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THE DEVOLUTION OF BOOKLAND IN NINTH-CENTURY KENT: A NOTE ON BCS 538 (S 319)

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A remarkable charter, which has until now escaped the attention it merits, sheds some much needed light on the devolution of bookland upon the lower levels of land-holding society in ninth-century England. BCS 538 [S 319]¹ is an eleventh-century text purporting to record a grant of land in Kent by the west Saxon king Aethelwulf. The only suspicious element of this charter is its dating clause. The year given, A.D. 874, is impossible, since Aethelwulf had died sixteen years before. This in itself, however, is not decisive proof of forgery; even undoubtedly genuine diplomas are occasionally misdated.² Moreover, in the case of this particular charter there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for such an error. BCS 538 contains two sets of confirmatory signatures. Dorothy Whitelock, observing that the first witness list and indiction would agree with A.D. 844, suggests that the scribe altered the date to accord with the appended confirmatory signatures.³

¹ BCS 538 = Walter de Gray Birch, (Ed.), *Cartularium Saxonicum* 2 (1887; repr., New York, 1964), no. 538; S 319 = Peter Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 8 (London, 1968), no. 319. This charter is now preserved as MS British Museum Stowe Charters, no. 21, and is reproduced in W.B. Sanders, (Ed.), *Facsimiles of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* 3 (Southampton, 1884), no. 21.

² BCS 538 has attracted the attention of only a few scholars. William Henry Stevenson, who noted it in passing, termed it a 'strange eleventh-century charter' without elaboration. W.H. Stevenson, (Ed.), *Asser's Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of Saint Neot's* (Oxford, 1904), 216, n.l. J.K. Wallenberg, *Kentish Place-Names*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift (1931), 222-3, appears to have regarded the text as an authentic transcription of a mid-ninth-century original. Most recently, Professor Dorothy Whitelock has offered her comments upon the charter in Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, 150.

³ See, e.g., BCS 201 (S 106) and BCS 467 (S 316). Both are contemporary texts.

⁴ Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, 150. The list of confirmatory signatures is headed by Archbishop Aethelred (A.D. 870-888/9).

In all other respects BCS 538 commands credence. Its formulae – Aethelwulf's royal title, the statement of privileges and reservations in the *verba dispositiva*, and the anathema clause – are similar to those employed in BCS 442 [S 293] and BCS 467 [S 316], contemporary texts of other grants of Kentish land by Aethelwulf.⁵ The first of the two witness lists, the one presumed to be contemporary with the transaction, is entirely consistent with Aethelwulf's reign and could hardly have been fabricated.⁶ In addition, the charter's archaic orthography argues strongly for its authenticity. The unrounding of the second element of the diphthong *eo*, as evidenced in the spelling of the name 'Beornwulf' as 'Biarnulue' is characteristic of ninth-century Kentish documents.⁷ Lastly, in any forgery one must pose the question, 'To whose benefit?' Since BCS 538 professes to be a grant to laymen and fails to mention any subsequent monastic endowment,⁸ it is difficult to imagine why anyone would have bothered to forge it. One would be hard pressed, certainly, to find a motive for such chicanery in the eleventh-century history of the estate in question, Horton.⁹ Thus there is little in this charter that would condemn it as spurious and much that commands our respect.

If we can rely on its authenticity, BCS 538 allows us to glimpse an extremely active market in bookland in mid-ninth-century Kent. The text reads in part:

I Aethelwulf, by God's mercy king of the West Saxons and of the people of Kent, give and concede with the unanimous assent and licence of my magnates the land which is called Horton to Eadred; and I permit the same Eadred to give this land to

⁵ See also BCS 449 (S 296), a contemporary text; BCS 507 (S 332); and BCS 539 (S 1203), a contemporary text.

⁶ Cf. the witness lists of BCS 442 (S 293), BCS 467 (S 316), BCS 486 (S 315), and BCS 507 (S 332).

⁷ Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), 119, 126.

⁸ Even the endorsement (written in a strange amalgamation of Latin and Anglo-Saxon) refers to the purchase of the estate by a layman, Liofric.

⁹ Horton is a hamlet in the parish of Chartham. It is located on the Great Stour some three miles southwest of Canterbury. In 1066 a thegn named Godric had held Horton *de rege*. This estate, along with Godric's other holdings in Kent, passed into the hands of the Conqueror's half-brother, Odo, Bishop of Bayeux and Earl of Kent. A clerk named Ansfrid Mas (or Masculus) held Horton from the bishop. *Domesday Book*, i, 10b, ed. A. Farley, Record Commission (London, 1783). Ansfrid seems to have weathered Odo's disgrace in 1082, for we find him in the *Domesday Monachorum* as holding Horton from Gundulf, Bishop of Rochester, 1100. *The Domesday Monachorum of Christ Church, Canterbury*, (Ed.) David Douglas (London, 1944), fol. 12r. By the early twelfth century the estate had passed to the family of Crevecoeur, who continued to hold it until 1407. See Edward Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, viii, (1798; repr., Menston, Yorkshire, 1972), 312–5.

