

= Liber Eliensis =

The Liber Eliensis (sometimes Historia Eliensis or Book of Ely) is a 12th @-@ century English chronicle and history , written in Latin . Composed in three books , it was written at Ely Abbey on the island of Ely in the fenlands of eastern Cambridgeshire . Ely Abbey became the cathedral of a newly formed bishopric in 1109 . Traditionally the author of the anonymous work has been given as Richard or Thomas , two monks at Ely , one of whom , Richard , has been identified with an official of the monastery , but some historians hold that neither Richard nor Thomas was the author .

The Liber covers the period from the founding of the abbey in 673 until the middle of the 12th century , building on earlier historical works . It incorporates documents and stories of saints ' lives . The work typifies a type of local history produced during the latter part of the 12th century . Similar books were written at other English monasteries . The longest of the contemporary local histories , the Liber chronicles the devastation that the Anarchy caused during the reign of King Stephen . It also documents the career of Nigel , the Bishop of Ely from 1133 to 1169 , and his disputes with King Stephen . Other themes include the miracles worked by the monastery 's patron saint , Æthelthryth , and gifts of land to Ely .

Two complete manuscripts survive , complemented by partial manuscripts . The Latin text was published in 1962 , and an English translation followed in 2005 . Extracts had appeared in print earlier .

The Liber Eliensis provides an important history of the region and period it covers , and particularly for the abbey and bishopric of Ely .

= = Background and authorship = =

The Liber Eliensis was written at Ely Abbey , which became Ely Cathedral upon conversion into a bishopric in 1109 . The historian Elisabeth van Houts believes that it was written in two stages : first under Bishop Hervey le Breton , in office from 1109 to 1133 ; and continued under Bishop Geoffrey Ridel , who served from 1173 to 1189 . For van Houts , the first stage was the translation of an Old English work into Latin , commissioned by Bishop Hervey . The rest of the work , van Houts argues , was composed in the 1170s . However , E. O. Blake , who edited the first Latin printing of the work , concludes that the Liber was probably composed in three parts , based on its contents ; the first book of the Liber was begun after 1131 , when one of the sources used in the Liber was completed . The second has a preface apologising for the delay in its completion , and could not have been started before 1154 , as it records events from that year . The third and final book was completed between 1169 , when Bishop Nigel died and whose death is mentioned in the book , and 1174 , when a new bishop was appointed . As there is no mention of Nigel 's replacement , Blake states that this suggests that book three was finished before the new bishop took office .

Traditionally the work was ascribed to either Thomas or Richard , two monks of Ely mentioned in the text . The historian Antonia Gransden is inclined to believe that the work is by Richard , who is usually identified with the Richard who was recorded as sub @-@ prior and prior of Ely , holding the latter office from 1177 until some time between 1189 and 1194 . Blake thinks that Richard was the author , but he considers the evidence to be inconclusive . Janet Fairweather , a classicist and a recent translator of the Liber , suggests that it may have been written by someone other than the traditional candidates . Whoever the author , the Liber specifically states that it was written at the bidding of some members of the monastic community at Ely .

The Liber is one of a number of monastic histories written during the middle and later 12th century , when a number of monasteries in northern and southern England produced works devoted to recording the histories of their religious houses and local areas . In the south , these included the Historia Ecclesie Abendonensis of Abingdon Abbey , the Chronicon Abbatiae Rameseiensis of Ramsey Abbey , the Chronicon Angliae Petriburgense of Peterborough Abbey , a history of the see of Bath and Wells , and the Chronicon Monasterii de Bello of Battle Abbey . The northern histories record the foundation stories of the various Cistercian houses in the north , along with other information relating to those houses . Those from the south , including the Liber Eliensis , mainly

concern themselves with the various controversies involving their respective religious houses . The northern histories are less concerned with controversy , and overall are more prone to hagiography .

