

ESSAY
ON
THE LIFE AND INSTITUTIONS
OF
OFFA
KING OF MERCIA

BY THE
REV. HENRY MACKENZIE, M.A.

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BY THE
REV. HENRY MACKENZIE,
M. A.

OF PEMBROKE COLLEGE, OXFORD; MASTER OF
BANCROFT'S HOSPITAL.

“Offa restauratus regali stirpe creatus
Erigitur; spernit quæ degenerantia cernit—
Armis donatur: Cato, Mars, Paris, hic reputatur.
Quo floret tuta duce Marcia lege statuta
Ense superborum vires reprimens, dominatur.
Hunc Rex Francorum Carolus timet et veneratur.
Communi voto cum clero Marcia toto
Offæ concedit sese, cui mitis obedit,
Ergo coronatur: ex tunc Rex jure vocatur!”
V. Matth. Westm., A. D. 779.

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TO
JOSEPH BOSWORTH, D. D.
OF
TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,
F. R. S., F. S. A.,
BRITISH CHAPLAIN AT ROTTERDAM,
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY OF LEYDEN,
MEMBER OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF THE
NETHERLANDS,
&c. &c. &c.
IN TOKEN OF
RESPECT FOR HIS LABORIOUS
ACQUIREMENTS,
(MORE ESPECIALLY WITH REFERENCE TO
THE ANGLO-SAXON LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE,)
ESTEEM FOR THE
CHRISTIAN SINGLE-MINDEDNESS OF HIS
CHARACTER,
AND
AFFECTIONATE REGARD FOR HIMSELF,

THIS ESSAY
IS INSCRIBED.

ADVERTISEMENT.

The following Essay, hastily prepared, and—though some time has elapsed since its composition—now hastily corrected for the press, was successful during the year 1836 in gaining an honorary premium, established by WILLIAM TAYLOR COPELAND, Esq., M. P., during the year of his Mayoralty.

The writer regrets that pressing avocations prevent his devoting to his subject that application and research which alone could make his composition more worthy of the name of the amiable and highly esteemed founder of the Honorary Premium, or of the approbation of the public.

The writer desires further to express his obligations to George William Johnson, Esq., of Gray's Inn, Barrister at Law, without whose kind assistance he would have been unable to consult several of the Historical works which have added materially to the information which he has collected upon this subject.

BANCROFT'S,
7th December, 1839.

AN ESSAY, &c.

“Nobilissimus juvenis; rex strenuissimus; vir religiosus.”

HOVEDEN.

The attention of the student is so universally directed in modern days to the attainment of Classic Literature, and to the knowledge of that period of History which has been stamped at once as the age of the purest taste and of the highest philosophy, that the youth of our country are too generally in entire ignorance of the early history of their own race; and with few, with very few, exceptions know no more than the names of those who in the “dark ages,” as they are erroneously termed, exercised an important influence over the well-being of England.

All error is prolific in its offspring—the stigma of darkness which has been passed upon the period that elapsed between the fourth and the tenth centuries has caused them if not actually to be shunned, at least to be lightly esteemed in the course of study; and the useful lessons to be acquired from the conduct of men in all but a state of nature, have been neglected for the sake of those to be deduced from society as it has conventionally existed in a highly civilized state. It is not here intended to be denied but that much may be learned by this method of procedure; yet is it unhesitatingly advanced as a necessary axiom in polity, that the state of nature should be *first* regarded, and the different improvements upon, or at least alterations from, that state afterwards compared, for the purpose of introducing a still higher degree of amelioration. In no condition can the natural propensities of man be learned so readily as in a natural condition; and the more civilization has increased in

any country, so much the more difficult will it be to lay down a Code of Laws which shall have the effect of correcting the natural evils and vicious propensities of the natives of the clime.

It might, perhaps, at first sight, appear that these remarks are not peculiarly applicable to the subject of the present Essay; but this is by no means the case. The object of History is to make the experience of past ages subservient to the use of the present; and the object of Education to enable the existing generation to take advantage of the experience so afforded. But if that portion of History most rich in traits of nature, most prolific in change, most useful in developing the workings of unsophisticated mind, be neglected, it were absurd to imagine that the present age could derive the benefit such period affords from other sources, which are undeniably less adequate to bestow it.

Circumscribed, however, as a brief composition of such a nature as the present must necessarily be, it is not perhaps advisable to enlarge upon a point of opinion that might admit of controversy. It may possibly be deemed sufficient to bear out, at least partially, the position laid down, to direct attention to the state of England at the period of its History preceding the accession of Offa to the crown of Mercia, and then trace briefly his mingled career of glory and of crime.

The question is not perhaps at the present day of easy solution, whether the Jutes^[1] under Hengist and Horsa came to Britain by invitation from the natives, or whether their settlement in this country arose from accidental circumstances: considering the numerical insignificance of the expedition the latter is most probable. Certain, however, it is, that their establishment in Kent and the Isle of Wight led to subsequent descents upon the coast both by Saxons and Angles, the former of whom established themselves between A. D. 449 and 527 in the south and south east of the country; while the latter, between A. D. 547 and 586, became located in the northern and midland districts. It was about the last-named date that Mercia was formed into an independent state by Crida, comprising in its full extent what are now the counties of Chester, Derby, Nottingham, and Lincoln (North Mercians), Leicester (Middle Angles), Rutland,

Northampton, Huntingdon, Beds, Hertford, Bucks, Oxon, Gloucester, Warwick, Worcester, Hereford, Salop, and Stafford (South Mercians). To these extensive domains,^[2]—extensive, that is, compared with the other kingdoms of the Saxon Octarchy,^[3]—Offa, the subject of the present Essay, succeeded in A. D. 755, upon the nomination of the last king, Ethelbald, who perished at Seggeswold in support of his throne against the powerful rebel Bernred.^[4]

^[1] The Jutes, Angles, and Saxons were Germanic tribes. The first of these were from Jutland, or the Cimbric Chersonesus, in Denmark. The Angles were a tribe of the Saxon Confederacy occupying *Anglen* in the south-east part of the Duchy of Sleswick in the south of Denmark.

The Saxons were at first only a simple state, though the name was afterwards applied to a confederacy of nations. Like all the Teutoni, or Germans, they were of oriental origin. They were as far westward as the Elbe in the days of Ptolemy (A. D. 90), and were, therefore, in all probability among the first Germanic tribes that visited Europe. Their situation between the Elbe and the Eyder, in the south of Denmark, seems to indicate that they moved among the foremost columns of the vast Teutonic emigration. When first settled on the Elbe they were an inconsiderable people, but in succeeding ages increased in power and renown. About A. D. 240, they united with the Franks (the Free people) to oppose the progress of the Romans towards the north. By this league and other means the Saxon influence was increased till they possessed the vast extent of country embraced by the Elbe, the Sala, and the Rhine, in addition to their ancient territory from the Elbe to the Eyder. After many of the Saxons had migrated to Britain, the parent stock on the Continent had the name of Old Saxons.—*Preface to Bosworth's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

^[2] “Dominabatur Rex Offa Magnus *in viginti tribus* provinciis quas Angli Shiras appellant.” Norfolk and Suffolk, Essex and Middlesex are given in addition to the above by the anonymous biographer of Offa, whose sketch is appended to Watts’s edition of Matt. Paris. (Cambridge appears to be omitted.)

Asser, “de Ælfredi rebus gestis,” bears this testimony to Offa’s power, “Fuit in Mercia moderno tempore quidam strenuus atque universis circa se regibus et regionibus finitimis formidolosus rex,

nomine Offa, qui vallum magnum inter Britanniam atque Merciam de mari usque ad mare facere imperavit.”—*Camden’s edition*, p. 3.

[3] “This state of Britain has been denominated, with great impropriety, the Saxon *Heptarchy*. When all the kingdoms were settled they formed an *Octarchy*.”—*Hist. of the Anglo-Saxons*, Turner, b. 2, ch. 4.

