CHAPTER SIX

ÆLFRIC’S LAY PATRONS

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INTRODUCTION

Ælfric addressed his patrons Æthelweard and Æthelmær in these words in the preface to his Lives of Saints, which he wrote at their request. He must have chosen his words carefully, for both father and son were amongst the most senior of all the earthly king’s thegns; this comparison between the saints’ service to God and their own to King Æthelred was therefore a powerful one. Indeed, this statement must have had weighty resonances for Ælfric himself, since his own career and livelihood depended upon the favour that the two men gained from the king for that service. Ælfric himself ‘served’ a number of thegns in his lifetime: from the great aristocrats and ealdormen, Æthelweard and Æthelmær, to the lesser thegns, the local gentry, Sigeweard of Asthall, Wulfgeat of Ilmington and Sigefyrth, for whom he wrote a number of treatises. It is these men, both mighty and middling, with whom this chapter is concerned.

Æthelweard and his son Æthelmær were both successively Ealdormen of the Western Provinces, and leading figures at the court of Æthelred

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1 LS Old English Preface, lines 59–65 (I, p. 6); trans. Skeat, p. 7: ‘An earthly king hath many servants and divers stewards; he cannot be an honoured king unless he have the state which befitteth him, and as it were serving-men, to offer him their obedience. So likewise is it with Almighty God who created all things; it befitteth Him that He should have holy servants who may fulfil His will.’
the Unready in the years 990 × 993 to 1005. 2 Æthelweard is celebrated for his Latin Chronicon, a version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, as well as for his patronage of Ælfric. 3 The homilist produced the Old English compilation Lives of Saints for Æthelweard and his son, and translations of part of the Book of Genesis and an abridged translation of the story of Joshua for Æthelweard. 4 Additionally, we know that the elder ealdorman received his own copy of the first series of Catholic Homilies with four extra homilies added. 5 Æthelweard also repeatedly requested an Old English version of the legend of Thomas of India, which is included in the Lives of Saints. 6 Simultaneously, father and son were taking care of Ælfric’s own career, with Æthelmær’s foundation of Cerne and Eynsham where Ælfric served respectively as monk and then abbot.

Evidence for the secular careers of the two men is scattered across a number of different sources but can be pieced together to build a picture, albeit a fragmentary one. The sources which historians often use to assess lay status and actions—charters, wills, and historical writings—are less forthcoming for these two men, partly because their names are relatively common and it is hard to identify them definitively in the documentary record. 7 Æthelweard’s mother, for instance, may have been the Æthelgifu whose daughter, Ælfgifu, married King Eadwig, but we can not be sure. 8 We are helped by Æthelmær’s foundation charter for Eynsham which records from whom he obtained the estates with which the monastery was endowed, noting blood relationships. The charter’s notes on estates and Æthelmær’s circles help to confirm identifications suggested in other sources. 9

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4 Genesis, pp. 8–88, and Marsden, ed., Old English Heptateuch, pp. 177–89. The accepted dating for these works is Lives of Saints before 998, translation of Genesis 992 × 998 and the translation of Joshua before 998.
5 See J. Hill, above, p. 55, and see Clemoes, CH I, p. 177 for the note in MS K. These four additional sermons cannot be identified: see Clemoes, ‘Chronology’, pp. 226–7.
6 LS 36, lines 10–12 (II, 400).
7 See, for example, Keynes’ account of the Other Æthelmær, Diplomas, p. 209.
8 See the discussion by A. Williams, Æthelred, p. 30 and p. 173, note 77.
9 S 911, Salter, Eynsham I, 19–28 with valuable commentary in A. Williams, Æthelred, pp. 29–32, who gives the best account of Æthelweard’s kindred with a family tree. See also her Land, Power and Politics, pp. 2–7.