History, Hagiography and Religious Works: The Writings of William of Malmesbury and his Date of Birth

Histoire, hagiographie et œuvres religieuses : les écrits de Guillaume de Malmesbury et sa date de naissance

Storia, agiografia e opere religiose: Gli scritti di Guglielmo di Malmesbury e la sua data di nascita

Geschichte, Hagiographie und religiöse Werke: Die Schriften von William von Malmesbury und sein Geburtsdatum

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Abstract:
By reconsidering the two dominating opinions about his date of birth, this paper argues that William of Malmesbury, the famous Anglo-Norman historian, was born in c. 1091, probably late that year. It also explores the chronology of William’s different works, reconciling the problems and contradictions raised by previous scholarship. It opens further discussion of the boundaries between history, hagiography and religious works in his writings, as well as offering a detailed insight into a monastic author’s understanding of the genres of writing in the early-twelfth-century Anglo-Norman world.

Keywords: William of Malmesbury, date of birth, Commentary on Lamentations

Résumé:
En reconsiderant les deux opinions dominantes sur la date de naissance de Guillaume de Malmesbury, cet article soutient que le célèbre historien anglo-normand est né vers 1091, probablement à la fin de l’année. Il explore également la chronologie des différents ouvrages de Guillaume, en réconciliant les problèmes et les contradictions soulevés par les travaux antérieurs. Il ouvre une discussion plus approfondie sur les frontières entre l’histoire, l’hagiographie et les ouvrages religieux dans ses écrits, et offre une vision détaillée de la compréhension qu’avait un auteur monastique des genres d’écriture dans le monde anglo-normand du début du XIIe siècle.

Mots-clés: Guillaume de Malmesbury, date de naissance, Commentaire sur les Lamentations
Riassunto:
Riconsiderando le due opinioni dominanti sulla sua data di nascita, questo articolo sostiene che Guglielmo di Malmesbury, il famoso storico anglo-normanno, nacque nel 1091 circa, probabilmente alla fine dello stesso anno. Esplora inoltre la cronologia delle diverse opere di Guglielmo, riconciliando i problemi e le contraddizioni sollevati da studi precedenti. Il libro apre un ulteriore discussione sui confini tra storia, agiografia e opere religiose nei suoi scritti, oltre a offrire una visione dettagliata della comprensione da parte di un autore monastico dei generi di scrittura nel mondo anglo-normanno del primo XII secolo.

Parole chiave: Guglielmo di Malmesbury, data di nascita, Commento alle Lamentazioni
avoided⁴. Things have changed significantly since Rodney Thomson’s second edition of William of Malmesbury was published in 2003, in which the author devotes a whole appendix to discussing the date of William’s birth, developing Stubbs’s arguments and suggesting that William was born in c. 1090, with a preference for some date between 1085 and 1090.⁵ Thomson’s research seems to have ended the former debate, and recent scholarship usually acquiesces in his opinion, using c. 1090 to mark William’s date of birth, without either providing additional reasons or reconsidering Thomson’s view systematically⁶. Thomson’s arguments are not conclusive, however, and his approach to William’s prologue to the Commentary on Lamentations (hereafter, Comm. Lam.), the most significant text mentioning his date of birth, needs to be reassessed. This paper will go through the previous arguments put forward by different scholars, especially Thomson, and point out their drawbacks. It will then propose a new approach to reconciling the existing problems and contradictions and shed some new light on William’s prologue to the Comm. Lam., with suggestions on the chronology of his different writings. It will also open further discussion of the boundaries between history, hagiography and religious works in his writings, as well as offering a detailed insight into a monastic author’s understanding of the genres of writing in the early-twelfth-century Anglo-Norman world.

Before going through Thomson’s arguments, it is advisable to consider the traditional view first, which maintained that William was born in c. 1095. This view is based on William’s own statement in his Comm. Lam., which indicates that he was forty years old when he wrote the prologue:

Quadragenarius sum hodie, admoquie pedem <ad> medietatem metae quam divinus psalmista ponit hominum vitae, dicens: Dies annorum nostrorum in ipsis septuaginta annis. Si autem in potentatibus octoginta anni, et amplius eorum labor et dolor.

I am forty today; I have come to the middle point of the course that the divine psalmist posits for the life of man, when he says: “The days of our life are in seventy years. But if there are eighty years for the strong, there are even more labour and sorrow for them”⁷.

⁴. For example, for the use of c. 1095 as William’s date of birth, see James, 1931, p. 16-17; Wright, 1991, p. 122; Gransden, 1996, p. 166. For the use of c. 1090, see Farmer, 1962b, p. 39. Much research involving William of Malmesbury just avoided this issue, such as Southern, 1960, p. 201-216; idem, 1973, p. 243-263.
⁶. For example, Kynan-Wilson, 2012, p. 35; Sonnesyn, 2012, p. 4. For more research that avoided the issue, see Fenton, 2008, p. 10; Hayward, 2011, p. 75-102; Gillingham, 2012, p. 45-74; Plasmann, 2013, p. 145-171; and so on.
On the one hand, at a particular point in the *Comm. Lam.*, William seems to refer to King Henry as dead, so he was presumably writing after Henry I’s death in December 1135. On the other, Robert of Cricklade, a canon of Cirencester, who later became prior of St Frideswide, Oxford, praised some of William’s works – including the *Comm. Lam.* – shortly after March 1137. Thus, the *Comm. Lam.* would have been written in 1135 or 1136, meaning that William was born in 1095 or 1096.