The eight kingdoms were the following, viz.:—

1. West Saxons, or Wessex.
2. South Saxons, or Sussex.
3. Kent.
4. East Saxons, or Essex.
5. East-Anglia.
6. Mercia.
7. Deira. And
8. Bernicia.

[4] It is not rendered clear from the confused statements of the early historians, whether the latter, who attempted to seize the crown, succeeded in holding it for any length of time; but it is certain, from the language of the venerable Bede (*Eccl. Hist.* l. 5. c. ult.) as well as from other authorities, that Offa had to contend for the diadem before he wore it, and not without effusion of blood possessed the regal dignity.

The author of the “*Vita Offæ Secundi*,” appended to Watts’s edition of Matthew Paris, states, that Tuinfredus and his wife (the parents of the subject of the Essay) were persecuted by Beormredus (Bernred), but that he despised their youthful offspring who is described as “usque ad annos adolescentiæ inutilis poplitibus contractis, et qui nec oculorum vel aurium plenè officio naturali fungeretur.” When, however, the designs of Bernred had so far succeeded as to induce Tuinfredus and his wife to take refuge in some distant place of security, a miraculous change took place in Tuinfredus, their son, similar to that which had, in former ages, occurred to Offa the son of Warmund; and from a dull and feeble youth he suddenly sprang into full possession of all his faculties, and appeared a highly-gifted man. “Quid plura? de contracto, muto, et cæco, fit elegans corporis, eloquens sermone, acie perspicax oculorum.” From this change the enraptured Mercians looked upon him as some divine person sent to deliver them from the tyranny of Bernred, and called him

no longer Pinefredus, but “a second Offa!” Of this anonymous historian, however, the authority is not perhaps of peculiar weight, neither is the miraculous change stated to have taken place in the youthful Pinefredus especially calculated to court our unhesitating reliance; and most of his readers will be inclined, with his editor, to quote from Horace, “Credat Judæus Apella, non ego!”

Some of the annalists of the events of that period are more brief in their accounts of Offa’s accession. Thus,

“Cumque prædictus rex *Ethelbaldus* XL et uno annis regnasset, juxta prophetiam sancti patris *Guthlaci*, bello minus provide inito super *Seggeswold*, a *Bernredo* tyranno extitit interemtus. *Bernredus* vero tyrannus non diu tanta tyrannide gloriatus, eodem anno periit. *Æthelbaldusque* rex apud *Ripadium*, id est, RIVEDUNE, tunc temporis celeberrimum monasterium tumultatus, regnum Merciorum nepoti patruelis sui, videlicet *Offæ* filio *Dignferti*, filii *Ænulphi*, filii *Osmodi*, filii *Æoppæ*, filii *Wibbæ* patris regis *Pendæ*, consentientibus totius Mercie proceribus, reliquit.”—*Ingulphus* 5.

Also,

“Anno 757. *Adebaldo* rege Merciorum occiso apud SECANDUNE successit *Beornred*, quem *Offa* eodem anno expulit, et regnum pro eo super Merciam XXXIX annis obtinuit.”—*Chronica de Mailros*, 137.

Also,

“*Beornred* in regnum Mercæ tanquam hæres legitimus dicto regi *Ethelbaldo* successit, brevi tamen tempore illud regens. Nam *Offa* infra suum primum annum eum aufugavit, qui 39 annis regnum Mercæ et populum postea gubernavit.”—*Bromton*, 776.

Also,

“Anno 757. *Ethelbald* rex Merciorum a suis tutoribus *fraudulenter interfectus est*. Eodem vero anno *Merci* bellum inter se civile inierunt. *Beornred* in fugam verso, *Offa* rex victor extitit.”—*Simeon Dunelm*: 757.

Also,

See Matthew Westminster, who states that Ethelbald perished in battle with Cuthred king of the West-Saxons, “in loco qui Sachêda dicitur,” to whom *Beornred* succeeded.

He further states,

“Anno gratiæ DCCLVIII gens de regno Merciorum contra regem suum Beornredum insurgens pro eo quod populum non æquis legibus sed per tyrannidem gubernaret, convenerunt in unum omnes tam nobiles quam ignobiles et, Offa duce, adolescente strenuissimo, ipsum a regno expulerunt. Quo facto unanimi omnium consensu predictum Offam in regem tam Clerus quam populus coronarunt.”

Offa is made out to be the eighteenth in descent from *Woden*, who was the sixteenth from Noah!—*Matt. West.*, p. 274–5.

V. also Holinshed's Hist., b. 6. ch. 1., A. D. 755.—Hoveden's Annal. in Savile's Collection, 409.—Hen. Huntingdon, ib. 342. Ingr. Sax. Chron., A. D. 755.

No sooner had Offa been established, not less by the hearts of his subjects than by the acts of his power or the will of his predecessor, upon the throne of Mercia, than he applied himself to the duties of a barbaric sovereign, confirming his dominions and extending the limits of his territory. Brave and ambitious, endowed with personal vigour and mental abilities unequalled by any of his age and country, he gradually directed his powers against the neighbouring sovereigns. Circumstanced as the Saxon kingdoms in Britain were, nothing could be more easy than to find a pretext for offence; and whether we suppose, with the Monk of St. Alban's, that Offa was instigated in his ambitious views by his wife Cynedritha, or believe that he simply acted on the defensive against the confederate monarchs of Deira, East-Anglia, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex, certain it is that his wars with these opponents terminated to his glory and their disgrace. At Feldhard in East-Anglia, the superiority of Offa's forces was first made manifest. Within two years after this engagement he won the *spolia opima* in the decisive conflict at Otteford, near Sevenoaks, with the troops of Kent. And not long subsequently, he routed the combined forces of his enemies under the command of Cynewulf—himself a celebrated warrior—at Bensington, or Benson, (about twelve miles on the London side of Oxford,) the Villa Regia of the West Saxons, and dismantled the fortifications which their monarch had in vain striven to preserve.

After such specimens of prowess on the part of the Mercian king, it is no marvel that the kings of Deira and of Sussex should seek a

distant and friendly land as the scene of their operations against the successful Offa. They sought refuge and assistance at the court of Marmodius, king of Wales; and against the Britons accordingly Offa next directed his arms. Aided by their native fastnesses these new opponents afforded protracted resistance on the western boundary of his kingdom, and with them and their Saxon allies he had many and severe engagements. Owing to the craft of Marmodius he met with some reverses in his first campaign, and on one occasion narrowly escaped with his life. Eventually, however, his good genius prevailed. He annexed to Mercia the east of Wales as far as the Wye, planted the subject territory with Anglo-Saxons, and built the wall known by the name of Offa's Dyke,^[5] about one hundred miles in extent, from the æstuary of the Dee to the mouth of the first-mentioned river.

^[5] The following is the substance of Offa's war with the Britons, as collected from Speed's Chronicle. Their king at this period was Marmodius. The West-Saxons, in their struggles with Offa, had found in Marmodius an ally. On the discomfiture of Kenwolfe, (k. of W. S.) Offa marched to the borders of Wales. Previous letters and explanations had passed between the two monarchs, and the negotiations were still, by the artifice of Marmodius, prolonged. "A stratagem (in the words of our authority) to protract time, and work upon advantage." In this interim of compliments the Mercian king built a fortified dyke or ditch, commencing at Basingwark in Flintshire, and ending near Bristow at the fall of the Wye, and forming, in its utmost length, a barrier of about one hundred miles between the two kingdoms. "Marmodius, who openly bare saile to this wind, and seemed to winke at Offa's intent, secretly called a council of state, wherein he declared how the act there in working would soon prove the bane of liberty unto their country, and the marke of dishonour to themselves and posterity for ever, therefore his advice was that by some stratagem it might be staid by time." Accordingly, having secretly collected their allies the Saxons "both of the South, West, and North, upon St. Stephen's day, at night, they suddenly brake down the banke of this fortification, filling up again great part of the ditch, and in the morning most furiously rushed into Offa his court, putting a great number to the sword who were more intent and regardful to the feast than to any defence from their cruel and merciless swords." The effect of this successful stratagem was a short superiority on the side of the

Britons. Offa's army was routed, and himself in imminent danger. But his return was speedy, and his revenge decisive. He made their hostages his vassals and slaves, and entering Wales with a large army, conquered Marmodius, "and all his associates in the field."

