> Krusch, 'Studien', p. 60 and F. Ruhl, *Chronologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* (Berlin, 1897), pp. 179-80. Only in the Alexandrian cycle did the pattern of epacts change in September. Dionysius had to face the problem of reconciling Alexandrian (luni-solar) epacts with the Roman (solar) calendar.

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‘Christian books’, for they lack scriptural or patristic authority. Turning to the *lunae circulus*, we have here the cycle of which Meton (about 430 BC) was the originator in the Mediterranean world, based on the fact that nineteen solar (tropical) years equal 6,939.6 days and 235 lunar (synodical) months equal 6,939.7 days, so that every nineteen years the new moons occur again on the same solar days; and on this cycle all Easter calculations are based. By inserting embolismic, or intercalary, months into seven of the nineteen years a luni-solar calendar is created, not very accurate by modern standards but establishing a reliable sequence of years. And it is important to recognize that a luni-solar calendar can be checked by observation of the phases of the moon. That such a calendar was employed by the Anglo-Saxons in pre-Christian times we know from Bede, *De Temporum Ratione*, ch. xv.<sup>1</sup> Since the Dionysiac tables contain a column for *lunae circulus* as well as for *anni domini*, dates derived from a luni-solar reckoning could readily be transferred to the Christian reckoning; and the nature of several dislocations – as they appear to be – among the early annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* can be interpreted as a break-down in the process of transfer.<sup>2</sup> In the same chapter of *De Temporum Ratione* Bede refers to the feast at midwinter, which the pagans took as the beginning of the year: ‘incipiebant autem annum ab octauo kalendarum ianuariarum die, ubi nunc natalem domini celebramus’. Bede, therefore, did not make Christmas the start of his year, but 1 January, as his practice shows: thus in *De Temporum Ratione*, ch. xxii, he says ‘Si ergo uis scire hoc uel illo die quota sit luna, computa dies a principio mensis ianuarii usque in diem de quo inquiris . . .’ and again, for days of the week, ‘computa dies a Kalendis ianuariis usque . . .’.<sup>3</sup> The opinion put forward by R. L. Poole that ‘Bede in his theoretical work *De Temporum Ratione* states, as a matter which needs no explanation, that the year reckoned from the Incarnation began on Christmas Day’ is not true;<sup>4</sup> Bede nowhere says so.<sup>5</sup> We can combine ‘romani a bruma . . . inchoant [annum]’ (*De Temporibus*, ch. ix) with ‘[dominum] in solstitio brumali VIII Kalendas ianuarias natum’ (*De Temporum Ratione*, ch. xxx), but the former refers to Roman usage (from Numa, it was believed) before the Julian calendar was adopted.<sup>6</sup> To a contemporary of Bede there could be no doubt where the Year of Grace started; by Ælfric’s time it had become ‘the old custom’.

Computing is one matter, popular usage another. By about the end of the

<sup>1</sup> Jones, *Opera de Temporibus*, p. 211.

<sup>2</sup> K. Harrison, ‘Early Wessex Annals in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’, *EHR* 86 (1971), 527–33.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *Opera de Temporibus*, p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> R. L. Poole, *Studies in Chronology and History* (Oxford, 1934), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> A point already noticed by C. W. Jones, *Saints’ Lives and Chronicles in Early England*, (Ithaca, N.Y., 1947), p. 210, n. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, *Opera de Temporibus*, pp. 236 and 298. In his notes pp. 354–7, Jones would partly attribute the preservation of 1 January as New Year’s Day to Bede and his followers.

fourth century, or a little earlier, the church had fixed its celebration of the Nativity on 25 December, 'in solstitio brumali', the time of the winter solstice. The octave of this feast lasted until 1 January, blurring the distinction of dates, and we shall find that for a considerable stretch of the eighth and ninth centuries a popular reckoning of the year from Christmas was to all intents and purposes universal. In Rome at least the kalends of January were distinguished by celebrations of a rather jolly character, which earned the disapproval of Boniface,<sup>1</sup> and as a festival the day would not commend itself to the church at large. By contrast, the ecclesiastical calendar, and the martyrologies that arose from it, began on 1 January, although, as Ælfric noted, the beginning of the ecclesiastical year was often fixed at Advent. In the long run nobody could escape from the Julian calendar; but the rough-and-ready Christmas reckoning is understandable, and Midwinter lingered as a name even after the Conquest.

The second column of table 1, containing the indictions, now calls for consideration. It is hardly necessary to explain that indictions run in fifteen-year cycles, starting with AD 312. What is called the Greek indiction, beginning the year on 1 September, is regularly found in papal documents from the time of Pelagius II (584);<sup>2</sup> Gregory the Great's letters to the Augustinian mission are dated by indiction alone, and when Archbishop Theodore arrived from Rome in 669 he, too, employed this indiction for his official acts. As a complication, in *De Temporum Ratione* (ch. XLVIII), written in 725, about six years before the *Historia*, we have the categorical assurance that 'incipiunt autem indictiones ab VIII kal. octobres ibidemque terminantur'. Did Bede take this statement from a computistical tract, now lost? He often followed the custom of his day by quoting written sources without acknowledgement, though scrupulous enough about the spoken word. Or did he believe that the indiction should be brought into line with the equinox? To these questions an altogether satisfactory answer has not yet been found;<sup>3</sup> asking them is only a signal to the effect that from 725 onwards we must take account not only of the indiction employed by the papal chancery, 1 September, but also of what seems to be – though we cannot be sure – Bede's invention of 24 September, the 'Bedan indiction', also known as 'Caesarean' from its employment under the Holy Roman Empire.

<sup>1</sup> *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae III*, ed. E. Dümmler (Berlin, 1892), 301.

<sup>2</sup> P. Jaffé, *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1885), p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *Opera de Temporibus*, p. 268. Dr N. Brooks has drawn my attention to a paper by J. Halkin, 'La Nouvelle Année au 23 Septembre', *AB* 90 (1972), 56, where it is stated that, from the fourth century until the middle of the fifth, the Byzantine year was sometimes reckoned from the birthday of the Emperor Augustus, 23 September, coinciding with the autumnal equinox. Yet the choice of 24, rather than 22 or 23, September is curious. In a calendar so adjusted that *epacta nulla* falls on 1 January, as in the first year of a Dionysiac nineteen-year cycle, there is another *epacta nulla* on 24 September, which may explain Bede's preference for this day; the equinox can vary from year to year, whereas the *epacta* is fixed.