Both Stubbs and Thomson noticed many problems with such a late date. Based on Stubbs’s thoughts, Thomson made a list of the difficulties, which I shall summarise here:

(a) William witnessed a miracle that involved Ernulf of Hesdin, a landowner in Wiltshire, who probably departed for the Crusade with Duke Robert of Normandy, in September-October 1096, and died at Antioch.

(b) William met old monks who knew Abbot Wulfsige (d. c. 1033-1034) in his own abbey. Thomson assumes these monks would have been born in c. 1010, and William must have encountered them no later than c. 1080-1090.

(c) William seems to have assisted Abbot Godfrey with restocking the abbey library. The abbot took office between 1084 and 1091 and died before 1106. William witnessed some of the miracles that occurred in Godfrey’s time, so he would have become a novice several years after the beginning of Godfrey’s abbacy. Since he had already had some education, he would have been older than the dates of 1095 or 1096 suggest.

(d) William heard an elderly priest talking about the good qualities of Bishop Ælfwold of Sherborne (d. 1058).

(e) William saw Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 1109).

(f) William had several conversations with Queen Matilda (d. 1118) about the project of writing the *GR*, part of which seems to have been finished by the time the queen died. He also compiled the *Liber Pontificalis* in or


10. William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum…*, I, p. xiv-xvii; Thomson, 2003, p. 199-201. Stubbs tried to find a compatible way to reconcile these problems with the late date but had already raised the hypothesis of throwing “the date five years further back”.

11. The following comes from Thomson’s Appendix I in the second edition of his monograph on William of Malmesbury, see Thomson, 2003, p. 199-200.
soon after 1119, which required much work. If he was born in 1095 or 1096, he had done substantial research and writing by the time he was in his early twenties.

If William’s date of birth needs to be moved back, it means the Comm. Lam. was composed earlier than 1135. For the intriguing reference to King Henry I, Stubbs raises the possibility that the phrase “tempore regis Henrici” might be understood as “a king reigning at the time”, while Thomson thinks that William is likely to be referring to him in the past tense for the sake of future readers, as he had in the GR. Nevertheless, Thomson suggests that William’s reference to his historical writings as “olim” becomes more problematic the earlier the production of the Comm. Lam. is dated. He believes that the date for the Comm. Lam. should be shortly after 1130 to provide an interval for William’s writing of the GR and Gesta Pontificum Anglorum (hereafter, GP), the first editions of which were finished by 1124. Yet he is not satisfied with a birth date after 1090 either, because of the difficulties mentioned above, so he uses Stubbs’s hypothesis of translating “quadragenarius” to “in my forties” rather than “forty”, which finally moves William’s birth date back to before 1090.

Stubbs’s and Thomson’s interpretation of “quadragenarius” seems, however, to go too far. If we carefully consider William’s citation of the Psalms which follows “quadragenarius” in the same sentence – “Dies annorum nostrorum in ipsis septuaginta annis. Si autem in potentatibus octoginta anni, et amplius eorum labor et dolor” (“The days of our life are in seventy years. But if there are eighty years for the strong, there are even more labour and sorrow for them”) – it is clear that the Bible assumes the normal lifespan of mortals to be between seventy and eighty years, so “the middle point of the course” could never be over forty. In addition, on one occasion in the GR, William uses the expression

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15. Ibid., p. 201. The original words of the translation suggested by Stubbs are “between forty and fifty”, see William of Malmesbury, De Gestis Regum Anglorum..., I, p. xvi. Farmer also suggested translating “quadragenarius” to “in my forties”, but he believes that the Comm. Lam. was composed in c. 1116, and William’s date of birth was c. 1093, without providing any reasons, see Farmer, 1962a, p. 283-284, 288; idem, 1962b, p. 50-51.
17. One of the most influential schemes of lifetime in the Middle Ages was the six stages presented by Isidore of Seville in his Etymologies: infantia (infancy, 0-7), puерitia (childhood, 7-14), adolescentia (adolescence, 14-28), inventus (youth, 28-50), gravitas (maturity, 50-70), and senectus (old age, 70+). See Isidore of Seville, The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville, Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Bech, and Oliver Berghof (eds. and trans.), XI, ii. 1-8, p. 241. Although Isidore did not mention the usual maximum for old age, it can still be seen that medieval men were expected
“maior quadragenario” (being over forty years old) to describe William Rufus’s age when he died.\(^{18}\) It is obvious that in this case “quadragenario” means precisely “forty years old”, so it is very likely that William employs it in the same way in the Comm. Lam.