Mr. Hutton, who examined the remains of Offa's dyke in 1803, says "the traveller would pass it unheeded if not pointed out. All that remains is a small hollow which runs along the cultivated fields, perhaps not eighteen inches deep in the centre, nor of more than twenty yards width."—*Travels in Wales*, 221.

For fuller particulars of Offa's conquests, see also Matth. Westm. 275–9. Chron. Mailros, 138. Sax. Chron., 61. Bromton, 770. Hen. Huntingdon, 343. Flor. Wig., 778. Hoveden, 409. Sim. Dunelm: 107. 118. Watts's ed. Matth. Paris, 975. Holinshed, b. 6. ch. 4.

In policy as in arms Offa proved himself equally successful. When he had been about ten years on the throne he made an attempt to deprive Iambertus, or Lambert, Archbishop of Canterbury, of his province, and, "contrary to the customs of antiquity," to erect Lichfield into an Archiepiscopate. Although the clergy and natives of Kent were naturally opposed to an innovation which so materially affected their ecclesiastical importance, the king of Mercia succeeded in obtaining from Pope Adrian the First permission to prosecute his design; and the bishops of Worcester, Leicester, Chester, and Hereford, and of the East-Angles Helmham with Norfolk, and Domuck, or Donwich, with Suffolk, were, some years later, subjected to the Bishop of Lichfield: London, however, Rochester, Winchester, and Sherbourn remained in the diminished province of Canterbury.^[6]

^[6] V. Matth. West. A. D. 765. Tanner's Notitia Monastica XVII. Staffordshire I.

Holinshed thus writes: "Eadulphus, bishop of Lichfield, was adorned with the pall and taken for archbishop, having all those bishops within the limits of king Offa his dominion suffragans unto him; namely, Denebertus, bishop of Worcester, Werebertus, bishop of Chester, Eadulphus, bishop of Dorchester, Wilnardus, bishop of Hereford, Halard, bishop of Eltham and Cedferth, Tedfrid, bishop of Donwich." "But (as saith another writer, Will. of Malmsbury,) this iniquity did not long deform canonical

institutions." Kenulph, second in succession from Offa, restored Athelard, or Ethelard, to the privileges of the See of Canterbury; and the same king in a letter to Leo, the then reigning Pope, professes his sense of the impropriety of Offa's conduct, and his willingness to submit in ecclesiastical matters to the example of antiquity and of the Pope.

A correspondence, still extant, which took place between Offa and the emperor^[7] Charlemagne, serves to throw some light on the complexion of the times; and the fact of its existence may be deemed a valuable compliment to the talents, the power, and the reputation of the Anglo-Saxon. How their acquaintance commenced is uncertain: but the fact of Alcuin, an English clergyman, having been preceptor to the emperor is sufficient to account for his being favorably inclined to the nation that gave his tutor birth.^[8]

^[7] The following is the greeting of Charlemagne to Offa: "Karolus gratiâ Dei rex Francorum et Longobardorum et Patricius Romanorum, viro venerando, et fratri karissimo Offæ regi Merciorum, salutem." *Cont. Hist. of Bede (incerto auctore), b. 1. ch. 14.* See also Leland's Collectanea, vol. 1.

^[8] The anonymous biographer of Offa, who records his miraculous metamorphosis, states that the five kings to whom Offa soon became formidable after his elevation to the crown of Mercia, sought aid from Charles the Great of France (probably Carloman, the brother and predecessor of Charlemagne is meant), who promised to protect them, and wrote to Offa accordingly. The sovereign of Mercia, however, spurned his threats, and proceeded to effect his conquests. Carloman in the meanwhile dying, left his kingdom to Charlemagne, to whom the five kings repeated their supplications for aid, which was again promised, and Charlemagne wrote enjoining Offa to desist from attacking them. "Quid nobis rex transmarinus?" was the lofty remark of the Mercian king, and he proceeded undaunted in the prosecution of his designs. Some time subsequent to these events, Offa is stated (and in this Speed's Chronicle follows the Monk of St. Albans) to have written to Charlemagne with the design of procuring his friendship and alliance; and to this epistle he received a favourable reply, which led to a friendship and correspondence between the two potentates. Vide also Will. Malmesbury in Savile's Collection, 32.

The friendship of monarchs, however, from its intimate connexion with political expediency, is necessarily unstable: nor was that of Offa and Charlemagne without interruption. The Frank desired the hand of a daughter of Offa for his natural son Charles; but this the Mercian sovereign refused unless Bertha, the daughter of the emperor of the west, were bestowed upon Egfrid his own son and heir. The demand excited the anger of Charlemagne; and, in consequence, disregarding the wise remonstrances of his council, he closed the ports of Gaul against the merchants of Anglo-Saxon Britain.^[9] In consequence of this hasty and decisive step, Offa was apprehensive of invasion from his indignant foe, and this anticipation of evil was increased, by the knowledge that he afforded his powerful protection to some Anglo-Saxon malcontents. Lambert, the Saxon Primate, was suspected of being privy to the emperor's designs, and this afforded a pretext (if indeed it were not really the reason) for removing the Archiepiscopate from Canterbury to Lichfield. After some lapse of time, however, concord was restored between the regal friends, through the mediation of Alcuin and the abbot Gervald^[10]. The former of these (one of the most interesting and learned characters of that age) had not escaped the imputation of treasonable designs—an imputation which he repels with great simplicity and apparent honesty in the words addressed to a friend, “Vere Offæ regi nec genti Anglorum *unquam infidelis fui!*” His embassy from the court of his adopted to that of his natural sovereign was accompanied by gifts which were thus symbolically interpreted;

“A Carlo dona data sunt Offæ, *mucro, zona;*
Cingat ut imbelles clemens, feriatque rebelles.
Pallia donantur velut his secreta tegantur.
Tiro mucrone sed et utens munere zonæ,
Indomitos punit, pronos sibi nectit et unit,
Palliat arcana,—ne signent pallia vana.”

^[9] Woollen gowns were at this time the chief articles of exportation from Britain. Four centuries earlier than the date under review a Gyneceum, or manufactory, existed at Winchester. V. *Gibbon, ch. 17.*

V. Mabillon's Acta S. Ben. pars 1. p. 169, quoting the Chron. Fontanellensis, c. 15.

[10] "Aliquid enim dissentionis diabolico fomento inflammante nuper inter Carolum regem et regem Offam exortum est: ita ut utrinque navigatio interdicta negotiantibus cesset." Leland's Collectanea, v. 1. p. 401. V. Opera Alcuini, 1. 6. Mabillon's Annal: L. xxv. n. 76; L. xxvi. n. 10. V. also Matth. West. 278.

A brief review of the Anglo-Saxon system of government may, perhaps, be here not inapplicably inserted, in order to convey some definite idea of Offa's position as the sovereign of Mercia, and enable the reader to trace more satisfactorily the improvements which he was the means of introducing into Britain.

The prescriptive constitution of the Anglo-Saxons was decidedly of a liberal form, and to it may be traced the majority of our own liberal institutions; but one most important difference exists between the ancient and modern constitution of Britain, in the fact of the sovereignty of the Saxon kingdoms not being positively hereditary. "A son who inherited his father's virtues and talents," observes the author of a popular History of Modern Europe, "was sure to succeed his sway; but if he happened to be weak or profligate, or was a minor, the next in blood, or the person of the greatest eminence in the state, generally procured an elevation to the throne."^[11]

[11] This practice, indeed, recognized in the laws of Offa alluded to in a subsequent portion of the Essay, continued so late as the Norman king, John, and the unsettled state of the doctrine of succession has been urged in extenuation of his usurpation.

