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**The Building of a Great Church: the Abbey of St Peter's,  
Gloucester, and its early Norman Benefactors**

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## The Building of a Great Church: The Abbey of St. Peter's, Gloucester, and its early Norman Benefactors

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The *Historia* of the abbey of St. Peter's, Gloucester, which was completed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century in the time of abbot Walter Frowcester (1381–1412), describes a monastery whose condition at the time of the Norman Conquest of England was far from prosperous.<sup>1</sup> Its account associates the community's growth with the rule of the first Norman abbot, Serlo (1072–1104), a former canon of Avranches and monk of Mont-St-Michel. When Serlo assumed his responsibilities at Gloucester he apparently had only two monks and eight novices under his authority; by his death the size of the community is supposed to have grown to one hundred. Another important feature of Serlo's work was the beginning of a new abbey church, a large building in an original style, much of which still survives; the foundation stone was laid by bishop Robert of Hereford in 1089 and the church, although certainly not completed, was consecrated in 1100. Even if some of the *Historia's* statements – particularly the account of near-desertion in 1066 – are regarded as exaggerations, the fact remains that abbot Serlo's personal achievement was a very great one. The present article merely seeks to fill out and to an extent explain the circumstances in which so much was accomplished, through a study of the abbey's early Norman benefactors. In particular it offers reasons why abbot Serlo was able to build on so lavish a scale.

Domesday Book shows Gloucester abbey's estates to have lain in the four counties of Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire and to have been worth £99 in 1086. It also demonstrates that abbot Serlo had followed a policy of energetic estate-management, since the value of the abbey's lands had doubled since 1066.<sup>2</sup> But Gloucester was far from being among the wealthiest English monasteries; according to Dom. David Knowles's calculations it was in twenty-second place on a list headed by Glastonbury whose lands were worth £827 18s 8d.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the Norman Conquest the abbey's property was not plundered, as was the fate of several houses. The only obvious hint of a crisis is the departure on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, on which he died, of the last English abbot, Wulfstan (1058–72), which might include him among those abbots such as Aethelsige of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, who could not accommodate themselves to the new regime. Also, lands in Gloucestershire at Standish, Oddington and Northleach, which had been appropriated by archbishop Ealdred of York in 1058 when he had rebuilt the abbey church, and which were worth £49 in 1086, had been transferred to his successor, archbishop Thomas (1070–1100).<sup>4</sup>

The abbey received benefactions from some of the Norman newcomers. The Conqueror himself is said by the *Historia* to have given Nympsfield (Glos.) in abbot Wulfstan's time and other properties in abbot Serlo's, although only Barnwood of these supposed gifts occurs as Gloucester property in Domesday Book.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise the abbey is known to have received grants only from Walter de Lacy and his wife Emmelina and from Arnulf de Hesdin; these gifts being made from 1080 onwards: Walter and Emmelina gave property at Upleadon (Glos.) and



Duntisbourne Abbots (Glos.); Arnulf, at Linkenholt (Hants.).<sup>6</sup> Both these men were among the major beneficiaries from the Norman Conquest. Walter de Lacy had come over to England as a follower of William fitz Osbern and had become a tenant-in-chief as a result of the forfeiture of fitz Osbern's son Roger in 1075.<sup>7</sup> Arnulf was a Fleming with estates scattered through thirteen counties in Domesday Book. His piety and generosity to the Church were praised by William of Malmesbury.<sup>8</sup> He died at Antioch on the First Crusade. Aside from such royal grants as may have been made, the abbey of St. Peter's, Gloucester, received gifts only from local and notably religious benefactors in the period before 1086. Their total value according to Domesday Book amounted to £9 10s.<sup>9</sup>

The flood of donations which began in the 1090's is evidenced by numerous charters in the Gloucester cartularies, by the list of benefactions in the *Historia*, and by William Rufus's confirmation charter which is dated to 1096.<sup>10</sup> A precise chronology of these donations is hard to establish since the various documents can sometimes be in conflict with one another. Thus, for example, the gift of a mill at Framilode by Winebald de Ballon appears in the 1096 charter, but is dated by the *Historia* to 1126.<sup>11</sup> In the *Historia* archbishop Thomas's renunciation of Standish, Oddington and Northleach is dated 1095, which disagrees with a forged writ of the Conqueror which would date the transaction to 1070, and with the various testimonies on the histories of the properties submitted in the later 1140's which would place the restitution in the early 1090's.<sup>12</sup> A great deal of work could be done on these documents. For the present it is enough to point out that the *Historia's* dates may often not be accurate: Winebald de Ballon, for example, was alive and making gifts to monasteries in the first years of the twelfth century.<sup>13</sup> The 1096 charter is an example of the *pancarte*/diploma type of monastic confirmation charter into which interpolations might be periodically made.<sup>14</sup> There is no obstacle to the general conclusion that the grants recorded in the various sources were actually made at the time that abbot Serlo's new abbey church was being built.

