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Godwin and Berkeley, a Legend

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GODWIN AND BERKELEY: A LEGEND

Walter Map was a friend of Becket and Archdeacon of Oxford. In addition to more serious works he has left a collection of 'Court Gossip', compiled about the end of the reign of Henry II (1170-92). Here we find a story of Godwin which is worth repeating, were it only to show how a lively imagination and cheerful disregard of fact can produce an interesting though entirely fictitious scandal—which has naturally become firmly embedded in 'history'.

In 1046 Swegen the son of Godwin seduced Eadgifu, Abbess of Leominster. He was refused permission to marry her and retired to Denmark: the abbey was dissolved and its endowments reverted to Edward, or rather to his Queen, Edith the daughter of Godwin. Walter Map seems to have got hold of some nebulous version of this, and has reproduced it with his usual wealth of 'artistic detail'.

'At Berkeley on the Severn there was an abbey, of which the Abbess was both noble and lovely (*abbatissa nobilis et formosa*). Godwin coveted not her person but the abbey lands and therefore sent a young and handsome nephew (*nepotem juvenem elegantissimae formae*), who seduced both the Abbess and many of the nuns (*abbatissae multarumque*), Venus having displaced Pallas. Their frailty being exposed, the community was dissolved and Godwin obtained the property'.¹

Were there any nuns at Berkeley? Nothing is known of the early history of the abbey. Tilhere, Bishop of Worcester 777-81, witnesses deeds as Abbot of Berkeley in 759 and 775.² And Florence of Worcester writes that Ethelhun, Abbot of Berkeley, became Bishop of Worcester in 915 (and died 922). In the intervening years we read of the abbey mainly in connection with lawsuits. The origin of these dates back to 802, when Ethelmund,

¹ *De Nugis Curialium*: Walter Map. Bodley MS. 851; ed. M. R. James, Oxford, 1914. *Distinctio V*, cap. iii. (condensed).

² Taylor, C. S. *Berkeley Minster*. *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, 1894, xix, p. 70.

ealdorman of the Huiccii, was killed at Kempford on the Thames while leading the forces of Mercia against Wessex. King Kenulf thereupon appointed his widow Ciolburga 'Abbess' of Berkeley. This was a well-established method of providing for a retired statesman or his widow. The incumbent was not necessarily of the same sex as the inmates, so that a woman might be 'Abbess' of a house of monks: it was not even essential for the titular head to be 'in religion', that is, to take vows. In fact only in 803 at the Council at Cloveshoe (Cliff-at-Hoo in Kent) were such lay appointments forbidden. Possibly it was this enactment which landed Ciolburga in difficulties: anyhow, in 804 her son Ethelric secured to her use property at Westbury and Stoke, near Bristol, 'in order that during her life she might have protection against the contentions of the people of Berkeley'; with reversion to the See of Worcester. Clearly, though the King had the right to appoint the head of a royal monastery, the monks regarded the lady as merely titular 'Abbess', and her son found it necessary not only to provide her with an income independent of the abbey funds, but even to advise her to appeal to the Bishop if they made trouble.

Ciolburga died in 807, but the abbey stuck to her land, and it was not until 824, when Heaberht Bishop of Worcester got possession of the title deeds of the Westbury property, that he was able to get his claim to it recognised at Cloveshoe. There is no mention then of any abbess or of course of nuns, but 210 priests witnessed the settlement at Westbury. Yet the See of Worcester did not succeed in recovering the Stoke lands until 883, in which year the final settlement was signed by King Alfred, ealdorman Ethelred and Ethelhun Abbot of Berkeley. From start to finish there is no hint of nuns, nor except for Ciolburga of any woman, at Berkeley Abbey.

The whole story is highly improbable, and would ordinarily have been dismissed as 'another of Map's amusing fictions'. If Godwin had decided to appropriate abbey property he was not the man to waste time by such roundabout methods as these. Unfortunately, though it seems impossible that Map knew of it, there is an entry in the Domesday of Gloucestershire

under 'Udecestre':—'Gueda, mother of Earl Harold, held Woodchester. Earl Godwin bought it and gave it to his wife that she might be maintained from thence while she dwelt at Berkeley. For she was unwilling to eat anything from that manor on account of the destruction of the Abbey.'¹

The standard commentary is, 'The abbey had therefore been destroyed *in the time of Godwin* and he had a *share in its destruction*, but his wife refused to profit by the sacrilege': for which, however, there is not a shred of evidence. Had Godwin secured the manor of Berkeley for himself it would be shown in Domesday as having belonged, *tempore regis Edouardi, to Heraldus Comes*,² just as Woodchester had belonged to his mother. But no: the 1066 owner is given as *Rex, i.e., King Edward*, for the land was 'ancient demesne of the crown', to which of course it reverted when the abbey ceased to exist. A religious community was always *familia: abbatia* can only mean the abbey buildings, and 'destruction' indicates something far more drastic than mere dissolution. If Godwin had secured the property for himself he would obviously have taken as good care to conserve the domestic buildings as did those who obtained monastic estates in 1539.