= = Contents = =

The work is traditionally divided into three books . Along with the history in Book I the first section also contains a prologue and a preface . It discusses the founding of the Abbey of Ely and the background of the foundress , Æthelthryth . The first book also deals with the history of the abbey and its abbesses until the Danish invasions of the 9th century . A description of the destruction of the abbey by the Danes and of King Edgar 's (reigned 959 ? 975) rule concludes the book . The second book , Book II , begins with the restoration of the abbey during Edgar 's reign , under Bishop Æthelwold . Accounts of the subsequent abbots until the last , Richard , are included in Book II , as well as numerous charters and other documents . The final book , Book III , contains information on the conversion of the abbey to a bishopric , and on the first few bishops ; it concludes with a description of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket . Interspersed with the historical narrative are a number of documents and charters relating to the bishops .

The work also depicts the devastation that the Anarchy caused during King Stephen 's reign . The chronicler states that failure of the harvest and pillaging caused a famine . The work describes the area around the abbey for 20 ? 30 miles (32 ? 48 kilometres) as being filled with unburied corpses , and that the price of a bushel of grain rose to 200 pence . The long descriptions of Nigel of Ely 's disputes with King Stephen lead to a discussion of the Battle of Lincoln and other matters not directly related to Ely . The Liber gives a detailed account of Nigel 's career , although in general the chronicle 's author favours Stephen over his own bishop . The ascension of King Henry II to the English throne is considered to be an excellent event , and the Liber praises the new king .

An important part of the work was devoted to the miracles and glorification of Ely 's patroness , Saint Æthelthryth . The very beginning of the work incorporates an earlier Vita , or Life , of Æthelthryth , which resembles the Vitae of other saints written by Goscelin in the 11th century ; Goscelin is known to have visited Ely . The work may have helped to increase the number of pilgrims visiting Ely , as well as enabling the monks to better explain the history of earlier donations to the abbey . Many of the gifts to the abbey church are described , such as the altar cloth donated by Queen Emma (died 1052) , wife of both King Æthelred II (died 1016) and King Cnut (died 1035) , with a short history of the circumstances of the gift . The miracle stories frequently say that those who wished cures or miracles similar to those in the Liber would need to come to the monastery , where they could make a donation . The historian Jennifer Paxton argues that increasing pilgrimage to the monastery was one of the main goals of the compilers of the Liber .

Another concern of the chronicle was the acquisition of land by the abbey . The work incorporates three pre @-@ existing inventories of the abbey 's possessions , and records each gift to the abbey , giving the grantor and occasionally details of the grantor 's life . This detailed record of the various rights and possessions of the abbey was useful if those possessions needed to be defended against outside or inside conflicts . The Liber was used by the monks to defend their claims to be the real heirs of the abbey 's rights and property rather than the bishops , after the conversion of the abbey into a bishopric . The chronicle also records the division of property between the monks and the newly appointed bishop . According to the chronicler , the division took place during the episcopate of the first bishop , Hervey le Breton , and was characterised as barely adequate for the needs of the monks . Later the chronicle records documents from the bishops that defined the separation between the monks and the episcopate . The chronicle also records the conflict between the abbey and various Bishops of Lincoln , which had continued until the abbey became a bishopric in 1109 .

A third theme of the work is the stress on the importance and number of distinguished burials that took place at Ely . They would have increased the desire of others to be buried there , which would have benefited the community by the donations that would have flowed from those wishing to secure their burial . The Liber stresses the burials of Æthelstan , a Bishop of Elmham , that of Ælfwine , another Bishop of Elmham , and Wulfstan II , an Archbishop of York .

= = Influence = =

The Liber was familiar to the 13th @-@ century chronicler Matthew Paris , who used it along with the *Chronicon Abbatiae Rameseiensis* of Ramsey Abbey in his own historical works . Another 13th @-@ century English writer , Roger of Wendover , was also aware of the Liber .

Some of the information contained in the Liber is important to historians . It is in the Liber that the first statement that Æthelwold translated the Benedictine Rule into Old English is made . The Liber is the longest of the local histories produced in England during the 12th century , and it contains a description of the royal chancery , which might be the earliest evidence for the existence of that office in the Anglo @-@ Saxon kingdom . The Liber describes how King Edgar (died 975) granted the abbey the office of chancellor (head of the chancery) , but the authenticity of the passage is unclear . The existence of a formal chancery office in Anglo @-@ Saxon England before the Norman Conquest is a matter of some debate amongst historians .