The Anglo-Saxon annals afford an excellent commentary upon this system of a partially elective monarchy. Scenes of strife and bloodshed, family dissensions, party feuds, assassination, and even fratricide were not unfrequent occurrences amid this optional "setting up and pulling down of kings;" and the liberality and seeming justice of the system, that appear so seductive on a first view of the THEORY, fade before the exercise of tyranny, the right of might, and the injustice of usurpation, that evidence themselves as its prolific offspring when reduced to *practice*.

To aid the king and sanction measures of public administration, as well as give consent to the enactment of laws, there existed among the Saxons an Assembly or Parliament, termed a Wittena-Gemot, consisting of the nobles or thanes, the dignified clergy, and freemen possessing a given portion of land.^[12] There was also a county court, termed Shire-Gemot, where all the freeholders assembled twice in each year to receive appeals from the inferior courts (probably the petty courts held by each landholder for conducting the affairs of his own estate); and over this assembly the eorldeorman (earl) and the bishop presided, although they do not appear to have had farther authority allotted to them than was sufficient to keep order among the freeholders, and to offer their advice in causes of difficulty.

^[12] Five hides were at first deemed a sufficient qualification, but the required amount rose gradually to forty.

To obtain nobility among the Saxons required one of three qualifications, birth, valour, or wisdom. The parents who had distinguished themselves by either of the latter means transmitted their honors to their children. They who were born of obscure or moderate parentage (provided they were free) had, however, the path of distinction open to them to pursue at will. They who gained their nobility by valour were termed *adelingi*; they who gained it by wisdom in peace (because generally the fruit of experience) were termed *aldermanni* (senators or elder men); and they who gained it by a mixed valour and wisdom in war, being illustrious for success rather than simple courage, were termed *heretochii*.

Beneath the nobles there were two distinct classes, each capable of a subdivision; viz., the freemen, and the slaves or villains. The freeborn (*frilingi*) were either *custodes pagani*, country gentlemen, or simply *pagani*, ceorles or yeomen; while the villains were distinguished as *lazzi*, bondmen, or *free lazzi*, freedmen or manumitted slaves.

Of these all except the two last had a share in the representation of their respective states, and free access to, if not the right of voting at, the Micklemote or Wittena-Gemot when assembled.

Whether the priests formed originally a part of the Witan is difficult to determine, but unquestionably they did so after Christianity was received among the Saxons; for within six years after Augustin's arrival (A. D. 597) Ethelbert, king of Kent, having summoned a council "tam *Cleri*, quam *Populi*," distinguished himself as the promulgator of the earliest written laws of the Anglo-Saxons which are now extant. Of the lawgivers next following him, Hlothære and Eadric, as well as Whitræd, little beyond their names is known; but about a century after Ethelbert's time, Ina promulgated a fresh and more extensive Code of Laws, "suasu et instituto *Episcoporum*, omnium *Senatorum* et natu *majorum sapientium populi*; in *magnâ servorum Dei frequentia*." After him Offa promulgated laws throughout his dominions, but these are not now separately extant: and about a century later Alfred the Great, "consultu *sapientium*," retained and confirmed all the righteous laws of Ethelbert, Ina, and Offa, while he reformed or rescinded those enactments which circumstances had rendered less efficient or less advisable to be retained.

"The laws of Offa," remarks Sir Francis Palgrave,^[13] "have not been retained in their original form, and we cannot distinguish them in the capitulary of the king of Wessex. But the laws of Ina are annexed to the statute of Alfred, and perhaps we only possess them in his edition. There was no incorporate union of the Saxon kingdoms, and it is, therefore, probable that there were two promulgations of Alfred's laws, one statute for the West-Saxons, and to which the laws of Ina were appended, and another for Mercia, since lost, to which the laws of Offa were, in like manner, annexed."

^[13] Rise and progress of the English constitution.—*Chap. 2.*

It is of course with diffidence that any opinion is set forth which seems to run counter to so eminent an authority as Palgrave; but there does appear a plausible reason (if not a sufficient one) for the laws of Offa not being found under a separate title; viz., that the laws termed those of Alfred, independent of Ina and Ethelbert, were those of Offa! This idea is corroborated by the circumstance, that Alfred did not assume to himself so much credit as a *Lawmaker* as a collector and improver of laws; for in the preamble to his Code, he says that

he had selected some of its laws, with the approbation and advice of his council, from those of *Offa* and others!

The entire improvements which Offa introduced into the legislation of his kingdom and subjected territories are, at the present day, too difficult of discovery to be clearly elucidated, unless the foregoing hypothesis be adopted: but there may be excepted from this difficulty the laws passed at the legatine council in his reign, held at Calchythe, A. D. 785, when Egfrid his son was associated with him in the government.^[14]

^[14] A. D. 785. Offa appointed Hibbert bishop, archbishop Lambert having resigned some part of his bishopric. Everth, or Egfert, was consecrated king. Adrian the pope sent legates to England to renew the blessings of faith and peace, which St. Gregory sent us by the mission of bishop Augustine.—*Ingram's Sax. Chron.*

The following is from the letter of the legates themselves:

Concilium Calchuthense. Ex Magdeburg. Cent. VIII. c. 9. p. 575.

Proœmium ad Adrianum papam 1.

Nos faventibus sanctis orationibus vestris, hilari vultu vestris jussionibus obtemperantes pereximus; sed impedivit nos is, qui tentat, vento contrario; ille vero qui mitificat fluctus, exaudita vestrâ deprecatione, mitificavit cœrulea freta, et transvexit nos ad portum salutis; ac licet multis periculis afflicto, tamen illæsos Anglorum appulit oris. Igitur suscepti primum ab archiepiscopo laenbarcho sanctæ Dorovernensis ecclesiæ, quæ alio vocabulo Cantia vocitatur, ubi sanctus Augustinus in corpore requiescit; inibi residentes admonuimus ea, quæ necessaria erant. Inde peragrantes pervenimus ad aulam Offæ regis Merciorum. At ille cum ingenti gaudio ob reverentiam beati Petri, et vestri apostolatus honorem suscepit tam nos, quam sacros apices a summa sede delatos.

Tunc convenerunt in unum concilium Offa, rex Merciorum, et Chuniulphus, rex West Saxonum; cui etiam tradidimus vestra syngrammata sancta; ac illi continuo promiserunt se de his vitiis corrigendos. Tunc inito concilio cum prædictis regibus, pontificibus, et senioribus terræ, perpendentes quod angulus ille longè latèq. protenditur; permisimus Theophylactum venerabilem

episcopum, regem Merciorum et Britanniae partes adire. Ego autem assumpto mecum adjutore, quem filius vester excellentissimus rex Carolus, ob reverentiam vestri apostolatus nobiscum misit, virum probatae fidei, Wignodum, abbatem presbyterum, perrexī in regionem Northanhymbrorum ad Ælfwodum regem et archiepiscopum sanctae ecclesiae Eboracae civitatis Eanbaldum. Sed quia praefatus rex longē in borealibus commorabatur, misit jam dictus archiepiscopus missos suos ad regem, qui continuo omni gaudio statuit diem concilii, ad quem convenerunt omnes principes regionis tam ecclesiastici, quam seculares. Sed audientibus nobis relatum est, quod reliqua vitia non minima ibi necessaria erant ad corrigendum. Quia, ut scitis, a tempore sancti Augustini pontificis, sacerdos Romanus nullus illuc missus est, nisi nos.

Scripsimus namq. capitulare de singulis rebus, et per ordinem cuncta disserentes, auribus illorum pertulimus; qui cum omni humilitatis subiectione, et clara voluntate tam admonitionem vestram, quam parvitatem nostram amplexantes, sponponderunt se in omnibus obedire. Tunc nos epistolas vestras eis tradidimus perlegendas, contestantes eos tam in se, quam in subditis sacrata decreta custodire. Hæc namq. sunt capitula, quæ illis pertulimus conservanda esse.

Then follow twenty articles having reference to the clergy, to the kings, and to the people generally.