The grants which were made in the 1090's continue the existing pattern of royal and local benefactions. King William Rufus gave Rudford (Glos.) which had been held of his father by a certain Madog in 1086 and whose value was then recorded as £2.<sup>15</sup> Of local men, Roger de Berkeley had granted land at Clingre, Gerwy des Loges and his wife a small property at Temple Guiting, Arnulf de Hesdin churches at Kempsford and Hatherop, and Hugh de Lacy the church of St. Guthlac in Hereford as a priory. Other Gloucester benefactors were Walter, sheriff of Gloucestershire, and Patrick de Caorches who succeeded through his wife Mathilda to part of Arnulf de Hesdin's lands.

It was during this period from the 1090's that Gloucester abbey's lands were extended into many regions of England and Wales. Odo fitz Gamelin, for example, gave Plymtree (Devon) which had been worth £5 in 1086 while in 1102 William de Pomeray gave Berry Pomeroy (Devon) which had been worth £12.<sup>16</sup> Among these gifts two types stand out as being of particular interest. The first, already identified by Dr David Walker, is the grants made by men from the 1090's engaged in the expansion of the Norman settlement into Wales. Bernard de Neufmarché gave Glasbury-on-Wye and all tithes of his lordship of Brecon. Robert fitz Haimo granted the church of St. Cadoc at Llancarfan and land at Penhow (South Glamorgan). Bernard's gift is dateable from the *Historia* to c. 1088 and Robert's to before 1100.<sup>17</sup> Both were therefore made in the early stages of the Norman penetration of South Wales and both gifts were located near the frontiers of conquered land. The other area of interest is represented by the grants of Hugh de Port, who gave Littleton (Hants.) and became a monk of St. Peter's shortly before his death in 1096, and of Roger Bigod who gave a market in Norwich. The only discernable connection between these two men and the abbey of Gloucester is that both had made careers out of administrative service to the Norman kings and that Gloucester was a town visited regularly



by the royal court. Both Hugh and Roger had started their careers in England as protégés of bishop Odo of Bayeux, acting as sheriffs and judges under the Conqueror and sufficiently detaching themselves from bishop Odo to survive his fall and expulsion from England in 1088.<sup>18</sup> Hugh indeed had so far distanced himself from his former patron that he took part in the proscription of those who had supported Odo's rebellion.<sup>19</sup> The attachment of Hugh and Roger to the abbey of St. Peter's is likely to have been formed during a royal sojourn in the town, such as the 'deep speech' about the making of Domesday Book at Christmas 1085 or Rufus's fateful illness in 1093 when he consented to Anselm's appointment to the vacant archbishopric of Canterbury.

We cannot know how much these gifts added to the revenues of the abbey, although we can be certain that the increment was very large. The restitution of Standish, Oddington and Northleach, plus the grants of Rudford, Plymtree, Berry Pomeroy and Littleton mentioned above, would in total have added £72 at Domesday values. Since these represent only a fraction of the grants made and received, it would be a very conservative estimate indeed to say that the income of St. Peter's abbey more than doubled during the course of the 1090's. The typicality or otherwise of Gloucester's fund-raising during these years cannot yet be assessed since the subject of the relationship between estate-management, benefactions and the vast programmes of church-building undertaken in England after 1066 has scarcely been approached. On the basis of the grants made to Westminster Abbey which in 1066 had estates in six counties and in 1086 had expanded into fifteen, it is clear that that particular church had a very wide appeal. A recent study has discerned highly efficient management on the Domesday estates of the bishoprics of Winchester and Rochester;<sup>20</sup> it does not look, however, as if Rochester received much property outside south-east England.<sup>21</sup> It may be therefore that Gloucester's experience was somewhat remarkable in that the town's special position as a meeting-place for the king's court coupled with the consequences of the conquest of Wales permitted abbot Serlo to draw on a range of benefactors which was much more than local.

