

Flight 1991 C. Flight, 'John II, Bishop of Rochester, did not exist', English Historical Review, 106 (1991), 921--31.

Reading this paper again, I do not see anything seriously wrong with it. The conclusion that I was arguing for still seems sound to me -- that "John II" was an imaginary figure, conjured up by the monks, in about 1210, out of some mixture of ignorance and dishonesty. But some of the loose ends mentioned in the final paragraph do still cause me concern.

The list of bishops in *Instituta*, before the corrector went to work on it, would have looked (I suppose) like this:

xxv	Goduuinus ii
xxvi	...
xxvii	Siwardus
xxviii	Ernostus
xxix	Gundulfus
xxx	Radulfus
xxxi	Ernulfus
xxxii	(Iohannes)
xxxiii	(Ascelinus)
xxxiiii	(Walterius)
xxxv	(Walerannus)
xxxvi	
xxxvii	
xxxviii	

As it left the hands of the original scribe, the list would have ended with Ernulf (line 31); and four more names would have been added from time to time, to bring the list up to date (lines 32--5).

If I am right, the corrector erased seven names (lines 26--32) and rewrote six of them (lines 26--31), so as to make himself a vacant line for the insertion of "John II" (line 32):

xxv	Goduuinus ii
xxvi	... (Sywardus)
xxvii	... (Ernostus)
xxviii	... (Gundulfus)
xxix	... (Radulfus)
xxx	... (Ernulfus)
xxxi	... (Iohannes i)
xxxii	... (Iohannes ii)
xxxiii	(Ascelinus)
xxxiiii	(Walterius)
xxxv	(Walerannus)
xxxvi	(Gilebertus)
xxxvii	
xxxviii	

And that, I still think, is what he did. The problem is that he

could have achieved the same result more economically by erasing and rewriting the last three names (lines 33--5):

xxv	Goduinus ii
xxvi	...
xxvii	Siwardus
xxviii	Ernostus
xxix	Gundulfus
xxx	Radulfus
xxxi	Ernulfus
xxxii	(Iohannes)
xxxiii	... (Iohannes ii)
xxxiiii	... (Ascelinus)
xxxv	... (Walterius)
xxxvi	(Walerannus)
xxxvii	(Gilebertus)
xxxviii	

Why did he not do that? Plan B would involve only half as much work as plan A. So why did he prefer plan A?

The only answer which occurs to me is this. With plan B, "Iohannes ii" would be the first in a block of names which would look as if it was written (as indeed it was) in the time of bishop Gilbert. With plan A, "Iohannes ii" would be the last in a block of names which (on the surface) would look as if it was written in the time of John II. In other words, the evidence which was intended to prove the existence of this imaginary bishop would appear to have been written by a contemporary scribe, rather than by someone who did not arrive till more than fifty years later.

To be frank, I am doubtful whether the corrector was capable of so much subtlety. If I can think of this idea, however, I have to suppose that he could have thought of it first. There must have been some motive which impelled him to do what he did -- and it must have been a powerful motive too, because it drove him to obliterate one of the Anglo-Saxon bishops. As I understand it, there was originally a name in this list (line 26), between Godwine II and Siward, which was erased and overwritten by the corrector. And that is another loose end, perhaps the most worrying of all. Can it really be true that the corrector consigned a genuine bishop to oblivion, in order to make space for this imaginary one?

C.F. Apr 2017