Then come the signatures of several of the heads of the church, bishops, abbots, &c.

His peractis et datâ benedictione perreximus, assumptis nobiscum viris illustribus legatis regis et archiepiscopi, Maluinum videlicet et Pyttal lectores; qui una nobiscum pergentes, et ipsa decreta secum deferentes in concilium Merciorum, ubi gloriosus rex Offa, cum senatoribus terræ una cum archiepiscopo laenberchto sanctae ecclesiae Dorovernensis, et cæteris episcopis regionum convenerat, et in conspectu concilii clara voce singula capitula perlecta sunt; et tam Latinè quam Teutonicè, quo omnes intelligere possent, dilucidè reserata sunt. Qui omnes consona voce, alacri animo gratias referentes, apostolatus vestri admonitionibus promiserunt, se divino adminiculante favore, juxta qualitatem virium promptissimâ, voluntate in omnibus statuta hæc custodire. Quinetiam, ut supra taxavimus, tam rex, quam principes sui, archiepiscopus cum sociis suis in manu nostra, in

vice Domini vestri, signum sanctæ crucis firmaverunt, et rursum præsentem chartulam, sacrato signo roboraverunt.

Ego Iænberchtus, archiepiscopus sanctæ Dorovernensis ecclesiæ supplex, signo sanctæ crucis subscripsi.

Ego Offa, rex Merciorum, consentiens his statutis, prompta voluntate signo crucis subscripsi.

Then follow the names of twelve bishops, four abbots, three gentlemen, who call themselves *duces*, and of one who styles himself *comes*.—*Wilkins Concilia Mag. Britan. 145–51.*

In page 152.

Papæ Rom.

Adrian I. 14.

Archiep. Cantuar.

Iæmbert 22.

Anno Christi.

785

Reg. Saxon.

Egbert VIII

Imperat.

Constant. VII. 6.

Lichefeldensis episcopatus in archiepiscopatum designatur ab Offa rege. *Ex codice S. Alban. de vita Offæ regis. MS. p. 153. citante clar. Spelm.*

*	*	*	*	*	*
*	*	*	*	*	*

In illo quoq. concilio Offa, rex Merciorum potentissimus, in regem fecit solemniter coronari filium suum primogenitum Egfredum, juvenem strenuum et elegantem, moribusq. decenter redimitum; qui deinceps cum patre idem militans, et in omnibus obsecundans, usq. ad finem vitæ ejus conregnavit.—*Wilkins, p. 152.*

See also Rapin's England, vol. 1. b. 3. A. D. 785 or 787: but Matth. West. assigns 789 for the date of this council.

Calchythe, the *Chelsea* of the present day, was the residence of Offa in the latter part of his reign. It appears to have been chosen from its proximity to London (*caput regni Merciorum. V. Will.*

Malmsb. de Gest. Regum, l. 2. c. 4.), many of the municipal laws and privileges of which may fairly be traced to this era. The Lord Mayor, the representative of the Mercian king, is the only individual named in the acknowledgment of a new sovereign; and his official permission must be obtained before the proclamation can take place in the city. These, with many other civic privileges, appear to be the shadows of ancient royalty, standing forth amid the record of past days, the ghostlike remnant of a once more substantial glory!

Among these were the important enactments that no persons of illegitimate birth should ascend the throne, or inherit private property, and that kings should be “a sacerdotibus et senioribus populi eligantur;” that the Nicene Creed should be adopted; that bishops should visit their dioceses once a year; that tithes were to be paid, but that no tributes to the church were to be larger than was provided by the Roman law; that the rich and powerful should judge righteous judgment; with other provisions of minor importance.

Brief as is this notice of the Anglo-Saxon government, it is sufficient to show, that it was indebted to Offa for alterations and improvements, which, from the security and length of his reign, and their subsequent adoption by the great Alfred, may be fairly conceived to have been dictated by judgment, and enforced by a prudent exercise of power.

The first irruption of the Danes into Britain is said to have taken place during Offa's reign, and to have been by him, for a time at least, successfully repressed.^[15] But there is one event to which no allusion has yet been made, which has had greater effect in inducing posterity to form a judgment on his character than even the repulse of the early attacks of the *Vikingr*. An event that, if unrecorded, would have left him an almost stainless glory, but which, when fairly stated, leaves the painful impression that the blot of homicide darkens his otherwise fair escutcheon.

^[15] It was in this reign that the Danes first made their appearance on the British coast. “The reve (sheriff of the county) then rode thereto, and would drive them to the king's town; for he knew not what they were; and there was he slain. These were the

first ships of the Danish men, that sought the nation of the English.”—*Ingr. Sax. Chron.*

After Brithric, king of Wessex, and Æthelred of Deira had, with the hands of his daughters Eadburga and Ælfleda, received their kingdoms once again in subjection to themselves, Albert, or Ethelbert, king of the East-Angles, came with a lordly train to sue for the hand of Alfreda, the remaining daughter.^[16] Brave, yet pious; elegant, yet modest; exalted in station, yet humble in soul; the amiable and interesting Ethelbert was publicly welcomed to the court of Offa. The festal hall was decked for his reception, the spousal banquet spread, the goblet graced the board. The hospitable meal in seeming friendly confidence passed over; the prince retired to his sumptuous couch to rest; and the morrow brought the accession of a kingdom’s wealth to Mercia clogged by the weight of treacherous and inhospitable murder!^[17]

^[16] A. D. 791. Eadburga married Brithric king of Wessex.—*M. West. 282. Chr. Mailros, 139; but 787 is the date assigned to this event in Ingr. Sax. Chron.*

792. “This year Offa, king of Mercia, commanded that king Ethelbert should be beheaded; and Osred who had been king of the Northumbrians (Deira), returning home after his exile, was apprehended, and slain on the eighteenth day before the calends of October. His body is deposited at Tinemouth. Ethelred this year, on the third day before the calends of October, took unto himself a new wife, whose name was Elfreda.”—*Ingr. Sax. Chron. p. 79. Chron. Mailr.*

The following couplet describes the person and character of the unfortunate Ethelbert.

“Albertus juvenis fuerat rex, fortis in armis,
Pace pius, pulcher corpore, mente sagax.”
Vita Offæ Secundi.

For fuller particulars see an interesting chapter in Holinshed’s History, b. 6. ch. 5.

^[17] The Monk of St. Albans agrees with Matth. Westr. in recording that Cynedritha proposed to Offa the murder of their guest, but that he indignantly refused; and that subsequently she

prepared a device of a sinking platform in Ethelbert's chamber, so that when he threw himself on his couch it sank with his weight, and he was immediately suffocated by assassins who were on the watch in the chamber below. The difference however in the latter part of their narratives is as follows: M. Westr. states that Offa secluded himself from public and refused to taste food for three days,—but that, notwithstanding, as Ethelbert had died without heirs he despatched a powerful force to East Anglia to take possession of the kingdom. The Monk of St. Alban's, in the most approved style of legendary lore, proceeds with the history of Ethelbert's body after his murder. He states that his head was cut off, after suffocation, and the body and head being put into a sack were carried away: being dark, the head rolled out unseen and unobserved, and a blind man chancing to come that way kicked against it—he took it up, and anointed his eyes with the *sacred blood*, and immediately his sight was restored! Poetic justice is also dispensed to Cynedritha by this writer: he affirms that Offa had her shut up in punishment and seclusion for ever: that some years afterwards her place of retirement was broken in upon by robbers for the sake of her gold and silver, and that she was precipitated down her own well where her wretched existence was terminated. The archbishop of Lichfield is further stated to have begged the body of Ethelbert and buried it at Hereford, where miracles were performed by it! *Matth. West. A. D. 792.—Vita Offæ Secundi.*

In *Leland's Collectanea*, vol. 1. p. 210, the following marvellous record is also to be found: "Ethelbertus (after death) cuidam Brithfrid prædiviti viso apparuit, jubens, ut ejus corpus efferret ad locum nomine stratus waye, et juxta monaster: eodem loco situm sepeliret. Brithfrid adjuncto socio Egmundo quod jussit fecerunt, et corpus una cum capite in loco qui Fernlega, id est saltus filicis, dicebatur, nunc vero Hereford, sepeliverunt."