What is also interesting is the way in which the abbey of Gloucester drew to itself benefactions from men who were in the process of accumulating immense fortunes as a result of participation in the Norman Conquest of England. No one among Hugh de Port, Arnulf de Hesdin, Bernard de Neufmarché, Robert fitz Haimo or the others came from what could be described as humble origins on the Continent, but all were certainly among the group which made the most positive and purposeful use of the Conquest to advance themselves socially and financially. Their patronage of Gloucester abbey cut across their previous patterns of generosity and established a new focus; Hugh de Port and Robert fitz Haimo were tenants of Bayeux cathedral, Bernard de Neufmarché a benefactor of the abbey of Fécamp, and Robert fitz Haimo a benefactor of the abbeys of St. Martin of Sées and Mont-St-Michel.<sup>22</sup> The history of the rebuilding of Gloucester abbey therefore has significance for the way in which the Norman newcomers adapted to the new possibilities and new patterns of lordship in their acquired lands. It also demonstrates how effectively abbot Serlo and his monks took advantage of the opportunities offered to them by the Norman expansion into Britain. The magnificent new church at Gloucester was very much a product of the events and fresh potentialities of 1066 and after.

### Notes

1. The *Historia* was edited, along with the earliest of the Gloucester cartularies by W.H. Hart, *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii sancti Petri Gloucestriae*, 3 vols., (Rolls Series, no. 33, 1863–67). For the Norman Conquest and Serlo's rule, i, 9–13.

2. D.G. Walker, 'Gloucester and Gloucestershire in Domesday Book', *Trans BGAS* xciv (1976), 115–16.
3. Dom. D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1966), 702–3.
4. *Domesday Book, seu liber censualis Willelmi primi regis Angliae*, 2 vols., ed. A. Farley, and *Libri censualis, vocati Domesday Book*, 2 vols., ed. H. Ellis (London, 1783–1816), i, fo. 164v.
5. *Historia et Cartularium*, i, 65, 67, 85, 101, 102. For Barnwood, *Domesday Book*, i, fo. 165v.
6. *Historia et Cartularium*, i, 258, 374, 386.
7. For his estates, W.E. Wightman, *The Lacy Family in England and Normandy, 1066–1194* (Oxford, 1966), 117–34.
8. *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis monachi de gestis pontificum Anglorum*, ed. N.E.S.A. Hamilton (Rolls Series, no. 52, 1870), 437.
9. *Domesday Book*, i, fos. 43r, 165v.
10. A critical edition of William Rufus's charter appears in *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, ii, 1100–35, ed. C. Johnson and H.A. Cronne (Oxford, 1956), 410 (addenda no. 379a).
11. *Historia et Cartularium*, i, 61, 77.
12. *Ibid.*, i, 93. The writ is Hereford, Dean and Chapter Archive, ms. no. 1168. It was written by the notorious Westminster forger, probably in the 1140's, T.A.M. Bishop and P. Chaplais, *Facsimiles of English Royal Writs to A.D. 1100* (Oxford, 1957), xxi–xxii. My own view is that the writ is not based on authentic eleventh-century material. For the testimonies of the 1140's which refer to Gloucester's uninterrupted possession having lasted for at least fifty-six and fifty-five years, *Historia et Cartularium*, ii, 110, 112.
13. *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, ii, nos. 492, 544, 620, 800.
14. For discussions of this type of document, V.H. Galbraith, 'Monastic Foundation Charters of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, iv (1932–34), 214–22; L. Musset, *Les actes de Guillaume le Conquérant et de la reine Mathilde pour les abbayes caennaises*, (Caen, 1967), 25–35.
15. *Domesday Book*, i, fo. 170v.
16. *Historia et Cartularium*, i, 88; *Domesday Book*, i, fos. 114v, 116v.
17. *Historia et Cartularium*, i, 88. See D. Walker, *A New History of Wales. The Norman Conquerors*, (Swansea, 1977), 84.
18. For their careers as sheriffs, see now, Judith Green, 'The Sheriffs of William the Conqueror', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, v, *Proceedings of the Battle Conference 1982*, 136–7.
19. 'De iniusta vexatione Willelmi episcopi primi', in Simeon of Durham, *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols., ed. T. Arnold, (Rolls Series, no. 75, 1882–85), i, 193.
20. Sally P.J. Harvey, 'The Extent and Profitability of Domesne Agriculture in England in the Later Eleventh Century', in *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R.H. Hilton*, ed. T.H. Aston, et al., (Past and Present Society, 1983), 68–9.
21. For the tenants of Odo of Bayeux as patrons of Rochester, D.R. Bates, 'The Land Pleas of William I's Reign: Penenden Heath Revisited', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, li (1978), 18.
22. For Hugh and Robert as tenants, H. Navel, 'L'enquête de 1133 sur les fiefs de l'évêché de Bayeux', *Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de Normandie*, xlii (1935), 17–18. For the benefactions, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, collection Moreau, vol. 29, fo. 90rv; Sées, Bibliothèque de l'évêché, Cartulaire de St-Martin de Sées, fos. 32v, 46v; Avranches, Bibliothèque Municipale, ms. 210, fos. 79v–80r.

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