Lulla and Sigethryth. Lulla and Sigethryth, in turn, are conveying through royal arrangement a part of this same land, Horton, to Eaulf and Herewine [Herewynn?], that is, one sulung to be enjoyed as a perpetual inheritance. And Eaulf conveyed one half of his land to Biarnwulf; and the same Eaulf kept the other half for himself, so that he might hold it by free power, to have and possess, to enjoy it happily during the days of his life, and after his days, to leave it to whatever heir should please him.¹⁰

The original grantee, Eadred, appears as a witness to a number of Aethelwulf's Kentish charters.¹¹ From his designation as *dux* in these, it would seem that he was one of the west Saxon king's Kentish ealdormen. Apparently, Eadred sought bookland from the king in order to endow a Kentish thegn named Lulla¹² and his wife (?), Sigethryth. This couple, in turn, secured royal permission to book one sulung of their land to Eaulf and Herewynn.¹³ Finally, Eaulf gave half of his bookland to Biarnwulf.

The bookland at Horton thus passed through four separate stages of ownership upon this occasion. The original donee, ealdorman Eadred, appears to have retained none of the land. The subsequent recipients each kept part of the property and passed the remainder to others. A devolution of this sort is well suited to a society shaped by ideas of reciprocity. In early Anglo-Saxon England, as in so many other primitive communities,¹⁴ gift giving was a tool of governance. The flow of goods between lords and retainers sustained the social hierarchy. For every gift, like every injury, looked for its return.¹⁵ In

¹⁰ BCS 538: 'Ego Aethelulf rex misericordia Dei occidentalium Saxonum necnon & Cantuariarum, cum unanima voluntate ac licentia meorum optimatum, do et concedo Edredo terram quae dicitur Horatune. Et permitto ipsi Edredo dare Lullan & Sigethrythe; & rursum regali institutione Lulla & Sigethryth contradunt Eaulfe & Herewine partem terrae ejusdem quae dicitur Horatun, hoc est unum aratrum in sempiternam hereditatem perfruendam. Et Eaulf dimidiam partem tradidit Biarnulue; & ipse Eaulf medietatem retinuit ad habendum & possidendum & feliciter in dies vitae suae perfruendum, & post dies suos cuicumque heredi palcuierit derelinquendum ut libera eam habeat potestate.'

¹¹ BCS 467 (S 316), BCS 486 (S 315), BCS 518 (S 339).

¹² A *minister* and a *miles* bearing this name appear in BCS 460 (S 299), BCS (S 316), BCS 486 (S 315), and BCS 496 (S 328).

¹³ It is uncertain whether 'Herewine' ought to be rendered by the masculine form 'Herewine' or the feminine 'Herewynn.' The latter, however, is suggested by BCS 529 (S 1202), which relates that a 'Herewynne' held land near Chartham in A.D. 871.

¹⁴ On reciprocal prestation in modern primitive cultures, see Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le Don, Forme archaïque de l'Échange* (1925; trans. I. Cunnison, *The Gift*, Glencoe, Ill., 1954); Marshall Sahlins, 'On the Sociology of primitive Exchange,' in *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*, (Ed.) Michael Benton, A.S.A. Monographs 1 (London, 1965), 139-236, esp. 147, 158-64, 200-15.

¹⁵ Notions of *freondscipe* and *feondscipe*, gift giving and feud, permeate Anglo-Saxon literature. The world of the *Beowulf* poet, for example, is shaped by the principle of reciprocity. The purpose of gift giving in this poem is not purely economic.

this scheme a grant of land answered a retainer's loyal service and called forth from him a further gift of service.¹⁶ King Aethelwulf's donation secured not only his relationship with Eadred, but confirmed or created bonds of mutual obligation and *freondscipe* between: (1) ealdorman Eadred and Lulla and Sigethryth; (2) Lulla and Sigethryth and Eaulf and Herewynn; and (3) Eaulf and Biarnwulf. Moreover, since the king's permission was needed to ratify each of the subsequent transactions, Aethelwulf's gift acted to strengthen his hold over the loyalties of all these Kentish thegns.