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BEDE'S 'HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA'

A puzzling item in the *Historia* was noticed some seventy years ago by Plummer.<sup>1</sup> Since we are told that King Oswiu died on 15 February 670 and the next king, Ecgfrith, on 20 May 685 in the fifteenth year of his reign, from this and other apparent contradictions Plummer concluded that Oswiu must have died in 671, and that Bede or his transcribers had made a mistake. Later scholars have hesitated between these figures; yet the puzzle was not manufactured by Bede but arises from the assumption that a king succeeds immediately after the death of the preceding ruler. Apart from the interregnum between James II and William and Mary, the sovereigns of England have indeed ascended the throne in this fashion since Plantagenet times. We are not bound to suppose, however, that such ideas are applicable to seventh-century Northumbria. Writing within a few years of the event, Eddius Stephanus records a two-month interregnum between the accession of King Osred and the death of his father, power meanwhile being seized by an interloper;<sup>2</sup> and although we need not decide that hitches of this kind always occurred, equally the occasion need not have been unique. Once the assumption is discarded, it seems evident that Ecgfrith's regnal years were counted from a day lying between 1 and 17 September 670 and that all the statements made by Bede are in harmony.<sup>3</sup> There still remains a more general problem: did Bede, when writing the *Historia*, adopt the indiction as the starting-point of his year? R. L. Poole, whose wide experience as a chronologer lent considerable force to his argument, wrote as follows:

The *Annus Domini* was a recent importation. It was not intended to provide an era for historical purposes; its object was merely to serve as a reference in Easter tables. Naturally therefore it was taken as running on the same lines as the Indiction; and as the Indiction began four months before what we call the current year, so was the Year of Grace reckoned.<sup>4</sup>

Although the opening sentence is undoubtedly true, the remainder is rather questionable; still, Poole's theory should be judged by his own criterion that 'the acceptance of this principle for the period with which we are concerned will, I believe, produce harmony among a number of dates which are regarded as discrepant'.

These dates largely centre round the reign of Ecgfrith, and Poole took his stand on the interpretation of a comet which Bede records in 678, though in

<sup>1</sup> Plummer, *Opera Historica* II, 211.

<sup>2</sup> *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid, by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927) ch. LIX, p. 128. Bede, who was not writing a political history, does not mention the affair.

<sup>3</sup> K. Harrison, 'The Reign of King Ecgfrith of Northumbria', *Yorkshire Archaeol. Jnl* 44 (1972), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Poole, *Studies*, p. 40.

fact it appeared to European eyes about mid-August 676 and was visible for some three months. Dismissing the possibility that Bede was wrong, Poole argued from manuscript evidence that the figure was originally written 677, and 'reckoning that year from the Indiction of 1 September, his [Bede's] date included almost the whole of the time during which the comet was visible'.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation was challenged by Wilhelm Levison, arguing again chiefly on textual grounds.<sup>2</sup> But there is another objection to Poole's reasoning. Bede and his contemporaries well knew that the duration of comets can vary; seven to eighty days are the limits given by Bede himself, and no ominous significance was read into the length of time as such.<sup>3</sup> What startled them, and still surprises us, is the sudden brilliant appearance of a hairy star in the skies: 'apparuit mense Augusto stella quae dicitur cometa . . .' (*HE* iv. 12), a sentence that comes next before the downfall of Bishop Wilfrid. A comet appearing in the middle of August was a portent then but not in September.<sup>4</sup> Bede made a mistake over the date, perhaps let down by his source; what matters to the chronologer is that Ecgfrith's eighth year was thought by Bede to include the month of August 678.<sup>5</sup>

Levison's other arguments were more broadly based, although, like Poole, he believed that Ecgfrith had succeeded immediately on Oswiu's death, and his chronology has not been generally accepted. And we are faced with still another problem. In Ecgfrith's third year a council took place at Hertford, presided over by Archbishop Theodore;<sup>6</sup> the acts are dated 'die XXo IIIIo mensis Septembris, indictione prima', that is, 24 September of the indictional year beginning 1 September 672.<sup>7</sup> Bede wrote 'Factum est autem haec synodus anno ab incarnatione Domini DCLXX tertio', and Levison proposed that Bede had made a small mistake: 'he simply forgot that the indictions did not change, with the years of Incarnation, on Christmas Day, but four months earlier'.<sup>8</sup> We can, however, exonerate Bede from a mistake of this kind by looking at the matter in another way, by supposing him faced with an entry in a Dionysiac table: (in the margin) 'concilium in loco Herutford die XXo IIIIo Sept.' and (in the adjacent columns of the table) 'AD DCLXXIII, Ind. I'.

<sup>1</sup> Poole, *Studies*, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), p. 267.

<sup>3</sup> *De Natura Rerum*, PL 90, col. 244.

<sup>4</sup> According to *ASC* C, the comet of 1066 (Halley's) appeared on 24 April and 'swa scan ealle þa. vii. niht' – a spectacle of shortest duration, yet it had done its work and the Bayeux Tapestry makes it foreshadow the Battle of Hastings in October.

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, 'The Reign of King Ecgfrith', p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> *HE* iv. 5.

<sup>7</sup> That Theodore used the Greek indiction is shown by the date 'sub die XV Kalendas Octobres, indictione VIIIa', 17 September 679, for the Council of Hatfield (*HE* iv.15) in Ecgfrith's tenth year. The comet was dated by Bede to August 678, in Ecgfrith's eighth year; hence he came to the throne between 1 and 17 September 670.

<sup>8</sup> Levison, *England and the Continent*, p. 267.

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People accustomed to using these tables would find no problem here.<sup>1</sup> The indiction was the official reckoning, and any date falling between 1 September and 31 December 672 was properly described as AD 673, indiction I. As it turned out, the acts of the council were dated by the day of the month and the indiction only, and Bede filled in the Year of Grace quite correctly.<sup>2</sup> If he had written 672 he would have broken his own rule, in *De Temporum Ratione*, ch. XLIX, for finding the indiction, namely to the *annus domini* add three and divide by fifteen, the remainder being the indiction.<sup>3</sup> There was no need for the Year of Grace to be reckoned from the indiction; it had been fixed by its inventor to begin on 1 January, with the Julian calendar, and Bede would have acted strangely if at the moment of promoting AD as a historical era he had changed the start of the year without warning.<sup>4</sup>

Poole's arguments, therefore, are capable of another interpretation, and a consequence of those arguments needs to be mentioned very briefly, since it has called forth a series of emendations to the text. For example, Bede says that King Edwin was killed in battle on 12 October 633<sup>5</sup> and King Oswald nine years later on 5 August,<sup>6</sup> the year 642 being given in the Recapitulation,<sup>7</sup> and he goes to considerable trouble over explaining why Oswald was deemed to have reigned nine years.<sup>8</sup> Since Edwin died in October, however, by the requirements of Poole's theory the year should be changed to 632, and consequently Oswald died in 641, a date which now seems to be generally accepted.<sup>9</sup> Yet not only has the theory been applied in an inconsistent fashion – the month of August falls into the 'neutral' part of the year, unaffected by the indiction, and it is not clear why an event in October should be preferred *a priori* – but we must suppose Bede wrong; and wrong not about an event distant in time and place, but about the fate of a Northumbrian hero, the martyr-king whose death, translation and miracles occupy six chapters of the book<sup>10</sup> and whose fame had spread to Germany and Ireland in Bede's lifetime.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there is no manuscript evidence in favour of emending the date.