Despite all the problems and contradictions encountered so far, there is still a way to reconcile them. I suggest that William was born shortly after 1090, probably in 1091 or 1092. Let us go through Stubbs’s and Thomson’s arguments again to see whether this works. For (a), William would have been four or five years old, and possibly able to remember the miracle involving Ernulf of Hesdin; the healing of the landowner’s hands with balsam from St Aldhelm’s tomb seems to have been a big local event.\(^ {19}\) He could also have learned about Bishop Ælfwold from the old priest, probably in Sherborne (d), and would be in his mid- or late twenties by the time he was getting substantive results from his research (f).\(^ {20}\)

For Thomson’s mention of William’s meeting with St Anselm (e), it is doubtful whether it actually occurred, and even if they saw each other once before 1109, this would not pose a substantial problem to the current conjecture.\(^ {21}\) This leaves just (b) and (c). Thomson’s assumption in (b) can be modified if the monks who knew Abbot Wulfsige were oblates at that time and lived long lives, even extending into the early twelfth century.\(^ {22}\) Finally, the supposition of William’s assistance in Abbot Godfrey’s restocking of the abbey library (c) remains

to live into their seventies, which corresponds to William’s citation here. Roberta Gilchrist’s 2012 book has an interesting appendix on the life stages of medieval men, but her categories of maturity and old age (gravitas, 50-72 and senectus, 72 to death) seem to come from an incorrect citation of Isidore’s words, and should read between fifty and seventy, and then seventy onwards.

See Gilchrist, 2012, p. 34, 253. William would have been familiar with Isidore’s lifetime scheme; Etymologies seems to be a work known to him at first hand. See Thomson, 2003, p. 210.

\(^{18}\) William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum, I, iv. 333. 7, p. 576-577: “Obiit anno Dominicae incarnationis millesimo centesimo, regni tertio decimo, quarto nonas Augusti, maior quadragenario.” (He died in the year of our Lord 1100, and the thirteenth of his reign, on 2 August, being over forty years of age.)

\(^{19}\) In William’s words, Ernulf was a man with good reputation, see William of Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, I, v. 274. 1. p. 654-655: “Producatur ergo in medium Ernulfus de Hesding, vir inter optimates Angliae opinatissimus.” (Let me therefore bring on the stage Ernulf of Hesdin, a man of high repute among the nobles of England.)

\(^{20}\) For William’s meeting with the old priest, see ibid., I, ii. 82. 2, p. 282-283: “Audivi ego bonae fidei presbiterum et iam canis sparsum bona eius lacrimabili gaudio referentem.” (I have heard a reliable priest, his hair now flecked with white, weeping with joy to tell good things of him.)

\(^{21}\) Thomson’s thoughts are based on William’s description of Anselm in ibid., I, i. 65. 1, p. 194-195: “Vir qui omnes quos quidem uidermus sapientia et religione prestaret.” (A man who in wisdom and sanctity surpassed everyone whom we have indeed seen.) It is hard to take William’s acquaintance of Anselm as a certainty from this single sentence. Dr Jesse Harrington also points this out in his unpublished paper for the online workshop “Eadmer of Canterbury: Life, Manuscripts, History and Thought” on 8 Jan., 2021.

\(^{22}\) For William’s mention of these monks, see William of Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, I, v. 258. 2, p. 614-615: “Non defuerunt nostro tempore monachi qui, eum in carne conspicati, memoriam uiri runinare et alis proferre dulce habebant.” (In my time there were still monks who had seen him in the flesh, glad to mull over their memories of the man and pass them on to others.)
problematic. It is worth reconsidering William’s words on his own labours for the library. After his description of Godfrey’s efforts, he continues as follows:

*Quod studium si predico, uideor id quodam meo proprio iure facere, qui nullis maioribus in hoc presertim loco cesserim, immo, nisi quod dico iactantia sit, cunctos facile supergressus sim. Sit qui modo parta conseruet: ego ad legendum multa congessi, probitatem predicandi uiri in hoc dumtaxat emulatus. Ipsius ergo laudabili cepto pro uirili portione non defui. Vtinam sit qui labores nostros foueat!*

If I single out this activity, I think I have every right to do so, for in this area especially I have been inferior to none of those who went before; indeed (if I can say this without boasting) I have easily surpassed them all. May there be someone to look after the present stock! I have collected much material for reading, approaching the prowess of my excellent predecessor at least in this respect; I have followed up his laudable start as best I could. Let us hope there may be someone to cherish the fruits of our labours.

This passage does not mention that William had worked under Godfrey’s supervision for the library, but rather indicates that he carried on Godfrey’s work as the monastery’s librarian. Stubbs and Montague R. James argue that it only refers to William’s labours as librarian in terms of following Godfrey’s example and enlarging the collections. If we consider William’s evaluation of Godfrey’s efforts, described as copying books or making a start on the library, it is reasonable to assert that the above passage, which follows this evaluation, is just pointing out his own subsequent contribution. William, therefore, might have begun his noviciate in the middle or late years of Godfrey’s abbacy (which ended before 1106), when Godfrey had already done much work for the library. If William was born in c. 1091, then he was very likely in his late childhood (ten to fourteen years old) when he entered the monastery, which allows enough time for both his early education outside it and his later witnessing of some of the miracles involving Godfrey.