The power of early Anglo-Saxon kings depended in large measure upon the willingness of local magnates to submit to their rule.¹⁷ The authority of the ninth-century west Saxon kings in Kent called for the support of the native thegnage. Gifts of land, such as at Horton, served to achieve this end. Horton, certainly, was not the only property in Kent that the house of Cerdic booked to followers in return for loyal service. In 838 the *bretwalda* Egbert restored property to Christ Church on condition that 'we ourselves and our heirs shall always hereafter have firm and unshakeable friendships from Archbishop Ceolnoth and his congregation.'¹⁸ Since Egbert was to die within a year of this grant, it is tempting to see in it a *quid pro quo*. In return for their land the powerful clergy of Christ Church would pledge itself to the succession of Egbert's son, Aethelwulf. In other words, Egbert was 'electioneering' on behalf of his chosen successor.

Aethelwulf himself dramatically distributed a tenth of his lands to

Rather, the offer of a gift and its acceptance establish a social relationship between the donor and the recipient; the donee is placed in the debt of the donor and is morally obliged to requit the favour. See, e.g., *Beowulf*, (Ed.) Friedrich Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Lexington, Mass., 1950), ll. 2144-99, 2490-94, 2612-60. Cf. *Widsith*, (Ed.) Kemp Malone, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen, 1962), ll. 93-96. On reciprocity in Anglo-Saxon England, see P. Grierson, 'Commerce in the Dark Ages,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Ser., 9 (1959), 123-40; D.H. Green, *The Carolingian Lord* (Cambridge, 1965), 391-5; Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Distinction between Land and moveable Wealth in Anglo-Saxon England,' *Medieval Settlement*, ed. Peter Sawyer (London, 1976), 180-7; Richard Abels, 'Lordship and military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England' (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1982), 66-71, 92-94.

¹⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'Distinction,' 180-7; Abels, 'Lordship,' 66-71, 92-94.

¹⁷ As Asser points out, Alfred was only able to defend his realm against the Danes 'by gently instructing, flattering, urging and commanding' his landed nobility. Only after all else had failed would Alfred attempt to punish the obdurate. *Asser's Life*, ch. 91, Stevenson, (Ed.), 78. Asser, it is worth observing, felt that the true danger to a recalcitrant noble lay not so much in the king's displeasure as in the loss of his lands, family, retainers, slaves, hand-maids, and life to the Danish invaders. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ BCS 421, discussed by Patrick Wormald in James Campbell, (Ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons* (Oxford, 1982), 140.

the Church and thegnage in preparation for his pilgrimage to Rome in 855.¹⁹ We possess two authentic Kentish charters relating to this decimation. BCS 486 [S 315] relates how Aethelwulf endowed a Kentish thegn Dunn with a village and ten yokes of land near Rochester 'in consideration of the decimation of lands, which God giving I have ordered done for my other thegns.'²⁰ The last clause suggests the magnitude of the king's generosity. A contemporary charter dated the same year sheds further light upon Aethelwulf's motives. According to BCS 467 [S 316], Aethelwulf booked land in Kent to another of his thegns, his 'faithful minister Ealdhere, for his humble obedience and his fidelity to me in all things.'²¹ Apparently, Aethelwulf had divided a tenth of his private domain between his ecclesiastic and lay followers, hoping thereby to secure both the favour of God for his journey and the loyalty of his nobility during his absence. The reciprocal prestation posited for Horton may well have been part of a general policy on the part of the west Saxon kings of Kent.

The bounds of BCS 538 further illuminate the nature of the Horton grant. The property in question touched upon estates held at that time by two of the eventual grantees. On the west and south Horton bordered the lands of the thegn Lulla; to its north lay Biarnwulf's bookland.²² This may suggest that the request for a book had originated not with the ealdorman but with the lesser landowners, who presumably had asked Eadred to intercede with the king on their behalf, hoping thereby to add to their existing holdings in the locality.

BCS 538, to be sure, is an exceptional document, but it is tempting to speculate on how many other multiple grants lay hidden in the apparently simple transactions of the extant ninth-century landbooks.

¹⁹ Asser's *Life*, ch. 11, Stevenson, (Ed.), 8-9; ASC, s.a. 855. On the purported texts of the decimation see H.P.R. Finberg, (Ed.), *The Early Charters of Wessex* (Leicester, 1964), 210-3.

²⁰ BCS 486 [S 315].

²¹ BCS 467 [S 316].

²² BCS 538: '*Hi sunt termini eidem terrae curcum jacentes: ab oriente silva quae dicitur duungrab, ab occidente communiter episcopi & Lullan, ab australi parte terra Lullan ad Certeham, & ab aquilone Biernulfi quam terram aeternaliter possidet.*' For identifications of the places mentioned in the bounds, see Wallenberg, *Kentish Place-Names*, 222-3.