<sup>1</sup> It seems that the Dionysiac tables were formally introduced at the Synod of Whitby in 664 (Poole, *Studies*, p. 32), but how much earlier they came into use is not at the moment clear.

<sup>2</sup> Harrison, 'Reign of King Ecgriffrith', p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *Opera de Temporibus*, p. 269. In practice he could get the number from a Dionysiac table.

<sup>4</sup> Levison (*England and the Continent*, p. 277), in arguing that Bede began the year at Christmas, quotes a passage from *De Temporum Ratione*, ch. XLVII (Jones, *Opera de Temporibus*, p. 267), in which the occurrence of that festival at Rome is dated 'anno ab eius incarnatione iuxta Dionysium septingentesimo primo, indictione quarta decima'. Levison continues: 'The 14th Indiction began on 1 September 700; therefore Christmas 701, as mentioned, would have been Christmas of A.D. 700 if the number of the year had changed on the 1st of January.' It was indeed Christmas 700, because the year A.D. 701 is here qualified by the indiction.

<sup>5</sup> HE II. 20.

<sup>6</sup> HE III. 9.

<sup>7</sup> HE V. 24.

<sup>8</sup> HE III. 1 and 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. Sir F. Maurice Powicke and E. B. Fryde, 2nd ed. (Royal Historical Society, London, 1961), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> HE III. 9–13 and IV. 14.

<sup>11</sup> HE III. 13. In contrast, Bede does not state the day or month of Wilfrid's death, and gives the year only by inference: for a discussion see my forthcoming article in the *Yorkshire Archaeol. Jnl*,

Again, Pope Honorius wrote a letter to Honorius of Canterbury dated 11 June, 7th indiction, i.e. 634,<sup>1</sup> in which he made arrangement, in case either occupant of the Canterbury and York sees should die, for the surviving bishop to consecrate a successor. With this letter came the *pallium*, sent to each bishop as a concession in view of the distance involved, 'pro qua etiam re singula uestrae dilectioni pallia pro eadem ordinatione celebranda direximus'. In a letter to King Edwin,<sup>2</sup> not dated but thought to have been written at the same time,<sup>3</sup> the pope writes 'duo pallia utrorum metropolitanarum, id est Honorio et Paulino, direximus'. It seems clear that in June 634 the pope was unaware of the death of Edwin and the flight of Paulinus to Kent. We do not know how quickly news could get to Rome at this time, or how soon after the battle it became possible to send a messenger. At a much later date, in 1051, Robert of Jumièges was appointed to the see of Canterbury; from the C and E versions of the *Chronicle* it can be shown that he set off before 25 March and returned on 27 June.<sup>4</sup> This period of about fourteen weeks for the double journey tallies with a calculation that in the twelfth century a normal traveller, on horseback, took about seven weeks for the single journey, in reasonable weather.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand Archbishop Theodore's journey occupied the year May 668–May 669, although in his case entertainment and fatigue took their toll; his party had reached northern France (Paris, Meaux, Sens) when the approach of winter forced them to stop.<sup>6</sup> If Edwin was killed in October 633, more especially if messengers were delayed in starting and travelled part of the way on foot, the news might well not have reached Rome in eight months; if his death was in October 632, it seems very unlikely indeed, whatever the circumstances, that the news should have taken twenty months.

It would seem that when confronted by the official acts of Theodore, Bede felt obliged to take notice of the indiction; left to his own devices he ignored it.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the *Historia* we discover the indiction only in official documents, with one exception<sup>8</sup> and that in a papal context. As a historian Bede

'The Deaths of King Aldfrith and of Bishop Wilfrid'. Some difficulties over the career of Archbishop Deusdedit seem to have been resolved by P. Grosjean, 'La Date du Colloque de Whitby', *AB* 78 (1960), 235–8. Bede's date for the consecration of Archbishop Willibrord is considered below, p. 69.

<sup>1</sup> *HE* II. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *HE* II. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Plummer, *Opera Historica* II, 110.

<sup>4</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Revised Translation*, ed. D. Whitelock, D. C. Douglas and S. I. Tucker, (London, 1961), p. 116. (This work is cited henceforth as Whitelock, *ASC*.) The C text is here starting the year at Lady Day; Easter was on 31 March; and by dating Robert's appointment to mid-Lent 1050, and his return to 1051, with the information from E that he went to Rome 'in the course of the same Lent', C tells us that he started before 25 March.

<sup>5</sup> R. L. Poole, 'The Early Correspondence of John of Salisbury', *Proc. of the Brit. Acad.* 11 (1924) 31–2; repr. *Studies*, pp. 263–4. I am grateful to Professor Whitelock for raising this point of time.

<sup>6</sup> *HE* IV. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Although in his formal letter, 5 November 734, to the bishop (later archbishop) of York, he employed the formal style of the indiction; see Plummer, *Opera Historica* I, 423 and II, 388.

<sup>8</sup> *HE* II. 4.

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could not be expected to approve this arbitrary and ambiguous form of reckoning, and such was his influence in promoting the Christian era that we shall find the indiction soon losing the primacy, or virtual monopoly, it had once enjoyed.

### ANNALS AND CHARTERS

After Bede, the Recapitulation with which he ended his work,<sup>1</sup> drawn up in annalistic form, received additions for some seventy years. The manuscript tradition of these Northumbrian annals in their Latin version, included in the *Historia Regum* ascribed to Simeon of Durham,<sup>2</sup> has been discussed by P. Hunter Blair,<sup>3</sup> and by C. Hart;<sup>4</sup> they were also drawn on, as is well known, by the D,E recension of the *Chronicle*.<sup>5</sup> In general there is good agreement over dates, although between 776 and 789 the *Chronicle* seems for the most part to be a year ahead, probably owing to an error of transcription in the archetype.<sup>6</sup> When adjustment is made, the balance of evidence would strongly suggest that the year began at Christmas throughout this series of annals, at all events decidedly not with the 'Bedan indiction' on 24 September. Independent light on Northumbrian practice is revealed by Alcuin's preference for beginning the year 'cum nato Christo et crescente luce', in opposition to those at the court of Charles the Great who argued for the indiction.<sup>7</sup> It is desirable to mention here, in passing, that the time-reckoning of the Northumbrian annals is on occasion remarkably precise, day and month being given for mundane events, and eclipses down to the hour. In other kingdoms, and at a later date, this degree of precision was not to be attained.