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25. William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum...*, I, p. xvi; James, 1931, p. 17. However, part of James’s argument is based on the belief that William was born in c. 1095 and was not old enough to help Godfrey to collect books, which is problematic.
26. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, I, v. 271. 1, p. 644-645: "Libri conscripti nonnulli, vel potius bibliothecae primitiae libatae." (Some books were copied, or rather a start was made on building up a library.)
27. Here I use Isidore’s scheme for the age of *pueritia* (childhood), that is between seven and fourteen years old. See above, n. 17. For a bolder guess, I believe that twelve or thirteen years old would be more probable ages for William to have entered the cloister, which means that he began his noviciate in c. 1103. According to Deborah Youngs, the ages of twelve or fourteen were considered the threshold of obtaining reason and understanding, and at this point a person "could receive the Eucharist, go to confession, do penance, give evidence in..."
So far, my hypothesis works. If my suggestion for William’s date of birth and my interpretation of the term “quadragenarius” are right, it means the
Comm. Lam. was written around 1131. However, this raises two problems with regards the Comm. Lam. prologue, both of which were also noticed by Thomson and Michael Winterbottom. The first is that there seems to be a long period of “sloth” during which William did not write anything, or “at any rate nothing worthy”, before that book. The second is that William says he would like to turn away from histories to write a different kind of work as a result of his increasing age and “worsening circumstances”. Both problems cause difficulties in dating William’s hagiographical works, namely the Vita Wulfstani (hereafter, VW), the Vita Dunstani (hereafter, VD), the Vita Patricii (hereafter, VP), the Vita Benigni (hereafter, VB), and the Vita Indracti (hereafter, VI), and his local
history, *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* (hereafter, *AG*)³¹. It is therefore worth considering the dates of these different works to see how they might fit the present hypothesis.

It is not very difficult to deduce the time of writing of the works related to the abbey of Glastonbury. According to Winterbottom and Thomson, the main text of the *AG* and two books of the *VD* seem to have been written almost simultaneously³². In the first book of the *VD*, William already envisages writing the *AG*³³. The main text of the *AG* equally refers back to the *VD* i³⁴. Moreover, the second book of the *VD* mentions the *AG* as already finished³⁵. Finally, in the prologue of the *AG*, William says that the two books of the *VD* have been completed³⁶. As a result, the writing sequence of the *VD* and the *AG* would be: *VD* i. → *AG* (main text) → *VD* ii. → *AG* prol. In the *AG*’s prologue, Henry of Blois, abbot of Glastonbury, had already been consecrated as bishop of Winchester in

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³¹ When editing William’s hagiographies, Thomson argued that William’s *VD* and *AG* were written in c. 1129-1130, without discussing the prologue of the *Comm. Lam.*, see William of Malmesbury, *Saints’ Lives…*, p. xv. However, when Thomson and Winterbottom worked on the *Comm. Lam.* later, they apparently hesitate over the date, and suggest the possibility that the hagiographies were written after the *Comm. Lam.*, in order to fit c. 1130 as the completion date of the latter, see William of Malmesbury, *Willelmii Meldvnensis Monachi Liber Soper…*, p. xi; idem, *On Lamentations*, p. 11.


³³ *Ibid.,* *VD*, i. 15. 6, p. 204-205: “Quomodo autem et quo auctore reliquiae sanctorum ex Trans-humbranis Glastoniam sint aduectae, in libro de antiquitate eiusdem aecclesiae occasione accepta inserere non pigebit, si Deus mentem meam ad quod intendo direxerit.” (But how, and on whose authority, the relics of saints came to Glastonbury from beyond the Humber, I shall be happy to relate when the right moment arises in my book on the antiquity of the church, so long as God directs my mind to what I purpose.)

³⁴ William of Malmesbury, *The Early History of Glastonbury: An Edition, Translation and Study of William of Malmesbury’s De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie*, John Scott (ed. and trans.), 55, p. 114-115: “Primam itaque diebus eius liberalitatis palmam preripuit Edmundus frater Ethelstani qui eciam, ut ante dictum est, divine mentis consilio eum ibidem abbatem constituerat.” (In his time Edmund, the brother of Athelstan, first carried off the palm for generosity, he who, as I reported before, established him as abbot there on the advice of the divine mind.) The text referred to can be seen in idem, *Saints’ Lives…*, *VD*, i. 15. 4, p. 202-203: “Tum deinde, ut ueteris scriptoris ubra subitiam, ducens eum ad sacerdotalem cathedram et eum imponens dixit: ‘Esto istius sedis princeps potensque insessor, et presentis aecclesiae fidelissimus abbas.”’ (Then – to quote the words of the old biographer – he led him to the priestly chair, sat him in it, and said: “Sit in this seat in supreme power, as the faithful abbot of this church.”)

³⁵ William of Malmesbury, *Saints’ Lives…*, *VD*, ii. prol. i. p. 234-235: “Antiquitatem istius sanctissimi cenobii Glastoniensis, in quo cœlestem profitemur militiam, alio opere quantum divinum fuesur affuit absolutum.” (I have dealt in another work, as well as God allowed me, with the antiquity of this most holy monastery of Glastonbury in which I profess my heavenly service.)

