

London, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius D. VI

Andrew Dunning

Object Name/Short Title

Matthew Paris, *Abbreuiatio chronicorum*

Artist/Author, Place of Origin, Date

Matthew Paris, monk of St Albans (died 1259)

Finding Place

Benedictine abbey of St Alban (St Albans, Hertfordshire)

Material, Technique – Comment on the State of Preservation – Dimensions

Parchment, ink with miniatures in colours and tinted washes; survived the Ashburnham House fire on 23 October 1731; h 32,2 × w 21,6 × d 5 cm (heavily trimmed); fols 221 (fol. 12 mounted separately)

Owning Institution together with Inventory Number or Shelf Mark

London, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius D. VI

Description of Object

Matthew Paris was arguably the most illustrious historian of thirteenth-century England. He combines astute commentary with anecdotes of his subjects, resulting in engaging works that convey the flavour of contemporary life. Most of his works survive in autograph or in manuscripts produced under his supervision, allowing readers to see them almost as he originally conceived them. His writings are almost inseparable from their material form, filled with lively illustrations of his subjects, many from his own pen. This manuscript contains his *Abbreuiatio compendiosa chronicorum Anglie* (*Brief Abridgement of the Chronicles of England*), covering the years 1000 to 1255. This work is an epitome of his *Historia Anglorum*, itself edited down from his *Chronica maiora*. Although the text has earned less attention than his other works, the unique prefatory material to this book (fols 5v–12v) has earned it renown.

The manuscript opens with a portrait of Offa (d. 796), the king of the Mercians who was held up as the founder of St Albans Abbey; alongside this is a diagram and description of the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy (fol. 5v). The book is thus centred on St Albans, like nearly all Matthew's work. He had connections to figures in high office, including King Henry III (r. 1216–72), and many of them took an interest in his writings. Nonetheless, he does not seem to have intended his work for broad physical dissemination, creating most of it for his own monastery. St Albans was one of England's most prominent monastic houses, and had a strong historiographical tradition. Matthew is today far better known than other writers who were more famous during the Middle Ages themselves, largely because of the accident that modern scholars took an interest in his work and began printing his works by the sixteenth century.

The prefatory material continues with a series of portraits of the kings of England (fols 6r–9v), now among the most recognizable medieval depictions of these figures. The portraits begin with Brutus, the legendary great-grandson of Aeneas said to have become the first king of Britain, and end with Henry II, Richard I, John, and Henry III, king at Matthew's death. The kings are each shown with identifying attributes: Richard's nickname is celebrated in the shield he holds, which bears three lions; John's askew crown hints at his tumultuous reign. Following these portraits is a genealogy of the kings from Alfred the Great to Henry III (fols 10v–12r) and a map of Britain (fol. 12v), one of the earliest surviving attempts to show the geography of the isles rather than depict them schematically. Together, this material furnishes everything the reader needs to be oriented with the chronicle that follows.

The manuscript remained at St Albans after Matthew's death. Following the abbey's dissolution in 1539, it may have been in the hands of the historian John Stowe (b. 1524/5, d. 1605), who made extracts from the book c.1575; it was also inscribed by the judge Sir Richard Hutton (bap. 61, d. 1639), from whom Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (b. 1571, d. 1631) likely acquired it; his library formed one of the foundation collections of the British Museum when it was founded in 1753.

Sources and Literature

Vaughan (1958); Lewis (1987), pp. 143–58, 468–69; Morgan (1982–88), no. 93

Bibliography

Lewis, Suzanne. 1987. *The Art of Matthew Paris in the Chronica Majora*. California Studies in the History of Art 21. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morgan, Nigel J. 1982–88. *Early Gothic Manuscripts*. 2 vols. Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles 4. London: Miller.

Vaughan, Richard. 1958. *Matthew Paris*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 2nd ser., 6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.