Next we consider the evidence to be derived from charters.<sup>8</sup> Mostly they originate from Mercian kings, and it will be convenient first to consider the extensive series preserved from the reign of King Cenwulf. As to regnal years, Offa had died in 796 on 26 July (Simeon) or 29 July (*ASC*); Ecgfrith his son reigned 141 days;<sup>9</sup> thus, if Cenwulf came to the throne immediately, his reign began 14–17 December 796, a date not in conflict with charter evidence, as we

<sup>1</sup> *HE* v. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Simeonis Monachi Opera*, ed. T. Arnold, Rolls Series (1885).

<sup>3</sup> *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. N. K. Chadwick (Cambridge, 1963), p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> C. Hart, 'The Ramsey Computus', *EHR* 85 (1970), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Whitelock, *ASC* p. xiv.

<sup>6</sup> K. Harrison, 'The Beginning of the Year among Bede's Successors', *Yorkshire Archaeol. Jnl* 42 (1967), 193. The opening paragraphs of this paper are now obsolete.

<sup>7</sup> *MGH*, *Epistolae* iv, ed. E. Dümmler (Berlin, 1892), 231; Levison, *England and the Continent*, p. 277.

<sup>8</sup> Printed *Cartularium Saxonicum*, ed. W. de G. Birch (London, 1885–93), cited henceforth as *BCS*. This discussion would not have been possible without the help of Professor Whitelock, who supplied me with a select list of some eighty documents and, more important still, her comments on the reliability of the material and on a number of debatable points. I have also drawn on P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* (Royal Historical Society, London, 1968), and occasionally on M. Treiter, 'Die Urkundendatierung in angel-sächsischer Zeit', *Archiv für Urkundenforschung* 7 (1921), 53.

<sup>9</sup> Whitelock, *ASC* pp. 31 and 36.

shall presently see. The documents involving Cenwulf (and other kings) and Archbishop Wulfred of Canterbury are set out in table 2. *BCS* 322 (contemporary copy) is of 805, 13th indiction, 8 Cuthred of Kent, 26 July, 'die sabbati

TABLE 2

BCS number	Indiction	AD	Day	Regnal year	Wulfred's year
316	12	804	—	8 Cenwulf	—
321	13	805	—	9 Cenwulf	<i>electus</i>
322	13	805	26 July Saturday	8 Cuthred of Kent	<i>sedens in solio</i>
332	4	811	21 Apr.	15 Cenwulf	6
335	4	811	1 Aug.	15 Cenwulf	6 (?7)
341	5	812	—	16 Cenwulf	7
378	2	824	—	2 Beornwulf	19
379	2	824	30 Oct.	—	—
384	3	825	—	3 Beornwulf	20

quo transfiguratus est Christus'; and 26 July was a Saturday in 805. Haddan and Stubbs, supposing the feast to be on 6 August (a Wednesday in 805), as it is now, held that Wulfred had been consecrated on the previous Sunday, because the grant is made to him 'sedenti in archiepiscopatus solio'.<sup>1</sup> But the Transfiguration has been an unsteady feast, celebrated on a variety of days, and only settling down to 6 August in commemoration of the victory over the Turks at Belgrade in 1456. Anciently it fell on 26 July, as in the Martyrology of Oengus, or 27 July, as in Willibrord's Calendar, besides other days;<sup>2</sup> perhaps 26 July was the day of Wulfred's enthronement, as Haddan and Stubbs suggest, but, being a Saturday, can hardly represent the consecration, which presumably took place on one of the Sundays after the death of his predecessor Æthelheard, 12 May 805.<sup>3</sup> We turn next to *BCS* 321 (contemporary) which is signed by

<sup>1</sup> *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs (Oxford, 1869–78) III, 559. As a parallel to this use of *solium*, Alcuin writes to Æthelred of Northumbria (790–5) 'non decet te in solio sedentem regni rusticis uiuere moribus' (MGH, *Epistolae* IV, 71).

<sup>2</sup> *The Martyrology of Oengus*, ed. W. Stokes, Henry Bradshaw Society 29 (London, 1905), 72 and *The Calendar of St Willibrord*, ed. H. A. Wilson, HBS 55 (London, 1918), 35; on the whole question see F. G. Holweck, *Calendarium Liturgicum* (Philadelphia, 1925), pp. 230 and 258.

<sup>3</sup> Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* III, 468. Professor Whitelock thinks that *sedenti in solio* could merely mean 'occupying the archiepiscopal see'. Dr N. Brooks takes it as evidence that Wulfred was not yet consecrated, and has kindly furnished me (9 June 72) with the following note, which corrects my earlier view that the consecration took place before 26 July 805:

'If one accepts *BCS* 322 as evidence that Wulfred was not consecrated by 26 July 805, then the other Wulfred charters fall into place. One can accept the evidence of *BCS* 335 that his consecration must have been after 1 August 805, and of *BCS* 378 that the Council of *Clofeshob* of 824 was in his nineteenth year; *BCS* 379 shows this to have taken place at the end of October, and Wulfred's consecration is therefore pushed to October 805 or later. Thus there is no need to amend *BCS* 355, and no need to assume that there was one Council at *Clofeshob* before 24 July and another in October [which I had previously thought]. In this context there is no significance in the fact that *BCS* 378

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Wulfred as *electus*; according to the *Chronicle* he received the pallium in 804 (*recte* 806, since at this point *ASC* is two years behindhand). This charter is therefore in order, but *BCS* 316 is a late copy that seems to have been interfered with: 804, 12th indiction, 8 Cenwulf and witnessed by *Wlfredus archiepiscopus*. Thomas Elmham, in whose compilation the text is preserved, was a monk of St Augustine's, Canterbury, writing in the fifteenth century, and his material will have passed through the hands of transcribers who had access to copies of the *Chronicle* from the end of the eleventh century at latest.<sup>1</sup> From one copy, or some other source, they may well have derived the year 802 for the death of Æthelheard,<sup>2</sup> given as 803, *recte* 805, in extant versions of the *Chronicle*; nothing could be more natural than to substitute, in a document dated 804, the name of Wulfred for his predecessor. The years AD, indictions and regnal years of the remaining charters in table 2 offer no problem; Cenwulf was dead in 821, according to the *Chronicle*.