³⁶ William of Malmesbury, *The Early History of Glastonbury…*, prol., p. 40-41: “Unde sicut estimo non contempende stilum dedi opere, qui beati Dunstani priss Glastoniensis abbatis, deinde archiepiscopi Cantuariensis uitam labore meo eternae mandatu memorie dueaque libros de hoc ualentibus Glastonie fratibus, filius uestr, dominis et sociis meis, dudum integra rerum ueritatem absolvit.” (Wherefore I have employed my pen on that work, which I judge to be of no small value, in which I laboured to commit to eternal memory the life of the blessed Dunstan, abbot of Glastonbury and later archbishop of Canterbury, and have now completed, with scrupulous regard for the truth, the two books about him for which the brethren at Glastonbury, your sons and my masters and companions, had asked.)
November 1129\textsuperscript{37}. Meanwhile, William mentioned his GR as a work published “several years ago” in the second book of the VD\textsuperscript{38}. From all the evidence above, as Winterbottom and Thomson suggest, it is very likely that the VD and the AG were written in c. 1129-1130\textsuperscript{39}. In addition, since William does not mention Henry’s episcopacy in the VD, and in the AG’s prologue he says that the two books of the VD had already been circulated among the monks to be checked some time before, I suggest that the VD and the main text of the AG were all finished before Henry’s consecration, while the prologue of the AG was written shortly after it, probably late 1129 or early 1130, as a gift to be presented to Henry\textsuperscript{40}. At the same place in the AG’s prologue, William also refers to the VP, the VB and the VI as having been finished before the two books of the VD\textsuperscript{41}. It is therefore highly likely that he had completed them a very few years earlier\textsuperscript{42}. Compared to William’s works for Glastonbury, the date he accomplished his VW is much more uncertain. As Winterbottom and Thomson point out, the VW’s prologue is addressed to Warin, prior of Worcester (c. 1124-c. 1142), hence it is difficult to provide a more precise time\textsuperscript{43}. In the T and A versions of the GR, however, which had been produced by early 1126, the writing of the VW is already envisaged\textsuperscript{44}. William also uses Coleman’s Old English Life, the basis


\textsuperscript{38.} William of Malmesbury, Saints’ Lives..., VD, ii. 14. 2, p. 264-265: “Gesta Regum Anglorum, quae ante aliquot annos editi” (the Gesta Regum Anglorum, which I published several years ago).

\textsuperscript{39.} Ibid., p. xv.

\textsuperscript{40.} William of Malmesbury, The Early History of Glastonbury..., prol., p. 40-41: “Illus ergo libellus ser et utiam beati Patrici, miracula uenerabilis Benigni, passionem martiris Indracti, que similis cura procuderam, iam pridem in eorum permisi uersari manibus, ut si quid citra racionem dictum esset corrigertur pro tempore.” (Therefore, some time ago, I have already allowed those books to be circulated in their hands, not to mention the Life of the Blessed Patrick, the Miracles of the Venerable Benignus, and the Passion of the Martyr Indract, which I had produced with similar care, so that if anything short of reasoning had been said, it would be corrected for the time being.) Winterbottom and Thomson’s interpretation of this passage seems to err, because “pridem” refers to the circulation and checking of all four works, rather than the time of writing of the VP, VB and VI. Meanwhile, by the tense of “procuderam”, we can assume that these three works were finished before the VD. For Winterbottom’s and Thomson’s problematic interpretation, see William of Malmesbury, Saints’ Lives..., p. xv.

\textsuperscript{41.} William of Malmesbury, The Early History of Glastonbury..., prol., p. 40. See the previous reference.

\textsuperscript{42.} William of Malmesbury, Saints’ Lives..., p. xv.

\textsuperscript{43.} Ibid., p. xv. For Warin’s tenure, see Knowles and others, 2004, p. 83.

\textsuperscript{44.} William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum, i, iii. 269. 2, p. 498-499: “quorum aliqua intendendo dicere posterius, sit amen sanctissimis illius placuerit sensibus” (subjects on which [i.e. deeds and miracles of St Wulfstan] I intend to say something later, provided that this wins the approval of his saintly judgement). According to Thomson and Winterbottom, the T version is earlier than the other extant manuscripts, containing words that were wrongly omitted in other versions, and one manuscript (Tt: “Historia de gestis Anglorum”, Troyes, Bibl. mun., ms 0294 bis [s XII\textsuperscript{1}], fol. 1-119) is close to the lost one sent to Empress Matilda later in 1126-1127. The T version was probably transcribed from William’s first draft of the GR and deliberately omitted some information that was not suitable to be presented to the empress. After the completion of this first draft, William started to revise it, hence the A version appeared, in which he added some new information and changed some words. The A version might be a stage of this redaction and
of the Latin translation of the VW, in the GP from the beginning, while his narrative of St Dunstan and the other saints in the same book does not anticipate the writing of the VD, VP, VB and VI⁴⁵. From these clues, I suggest that William went to Worcester to finish the VW shortly after the redaction of the A version of his GR, and before he took on the much more onerous task from the other monastery. Thus, the writing time of the VW would be late 1126 or shortly after 1126. We may also imagine that William carried a copy of the earliest GP with him to Worcester at that time, which is how an anonymous local chronicler and John of Worcester could have had access to it⁴⁶.

In consequence, William’s five hagiographies and, as stated above, the main text of the AG, were all written before the consecration of Henry of Blois in November 1129, except the AG’s prologue which was written shortly afterwards, probably late 1129 or early 1130. This seems somewhat problematic if we consider the two problems above posed by the prologue of the Comm. Lam., since the “long period of sloth” before that book does not seem to exist, and the AG and William’s hagiographical works seem difficult to square with his previous devotion to histories. It is very likely, however, that William was exaggerating here⁴⁷.