It has been the effort of several historians to cast the blame of this foul transaction upon Offa's queen Cynedritha; but as all concur in stating the welcome given to the youthful monarch, and the subsequent and immediate assumption of dominion over his realms by his intended father-in-law, no inference can be drawn but that Offa was himself a *particeps criminis*: and when viewed even in the most lenient possible light an *accessory after the fact*.

Brief was the monarch's career posterior to this inhuman deed. Ere two years had passed he sank overwhelmed with remorse and sorrow into the cold embraces of the tomb. Within five months his promising successor, Egfrid, followed him to the grave—his abandoned queen soon closed her vicious career—the betrothed bride of the murdered Ethelbert wasted her widowed beauty in the monasterial walls of Croyland—Eadburga, the profligate and homicidal widow of Brithric perished miserably—and the race of Offa no more existed in the land!^[18]

^[18] A. D. 794. "This year died pope Adrian; and also Offa, king of Mercia, on the fourth day before the ides of August, after he had reigned forty winters. Everth (Egfrid) took to the government and died the same year."—*Ingr. Sax. Chr.*, p. 65. 80. V. also Speed's Chron., p. 345, A. D. 794. Chron. Mailros, A. D. 796. M. West., 797. Ethelward's Chron., 840. Bromton, 748–52. Leland's Collectanea, vol. 1. p. 210. Ingulphus by Gale, p. 7. Hoveden, 410. Huntingdon, 344. Flor. Wig., 281. Higden, 251. Radulf. de Dicet., 446. Asseri Annal., 154. Malmsbury by Savile, 88. Spelman's Concilia, 308. Holinshed, book 6. ch. 4.

The following is the dreadful character of Eadburga as given by Asser "de Ælfredi rebus gestis."—p. 3.

"Cujus (viz. Offæ) filiam nomine Eadburgh Beorhtric occidentalium Saxonum rex sibi in conjugium accepit: quæ confestim accepta regis amicitia, et totius pene regni potestate, *more paterno* tyrannice vivere incœpit, et omnem hominem execrari, quem Beorhtric diligeret, et omnia odibilia Deo et hominibus facere: et omnes quos posset, ad regem accusare, et ita aut vita aut potestate per insidias privare: et si a rege impetrare non posset, veneno eos necabat: sicut de adolescente quodam regi dilectissimo hoc factum compertum habetur: quem cum ad regem accusare non posset, veneno eum necavit. De quo veneno etiam præfatus ille Beorhtric rex inscienter gustasse aliquid refertur. Neque enim illa venenum dare regi proposuerat, sed puero, sed rex præoccupavit: inde ambo periire."

According to the same authority (p. 4) this wretched woman died a beggar in Pavia.

I have not succeeded in ascertaining what became of Ælfleda, but her husband "Ethelred, king of the Northumbrians, was slain

by his own people on the thirteenth day before the calends of May," in the same year that Offa died.—*V. Ingr. Sax. Chr. p. 80.*

The mind of the philosopher, the historian, and the poet, must alike reflect with pain, that there was one gigantic genius who might lay claim to the laurels of all, and could yet allow his opinions to be so biassed by prejudice as to declare the records of the times to which we have been alluding to be worthless as a history of the contests of kites and crows!^[19] The intellect that controlled the infancy of a mighty nation was spurned, because it did not chance to be in existence when that nation had advanced to maturity—but it surely needs no new observation to pronounce that the germs of originality will develop themselves at all times and under all circumstances. Events may doubtless occur to evolve them with a peculiar force, and education and early habit may deck them with characteristic colouring; but where the spirit of originality—the essence of causation—exists, it *will* find a vent for its exhibition, whether it rise in the breast of an Offa amid an age of comparative barbarism, or burst from the mind of a Napoléon, to stalk with the grandeur of a son of Anak superior to a host of petty minds, narrowed by the extreme polish of that very civilization upon which they chiefly pride themselves.

^[19] Milton.

Had not the genius of Offa led the way by subjecting so large a portion of England to his control, it is scarcely probable that Egbert would have succeeded so early as within a few years from his decease in uniting the divided kingdoms under his government. Nor should it be forgotten that the future monarch of all England took his early lessons in the rude chivalry of the times at the court of Offa, by whom he was protected from the persecution of Brithric:^[20] thence passing in safety by the connivance of his friend to the dominions of Charlemagne, he was entertained by that illustrious emperor till the death of Brithric left the kingdom of Wessex open to his claims. And on his return to his native land, he showed plainly that the ambitious designs of his early protector yet lived in his bosom, and but a transient period intervened ere the divided House of the Octarchy owned him as their common Lord.

[20] V. Holinshed, b. 6.

To Offa then, as the preserver, and to a certain extent the instructor, of the first sole monarch of England, the present age must look back with gratitude as the founder of the limited monarchy of the land; but as he is said by one of his historians^[21] to have been a man in whom virtue and vice were so mingled, as to render it difficult to say whether of the twain were predominant—so in the legacy of spiritual slavery which he bequeathed to his kingdom, it is a question whether the advantages arising from unity in political government were not more than counterbalanced.

[21] “Offa was a man of great mind, and who would endeavour to bring to effect what he had preconceived. He reigned thirty-nine years. When I consider the deeds of this man I am doubtful whether I should commend or censure. At one time, in the same character, vices were so palliated by virtues, and at another virtues came in such quick succession upon vices, that it is difficult to determine how to characterize the changing Proteus.”—*William of Malmsbury*.

It must be remembered, however, that William of Malmsbury was an interested party; and therefore his testimony as to Offa’s character must be regarded as coming from a source somewhat prejudiced against him.—V. note ²³.

Not only did Offa, by his application to the Pope for permission to transfer the province of Canterbury to Lichfield, recognize the principle of interference in the ecclesiastical government of this country on the part of the bishop of Rome, but he is expressly stated to have made his whole realm tributary to that See. And it is certain that in paying Romescot^[22] he followed the example of Ina, who in the year 697 “was the first that caused the monie called Peter Pence to be paid unto the bishop of Rome, which was for everie houshold within his dominion a penie.”

[22] The alms of “Romescot,” “Heord (hearth) penny,” or “Peter-pence,” “arose by degrees and parcels: for first Ina, the Saxon king, granted a penny out of every house in his kingdom. After, Offa granted it out of every dwelling house that had ground thereto, occupied to the yearly value of thirty pence, *excepting the lands which he had purposed for the monastery of St. Albans*.

This Offa had a much larger dominion than Ina, and was king over three and twenty shires. After whom Æthelwolf passed a new grant thereof out of his whole kingdom, which was well nigh all that part which was called Saxony, with this proviso, nevertheless, that where a man had divers dwelling houses he was only to pay for that house wherein he dwelt at the time of payment. Afterwards Edward the Confessor confirmed that donation out of such tenements as had thirty pence, '*vivæ pecuniæ*.'"—*Bacon, chap. 11th. V. also Holinshed, b. 6. ch. 1.*

The particulars of Offa's visit to Rome, at which city the arrangements alluded to in the text took place, are recorded by the monk of St. Albans as follows, viz.:—*Matth. Paris, Vita Offæ Secundi, 18.*

Offa igitur rex piissimus, suorum magnatum sano adquiescens consilio, divino ductus spiritu, transalpinum valdè laboriosum et sumptuosum iter arripit, sine moræ dispendio. Nec eum cura rei familiaris, vel regni custodiendi necessitas, vel comminantis senii gravitas, nec laboris immanitas, vel pecuniæ inæstimabiliter effusio ipsum poterant retardare, stabilem retinens in proposito cordis intentionem, ut sicut beatus Albanus protomartyr refulsit Angligenis, ita et monasterium ejus omnibus regni Cænobiis, possessionibus similiter et libertatibus, necnon et privilegiis, præfulgeat et præponatur.