With these problems out of the way, the remaining Cenwulf charters which are of value for dating purposes can be collected into table 3.<sup>3</sup> In *BCS* 309,

TABLE 3

<i>BCS</i> number	Indiction	AD	Day	Regnal year of Cenwulf
293	7	799	—	3
296	7	—	17 July	3
308	11	803	6 Oct.	—
309	11	803	12 Oct. Thursday	7
310, 312	11	803	12 Oct.	—
326	15 (?1)	808	16 Apr. Easter Day	12
340	5	812	31 Oct.	—
348	7	814	25 Nov.	—
350	7	814	26 Dec.	18
353	7 (?8)	815	19 Mar.	19
357	9	816	—	20
358	9	816	27 July	20
359, 360	10	817	—	21

issued at a Council of *Clofeshob*, Cenwulf's seventh year is correct for October 803, and 12 October was a Thursday in that year; although *BCS* 308 omits the regnal year it has seven witnesses in common, and like *BCS* 310 and 312 was issued at this same council. All are authentic texts, though, except for *BCS* 310

and 379 are in different formulas. *BCS* 378 is in favour of Canterbury, and drafted by the Canterbury scriptorium, *BCS* 379 in favour of Worcester and drafted by that scriptorium.<sup>4</sup>

This straightforward view has the advantage of avoiding emendation. The former charter, witnessed by Beonna (of Hereford) as *electus*, will have been drafted earlier than the latter, where he is *episcopus*. Perhaps *sedens in solio* can be taken in the sense of 'administering the see'.

<sup>1</sup> Whitelock, *ASC* pp. xii–xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Historia Monasterii S. Augustini Cantuariensis*, ed. C. Hardwick, RS (1858), pp. 13 and 339.

<sup>3</sup> The forged *BCS* 338 and suspicious *BCS* 349, with no regnal year in any case, have been omitted.

and 312, known from late copies only. The 11th indiction expired, however, on 1 (or 24) September 803, and if we are to insist that these charters are using an indictional year beginning in September then emendation of the *annus domini* is required for them and for *BCS* 379 (table 2) as well. It is altogether more likely that by this period the indiction was being copied mechanically from the column next to the *annus domini* in a Dionysiac table (see table 1) without thought for its real significance.<sup>1</sup> That the copying could be careless, initially or at a later stage, is shown by *BCS* 326, because Easter Day did fall on 16 April in 808, for which the proper indiction is 1; and unless the regnal year and *annus domini* are both wrong, then the indiction of *BCS* 353 should be 8. In *BCS* 350 (a late transcript but genuine) if the regnal year is right the *annus domini* will be 813 in modern reckoning though 814 by a year changing at Christmas, and the indiction becomes correct also. As for *BCS* 340 and 348, in the absence of a regnal year it does not seem possible to decide whether indiction or *annus domini* is wrong, if Christmas dating is systematic throughout this reign; from the consistent look of table 3, and the particular weight attaching to *BCS* 309 and its neighbours, we can hardly doubt that it was.

With these pointers from Mercia in the early ninth century we may now work backwards through the eighth. *BCS* 236, from the Worcester cartulary, is probably genuine: 780, 3rd indiction, *passio Sancti Mauricii*, i.e. 22 September.<sup>2</sup> *BCS* 235 is a forgery, also dated to 22 September 780, 3rd indiction, adding 23 Offa; but if the date is sound – as opposed to the content of the charter – and if the year began at Christmas, then it would seem that Offa came to the throne after 22 September 757.<sup>3</sup> Information from the reign of his predecessor Æthelbald is perhaps less meagre than would appear from table 4. Bede states that Tatwine was consecrated at Canterbury in 731, in the fifteenth year of Æthelbald, on Sunday 10 June.<sup>4</sup> *BCS* 152 is dated 2nd indiction, 17 Æthelbald,

<sup>1</sup> Expressed in another way, the charters in tables 2 and 3 dated in the critical period 25 September to 24 December (or 30 December), that is, *BCS* 308, 309, 310, 312, 340, 348, 350 and 379, carry an indictional number that is one too few if we assume that the people who drafted them were using an indiction beginning in September and a Year of Grace beginning on 25 December (or 1 January). Hence the ecclesiastical scriptoria began their indictional years and Years of Grace at the same time. (It should be noted, as Dr Brooks reminds me, that *BCS* 310 and 312 are contemporary copies.) On the evidence of *BCS* 350 the year began at Christmas, in agreement with other evidence from Alcuin and the Northumbrian annals. Of Carolingian practice it has been said that ‘fréquemment on a fait concorder l’indiction avec l’année de l’Incarnation ou même avec l’année du règne’ (A. Giry, *Manuel de Diplomatique* (Paris, 1894), p. 728).

<sup>2</sup> In a paper by P. Chaplais, to which Professor Whitelock has drawn my attention, ‘Some Early Anglo-Saxon Diplomas on Single Sheets: Originals or Copies?’ *Jnl of the Soc. of Archivists* 3 (1965–9), 325, it is stated that this charter shows use of the ‘Bedan indiction’ of 24 September. This would be true only if we could be assured that the scribe did not take the indiction from the column adjacent to the *annus domini* in a Dionysiac table, as indicated above.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately the reliable *BCS* 202–4, 223, 230 and 239 do not carry regnal years, and *BCS* 232, 256, 265, 267 and 269 are too muddled to be of use.

<sup>4</sup> *HE* v. 23 and 24.

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TABLE 4

BCS number	Indiction	AD	Day	Regnal year of Æthelbald
(Bede and ASC)	—	731	10 June	15
152	2	—	<i>die indictionis</i>	17
149	15	—	29 Oct	22
150	—	—	29 Oct	22
154	4	736	—	—
162	10	742	—	27 (?26)
178	2	749	—	33

*die indictionis*, i.e. 1 or 24 September 733; and taken together these sources would indicate that Æthelbald came to the throne on or after 2 or 25 September 716, in which year King Ceolred died.<sup>1</sup> But BCS 149 and 150 raise a difficulty, since Bishop Wor (Ealdwine) of Lichfield is a signatory to both and he is stated by Simeon to have died in 737.<sup>2</sup> Birch's emendation of the regnal year to XVII then leaves the indiction still hanging in the air, since it should be *secunda* for October 733. No sense can be made of these figures; yet the chief interest of table 4 lies in the transition from dating by indiction alone to dating by indiction together with *annus domini*. It is true that BCS 162 and 178 are later copies, the former with suspicious features (and seemingly the wrong regnal year), so that the Year of Grace could have been added; yet when we consider that Bede's *Historia* was circulated in 731 (or 732) the use of this style seems reasonable enough in 742 or 749. Much better evidence comes from BCS 154, of 736, 4th indiction, a grant by Æthelbald preserved in a contemporary copy, which has had the benefit of a careful scrutiny by Sir Frank Stenton.<sup>3</sup> It contains the title *rex Britanniae*, perhaps an equivalent of *Bretwalda*, as Professor Whitelock suggests; yet Stenton's examination throws no doubt on this title or its context or – though the point is not explicitly made – on the year and style. Certainly we can say that not all documents carrying the indiction alone have been interpolated.<sup>4</sup> Abroad, the first official use of the Year of Grace appears in the preamble to the *Concilium Germanicum* of 21 April 742, without the indiction.<sup>5</sup> And Krusch has found an entry in Berlin Phillipps 128 to the effect that *Teudericus rex Francorum* died 737 years 'a nativitate autem Domini usque ad praesentem annum'.<sup>6</sup> At the same period, in England, the indiction begins to