If the suggested chronology is correct, then from William’s Liber Pontificalis to the AG, it is worth noting how productive he was before 1130. If he wrote the Comm. Lam. in late 1131, he might have enjoyed a “holiday” of over a year, or even two years, during which he did not write a single major book. It is probable that the “long period” was simply an exaggeration on his part, and “sloth” was just a word used in self-mockery since he was less productive than before 1130. In fact, it seems that late 1131 is very likely to be the moment when William wrote the Comm. Lam. As Thomson argues, the “worsening circumstances” that William would have been finished in early 1126 so that one manuscript (Al: “Gesta regum Anglorum”, London, B.L., ms Arundel 35 [s. XII+⁴⁺], fol. r°-153r) could be sent to Winchester at that time. See William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regnum Anglorum, II, p. xvii-xxv; idem, Saints’ Lives…, p. xiv. The Troyes manuscript (Tt) includes two letters respectively to King David of Scotland and Empress Matilda, which were first printed and analysed by Ewald Könsgen, see Könsgen, 1975, p. 204-214.

⁴⁵. William of Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, II, p. 32, 194. William’s description of St Patrick, St Benignus and St Indract can be found in ibid., I, ii. 91. 6-9, p. 310-311. It seems that when he was writing the GP, he had not accessed as many documents about these saints as he did later when he was writing their hagiographies. For example, in the GP, he only refers to Benignus as a local hermit, and implies no relationship between him and Patrick, while in the VB, Benignus is alleged to be an Irish follower of Patrick. See ibid., I, ii. 91. 9, p. 310-312; William of Malmesbury, Saints’ Lives…, VB, p. 344-347. It seems to me that William received the request for writing the hagiographies for Glastonbury several years after the request for writing the VW for Worcester Cathedral Priory.


⁴⁷. Although Winterbottom raises the hypothesis that the Comm. Lam. may precede William’s hagiographies, which seems not to be the case from our discussion above, he still admits that those phrases in the prologue of the Comm. Lam. are “in any case overstated”, see William of Malmesbury, On Lamentations, p. 11.
mentsions in the prologue may refer to the “contemporary ills”.48. Although Thomson notices that William’s strong feelings might have been related to the occupation of the abbacy by Bishop Roger of Salisbury after 1118, he does not elaborate on his theory.49. In my opinion, William is almost certain to have used this phrase to refer to King Henry’s confirmation of Bishop Roger’s control over Malmesbury Abbey on 8 September 1131.50. This event was definitely a disaster for the monks, ending the dispute between them and Bishop Roger, at least during King Henry’s reign. It was probably one important reason for William’s pessimism and his writing of the Comm. Lam. – lamenting the expected gloomy destiny of his monastery. If my supposition is right, then we can assume that William was aged forty in 1131 and was probably born in late 1091.

William’s turn away from histories is an even more obvious overstatement. As Winterbottom points out, both his religious works, the Comm. Lam. and Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary (hereafter, MBVM), show his great interest in history, and he even finished a much more historical work, the Historia Novella (hereafter, HN), at the end of his life.51. He also wrote three books of Chronicles, which are now lost, before he completed the HN, and he probably continued these annals until his death.52. Moreover, he did not stop editing his two major histories, GR and GP, in the 1130s.53. These facts demonstrate that William’s turn away from history was at most a temporary claim, and his passion for writing history continued to the end of his life.

More interestingly, in many of his works, we often see the heavy convergence of history and hagiography.54. As some scholars have warned, we should be

49. Ibid., p. xi.
50. For King Henry’s charter of this confirmation, see Charters and Documents Illustrating the History of the Cathedral, City, and Diocese of Salisbury, in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, W. H. R. Jones and W. D. Macray (eds.), n. 6, p. 6-7; Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066-1154, C. Johnson and H. A. Cronne (eds.), II, n. 1715, p. 253.
52. William of Malmesbury, Historia Novella, prol., p. 2-3: "in tribus libellis quibus Cronica deði vocabulum" (in the three little books to which I have given the name of Chronicles). The Chronicles seem to have already been planned at some stage of William’s revision of the GR, see idem, Gesta Regum Anglorum, I, v. 449. 2, p. 800-801: "Et quidem iam dudum, quibusdam persuendentibus, ferebat animus ut, quae preterunda non putarem, per succiduos semper annos haec operi apponerem; sed consulitius uidetur alium de talibus librum procedere quam iam absolute frequenter noua inserere." (And indeed it had long been in my mind, at the persuasion of certain friends, that whatever seemed worthy of preservation should be added to this work year by year; but to make another book of those additions seems a better plan than to be frequently tacking new pieces onto a fabric already finished.) At the end of this chapter, William seems to imply that only death could end his writing of the annals, see ibid., I, v. 449. 2, p. 800-801: "in altero erit idem sitae qui scripturae terminus" (the writing of the other will end only with life itself).
Thomson believes that William is referring to his HN here, but as Hayward remarks, this reference was meant to be to the Chronicles, see ibid., II, p. 399; Hayward, 2017, p. 225-226.
53. The C and B versions of the GR were both made after February 1134, and the revision of the GP even continued until William’s death, see William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum, II, p. xxv; idem, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, I, p. xx-xxii.
54. Bailey, 2017, p. 14. Hayward also argues that both William’s histories and “hagiographical passages” favoured “the rhetorical devices, style and attitude of the classical historian”, see