Præparatis igitur edicto regio navibus, cum navium armamentis, rex puppes ascendit, et sinuatis velis, prospero cursu in quodam portu maris in Flandria applicuit, desiderato. Veniensq. ad quoddam oppidum, ubi quoddam erat monasteriolum, hospitandi gratia illuc divertit. Ubi jumentis suis pabula non inveniens, miratur valdè, quum locus ille pratorum copia conspicitur abundare. Quærit ergo rex, cujus sint prata illa? Responsum accipit, quod Dominos plures haberent qui jubentur omnes, ante regem comparere. Convenit igitur eos, de venditione pratorum illorum. At ipsi responderunt, dicentes, se nolle prata sua vendere, cum auro et argento satis abundassent, nec habebant propter egestatem necesse, alicui, præcipuè transeunti, sua vel prata vel rura vendere. Quos cum audisset rex divitiis omnimodis abundare, ait rex magnificus et munificus: "Credo quòd non sic abundetis, quin non possitis ampliùs abundare. Nos prata vestra comparabimus, non secundum eorum æstimationem, sed juxta vestram. Nec erit ulla difficultas de pretio, licèt nulla sit propriatio in contrahendo." Ipsi verò considerantes regis licèt piissimi potentiam, et quòd si

vellet, parvo nutu posset eos obruisse, responderunt, se velle voluntati suæ obsecundare, si tot nullia ipsis vellet numerare. Et nominaverunt tot millia, quot credebant regem nullo modo, licet prodigalissimus esset et inæstimabiliter abundaret, illis velle numerare, quia prata sua vendere non curabant.

Dinumerata deniq. pro distractione pratorum pecunia a loco rex progreditur, et Romam tandem perveniens, optata Apostolorum limina contingit, et diversorum loca Sanctorum percurrit: demum Adriano summo Pontifici, sub causam adventus explicans, et de loco, simul et beato Albano canonizando, et magnificando, Cænobioq. constituendo, devotè preces porrigens petitioni suæ Romanam de facili curiam inclinavit: Præsertim cùm Martyris inventio cælitus mortalibus sit declarata. Adaugebat quoq. omnium devotionem, quòd non cuilibet de populo, sed tanto taliq. Regi, tam magni Martyris sui pignora Dominus revelavit. De monasterio igitur conventuali, videlicet cænobiali, dignè ac celeriter constituendo, et ab omni Episcoporum subjectione emancipando, Papam et totam curiam consulit cum effectū.

Cumq. inclytus rex Offa eleganter perorasset, Romanus Pontifex humiliter ac favorabiliter inclinato capite, sic respondit. “O regum christianissimè, fili Offa, devotionem tuam circa regni tui protomartyrem, non mediocriter commendamus.” Nec nos quamvis, remotos, latet vestra strenuitas vel sincera sanctitas. Verè Cælibem vitam agentibus, meritò mittendus fuit angelus, cum castitati cognita sit puritas angelica, et cum favorabilis sit persona tua, favorabilior est causa quam proponis in medio, et labor tuæ peregrinationis acceptus est altissimo. De monasterio verò construendo et privilegiando petitioni tuæ assensum præbemus gratissimum; *Injungentes tibi in tuorum remissionem peccatorum*, ut prosperè ac feliciter rediens, cum Dei et mea benedictione in terram ac regnum tuum, consilio Episcoporum et optimatum tuorum, quas volueris possessiones sive libertates beati Albani Anglorum protomartyris cænobio conferas. Et tuo privilegio inde facto, Nos originale tuum privilegio nostro inviolabili gratanter roborabimus et confirmabimus consequenter; et monasterium illud in specialem Romanæ Ecclesiæ filiam adoptabimus, et nostro tantum illud Apostolatui subjicientes, ab omni nocivo cujuslibet mortalium impetu, specialiter mediante Episcopo sive Archiepiscopo, protegemus.

His igitur auditis rex, quid dignè tantæ benignitati compenset secū studiosè pertractat. Tandem divina inspirante gratia consiliū

invenit salubre, et in die crastina, Scholam Anglorum qui tunc Romæ floruit, ingressus, dedit ibi ex regali munificentia ad sustentationem gentis regni sui illuc venientis, singulos argenteos, de familiis singulis, omnibus in posterum diebus, singulis annis. Quibus videlicet, sors tantum contulit extra domos in pascuis, ut triginta argenteorum pretium excederet. Hoc autem per totum suam ditionem teneri in perpetuum constituit. Excepta tota terra Sancti Albani, suo monasterio conferenda, prout postea collata privilegia protestantur. Ut illo denario, à generali cōtributione sic excepto, et dicto monasterio sic collato, memoria donatoris indelibiliter perpetuetur. Et hoc tali largitate obtinuit, et conditione, ut de regno Angliæ nullus publicè pænitens, pro executione sibi injunctæ pænitentiae, subiret exilium.

Celebrata igitur donatione prædicta, et de peccatis omnibus (præcipuè tamen de præliorum multorum commissione) facta confessione, et pro prædicta Cænobii fundatione accepta pænitentia; Cum benedictione devota summi Pontificis, rex ad propria prosperè remeavit.

Matt. Westmonast. relates this in almost the same words, and adds, *p. 288.*

“Tunc congregato apud Verolanium episcoporum et optimatum suorum concilio, unanimi omnium consensu, et voluntate beato Albano amplas contulit terras, et possessiones innumeras, quas multiplici libertatum privilegio insignivit. Monachorum verò conventum, ex domibus benè religiosis ad tumbā martyris congregavit, et abbatum eis nomine VVillegodum præfecit cui cum ipso monasterio, omnia jura regalia concessit.”

It is scarcely less disgusting than instructive to trace throughout the middle ages the growing foliage of superstition, that cast its dim and lengthening shadow over the lovely temple of religion. And when it was the received creed of the time, that donations to the church, of which the bishop of Rome was falsely regarded as the head, were sufficient to compensate for the most heinous crimes, it cannot be surprising that the regal homicide should pay his court to the prevailing idol, or that the wide domains of the wealthy and noble sensualist should in his dying hour (no longer, then, of service to pander to his appetites,) be transferred to the service of that all-powerful agency which professed itself alike enabled to quench the fires of purgatory and unbar the portals of the mansions of eternal

bliss! Offa, the proud and conquering king, stripped of its vested rights the ancient province of Canterbury to aggrandize with spiritual supremacy his own domains^[23]—Offa, the daring and ambitious prince, yielded to the evil suggestions of tempting opportunity, and with a bold and bloody hand seized the broad lands of the sainted martyr Ethelbert. But Offa the pilgrim, the penitent, the failing and remorseful monarch, over whom the feeble halo of an earthly fame had passed and left no bright and pleasing memory behind—Offa, who felt his time at hand and looked through the hazy superstition of a corrupted church upon a vision of purchasable happiness in heaven “in testimony of repentance for the blood that he had spilled, bestowed a tenth of all his goods on the churchmen and on the poor,”^[24] built churches, founded abbeys, and endowed monasteries,^[25] to bribe the God whose laws he had infringed, and bargain at a price for the salvation which had been freely offered!

^[23] In addition to this (viz., the transference of the primacy from Canterbury to Lichfield) he committed other arbitrary depredations on the church. “He seizeth on churches and other religious houses,” says Holinshed. “A downright pilferer,” says William of Malmsbury, “he converted to his own use the lands of many churches, of which Malmsbury was one.” Everth (Egfrid), however, on his coming to the throne, restored to the monasteries the possessions which had been misapplied in former reigns: and gave Malmsbury into the hands of Cuthbert, then abbot of that place.

^[24] Speed’s Chronicle, p. 345.