<sup>1</sup> HE v. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Northumbrian annals in *Simeonis Monachi Opera* 11, 32. Dates from this source are usually reliable.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings', *EHR* 33 (1918), 439.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, apart from others, of the charters preserved in Elmham's *Historia*, ed. Hardwick, genuine or spurious, and ranging from 675 to 737, printed by Birch as BCS 35, 36, 42, 67, 73, 88, 90, 141, 149 and 150, all except BCS 42 are dated only by the indiction.

<sup>5</sup> MGH, Legum 11, *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, ed. A. Boretius (Hanover, 1883), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> B. Krusch in *Mélanges Chatelain* (Paris, 1910), p. 232. At the Council of Chelsea in 816 (Haddan and

take a lower place; after *BCS* 149 and 150, which seemingly cannot be later than 737 since they are witnessed by Bishop Wor, hardly any more charters are dated by indiction alone.<sup>1</sup>

The remaining material from Mercia starts after the death of King Cenwulf in 821; according to *BCS* 370 (contemporary copy) his successor Ceolwulf I was 'consecrated' in 822, 15th indiction, on 17 September, and although the true date could be 821 – reckoned as 822 from the Greek indiction on 1 September – a revival or survival of this reckoning seems to be unlikely when some other considerations are taken into account. In the first place, 17 September was an Ember Day (suitable for ordinations) in 822 but not in 821. Again, Cenwulf died at Basingwerk in Flintshire, apparently while engaged in trouble with the Welsh;<sup>2</sup> we have seen that the death of one monarch need not always be immediately followed by accession of the next; and the rite of 'consecration' could also be delayed.<sup>3</sup> If Mercian practice remained as in Cenwulf's reign, the year changed at Christmas and 17 September 822 is the right day. Next year Ceolwulf was expelled, according to the *Chronicle*; it has already been noticed that *BCS* 379 (see table 2) is signed by Beonna as *episcopus*, and may have been drafted later than *BCS* 378,<sup>4</sup> in Beornwulf's second year (and Wulfred's nineteenth, which ran approximately from June (or October) 823 to June (or October) 824); moreover Pope Eugenius II was elected on 24 May 824 and *BCS* 379 is signed by one Nothelm 'praeco a domino Eugenio Papa';<sup>5</sup> hence the date cannot be 30 October 823, and again the year changed at Christmas. A contrary impression is conveyed by *BCS* 400 (contemporary copy): 831, 9th indiction, 1 Wiglaf (who came back to rule in 830, according to the *Chronicle*), 'die V feria kal. Sept.', the first day of the month being a Thursday in 830 but a Friday in 831. Unless we are prepared to emend to *VI feria*, as Birch suggests, the year changed with the indiction, and it was not the 'Bedan indiction' of 24 September. Perhaps in agreement is *BCS* 432, of 841, 3rd indiction, 3 Beorhtwulf of Mercia, Christmas Day; the indiction is for 840, but this is not a contemporary copy, though genuine, and the doubtful *BCS* 433, purporting to be issued on the same day, has *indictione IIIIa*. To set against these charters, and in agreement with *BCS* 379, we have the authentic *BCS* 448, of 845 (indiction damaged), 'die dominica, VI Id. Novemb.', and 8 November was a Sunday in

Stubbs, *Councils* III, 593) the English bishops were encouraged to use AD because 'qualis annus Domini computatur, aut a quali Archiepiscopo . . . constitutum est illud iudicium. I owe this reference to Professor Whitelock.

<sup>1</sup> The exceptional *BCS* 296, of 799, has been included in table 3 only on this account, and not for its reliability, which has been discussed by Levison, *England and the Continent*, pp. 230 and 249, n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1971), p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> A century later Edward the Elder died on 17 July 924, but Athelstan's 'coronation' did not take place until 4 September 925: Whitelock, *ASC*, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> See above, p. 60, n. 3.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Thorogood, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the Reign of Ecgberht', *EHR* 48 (1933), 358.

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845. From Wessex, the genuine *BCS* 419, of 838, 1st indiction, is dated ‘III feria die uero XIII kl. Decembr.’, and 19 November was a Tuesday in 838; again, *BCS* 449 (contemporary) has 845, 8th indiction, ‘die II feria, XVI kl. Decembr.’, and 16 November was a Monday in 845. Finally *BCS* 451, of 848, 10th indiction, ‘secunda die natalis Domini’, can mean 26 December on either reckoning. Thus the simple emendation of *BCS* 400 proposed by Birch receives support from a considerable body of evidence on either side of 830–1, from Wessex as well as Mercia.

Much of the remaining Wessex material survives in doubtful shape, as a result of interference at Winchester or elsewhere in the eleventh century: *BCS* 377, 410, 413, 447, 468 and 483 can be rejected because they are suspicious or unhelpful. Four other charters, *BCS* 389–93, are perhaps of greater importance for facts than figures, and although forged or interpolated are worth considering because of their value for the history of Egbert’s reign.<sup>1</sup> The first part of *BCS* 389 states that it was written in 825, 3rd indiction, on 19 August; the second part has ‘singrapha caraxatum est VII Kl. Ian.’, i.e. 26 December; there is no mention of a change in the year, but *BCS* 390 adds the final date 826, 4th indiction, 24 Egbert and *ducatu*s XIII (a reading supported by *BCS* 393, whereas *BCS* 391 has *ducatu*s XIII).<sup>2</sup> If Egbert came to the throne after 19 August 802 the regnal year is correct. Professor Whitelock suggests that *ducatu*s may refer to his conquest of Cornwall, recorded by the *Chronicle* under 813 (*recte* 815). Now this Winchester source is undoubtedly right about another of Egbert’s campaigns in 825, and hence that date cannot have been taken from any surviving versions of the *Chronicle*, which are two years behind at this point; the possibility arises that *ducatu*s XIII is also correct, in which case the conquest of Cornwall could be referred to 812 instead of 815. Last of all, *BCS* 510 is an Old English diploma, 864, 12th indiction (*tacencircole*), 26 December, evidently of 863 in modern reckoning whether the year started at Christmas or with the indiction.<sup>3</sup> Later material is scanty and not helpful.