Now in 910 the Danes sailed up the Severn and 'plundered Mercia as far as Avon'. As they retreated, laden with booty, to rejoin their ships at Sharpness, they were caught by the Mercians at Cambridge, just north-east of (modern) Berkeley, and defeated with great slaughter at Wanswell. Since the abbey buildings were at Oldminster, now covered by the railway sidings of Sharpness Dock, and two miles west of Wanswell, it is not surprising that we hear no more of the abbey after that time. It cannot be that an important religious establishment, owning one of the largest estates in Gloucestershire, existed from 915 to 1086 without a single mention of any kind: or that

¹ *Godwinus comes emit et dedit suae uxori ut inde viveret donec ad Berchelai maneret. Nolebat enim de ipso manerio aliquid comedere propter destructionem abbatiae.*

² *cf.* Nass, Kempsford, Alveston, etc. The Domesday commissioners always record Harold as 'Earl', never 'King', and omit no occasion of denigrating him or his family.

its destruction passed unrecorded,¹ unless swallowed up in some general catastrophe. The obvious inference is that it was totally and finally destroyed in 910.

When did Gueda 'dwell' at Berkeley? Her actual dwelling was probably on the low crest where Berkeley Castle now stands, some miles from the ruined abbey. There was no castle then, but perhaps a substantial manor house with palisade or other defences, and also apparently a small township with church and market.² In his youth Godwin was a favourite of Cnut, who made him earl, gave him his niece Gueda, daughter and heiress of his murdered brother Ulf, in marriage and employed him in the Scandinavian wars—perhaps from 1019, probably from 1025 to 1029. It was, I suggest, at this time that the earl left his young wife in the comparative security of her uncle's royal manor of Berkeley, buying Woodchester so that she might 'be independent': his own estates were mainly in Kent, perhaps too much exposed to attack for him to feel at ease. If the Domesday commissioners' hint is justified, and she genuinely felt scruples about eating the produce of 'Church land', it must have been because she thought her uncle should re-dedicate it. Cnut's lavish donations to the church were an avowed attempt to atone for former Danish ravage.

It might, of course, be argued that Godwin had indeed obtained possession of Berkeley, but that after his death in 1053 the property reverted to the crown. This contradicts the *Chronicle*: 'Earl Harold, his son, succeeded . . . to all his possessions'. But it involves the greater difficulty that the saintly Edward, at the very time (1056) that he was robbing Pershore and Deerhurst to endow his great abbey at Westminster, was clinging to a richer estate that had quite recently been church property—about which, too, his mother-in-law held strong views. We encounter such quotations as 'Godwin made far too few amends regarding Church property which he had taken'. But

¹ The Benedictine revival in Gloucestershire was about 969; the Danish invasion by land in 1015 did not affect this area.

² Domesday notes that Roger, the King's Provost at Berkeley, claims the five hides at Sharpness which had belonged to Bernard the priest, *i.r.e.* and which Earl William has set apart for building the castle.

the actual words are 'which he had taken from many holy places'. That is, he did not pay for his requisitions: the *Abingdon Chronicle* records just before the sentence quoted, 'They did no great harm, except to seize provisions': the 'church property' was not real estate.

But only a few months before at Gloucester Godwin had been unable to obtain a hearing because the Normans had gained the king's ear: and their leader was Robert, the new Norman archbishop and a personal enemy of Godwin, who had supported the English candidate Aelric. Beverstone where Harold camped was actually part of the Berkeley estate. If Godwin had possessed himself of a rich church property only a few miles away, if it had but been suggested that he had had a hand in its fall, what a magnificent opportunity! Some record of such a damning charge must have survived. But the Chronicles give no hint of it: the early (1074) 'life of Edward', Florence of Worcester (1116), William of Malmesbury (1142) who gives us such details about the quarrel, Giraldus Cambrensis, Map's friend—even the thirteenth century 'Estoire de Seint Aedward' which also describes the quarrel—all are silent. Despite this, Map's anecdote is 'too good to leave out'; affording as it does an 'interesting' though entirely unjustified explanation of the Domesday sentence, it has found its way directly or disguised into many histories and even into modern accounts of Godwin or of Berkeley in the sober 'Transactions' of learned societies. Yet if we resist the temptations of salacious excitement and rely on probability and contemporary evidence, our decision, I submit, must be:—

1. There is no evidence of nuns at Berkeley;
2. The abbey was destroyed by the Danes in 910;
3. The property then reverted to the crown; and
4. Godwin never had any connection with it.

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