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cautious about applying the modern distinction between these two genres to the Middle Ages⁵⁵. Both William’s GR and GP contain many deeds and miracles of saints, while his hagiographical works preserve much material which can be regarded as “historical”. Taking William’s GP as an example, it is usually considered as a historical work, a history of English bishops which is a companion volume to his history of English kings⁵⁶. However, as Bailey points out, many of William’s episcopal subjects were themselves saints⁵⁷. William did not hesitate to record their miracles which reached him through oral or written accounts, and his narratives about these individuals could sometimes be treated as small vitae as well. From this perspective, there is no real difference between William’s GP, his Saints’ Lives, and his local history, the AG – not to mention the fact that the fifth book of the GP can be counted as another truly hagiographical work, the “Life of St Aldhelm”⁵⁸. William himself never thought of a distinction between this last book and the previous four, but considered them as inseparable parts, an opinion which is perfectly reflected in his prologue to Book Five – “It would be a monstrous deviation from justice if in this brief account of the saints I threw light on all save our own lord and patron, I have undertaken to say something, however short, of his life, though I cannot do as much as I should wish because of the shortage of information”⁵⁹. It is clear that William is referring here to the whole GP as an

Hayward, 2017, p. 229. In fact, William was certainly not the only writer at that time to demonstrate vague boundaries between genres. Charles Rozier has shed some new light on another historian, Eadmer of Canterbury, whose Historia novorum “highlights a fluidity of boundaries” between history and hagiography, see Rozier, 2019, p. 17.

⁵⁵. Felice Lifshitz warns of this danger, see Lifshitz, 1994, p. 95-113. Matthew Kempshall also emphasises that the medieval writing of history “straddled a huge variety of genres”, including hagiographies, see Kempshall, 2011, p. 34. James Campbell draws a clear line between the historical works of William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntington on the one hand, who “stood for the pursuit of truth”, and the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the hagiographies of St Edmund and St Osyth on the other, which set aside that pursuit and were “in favour of warmly interesting and richly circumstantial fiction”. His opinion is refuted by David Rollason, who uses the case of Durham to argue that “history had a range of different forms and purposes” and should not be simply judged by the modern “scientific” view. See Campbell, 1984, p. 149; Rollason, 2016, p. 97-100. Meanwhile, many scholars have agreed that hagiography is not really distinct from other historical writings and contains important values from a historical dimension, though it has its own “discourse”, if not emerging as a clear “genre”. See Uytfanghe, 1993, p. 135-188; Goulet, 2005, p. 9-27; Palmer, 2018, p. 2-11.

⁵⁶. William himself also regarded the GP and GR as different parts of a single work at the beginning, and only made his GP a separate work at a late stage. See William of Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, I, p. xxiv-xxv; II, p. xx.


⁵⁸. It is noteworthy that the fifth book of the GP – about St Aldhelm – was usually missed out in the circulation of the whole book in the Middle Ages. Of all the extant manuscripts of the GP, only the manuscript A (“Gesta pontificum Anglorum”, Oxford, Magdalen College, ms lat. 172 [s. XII]), fol. 1-104] has a complete fifth book, and only the manuscript B (“Vita Sancti Aldhelmi Episcopi”, London, B.L., Cotton ms Claudius A. V. [s. XII], fol. 129-133) contains an abbreviation of it, see William of Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, I, p. xiii.


“account of the saints” and the last book on Aldhelm is a continuation of this theme. This shows that there was no clear boundary between his histories and his hagiographies. If we really have to make a distinction between William’s various works, I believe his two religious works, the Comm. Lam. and the MBVM, differ from his historical and hagiographical productions to a far greater degree. I suggest that William’s claim of turning away from histories in the prologue of the Comm. Lam. includes not only his GR and GP, but also his five hagiographies and the AG. What are to us hagiographical works were probably historical in his mind, and he was very likely drawing a line between those previous histories and hagiographies and his new attempt at writing religious works. Such a statement may only represent his thoughts during a specific period, from the early 1130s when he was planning to write the Comm. Lam., thoughts which would be set aside later with his return to histories. Thus, the hypothesis that William was born in 1091 and wrote the Comm. Lam. in 1131 no longer causes any problems to the chronology of his AG and his hagiographical works.

In the end, William’s life and works bear witness to a transitional stage of English historiography in the twelfth century. He belonged to a generation that revived historical writing in England, a “golden age” of medieval English historiography, which inherited the English chronicle tradition from before the Norman Conquest and knowledge of Old English, and tried to fill in the gaps in the narrative of the Anglo-Saxon past. His date of birth in 1091 and his efforts in history and hagiography during his early life, particularly in the 1120s, gave him access to a collective memory of pre-Norman England that was still fresh and preserved not only in Malmesbury but also in other monastic communities.