Thus from the documents considered here we may provisionally adopt the following conclusions:

- (a) *BCS* 154, of 736, appears to be the first charter of undoubted authenticity to carry the Year of Grace as well as the indiction. Although there is no *a priori* reason why charters should not have been dated by this style in earlier times – if we remember the Synod of Whitby in 664 – we do not yet have satisfactory evidence that they were.

<sup>1</sup> Whitelock, *ASC*, p. 40, n. 5.

<sup>2</sup> This date could be an argument in favour of a year beginning in September; but the change of indiction could also arise from thoughtless copying in accordance with the change of year at Christmas.

<sup>3</sup> Also printed *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. A. J. Robertson (Cambridge, 1939), pp. 16–19.

- (b) Since *BCS* 149 and 150 cannot well be later than 737, we seem here to be reaching the limit of dating by indiction alone; and, in spite of its being included as a formality in most of the dated charters, we should perhaps be on guard against assigning too much weight to it in later times (cf. *BCS* 326, table 3).

Admittedly these conclusions can only be tentative, since there is some difficulty in deciding whether correction, omission or addition of a dating clause could have taken place. And further, remembering that several kingdoms are involved, none of which had a 'chancery' in any recognizable sense, there may have been more variation in practice than we are inclined to admit. Turning to the more important question of when the year began, it does not seem possible, from lack of evidence until the death of Offa, to decide from charters alone between the indiction and Christmas. But the Northumbrian annals, taking the record from Bede's lifetime to 806, offer no convincing evidence that the year began in September; and in the last decade or two, when months and days are more freely sprinkled into the narrative, a Christmas dating is abundantly clear. Thereafter the Mercian and Wessex charters carry on in the same vein,<sup>1</sup> with increasingly strong evidence in favour of Christmas until *BCS* 449, of 845, from which time until the close of the ninth century no unambiguous charter information is available.

#### THE 'ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE'

This continuing and substantial agreement is fortified by annals in the *Chronicle* until at least as far as 823 (*recte* 825).<sup>2</sup> Nothing, then, prepares us for the undeniable fact that during the latter part of the ninth century, from 851 at latest, the *Chronicle's* year begins in the autumn.<sup>3</sup> Its compilers could have had two starting points to choose from, one precise and the other not:

(1) If a precise reckoning from the Greek indiction of 1 September were chosen we should have to postulate an antiquarian revival or a new and powerful influence, perhaps from as far afield as Rome. Alternatively, Bede's preference for 24 September, operating through a copy of *De Temporum Ratione*, may have been the deciding factor. Yet there is a serious objection to thinking of any precise date for the beginning of the year, namely, the imprecise nature

<sup>1</sup> It will be noticed that *BCS* 308–12 and 379, where the evidence for Christmas dating seems to be unequivocal, were issued at Councils of *Clovesbuh* and must surely represent official practice.

<sup>2</sup> Thorogood, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the Reign of Ecgberht', pp. 355–7. And the annal for 827 (*recte* 829) opens with a lunar eclipse 'on middes wintres mæsse niht' – actually the early hours of Christmas Day.

<sup>3</sup> M. L. R. Beaven, 'The Beginning of the Year in the Alfredian Chronicle', *EHR* 33 (1918), 238 and Whitelock, *ASC* p. xxiv.

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of the annals themselves. Proof of the autumn dating in this section of the *Chronicle* has been arrived at almost entirely through a study of outside sources – northern detail preserved by Simeon, Roger of Wendover and others, together with material from continental annals; thus the *Chronicle* compares unfavourably in this respect with the Annals of St Bertin, 830–82.<sup>1</sup> And the text itself is very meagre: after Easter (853); in the harvest season (877); after twelfth night, at Easter, the seventh week after Easter (878); an eclipse, but not even the month given (879); before Christmas (885); a comet, after Easter at the Rogation Days or before (891); the death of King Alfred, six days before All Saint's Day (900). The last item apart, woolly writing of this character does not suggest an urge to restore the indiction in either of its forms; the word *tacencircol* never occurs. King Alfred's remarks, often quoted, about the decay of learning in his time may sound overdrawn; yet his complaints are true both of Latinity and of writing in the native tongue,<sup>2</sup> and find an echo in chronology as well.

(2) A vague concept, such as that of 'the campaigning season'. During the first half of the ninth century it seems to have been only in summer that the Vikings were a menace, and then chiefly near the coast. Not until 850–1 did they winter for the first time in Thanet;<sup>3</sup> then in 855 they are found as far inland as the Wrekin (*BCS* 487), though they may only have started from Wales; and by 865–6 the great Danish army was wintering in East Anglia. Since these land forces often changed their quarters during the autumn, annalistic writing may have been adapted to this hard circumstance; and it has been suggested that for the period 892–6, where the narrative has a distinctive style, 'the writer of these annals is thinking rather of campaigning years than in calendar years'.<sup>4</sup> For the remaining annals of this period, until about a dozen years after Alfred's death, it may be preferable to think of 'autumn dating', rather than in precise measure. Yet the change of style from Christmas becomes less strange if we suppose that the *Chronicle* may not be an 'official' document, although King Alfred could well have encouraged its circulation. Sir Frank Stenton has argued, from internal evidence, that it was written for a person of rank in the south-western shires; in diocesan terms, Sherborne rather than

<sup>1</sup> A recent edition is that of F. Grat *et al.* (Société de l'Histoire de France, Paris, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> F. M. Stenton, *The Latin Charters of the Anglo-Saxon Period* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 39–43 and D. Whitelock, 'The Old English Bede', *Proc. of the Brit. Acad.* 48 (1962), 74–5. In this paper (p. 66) Professor Whitelock also observes that the translator has omitted some references to the indiction.

<sup>3</sup> So *ASC*, but other evidence suggests wintering in Kent some fifty years earlier; see N. Brooks, *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 79–80. I am grateful to Mr Hunter Blair for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>4</sup> Whitelock, *ASC* p. xxiv; for a more detailed discussion see Professor Whitelock's Appendix to the introduction to *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer on the basis of an ed. by J. Earle (repr. Oxford, 1952), pp. cxxxix f.

Winchester, for all that its tone is secular and not ecclesiastical.<sup>1</sup> If the character of the annals does not allow of any proof that the year began with an indiction – as against ‘the autumn’ – we have to consider the possibility that this style may have survived, or been revived, in another context.

