

**TWO DISSERTATIONS ON
THE HAMLET OF
SAXO GRAMMATICUS
AND OF SHAKESPEAR**

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R. G. LATHAM

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ON THE
HAMLET
OF
SAXO GRAMMATICUS
AND OF
SHAKESPEAR.

- I. THE HISTORICAL PERSONALITY OF HAMLET.
- II. THE RELATION OF THE 'HAMLET' OF SHAKESPEAR TO THE GERMAN PLAY, 'PRINZ HAMLET AUS DÄNEMARK,' &c.

BY

R. G. LATHAM, M.A., M.D., &c.

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ON THE DOUBLE PERSONALITY OF THE HAMLET
OF SAXO GRAMMATICUS—THE HAMLET OF
SHAKESPEAR—ITS RELATION TO THE GER-
MAN HAMLET.

BY DR. R. G. LATHAM, M.A., M.D., ETC.

PART I.

SAXO GRAMMATICUS lived in Denmark during the latter half of the twelfth century, and wrote a work on the history of his country,—the 'Historia Danica;' his friend, patron, and instigator being Absalon, Archbishop of Lund. His father and grandfather held respectable offices in the state. He was born not much before, nor yet long after, 1150. His work was begun after 1177. Little as this information amounts to, it is nearly all we have; nor is this little absolutely beyond cavil. It has even been doubted, for instance, whether he were a native of Denmark, the name *Saxo* suggesting a German origin. It seems, however, to have passed into a proper name before the end of the eleventh century. When it took the honourable addition of *Grammaticus* is uncertain.

Of authorities, in the strict sense of the term, Saxo quotes only two,—Beda and Dudo of St. Quentin, both incidentally. He made, however, application to the learned men of the day, and resorted to the traditionary lore of the Icelanders. Thirdly, he quotes certain passages from certain poets, but, as

they are in Latin and anonymous, the value of them is uncertain. Are they originals or translations? They occur chiefly in the earlier books. His cotemporary Snorro Sturleson, in his 'Heimskringla,' or 'History of the Kings of Norway,' written in the vernacular Icelandic, makes similar references. His quotations, however, are in the original language and the original metres, and generally the name of the composers accompanies them. Upon the whole, then, we have a fair general notion of what Saxo means by the *carmina antiqua*. Occasionally we can trace them in the prose narrative by their alliteration.

The true illustration, however, of Saxo is to be found in the age to which he belonged. Neither he nor his cotemporaries had anything like systematic, critical, or adequately informed predecessors. In the way of actual testimony they had nothing but that of the men of their own generation for the events of their own time. Application to the oldest of these cotemporaries led them generally into the region of tradition. Latin accounts, when they delivered new matter, would rarely transcend the introduction of Christianity; even the *carmina antiqua* would generally consist of allusions to events supposed to be generally known rather than of explicit narratives.

About any English sources Saxo says nothing beyond his reference to Beda. The only parts, however, of the earlier narrative which point in the direction of genuine history are English. This is because occasionally, exceptionally, and under very favourable circumstances, an event or individual may be common to the history of two nations, of which the

records of the one are older than those of the other, but at the same time accessible to the younger. When such happens, a piece of real or approximate history may be obtained. If so, it stands by itself, isolated, and, as such, contrasted with what precedes and what follows it. This is the way in which the Britons knew about Cassivelaunus, Cynobelinus, and the like; not because there were any native records to say who they were and what they did, but because certain Romans had written about them, and certain Britons had read what they wrote. Beyond all this, there were certain floating names, narratives, and inferences wearing the garb of tradition, of which the best that could be said is that where there is a superstructure there is a foundation, or, more simply, where there is smoke there is fire.

Saxo's age, however, either required or produced something more than this: for it was the age of the early French romances, the age of poems in Germany like the 'Nibelungen-lied,' the age of a wholly new literature in the vernacular languages, and of certain very peculiar and characteristic forms of Latin prose. They passed for history; logography, however, would be the better name. That any writer willingly and consciously sat down to concoct a systematic series of dynasties with the view of extending the antiquity of his county to such or such Scriptural or Classical date, is what few believe; but that sooner or later most countries produced a work in which such an extension is to be found, is beyond doubt; and one of these is the 'Historia Danica,' another being the 'British History' of Geoffrey of Monmouth. There are others, but these best illus-

trate both one another and the age which produced them.

We may call this constructive chronology; though I again guard myself against the supposition that I consider either Geoffrey or Saxo as wilful and conscious constructors. How the system grew up is doubtful. It culminated, however, in more countries than one about the same time, — the time under notice.

How it grew we cannot say; but now that we have got it, we can analyse it.

The common-sense method of treating lists of kings which logographies of this kind give us is to take the two extremes, either of which supplies us with a starting-point. We know that the newest is historical; we know that the earliest is not. We may begin, in British history, with Cassivelaunus and the evidence of Julius Cæsar, or we may begin with Brutus, the eponymus of Britain, and no evidence whatsoever.

This principle is universal in its application, though it need not always be applied. Sometimes we see all that it gives us by mere inspection; at others, it has special complications that keep it in the background. It is always, however, implied. In the following series the most historical part lies near the middle. The thirty-eighth king is a cotemporary of Charlemagne; and, as this brings him on the confines of continuous history, the list is here made to end with him.

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Humble I.</i> (word for word
<i>Hamblet.</i>) | 4. Skiold. |
| 2. Dan I. | 5. Gram. |
| 3. <i>Humble II.</i> (<i>vide supra</i>)
and Lothar. | 6. <i>Guthorm</i> and Hading. |
| | 7. <i>Frotho I.</i> |
| | 8. <i>Holfilan.</i> |

- | | |
|--|-----------------------|
| 9. Roe. | 24. <i>Ingeld.</i> |
| 10. Scato. | 25. Frotho V. |
| 11. Helgo. | 26. <i>Haldan.</i> |
| 12. <i>Rolco.</i> | 27. <i>Sivald.</i> |
| 13. Hother. | 28. <i>Sigurd.</i> |
| 14. <i>Röricus.</i> | 29. Five Kings. |
| 15. <i>Vikletus.</i> | 30. Harold Hildetand. |
| 16. <i>Vermundus.</i> | 31. Olo. |
| 17. <i>Uffö.</i> | 32. Omundus. |
| 18. Dan II. | 33. Syvardus. |
| 19. HUGLERUS (<i>melius</i> HU-
GLEKUS). | 34. Buthlus. |
| 20. Frotho II. | 35. Jarmeric. |
| 21. Fridlev. | 36. Snio. |
| 22. Frotho III. | 37. Gormo. |
| 23. Frotho IV. | 38. <i>Götricus.</i> |

To these must be added, from the Danish dynasties in Ireland, *Amblaibh Cuaran*, or *Anlaf Cuiran*, and from the kings of Norway, *Olaf Kypre*.

Now it is not in accordance with the rules of rhetoric to address the argument to the eye rather than the understanding, and to throw the proper duties of the writer upon the printer. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the preceding list a great deal is indicated by the italics. This is, firstly, because the question is so complicated that no means whatever of abating its complexity should be neglected; and secondly, because a general view of the import of several names separated from one another by occasional intervals is absolutely necessary as a preliminary. *Hugletus* has a value of its own. *Vikletus*, *Vermundus*, *Uffö* have theirs. The others, in italic, have theirs; and, in a smaller degree, every name on the list has a value of some kind or other.