The historian Dorothy Whitelock says of the work that it is " unique among post @-@ Conquest monastic histories " . It was written to help buttress the claims of Ely to a judicial liberty , or the exercise of all the royal rights within a hundred . To do this , the Liber collected together earlier sources used to help the abbey evade episcopal control , prior to the abbey becoming a bishopric . These documents may have been forged or had their contents doctored to help the abbey 's cause . Because of the tendentious nature of the collection , the work is used by historians with great caution . Despite the untrustworthy nature of the Liber and the documents preserved therein , it remains a valuable source for the history of the time period it covers , as well as the internal history of the abbey and bishopric . The historian Antonia Gransden characterises the Liber as " valuable for general history " , but qualifies by saying that " the whole lacks unity and has errors and confusing repetitions " .

= = Manuscripts = =

The work survives in two complete manuscripts (MS) , that of Trinity College , Cambridge MS O.2.1 , usually known as the E manuscript ; and one in the possession of Ely Cathedral Chapter , usually known as the F manuscript . The E manuscript dates from the late 12th century , and shows three different scribal hands . The F manuscript dates to the early 13th century , with four scribal hands . The E manuscript was given to Trinity College as part of the Gale Collection by Roger Gale in 1738 . The F manuscript has remained at Ely since its creation , and is the only manuscript at Ely still remaining from the medieval monastic library .

As well as the two complete manuscripts , a number of other manuscripts contain parts of the whole work . British Library MS Cotton Titus A.i , usually known as the G manuscript , has part of Book II , and dates from the late 12th or early 13th century . British Library MS Cotton Domitian A.xv , known as the B manuscript , dates from the late 13th or early 14th century and includes some other material along with Book I and the same parts of Book II as in manuscript G. Another Cottonian manuscript , British Library MS Cotton Vespasian A.xix , has parts of Book III , and dates to between 1257 and 1286 . This manuscript is usually known as the A manuscript .

The relationship between the various extant manuscripts is complex , and a definitive scheme of how the various manuscripts relate to each other cannot be made . Blake , in his edition of the Liber , suggests that Book I once existed as a stand @-@ alone work , which influenced the B manuscript . A separate Book II , with parts of Book III , was then written and combined with the stand @-@ alone Book I , into either manuscript E or an earlier version of that manuscript . Book II was then revised , combined with parts of G , Book I , and parts of E to make manuscript F.

Related manuscripts include Bodleian Library Oxford MS Laud 647 , known as the O manuscript . This is based on the Liber , but reorganised into a listing of the acts of the various abbots and bishops and dates from the 14th century . Blake , in his edition of the Liber , calls that and related works the *Chronicon Abbatum et Episcoporum Eliensium* . Another related work is contained in Trinity College , Cambridge MS O.2.41 , which contains the *Libellus* of Æthelwold and an Ely

cartulary . Two other related works containing just cartularies are British Library Cotton MS Tiberius A vi and Cambridge University Library Ely Diocesan Register Liber M.

= = Publication = =

Liber Eliensis has been published by the Royal Historical Society in its Camden Third Series , edited by E. O. Blake . The edition contains the Latin text along with some Old English texts , but no translation . Janet Fairweather has produced a recent English translation of the Latin , published in 2005 by the Boydell Press .

Formerly , only sections of the Liber had appeared in print , without translations . Parts of the Liber were edited by D. J. Stewart and published by the Anglia Christiana Society in 1848 . Other extracts were published in various works , including parts of Book I that were included in Volume 2 of Jean Mabillon 's nine @-@ volume Acta Sanctorum , printed between 1688 and 1701 . Another set of extracts , mainly consisting of parts of Book II , was compiled by Roger Gale 's father Thomas Gale , as part of his Historicae Britannicae Scriptores XV , published at Oxford in 1691 .

= = = Editions = = =

Blake , E. O. , ed . (1962) . Liber Eliensis . Camden Third Series . London : Royal Historical Society . OCLC 462668616 .

Fairweather , Janet (trans .) , ed . (2005) . Liber Eliensis . Woodbridge , UK : Boydell Press . ISBN 978 @-@ 1 @-@ 84383 @-@ 015 @-@ 3 .