^[25] There is considerable difficulty as to the dates of some of Offa’s endowments and foundations. His endowment of the English college at Rome (*Matth. West. A. D. 794*), his making Mercia tributary to the See of Rome (*Holinshed, ch. 4, b. 6, vol. 2.*), and his erection and endowment of St. Albans over the body of the English protomartyr, were all subsequent to the murder of Ethelbert. Some of his other donations to the church were as follows: viz.—

He made large gifts of land near Sandwich “monachis ecclesiæ Christi Doroberniæ” at the request of archbishop Lambertus, A. D. 773, Canterbury (*Cant-wara-burh*) having been burned a few years before.—*Dugd. Mon. Angl.*

He freed the abbey of Woking A. D. 775. "In the days of this same Offa was an alderman of the name of Brorda who requested the king for his sake to free his own monastery, called Woking, because he would give it to Medhamsted and St. Peter, and the abbot that then was, whose name was Pusa. Pusa succeeded Beonna; and the king loved him much. And the king freed the monastery of Woking against king, against bishop, against earl, and against all men: so that no man should have any claim there except St. Peter and the abbot. This was done at the king's town called Free-Richburn."—*Ingr. Sax. Chron. p. 75.*

After *Bath* had been devastated by the Danes Offa rebuilt the church of St. Peter about A. D. 775.—*Tanner's Notitia Monastica. V. Somersetshire I.*

At *Bredon* or *Breordun* he founded or endowed a monastery A. D. 780.—*Tanner's Not. Mon. III. Worcestershire 5.*—*Dugd. Mon. Angl.*

He also appears to have granted some endowment or privilege to the cathedral and benedictine priory of Worcester.—*Not. Mon. XXI. Worcestersh. I.*

He was also a liberal donor to (some imagine the founder of) Westminster Abbey. A. D. 785 "Offa granted ten plough-lands at Aldenham in Herts to St. Peter's church, 'et plebi Domini degenti in Torneia' (Thorney Isle, on which the Minster was built). He also 'collected a parcel of monks here' and 'repaired and enlarged the church,' and 'having a great reverence for St. Peter,' continues Sulcardus, 'he in a particular manner honoured it by depositing there the coronation robes and regalia.' He also exempted it from the payment of Romescot."—*Neale's Westminster Abbey, vol. 1. p. 13. Dugd. Mon. by Ellis, I. 266.*

He resettled the see of Dorchester (Oxon), which had experienced some interruption in the succession of its bishops.—*Flor. Wig. 785. Kennett's Paroch. Antiq. p. 33.*

He built a nunnery at Winchelcombe (called Winchcumb by Dugdale), A. D. 787.—*Not. Mon. XXXIII. Gloucestershire I.*

He gave "between the years 791 and 794 to Athelard, archbishop of Canterbury thirty tributaries of land on the north side of the Thames, at a place called Twittenham."—*Lyson's Twickenham.*

But the most important of Offa's foundations was that of St. Alban's abbey. I have followed the date of Ingram's Saxon Chronicle, Speed, and others, in assigning 794 as the period of his death, and therefore cannot suppose the foundation of St. Alban's to have been later than that year, though it may have been the year previous. (V. *Storr's Chron.*) From *Tanner's Not. Mon. (l. Hertfordshire, l.)* we learn that A. D. 793 a noble abbey for one hundred Benedictine monks was founded by Offa. The Chronicler Speed says that in A. D. 795 "Offa in honour of St. Albane, and in repentance of his sins, built a magnificke monastery (over against Verolamium in the place then called Holmehurst, where that protomartyr of Britaine for the constant profession of the Faith lost his head), indowing it with lands and rich revenewes for the maintenance of an hundred monks. Upon the first gate of entrance in stone standeth cut a salteir argent in a field azure, and is assigned by the judicious in Heraldry to bee the armes that he bare."—*Book 7. ch. 28.*

Matthew of Westminster and others assign different dates varying from A. D. 793 to 797 to this foundation, and the Monk of St. Albans agrees with Matth. West. in recording the vision of an angel which occurred to Offa at Bath, wherein he was instructed by the heavenly visitant to exhume and place in a tomb worthy of him the body of St. Alban. This design he subsequently named to the Pope, for which the Holy Pontiff commended him, and promised to take the projected abbey of St. Alban under his especial protection "nullo episcopo sive archiepiscopo mediante."

Speed further states, that Offa built a church in Warwickshire after his return from Rome, "where the adjoining town from it and him beareth the name of *Off-Church*:" and that at Bath he built "*another* monastery." Perhaps it is to this last, and not to St. Peter's church which was rebuilt by him (see *ante*), to which Dugdale refers in his *Mon. Angl.* when he says, "Monasterium Batoniense rex Offa construxit, quod post rex Edgarus, sicut alia monasteria reparavit."

To the above Holinshed adds the church of Hereford, which he states that he "indowed with great revenues." *Hist. Engl. b. 6. ch. 4.*

But with all his faults and failings, Offa was a great, an illustrious character! The stain, the indelible stain of the pure and high-minded Ethelbert's blood must remain to deface his memory; yet cannot it

annihilate the brilliant talents that the Mercian king displayed in war—the nobleness and independence of spirit that could not, for an instant, brook an alien interference—the humanity he showed in bestowing burial on the bodies of his enemies slain in battle^[26]—his personal humility when in the height of prosperity^[27]—his judgment and affection in associating with himself in the government of the kingdom his noble and pious son—his admirable policy in restoring to the conquered kings of Wessex and of Deira their respective realms, and of binding them to his interests by giving them his daughters in marriage—his systematic enforcement of the majesty of the law^[28]—his knowledge of human nature in ordaining regular insignia of royalty^[29]—or his early patriotism and unflinching valour that wrested from the tyrant rebel the empurpled crown, and wreathed for the diadem a garland of victory to grace his own commanding brow!^[30]

^[26] V. Vita Offæ Secundi.

^[27] “As a conqueror over all his enemies triumphantly after ten years’ wars abroad returned he to his own kingdome, neither puffed with pride, nor suffering his title to be enlarged according to his conquests.”—*Speed’s Chronicle*.

^[28] Alcuin bears this testimony to Offa’s laws not long after his death: “Vos quoque omnem gentem Merciorum admoneatis ut *mores bonos et modestos et castros* diligenter observent, quos beatæ memoriæ Offa illis instituit.”

Ex Epist. Albini ad quendam Anglum patritii ord. virum. Leland’s Collect. vol. 1. p. 402.

^[29] “He was not neglectiue of regall state,” by the report of the Ligger booke of St. Alban’s, which saith, “that in regard of his great prerogatiue, and not of any pride, *he first* instituted and commanded, that even in times of peace also, himselfe and his successors in the crowne should, as he passed through any cities, have trumpettters going and sounding before them, to shew that the person of the king should breed both feare and honor in all which either see him or heare him.” *Speed’s Chronicle, p. 345.*

^[30] The death of Offa took place at Offa-leia, or Off-ley. *Speed says 29th July, 794. Ingr. Sax. Chron. A. D. 794. Mailros. 796. Matth. West. 797.*

In bold relief he stands amid a crowd of inferior souls—and if cruelty did occasionally embrue his sword in needless blood—if a weak yielding to an artful woman's wiles does stain his memory—if a blind and superstitious following of blind and superstitious as well as artful guides lead posterity to doubt the healthy vigour of his intellect—let it be remembered, that for his faults he was mainly indebted to the unlettered days in which he lived—his virtues and his talents were such as could not fail to render him illustrious, had he lived in a far more advanced and highly civilized age than that which he adorned.

END.

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In [Footnote 16](#), “*Vita Offæ 2*” superscript “di.” has been transcribed as “*Vita Offæ Secundi*.”

Changes that have been made are:

- [Footnote 4](#), from “anfugavit,” to “aufugavit” in “Nam *Offa* infra suum primum annum eum aufugavit,”
- [Footnote 14](#), from “filum” to “filium” in “... in regem fecit solemniter coronari filium suum ...”
- [Footnote 17](#), from “jubeus” to “jubens” in “... Brithfrid prædiviti viso apparuit, jubens,”
- [Footnote 22](#), from “corum” to “eorum” in “... non secundum eorum æstimationem,”

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