The date of King Alfred’s death was fixed by W. H. Stevenson to 26 October 899, the available evidence leading him to think that the year began on 25 March, and that the figure 900 given by version A of the *Chronicle* must be emended.<sup>2</sup> In a more extended study, establishing the date of Athelstan’s death, M. L. R. Beaven held that the year began with the ‘Bedan indiction’, or at all events in the autumn;<sup>3</sup> it seems almost certain that this king died on 27 October 939, yet version A of the *Chronicle*, by now reverted to Christmas reckoning for other events, makes the entry under 940. Since these annals cannot be called contemporary, a suspicion arises that the compiler may have consulted a regnal list which began the year with an indiction,<sup>4</sup> not in itself an improbable circumstance in view of the conservatism that surrounds royalty in life or death. If such a list were on strict indictional principles the date would have read ‘VI Kal. Nov. Indictione XIIIa’, that is, the indiction for 940 which began on 1 or 24 September 939. A difficulty worth mentioning, however, is that the compiler of this annal could have followed a practice similar to one noticed earlier<sup>5</sup> and taken the *annus domini* from the column adjacent to the indiction in a Dionysiac table, or calculated it, yielding ‘VI Kal. Nov. DCCCCXL’. And if the date in the regnal list had been written ‘VI Kal. Nov. DCCCCXL, Indictione XIIIa’, meaning 27 October 939 to people like Bede and his contemporaries, strictly brought up, these particulars could have been read as 940 in a later age, when to all appearances the indiction had lost a good deal of ground. There seems to be no difficulty over the death of King Eadred, which is recorded by the A version as 23 November 955; his successor Eadwig issues charters in 956,<sup>6</sup> and can hardly have been crowned later than January of that year.<sup>7</sup> May it not be that the Athelstan entry is due to a simple but understandable mistake?

If the evidence from annals and charters has been properly read, during the century between about 740 and 840 the ‘Bedan indiction’ could be a mirage,

<sup>1</sup> ‘The South-Western Element in the Old English Chronicle’, *Essays in Medieval History presented to T. F. Tout*, ed. A. G. Little and F. M. Powicke (Manchester, 1925), p. 15. Two bishops of Sherborne figure in a military capacity: Ealhstan fighting the Danes in 845 and his successor Heahmund killed in battle in 871.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Date of King Alfred’s Death’, *EHR* 13 (1898), 71.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Regnal Dates of Alfred, Edward the Elder and Athelstan’, *EHR* 32 (1917), 517.

<sup>4</sup> Whitelock in Earle and Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, p. cxlii.

<sup>5</sup> Above, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, pp. 207 ff. Some at least are not suspicious.

<sup>7</sup> *Memorials of St Dunstan*, ed. W. Stubbs, RS (1874), p. lxxxviii. It has been calculated (Whitelock, *ASC* p. 5, n. 1), that Eadwig was probably crowned on 26 January, the third Sunday after Epiphany in 956 – not the second, as Stubbs has written, probably by a slip of the pen.

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and the Greek had dropped to insignificance. Further study of material from the *Chronicle* will no doubt clear up the uncertainty between indiction and ‘autumn’. Meanwhile it seems fair to conclude that although Bede did not invent the Christian era he presented it in a form so well adapted to the piety and comprehension of the Anglo-Saxon church that this era may have come into operation, as a prime reckoning, far more quickly than we have been accustomed to allow.

### APPENDIX

#### THE CONSECRATION OF WILLIBRORD

Bede states that Archbishop Willibrord was consecrated (to Utrecht) by Pope Sergius at Rome, in the church of St Cecilia on her festival, 22 November 696;<sup>1</sup> in religion he took the name of Clement. Willibrord’s *Calendar* contains in the left-hand margin of the table for November an entry, almost certainly in his own hand, stating that he was consecrated in AD 695 – an early example (728) of dating by the Incarnation; on the right-hand side an entry in a different hand, ‘ordinatio domini nostri Clementis’, begins on a level with 21 November, which was a Sunday in 695.<sup>2</sup> Neither 21 nor 22 November was a Sunday in 696. The discrepancy was brought forward by Poole in support of his theory that Bede began the year in September,<sup>3</sup> so that the figures mean 22 November 695 in our reckoning; and this date is of more than limited interest since it is an element in deciding when the *Historia* was written.<sup>4</sup> If there were only one discrepancy to account for, as between the years 695 and 696, Poole’s argument would be powerful. But there is also a discrepancy over the day, in an account otherwise circumstantial: not only does Bede name the church, but adds that Willibrord left Rome for his diocese fourteen days after arriving in the city, and thus lends an air of enthusiasm and despatch to the proceedings. Bede’s source may have been the priest Nothelm, who visited Rome to search the papal archives,<sup>5</sup> or perhaps Acca, bishop of Hexham, a friend of Willibrord.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand 21 November 695, a Sunday and the eve of St Cecilia, makes equally good sense and we appear to have it in the hand of the archbishop himself and one of his *familia*, unless the second entry was made after his death. Moreover, 21 November was a Sunday in 728, when Willibrord’s note was made, and we can hardly doubt that it celebrates the thirty-third anniversary of his consecration, both day and year; if we inspect the days on which 21 November fell in adjacent years the significance of 728 becomes apparent.<sup>7</sup> Bede’s information about the day must surely be at fault; in the matter of the year he put down 696, but, as in the case of the comet of 676, could

<sup>1</sup> HE v. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, *Calendar of St Willibrord*, pp. 13 and 42 and pl. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Poole, *Studies*, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> *The Moore Bede*, ed. P. Hunter Blair, EEMF 9 (Copenhagen, 1959), 30.

<sup>5</sup> HE *Praefatio*.

<sup>6</sup> HE III. 13.

<sup>7</sup> 725 (Wednesday), 726 (Thursday), 727 (Friday), 729 (Monday), 730 (Tuesday) and 731 (Wednesday). Willibrord was about seventy at this time and could not know he would live for another decade.

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have been given the wrong figure for that also. This date is not of such cast-iron character as to lend support to a theory; rather, it needs to be interpreted in the light of any theory that comes to hold the field. It is a good deal more likely, we may reflect, that Bede was misled over a ceremony in Rome than over the battle in Shropshire where King Oswald met his end.<sup>1</sup>

A little while later, on the continent, we come across a still more remarkable circumstance; no run-of-the-mill consecration but the martyrdom of Archbishop Boniface of Mainz and his fifty-three companions. The year is given as 754 by the tradition of Fulda, where he was buried, and as 755 by his biographer Willibald, representing the tradition of Mainz;<sup>2</sup> yet these two places are no further apart than, say, York and Jarrow. Boniface was killed on 5 June, in the 'neutral' part of the year, and so, as Plummer says of a similar trouble, 'the question of the Indiction mercifully does not come in'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Levison, *England and the Continent*, p. 90, n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Plummer, *Opera Historica* II, 61.