In this memory, hagiographies or various vitae of saints were an integral part of the Anglo-Saxon past because they attested to a history of English glory and the hope of a resurrection of the English nation in the future; in other words, they made history English. The result is “a fluid continuum of writings related to the past”, in Rozier’s words, which blurred the boundary between history and hagiography in both the writings and the mind of William and other monastic historians in the early twelfth century.

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61. As exemplified by (b) and (d) above, William, in his early life, still had great access to the oral testimonies of people who had witnessed the Norman Conquest.
62. William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum, ii. 207. 3, p. 386-387: “simulque considerandum quatuor diuinæ pietatis fulgor ab initio fidei populum illum circumfulserit, quod nusquam gentium, ut opinor, reperies tot sanctorum illibata post mortem corpora, incorruptionis illius extreæ simulacrum preferentia. Quod ideo fieri credo creatæ, ut natio pene extra orbem positæ, ex consideratione incorruptelae sanctorum, fulgenter ad spem resurrectionis animaretur.” (At the same time we must consider how the bright light of divine love has shone upon this people from the first days of their conversion, so that nowhere else on earth, in my opinion, will you find so many bodies of saints that are incorrupt after death, and offer an image of the incorruption that is to come at the last. I believe Heaven’s purpose in this was that our nation, situate almost beyond the world, might by considering the incorruption of the saints be kindled to a more confident hope in the resurrection.) Also see Stein, 1998, p. 98-104.
63. Rozier, 2019, p. 18.

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some extent, the new trend of focusing on contemporary events in English historiography and hagiography after 1170. William’s VW, his only work on a contemporary saint, already shows a clear preoccupation with recent events and bears strong similarities to historical works based on personal testimony and written documents, which emphasise the value of the eye-witness and the credibility of witnesses. Together with Eadmer’s *Vita Anselmi*, they became a preview of the growing number of volumes about contemporary saints in later decades. Furthermore, changes in the political landscape since the late 1130s encouraged William to turn to the writing of contemporary history, namely the *HN*, which in my opinion can be regarded as the most secular piece of history writing that William produced during his lifetime; it no longer gives as much space to saints and miracles as the *GR*. We do not need to interpret this as William starting to draw a clear distinction between history and hagiography in the early 1140s, at the end of his life, but it points at least to William’s change of taste in history writing. Besides, the Anglo-Saxon past was becoming more and more remote and it was not as difficult to handle as it had been decades before; “the broken chain” of English history had been mended by William himself and other Anglo-Norman historians, hence the growing urgency to understand current events in order to approach divine will and contemplate the future of the English. This made William even more similar to his counterparts in Angevin England, who were predominantly secular writers and were especially concerned with wide-ranging contemporary histories.

In summary, my hypothesis of William’s date of birth in c. 1091 has been proven solid. Although on first impressions it does not appear to differ greatly from the suggestion put forward by Thomson, who believed that William was born in c. 1090 (his preference being for a date between 1085 and 1090), the basis of the argument has changed. There is no need to translate “*quadragenarius*” as “in my forties” rather than “forty”, and the chronology of William’s hagiographies (*VW*, *VD*, *VP*, *VB* and *VI*), the *AG*, and his religious work, the *Comm. Lam.*, no

65. For example, a significant amount of the material in the *VW* came from the account of Nicholas, apparently a friend of William’s, who was the intimate pupil of St Wulfstan. William believed that Nicholas could have been the most suitable person to write his Life. See William of Malmesbury, *Saints’ Lives...*, VW, iii. 17. 2, p. 132-133: “Porro Nicholaus Wlstani dicta et facta refere voluptati habebat, in hoc fortasse culpatur quia uita eam eis non commisit. Nullus enim eam memoriae mandare posset uerius quam nemo ipso nosset presentius.” (Further, Nicholas loved to tell over the doings and sayings of Wulfstan, and could perhaps be criticized for not writing his biography. For no one could have more truthfully recorded a life that no one knew more intimately at firsthand.)
66. A similar attempt at relating the contemporary conflicts between King Stephen and the Angevins is the anonymous *Gesta Stephani*.
67. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, i. prol. 4, p. 14-15: “Vnde michi cum propter patriae caritatem, tum propter adhortationem auctoritatem ululantius fuit interruptam temporum seriem sacrire et exarata barbarice Romano sale condire.” (It was therefore my design, in part moved by love of my country and in part encouraged by influential friends, to mend the broken chain of our history, and give a Roman polish to the rough annals of our native speech.)

longer presents problems and contradictions when considered in conjunction with the core text regarding his date of birth: the prologue to the Comm. Lam. The discussion above has also demonstrated that if we really have to define boundaries between William’s different kinds of writing, we should make the distinction between his religious works on the one side and his histories and hagiographies on the other, rather than drawing a line between his historical writings and his other works. When William refers to the efforts he has devoted in the past to histories in the Comm. Lam. prologue in 1131, he very likely means to all the historical and hagiographical works written by him before 1130. Furthermore, if the supposition about William’s reference to King Henry’s confirmation in September 1131 is right, then we can go as far as to assume that he was born in late 1091. Overall, this date of birth is acceptable, and helps advance our understanding of his life and works. William’s case also sheds new light on a flourishing group of monastic historians in the Anglo-Norman world and the changes that occurred in medieval English historiography throughout the twelfth century.

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